# Conclusion: Lessons from a 360º digital public history experiment

The journey through this book has been both an intellectual and a practical exploration of what it means to ‘do history’ in the digital age. The hermeneutics of practice that emerged from this study is not a fixed methodology but an evolving ethos—a way of thinking and doing history that is attuned to the challenges and opportunities of our time. By foregrounding hands-on experimentation, this approach highlights the value of engaging directly with digital tools, acknowledging their interferences, and critically reflecting on their implications for historical scholarship.

The Memorecord project demonstrated the power of participatory design and community collaboration in shaping historical research. By inviting participants to share their migration memories, the project created a space for shared authority and pluralistic storytelling. At the same time, it revealed the complexities of mediated memories and the ways in which digital technologies shape the narratives we construct. These insights underscore the need for historians to remain critically engaged with the digital—not merely as users but as active shapers of its possibilities.

Throughout this book, I have argued that the digital turn in history requires a shift in how we approach sources, methods, and interpretation. Hermeneutics of practice provides a framework for navigating this shift, combining the rigor of traditional historiography with the creativity and adaptability demanded by digital contexts. It is a framework that insists on the historian’s agency in shaping the tools and processes of research, while also embracing the uncertainties and serendipities that arise from experimentation.

The broader implications of this approach extend beyond digital history. As the boundaries between analogue and digital, academic and public, local and global continue to blur, historians must grapple with questions of representation, ethics, and accessibility in new ways. Hermeneutics of practice offers a means of addressing these questions, fostering a more inclusive and reflective historiographical practice.

As this book concludes, it is my hope that it will inspire historians and practitioners in allied fields to embrace the experimental ethos that underpins hermeneutics of practice. By doing so, we can not only enrich our own work but contribute to a broader reimagining of what historical scholarship can achieve in the digital age. Let this be an invitation to think critically, act boldly, and, above all, to engage with the digital as an integral part of our shared intellectual journey.   
The conclusion of this PhD research is an invitation for us all to engage productively with experimental approaches in this critical time in which we face the transition from the analogue to the digital ways of doing history. Throughout the thesis, I tried to demonstrate how more and more it is the case of a *hybridisation* of the *doing* rather than a radical renovation of methods and theoretical assumptions descolated from the knowledge we accumulate since the foundation of the historical discipline. However, this reference to the epistemological basis of our discipline does not dispense the need for updating it to the taste of the time, as I suggested in [Chapter 4](#_Chapter_4:_The). In my discussion about the *tira-gostos* (appetizers) resulting from the analysis of the Memorecord’s harvested memories I argue that we need to approximate flexibility and history no matter how strange or uncomfortable it may sound to the guardians of rigor. Flexibility is key if we want to experience a true experiment.

However, I understand that such flexibility does not depend exclusively on the researchers’ will. There are, indeed, a series of factors that can operate limiting or enabling a flexible posture. While it may depend considerably on the historian’s methodological idiosyncrasies as well as his/her theoretical and ideological preferences, the chance of being flexible and taking risks is, in the long run, principally dependent on the researcher’s *social place*, as I discussed following Michel de Certeau’s ideas in [Chapter 1](#_Chapter_1:_Framework:). The historiographical operation takes place in specific personal and institutional circumstances that imply a whole “topography of interest” (Certeau 1988, 58) that may affect the research, such as particular rules and protocols of this *place* or even the researcher position (i.e. professor, liberal professional, observer, etc.). In my case, as I stressed in the introductory chapter, being a PhD in a newly founded centre for Digital History such as C²DH, I was privileged to be in contact with a critical mass of researchers embedded in the spirits of the “laboratory of historical uncertainty”, willing to experiment and exchange about their work.C²DH’s thinkering philosophy that embraces the “building as a way of knowing” (Watrall 2016), was what concretely endorsed my hands-on approarch.

In addition to the experimental ethos running through C²DH, I have made it clear in [Chapter 2](#_Chapter_2:_), how reliant my project was on C²DH’s Digital Research Infrastructure. In other words, a mindset alone might not be enough if we want to create something new, with tools and techniques that at first may be estranged to us. Without the collaboration with computer experts I would have not been able to develop a whole new platform, which would lead me to a selection of a third-party Content Management System (CMS) that would not be as suitable to needs as Memorecord was, being developed in-house from scratch to screen, e.g. Wordpress, which was said to be “cold” or “institutional”. Most critically, without the expertise and support from the IT and Design colleagues at C²DH, I would have been unable to correspond to the expectations of the community members who took part in the participatory design of the platform. Ultimately, the lack of expert support and infrastructure, could have jeopardised the very idea of shaping the digital memory platform together.

