20 Years of Digital Medievalist

A Reflection on the Development of a Community

Poster Design **Tessa Gengnagel** · *Image* **Codex Manesse (Cod. Pal. germ. 848), f. 273r**

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27 January 2002 **"Hello all, I'd like to thank you for the great interest you have shown in this list.** [...] In its final form, this will be a "Community of Practice" for medievalists working with digital media. There will be a refereed on-line journal for research articles, commentary pieces, project reports, bibliography, and reviews, and a notice board/community centre where we will be able to exchange expertise, establish and announce new projects, share tips, post examples, and work together on common problems. [...]

Email by Daniel O'Donnell – the first to be sent to the Digital Medievalist mailing list (dm-l)

Introduction

This year we celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the founding of Digital Medievalist (DM). In the light of this anniversary, the authors of this poster – all members of the DM community – have collected and analysed data about the Digital Medievalist and its activities, conducting interviews with former members that were central to the DM community and its development. The goal is to provide the collected material to the wider community and write an article about this organization that had a long-lasting impact on the medievalist community. (→ https://digitalmedievalist.wordpress.com)

Oral History

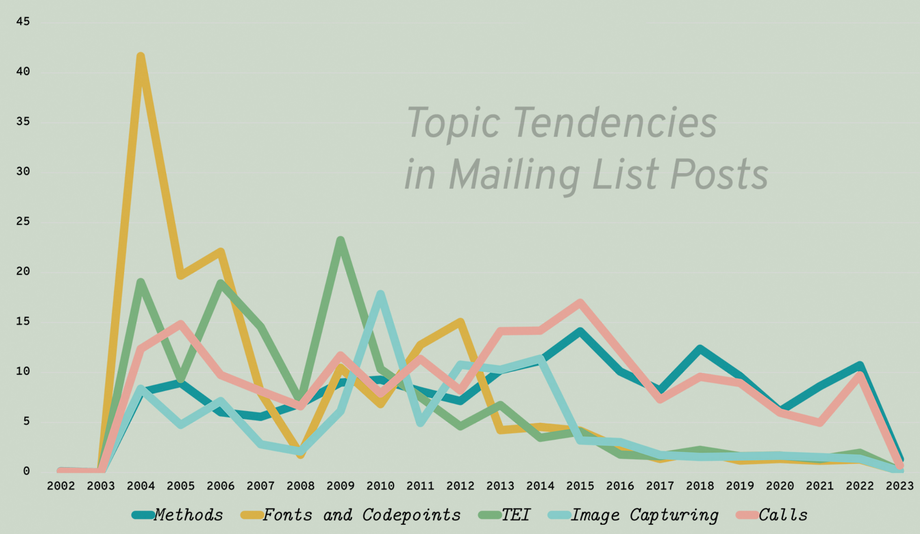
Oral history accounts of founding members of the DM community provide important insights into the motivations for establishing DM, its mailing list and journal, and how it has changed over time. The interviewees highlight the important role Digital Medievalist had in community- and identity-building. Some members identify DM as the core community for digital medieval studies.

So far, we conducted seven interviews and will provide them as transcripts for the community.

> "Initially, it was academic medievalists who didn't necessarily have in-depth digital skills, sharing experiences with each other and best practices… it was very much about trying to make sure that we were doing things in the right way, if we were going to, you know, spend this time and money making some digital resource.
>
> *James Cummings*

> "It was not only a community of practice but a community of identity. And so, people started joining Digital Medievalist, because that's how you show that you are a digital medievalist.
>
> *Daniel O'Donnell*

> "There was a lot of openness… let's see what this person is doing. It sounds interesting.
>
> *Arianna Ciula*



Mailing List Analysis

Since the mailing list was founded in 2002, over 3600 posts went through the *Digital Medievalist* mailing list hosted at the University of Lethbridge (Canada). The first two years were not preserved in an archive, except for the first email sent. A distant reading analysis based on topic modeling (using MALLET, McCallum, Andrew Kachites. "MALLET: A Machine Learning for Language Toolkit." http://mallet.cs.umass.edu, 2002) reveals insightful patterns: The mailing list started as a self-help group where the group discussed pertinent topics of interest. Questions like "How is the TEI used in practice? Which fonts/codepoints seem helpful for depicting an abbreviation? Which image-capturing technologies show promising results?" were at the center. Over the years, the list slowly switched to a tool for a settled community to share upcoming events, calls, and job opportunities.

With the topic modelling, 40 topics led to meaningful results, and some clusters identified single high-throughput contributors. A multilingual stop-word list was used to deal with the archived emails (some based on encodings different from Unicode). The list contained frequent words with no semantic value for the raised questions alongside control strings. All attachments were stripped before the analysis.

Numbers

Since 2004, there have been 23 sessions at the *International Congress on Medieval Studies* in Kalamazoo and 12 sessions at the *International Medieval Congress* in Leeds officially sponsored by Digital Medievalist, making for a total 35 **sessions**. The topics were very broad ("Text, Databases, and Dictionaries", Leeds 2006); they became more focused on encoding ("Diplomatics and Editorial Practices…", Leeds 2014). In recent years, papers focused on "best-practices" have dominated.

Since 2005, the *Digital Medievalist* **journal** has published 85 articles in 15 volumes (gold stanard OA, peer-reviewed): https://journal.digitalmedievalist.org/.

Since 2021, the Postgraduate Committee has publishing the **podcast** *Coding Codices* which has produced 14 episodes that have had more than 3,318 plays: https://codingcodices.com.