

BLESSING DATIRI

An Insight into the Dynamics of Digital Media Research

Review on Lewis Levenberg, Tai Neilson and David Rheams, *Research Methods for the Digital Humanities*. Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. 325 pages. ISBN978-3-319-96712-7. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-967134>

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Digital Humanities are transforming our understanding of various aspects of human society and culture by utilizing modern computing tools to investigate old and new questions across the humanities. In the 21st century, scholars in this relatively new field of study operate within the context of ever-changing technological trends, resources and constraints. This volume helps to navigate this evolving challenge by filling in the gap of inadequate research guides in the field, particularly for upcoming scholars. Hence, students and interdisciplinary intellectuals are provided with relevant research methodology to apply in their research amidst technological disruption and the advancements in Digital Humanities studies.

The volume is designed as a guide for new researchers on new dimensions of ‘studying’, ‘interpreting’ and ‘presenting’ findings on a wide range of cultural material, artefacts and practices shared on the digital public space (2). In their introduction, the editors, Lewis Levenberg, Tai Nelson and David Rheams, who are all affiliates of George Mason University, indicate that the inspiration and ideas for publishing the volume emerged after a panel discussion on Digital Research Methods at a Cultural Studies Association Conference. The editors succeeded in selecting the right range and quality of papers covering different aspects of Digital Humanities. The 17 chapters are grouped into four categories for ease of navigation. They are titled Analytical, Ethnography, Representational and Archival. Academics, programmers, ethnographers, graphic designers and digital archivists will find this volume as useful as I did.

The “Analytical” section sets out guidelines for computational methods of researching a wide range of textual data. These five chapters provide a range of methodologies to utilize archival methods for analysis in the Digital Humanities. Lewis Levenberg proffers useful suggestions exploring physical and technical elements of telecommunications based on how information is transmitted. Drawing from telecommunication networks in West Africa (Ghana, Nigeria and Liberia) Levenberg asserts that practices and techniques from computer science, sociology, literary studies, history or policy analysis can be used to examine ‘physical infrastructure’ or ‘public policy’ by drawing conclusions from textual data and or computational analysis. Levenberg suggests that the most important outcome of interdisciplinary research in Digital Humanities is the ability of setting and solving original research questions by combining modes of inquiry and using adequate analytical techniques.

Robert Gehl in the next chapter, “Archives of the Web: A field Guide for Study”, explains the relevance of engaging the systems of technical infrastructure to study the users and the dynamics of the cultures of the Dark Web. The chapter expatiates on the politics of the Dark Web ranging from access to search engines, social networking sites and markets which form the totality of its existence and use. These concepts, Gehl asserts, draw

on the achievements of the findings presented in his book *Weaving the Dark Web Legitimacy on Freenet, Tor and I2P*. Gehl dives deep into the questions of the existence and legitimacy of the Dark Web as a network of other networking sites that are not easily accessible to the general public. His guidelines on the use of Tor, Freenet and I2P highlight the benefits from using such tools, even if the research focus is on ethics, end users, or Dark Web cultures and not just on technical functions.

In the fourth chapter, “Music and Detour: Building a Digital Humanities Archive”, David Arditi outlines ways to create a hypothesis for conducting research on digital music archives taking into consideration possible copyright issues, using the Dallas-Fort Worth local music archives as a case study. His exposé indicates lessons on ways to make other forms of cultural material, beyond music, available to the public. In the next chapter, “Creating on Influence-Relationship Model: To Locate Actors in Environmental Communications”, David Rhemas offers a guide to ‘disconnected’ textual data analysis by creating an archive of Newspaper articles. The stages for creating an influence-relationship model can be achieved by knowing the key ‘actors’ and influencers, following this order of inquiry: conceptualize and assemble the model, group the actors and then evaluate the results. In the last chapter on ‘archival’ research methods Mark Alfano in “Digital Humanities for History of Philosophy; A Case study of Nietzsche” explores the synoptic Digital Humanities approach to the study of Friedrich Nietzsche by explaining the importance of text processing techniques of research. Alfano, offers six key steps to conduct a historical research: select core concepts, operationalize concepts, conduct searches, analyze and visualize data and lastly closely read relevant passages.

