
General report

Unconference Digital Criticism

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Conference website: <https://critique-digitale.ch>



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1. Summary

The Unconference Digital Criticism / Critique Digitale / Digitale Kritik report presents in detail the main discussions held during the event and more broadly, the way participants think critically about digital technologies based on their personal and professional experiences. During two days, 14 panels were created in the unconference that cover different topics suggested and animated by the participants themselves such as pre-modern data for NLP techniques and digital selfcare tools.

The report is organized in five sections. First, the unconference motivation is introduced, as well as the keynotes (section 2). Second, the panels and their topics developed during the unconference are covered (section 3). Third, the methodology that was used for conducting a cross-panel analysis is presented (section 4). Fourth, the major themes that emerged transversally during the unconference are discussed in the results (section 5). Finally, the conclusion ends the report with a summary of the unconference issues that were addressed for new research perspectives (section 6).

2. Presentation Digital Criticism / Critique Digitale / Digitale Kritik

The unconference Digital Criticism / Critique Digitale / Digitale Kritik was funded by the Swiss Academy of Humanities and Social Sciences and dhCenter UNIL-EPFL thanks to an initiative by infoclio.ch, PDEN and members of the University of Bern and Lausanne. The unconference's main motivation is to put forward the priority of the humanities and social sciences' responsibility in developing a social and cultural critique of the digital world.

Indeed, the penetration of digital technologies in all disciplines as well as the dominant paradigm of the knowledge economy imply a profound mutation of traditional places of knowledge. To lead this critique, the unconference sought to collectively debate the main orientations around which to federate interdisciplinary collaborations and research projects.

The objective of the unconference was to bring together researchers and practitioners from different disciplines of the SHS and beyond to identify and problematize the challenges raised by datafication processes and the emergence of algorithms that play a central role in scientific work and in cultural activities. There is an opportunity to leverage the complementarity of approaches in social and human sciences for creating spaces likely to produce a reflexive knowledge of the digital phenomenon and to contribute to the social debate.

The chosen format of the event was that of an "unconference", known to the organizers from THATCamps, and consisting of collaborative events based on discussions whose precise topics are determined by the participants themselves at the time of the event. This format is particularly beneficial to bring together different professional actors and build common objectives.



This particular unconference builds upon a first event organized in 2011 by infoclio.ch at the University of Lausanne that attracted more than 100 participants and energized the Digital Humanities in Switzerland. The 2021 unconference was organized around the major topics of the contemporary cultural critique that address the challenges posed by digital technologies. It attracted (again) more than 110 participants over two days online.

At the unconference, three keynote speakers presented their approaches to a critical digitality: Nathalie Pignard-Cheynel (Université de Neuchâtel, Switzerland), Dominique Cardon (Médialab Sciences Po, Paris, France) and Mar Hicks (Illinois Institute of Technology, USA)¹. After an opening presentation by Markus Zürcher, Director of the Academy of Humanities and Social Sciences, the participants were able to discuss a variety of topics, as can be seen from the program [<https://critique-digitale.ch/#programme>]. We will briefly introduce them in the following section.

3. Panel Presentation by Topics

The unconference gathered 14 panels with multiple topics (Table 1) suggested by the participants, and selected using online voting [<https://app.mieuxvoter.fr>]. The voting method, called “majority voting”, was chosen because it gives preference to those candidates that are acceptable to most voters, as opposed to extreme outcomes.

The topics are presented according to three principles. First, the topics are organized according to the two-day unconference plan: Thursday (21.10.2021) and Friday (22.10.2021). Second, topics are separated into three of the “online hosting cities” from which some of the organizers are affiliated to: Basel, Zurich, Lausanne. Finally, topics are organized by the virtual rooms created at the unconference. Each virtual room was assigned to a panel slot.

