Beijing Digital Humanities Special Interest Group
11/2019 Seminar Report

Discussion Topic:

How can humanities scholars and non-humanities scholars collaborate in the field of digital humanities?

Discussion Aims:

In recent years the field of digital humanities has developed rapidly in China; lectures, workshops and seminars have all been critically important in the teaching and discussion of topics in the digital humanities. As a basic awareness of digital humanities concepts, methodologies and tools reaches an ever greater audience, we are increasingly faced with a number of pressing questions: How can scholars deploy what they learn to address research questions in the humanities? How can we promote the development and improvement of these tools and methodologies in the digital humanities? The Digital Humanities Special Interest Group (DHSIG) at Peking University intends to provide answers to these questions.

DHSIG meetings will provide a venue to tackle questions of digital humanities tools, methods and theories in round-table discussion. Rather than focusing on a single presenter, discussions will be conducted freely with a discussion leader's guidance. Discussion materials will be shared in advance so as to provide a basic understanding of the topic at hand and offer participants the opportunity to participate equally in discussion. To encourage students' active participation, at each stage of our discussion, we will first offer students the opportunity to voice their perspectives before opening the floor to all attendees. We will seek to arrive at a common consensus on each of our topics, and after our meeting concludes, we will compile these thoughts in the form of a proposal that we will then publicly issue. (This proposal may include a number of different complementary or even opposing arguments.) We hope that these proposals can provide workable plans of action to scholars in the digital humanities and help to guide further research in the field.

Our Proposals

What problems do humanities scholars hope to answer with digital methods?

1. Humanities scholars wish to use digital methods to handle simple but time-consuming research tasks.
2. Humanities scholars would like to use digital methods to create visualizations that paper-based methods do not allow.
3. Humanities scholars hope to automate methods of solving otherwise complex or convoluted problems. For instance, when dealing with ancient texts, automation of the following tasks:

collation, copying, citation checking, converting between different calendar systems, generation of family trees, interpretation of seal carvings or archaic writings, et cetera.

4. Humanities scholars hope to use digital methods to empirically describe certain of their qualitative impressions and conclusions. For instance, finding quantifiable ways to express certain conclusions regarding different editions of a given text.

When collaborating on digital humanities research, what points should humanities scholars and non-humanities scholars keep in mind?

1. When non-humanities scholars embark on humanities research, or when humanities scholars embark on non-humanities research, it is necessary to abide by the scholarly norms and standards of the field.
2. We propose that for those fields relevant to the digital humanities (e.g. literature; history; philosophy; mathematics; computer science; statistics), an index of specialized vocabulary should be prepared, such that colleagues in different disciplines can understand one another's terminology.
3. We propose that in collaborative publications in the digital humanities, authorship of published papers should be decided by means of cooperative and egalitarian consensus.
4. We propose that in collaborative research in the digital humanities, scholars should communicate recent research developments in their fields to their cross-discipline colleagues in layman's terms.

What training do humanities and non-humanities scholars need when doing work in the digital humanities?

For humanities scholars:

1. We propose that interested humanities scholars should learn a programming language (such as Python), so as to understand exactly what programming can accomplish in the humanities.
2. To learn to use regular expressions, or if those pose a difficulty, at the very least the use of wildcard characters when searching in Word.
3. To understand the use of encodings such as ANSI, GB, GBK, BIG-5, UTF-8, Unicode.
4. To understand basic Excel functions such as VLOOKUP, IF, LEFT, RIGHT etc.

For non-humanities scholars:

1. We propose that interested non-humanities scholars first read Prof Rong Xinjiang's book "Academic Training and Academic Norms: An Introduction to the Study of Early Chinese History".

How do we evaluate the results of digital humanities projects and research?

1. Evaluations of digital humanities projects and research should emphasize their scholarly contribution to the study of humanities.
2. The importance of engineering in digital humanities research must not be understated. We propose the following evaluative angle for the engineering work that goes into a digital humanities paper:
    a. The accuracy with which it addresses needs in the humanities
    b. Its systematic approach
    c. The reproducibility of the project's engineering methods
    d. Its ease of use and usefulness for humanities scholars
    e. The ability of data and/or tools to be reviewed by humanities scholars
    f. Compatibility with other projects
    g. Rate of citations in humanities scholarship.
3. We propose that data, models, algorithms and code should be publicly available and open-source. This enables digital humanities research to be reproduced and reviewed and helps to avoid unnecessary repetition of work others have conducted. We propose that research be shared on Github, and that methods should be shared in readme.md, and that copyright details should be explained. When it comes to the interests of local projects and centers, we understand the unwillingness to publicly share certain scholarly projects, but we strongly hope that all content can be made public and open-source wherever possible.

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Appendix 1: Practical Handbook

https://github.com/DHSIG/dhsig_bj_files/blob/master/Seminar%20references/201911/201911%20DHSIG%20-%20Beijing%20Seminar%20Practice%20Manual.docx

Appendix 2: Bibliography

https://github.com/DHSIG/dhsig_bj_files/tree/master/Seminar%20references/201911/references