The chapters in the “Ethnography” section attempt to scientifically describe the use of digital communications to facilitate digital research of human cultures and societies. In the seventh chapter, “Researching Online Museums: Digital Methods to Study Virtual Visitors”, Natalia Grincheva examines museums and cultures that have incorporated digital media into their cultural programming and social activities by adapting the visitor study methodology. She gives insight into audience or visitors assessment, behavioral analysis, quantitative and qualitative methods of research. In “Smart Phones and Photovoice: Explaining Participant Lives with Photos of the Everyday”, Erin Carlson and Trinity Overmyer conduct a photovoice focus group analysis. Using this method, the authors gathered samples from participatory observation (ethnography and auto-ethnography) of participants who documented their everyday lives with their mobile phones. Tai Nelson, in the last chapter of this section in “Digital Media, Conventional Methods: Using Video Interviews to Study the Labor of Digital Journalism”, studied digital journalism in the United States and New Zealand. He offers a methodological guide to conducting online interviews using digital tools by pointing out its benefits and limitations. The methods

presented in these chapters can be modified to suit any digital ethnographical research. These ethnographic chapters offer an empirical guide on the use of digital media in studying socio-cultural behaviors of respondents.

The three chapters in the “Representational” section give insight into research case studies. Elizabeth Hunter’s study on “Building Video Game Adaptations of Dramatic Literary Texts” offers a critical method of adapting literary text into video games by complementing traditional humanities research of the documentation and preservation of texts. Hunter conducts an interdisciplinary examination on “Something Wicked” adapted from *Macbeth* and shows key steps to creating video game adaptations. In “Virtual Bethel: Preservation of Indianapolis Oldest Church”, Andrea Copeland, Ayoung Yoon, Albert Williams and Zebulun Wood, following the creation of the digital 3D model of the oldest Black church in the city of Indianapolis, offer a tutorial to three dimensions imaging, modeling and representation of spaces. J.J. Sylvia’s “Code/ Art Approaches to Data Visualization” introduces a Code/Art approach of data visualization by using P5.JS as the markup language with the aim of showing how narrative data visualization can be used to answer provocative questions by designing and developing a framework.

Finally, the last chapters in “Archival” provide insights into historical data research in the Digital Humanities. Nick Thieber, in “Research Methods in Recording Oral Tradition: Choosing Between the Evanescence of the Digital or the Senescence of the Analog”, studies small languages in Australia. The analysis presented in this chapter demonstrates how linguistic textual research benefits from the creation of primary records that can be archived and used for analysis over the course of time. In the next chapter titled “A Philological Approach to Sound Preservation”, Federica Bressan provides an overview of the challenges posed by audio media preservation from a cultural, intellectual, historical and technical point of view. Bressan also provides a guide to support systemization in the field of preservation of sound and audio.

Tarrin Wills, in “User Interfaces for Creating Digital Research”, focuses on applications and technologies that connect a User Interface (UI) through which scholars who create data interact with the data itself. Exploring the Skaldic poetry project (<https://skaldic.org>) readers learn how to evaluate UI systems. Comparably, Henriette Roued-Cunliffe in “Developing Sustainable Open Heritage Datasets” provides a guide on how data can be extracted from data sets of Application Programming Interfaces (API’s). She analyses a collection of Danish photos and shows how data sets can be combined for the purpose of visualization analysis to develop sustainable open heritage datasets. Discussions on mass digitization, crowd sourcing, openness and copyright are covered in the chapter. Lastly, in “Telling Untold Stories: Digital Textual Recovery Methods”, Roopika Risam demonstrates how digital media can strengthen and diversify cultural records. By using

structural markup languages to recover Claude Mickey's poetry, Risam opines that Digital environments are gradually becoming spaces that create, keep and disseminate the cultural memory of humanity.

This volume will be beneficial to intellectuals, scholars and anyone who is interested in understanding the dynamics of digital content applied to the humanities. The editors have attempted to select chapters that cover all major aspects of Digital Humanities research. However, the volume is hardly comprehensive. For example, none of the chapters addresses other possible methods of internet ethnography such as online questionnaire surveys. The convenience and cost efficiency of online surveys have made this method appealing to many scholars. Considering the growing importance of online surveys, this volume would have been more complete by including a chapter exploring the dynamics of online surveys, the ethical concerns they portend and the best ways to address these concerns. In addition, this volume does not discuss the utility of social media (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc.) in humanities research, despite their dominance in new media space. With these deficiencies notwithstanding, readers will appreciate the important research methodologies contained in this volume as they are presented in a 'how to do it style'. Academics from any background will find this volume functional as it gives different perspectives to new research trends and widens the list of the tools and frontiers of inquiry across Digital Humanities.