Virtual rooms <u>Thursday, 21st of Oct.</u>	A- Basel	B- Zurich	C- Lausanne
Panel 1	Combining information from diverse collections and sources. Accessing visualizations	Critical digital literacy in the libraries for persons from different socio-cultural milieus (empowerment)	Algorithms as normative tools
Panel 2	Premodern data for NLP	Political discourse online on YouTube	Essential readings on digital criticism

¹ Recordings are available at the following link: Introduction + Keynote P. Cheynel:

<https://bbb.ch-open.ch/playback/presentation/2.3/31b3f63b08280799c2bffa5d32bd3b0022666ece-1634797796817> ;

D. Cardon:

<https://bbb.ch-open.ch/playback/presentation/2.3/31b3f63b08280799c2bffa5d32bd3b0022666ece-1634887186489> ;

M. Hicks: <https://bbb.ch-open.ch/playback/presentation/2.3/31b3f63b08280799c2bffa5d32bd3b0022666ece-1634826472822>



Panel 3	Transparency and democratizing archives by digitization	Micropublications (secure research data, do something participant driven, new ways for preprints)	Promesses et contraintes de l'intelligence des réseaux 5G
Virtual rooms <u>Friday, 22nd of Oct.</u>	A- Basel	B- Zurich	C- Lausanne
Panel 4		From papyri to photographs. Doing research with images	Non-uses of digital technology
Panel 5	Digital self care tools and utilities	How much advertising DH research while doing it?	Social media as a source for research (ethical, technical, legal)

Table 1: Unconference topics presented by day, panel number and online hosting city.

The 14 panels with their corresponding topics can be identified with a reference created by a letter (A, B or C) corresponding to the hosting city, and a number from 1 to 5 corresponding to the panel slot. For instance, one can read the table as follows: On Thursday 21, in panel 1 the topic at A-Basel was “Combining information from diverse collections and sources. Accessing visualizations”. This topic is identified as “A1” in the results part. In total, there are 14 identifiers that will help the reader to identify the topics at the unconference. The identifiers are A1, A2, A3, A5, B1, B2, B3, B4, B5, C1, C2, C3, C4, C5.

All topics are considered equally important at the unconference. The importance is not counted in terms of how many votes they got or how many participants were present in each panel. Instead, the report values every topic highly as topics were used as a medium for giving voice to the participants interested more broadly in critical stances.

4. Method

4.1. Individual and Collective Note Taking

At the unconference notes were taken individually and collectively. For the collective notes, participants were requested to take notes together on a collaborative platform [<https://framapad.org/>] for each panel according to the online documents previously created. For the individual notes, eight reporters were responsible for taking notes during the discussion in the 14 panels. Finally, reporters combined the individual and collective notes. They also summarized the main outputs in the discussions according to a reporting structure previously defined between the reporters and the reporting coordinator. Notes were taken in the language used during the discussions. The main language used was English, but there were also one discussion in French and one in German. The latter were summarized by the reporters in English. Every panel produced separately an individual report.



4.2. Explorative Thematic Analysis

The individual reports produced for the 14 panels at the unconference were explored using NVivo 12; a qualitative data analysis software for identifying significant themes across panels in an automated way. For creating a theme, Nvivo computes statistics and “detects significant noun phrases to identify the most frequently occurring themes. The process collects the themes and counts their mentions across all files in the set being processed.”(<https://help-nv.qsrinternational.com/12/win/v12.1.108-d3ea61/Content/coding/auto-detect-code-themes.htm>]

After detecting themes in an automated way using NVivo, the coordinator proceeded to a post-processing coding phase to review the codes. This phase was relevant to verify the coherence of the themes as the coordinator was present in the unconference and read the panels’ individual reports. She reviewed the automated codes and deleted repetitive codes. There are 15 themes retained, from which the four most frequent themes evoked across panels are analyzed and presented in detail in the following result section. The themes are research, digital, knowledge, information. The goal is to present in an exploratory manner, the main concerns, challenges and solutions that participants provided across panels for each specific theme identified.

5. Results

In this section we first provide an overview on the themes evoked at the unconference. Secondly, we focus on developing the major themes across panels.

5.1. Themes

There are 15 themes identified in total across the 15 panels. The themes are data, digital, discourse, history, information, knowledge, process, projects, public, research, results, social media, texts, topics, traditional.

Some themes were more present in some panels than others (see Annex 2). For instance, the theme “data” was present in three panels; A1, A2, A4. In contrast, the theme “research” was present in ten panels: A1, A2, A4, B1, B2, B3, B5, C1, C4, C5. While some themes are predominant because they are directly related to the panel’s topic, these results do not mean that “data” was not important in other panels.

For this report’s purpose, as we intend to provide a transversal analysis of the unconference, we present in section 5.3 the major cross-panel themes where every theme is defined. Before presenting the analysis, in the following subsection the themes and subthemes are represented visually in a hierarchical way.

5.2. Hierarchical Theme Visualization and Definition



There are 138 themes and subthemes that were identified cross-panel. They are visually presented below in Figure 1 by color and size, according to the theme frequency (how many times the theme can be found within a noun phrase in every panel). The detailed list can be found in annex 2 and they are visually presented in detail in the provided digital files attached to this report.



Figure 1. Hierarchical Theme Visualization

5.3. Major Cross-panel Themes' Analysis

Four themes were the most frequently evoked by participants cross-panel during the unconference (Table 2).

Theme	Frequency
Research	10
Digital	9
Knowledge	6
Information	5

Table 2. Frequency by main four themes.

1 The meaning and practices of conducting digital research

The first theme identified across panels is research. Throughout different topics and objects of studies at the unconference, participants were mainly (i) defining what digital research means, (ii) discussing the current challenges to conduct research about/within the digital, (iii) proposing solutions to facilitate the research process.

(i) When defining digital research, on the one hand, participants compared digital research with traditional research, participants found difficulties, and we are reminded of the same difficulties. On the



other hand, they expressed that DH research is more about speed and collaboration. “Research in the area moves so fast, we can't wait 3 years to the official publication.” (Panel B5). Moreover, DH projects “involve sharing time with other researchers; [but how much of that time is useful for the research] regarding the amount of time invested [is unclear].” (Ibid.).

(ii) When discussing the main challenges on how to conduct digital research, participants criticized how each research community has their own standard, which is too specific to apply to research in other disciplines. This standardization makes it difficult to conduct interdisciplinary research. One main challenge is to reuse the research pipeline, or specific tasks and results that are already produced, in new research. Some participants consider it useful to present intermediary results or databases. Participants find difficult to process pre-modern data, and are confused about where to publish. While there is an advantage in “the automation of manually unfeasible projects/tasks”, participants find it hard “to assess the effort and return of processing digitally pre-modern data in a big editing project.” (Panel A2). Some participants highlighted the advantages of publishing research online, but others explained the critical aspect of securing research data, transforming information into data, and sharing it. A main concern was to define research data and the utility of providing data resources. To participants, data are often unorganized, and the research journal procedures are often trivial. In contrast, the terms of transparency and reproducibility were appropriate to characterize research data processes. The idea of sharing research process examples as models to learn from was also important. Some participants also highlighted the problem of spending too much time programming tools for the research project. The programming part, and the documentation of the research process is time consuming.

(iii) Finally, the participants proposed some solutions to tackle current challenges about digital research. As a main take away, it was stated that “In the digital era, forms of publications need to become more hybrid and flexible. What research data must be included in the publications, which institutions have the authority to fix publications, and when the moment of fixing and valuing a publication happens, remains to be determined.” (Panel B3). Another idea was to develop research interests through critical algorithmic studies, or by “queering the DH [Digital Humanities]” (Panel C4). When framing the research, one should also take into consideration that researchers’ are both observers of a system and part of it. Related to these solutions, the keynote speaker Mar Hicks offered a rich presentation on the benefits of post-colonial and feminist studies. In particular, they made a parallel between history and today’s situation in the technology industry. She also covered issues related to the characteristics and conditions of the workforce, the invisibility and vulnerability of some actors, as well as the gendered business model in the technology industry.

2 Digital inclusion and digital life quality

The second theme identified is digital. The discussion mainly covered (i) digital critical literacy, and (ii) personal and professional struggles within the digital environment.



(i) Critical digital literacy was an important issue for the unconference participants. “Inspired by ideas and concepts of Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire concerning critical pedagogy, the following question arose: how critical digital literacy can be improved to step up to digital poverty, which became especially apparent through the pandemic, and hegemonic structures in research publishing.” (Panel B1). It was highlighted by participants that there is a level of complexity related to the use of digital tools. Therefore, these tools required a certain technological literacy. This evidence contradicts the fact that users are looking for technologies that facilitate their activities. As digital tools do not necessarily enhance performance, one should seek to better understand “non-use” practices of digital tools, e.g., non-use as a self-protection measure; define a timespan for not using the mobile phone (see Panel C4). Some participants found it useful to compare digital practices with research practices of pre-digital times to understand the real transformations coming along with digital technologies. For instance, “One of the participants questioned the specific digital properties of the dating apps in comparison with the traditional forms of dating.” (Panel A1). The answer by one researcher was that users learn new things with digital tools that are later used in offline contexts.

(ii) Concerning the struggles within the digital environment, participants expressed their personal and professional experiences on the use of digital tools. To tackle these struggles, the selfcare project “Twinkle” was presented “which was inspired by people who are emotionally or physically overwhelmed by digital tools.” (Panel A5). In addition, researchers acknowledged the relevance of advertising their research in social media. At the same time, they claimed this task is time consuming so they do not do it and suggested that “universities should provide financing for social media presence.” (Panel B5). More broadly, a group “also discussed their own position as researchers in a larger context of digital capitalism and immersed in an algorithmic structure” (Panel C5): a position that carries on some difficulties to do something freely in a powerful overarching system.

In that respect, keynote speaker Nathalie Pignard-Cheynel presented a study conducted with journalism students and the way they understand algorithms. Based on the insights of her study, she emphasizes the need to focus on the digital imaginary and the place it has taken in culture.

3 Solutions for digital knowledge production

The third theme is related to knowledge. The discussion was centered on solutions for producing knowledge about/with the digital: (i) learning from other types of knowledge, and (ii) filling the gap between the global north and south.



(i) To learn from other types of knowledge, participants consider that some predominant research techniques, such as natural language processing, could benefit from previous knowledge produced on the study of texts. This combination of knowledge from different disciplines can be useful to students. To participants, “institutions must get more flexible and welcome knowledge outside of the western academic bias (including citizen science [field] and people with different cultural backgrounds).” (Panel A2). Moreover, it emerged during the discussions that study programs and academic initiatives should ensure knowledge transfer between older and younger researchers. While the field of digital humanities is rich in terms of interdisciplinarity, participants found it relevant to ensure transversal interests to make the network stronger. Moreover, it could be beneficial to do something with the digital humanities knowledge and expertise produced outside academia.

(ii) At the heart of knowledge production, participants identified a divide between the global north and the global south. As a solution to fill in the gap between these poles, participants suggested that “new knowledge sources are needed [to put closer the global south and global north for] pushing the current boundaries in research.” (Panel B1). For instance, creating “digital humanities journals which are open globally and start thinking beyond the traditional threshold. Also, there must be found a way how copyright and licenses can be loosened for certain cases.” (Ibid.).

4 Interrogating information production processes

The fourth theme is information. Participants were mainly focused on discussing (i) the quantity and speed in which information is produced online, and (ii) the production process of information.

(i) A lot of information produced at high speed online makes it difficult for researchers to filter out the relevant information to study. A particular problem when conducting social media research is the difficulty to know who the study subjects are. For instance, “the demographic information about the people who leave comments is missing” (Panel B2). Related to this, the keynote speaker Dominique Cardon gave a presentation on the benefits and challenges of conducting research on Youtube. He discussed what information can be extracted from online comments, how to analyze it, and more broadly, how to understand social practices within the digital from experiences drawn from the medialab history, and the actor network theory.

(ii) To participants, it is important to “conscientize the students and concerned audience to the inherent hegemonic power structures within the information resources” (Panel B1). They consider that “critical digital literacy is not only about teaching to use digital tools, but also to be able to interrogate the production and infrastructure of the information production process.” (Ibid.). A current problem is how open access is defined: “Digitizing and spreading information is easily possible nowadays but licenses and copyrights, often supported by certain lobbies, prevent the use of scientific content for people outside a certain social status.” (Panel B1).



5 Conclusion

The report shows, first, the way the unconference was organized in a bottom-up approach. It brought together young researchers and experts in academia from different disciplines, as well as #alt-ac (Alternative-Academics like librarians, archivists, and independent academics), and people outside of academia. The participants defined and voted on the topics they wanted to discuss. The topics are a reflection of the main issues in the community of critical digital studies and digital humanities. Ultimately, this bottom-up approach helped to keep the Swiss community alive, to grow, and learn collectively.

Second, by presenting the four major themes analyzed and every panel topic that took place at the unconference, the report enhances with new perspectives the state of research, debates, and reflections in the community. Digital phenomena were tackled from the humanities perspective, including sociological and computing preoccupations. There were discussions about design research methods and processes, ethical and interdisciplinary considerations, as well as academic power relations between the global north and the global south. Yet, some general questions remained open to debate: To what extent digital is a concept we can grasp? What is the consistency of the digital term for the humanities?

While the concept of the digital was criticized, participants were creative and provided a set of solutions for each topic. More generally, the participants showed how a broad mindset can help improve the interdisciplinarity of digital studies and the digital humanities.