Looking from the public historian point of view, what I valued the most from the process of creating the plataform in a collaborative way, by means of participatory design, was the fact that sharing the ongoing development with the interested community really created some extra room for negotiating shared-authority. Having participants engaging effectively in the design of the project from its early stages enriched my understanding of the potential participants viewpoints, something which, later on, when it was the time to interpret the memories collected through the crowdsourcing, proved to be enlightening to the unravelling of the performances encountered on social media. During the process of building the platform, as described along the Memorecord’s roadmap, I was also implementing participatory design as a way to empower the community and "some kind of empathy" [(Caldas and Pihlainen 2019)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?smuo2Z).

What I was not fully aware at that early stage was how constructive that approach would have been at the end of the research cycle, when I was confronting myself with the sources. In fact, after having visited all the research phases, from the conceptualisation of the very mean to collect the sources until the online publication of the thesis itself always having the public in mind, I realised how fecund this kind of 360º experiment – or 360º history, as argued in [Chapter 3](#_Chapter_3:_Analysing) (p.136) – can be for digital public history projects animated from within the academia aiming at contributting to historiography too. From departure, I did not have this idea clear in my mind, as discussed in the introduction of the case study, the objective was rather oriented towards a “history from below” perspective, inspired by the British *History Workshop* movement. However, at the end of the journey, I realised that by expanding the qualitative participation and authorship of the public within the different phases of the project we could enable together a somewhat 360º outlook, meaning that we – historian and community – were doing people’s history not only in terms of content, but also conceptually and methodologically wise.

There were, however, some degrees to which the project was still very much centered in my role as a researcher, of course, especially when it came to the very specific tasks of methods analysis and source criticism. Nevertheless, it would have been interesting to engage the participants at least in some stages of the sources interpretations. In Memorecord, as demonstraded throughout [Chapter 2](#_Chapter_2:_), community members were involved in the project as co-designers, as interview partners and crowdsourcees, as audience to the Memorecord projetct, and, finally, were taken into account as potential readers of this thesis’ online version as much as my history peers[[1]](#footnote-1). Still, as I explained earlier, some detours prevented me from concluding the activities planned with this aim. Regrettably, that was a missed opportunity to investigate this enhanced form of qualitative community participation. I leave, however, the indication of the need for future research exploring these possibilities in more depth, as for instance, with an evaluation of the benefit of Extreme Citizen Science (Hacklay 2015; English et al, 2018) practice for digital public history and historical research at large.

While my contribution did not go as far as I expected with respect to this further degree of qualitative engagement of participants, which could have fostered an estimulating debate for public history, I believe my position in C²DH did provide me the crucial context to make a provocative claim for a new hermeneutics of practice in the specific realms of digital public history. In [Chapter 3](#_Chapter_3:_Analysing), I deliberatedly examine how C²DH’s research environment was determinant to the realisation of my experiment, but analysing it beyond the more immediate aspect of expert support, emphasised in [Chapter 2](#_Chapter_2:_). In the analysis of digital methods carried out as an intermediary step between the building of the platform ([Chapter 2](#_Chapter_2:_)) and the interpretation of the crowdsourced memories ([Chapter 4](#_Chapter_4:_The)), I argue that within the emerging field of digital hermeneutics we might need a new form of it that enables us to unbox the uncertainties brought by the digital component.

As discussed in [Chapter 3](#_Chapter_3:_Analysing), the tool-oriented approach that has marked the first decades of digital humanities is slowly unfolding into a more hybrid form of engagement with new tools and methods that benefits from activities like building and modeling as true ways of thinking. I discussed this learning by doing spirit along the notion of *thinkering*, which draws on experimental approached in the field of media archeology, with deep philosophical roots in Cassirer’s double act of *grasping*, encompassing the conceptual and technical design of things; simply put, grasping as a ‘hermeneutic act’ (Hall and Ellis 2019, 125). Thinkering, somehow, already embodies the combination of these two dimensions of grasping. Actually, the term *per se*, literally, suggests combining two different activities that, at the end of the day, are entitled in a form that is pretty much alike, and are performed in association (*to think* and *to tinker*). Hermeneutics of practice, in its turn, is a necessary oxymoron, a constant reminder of the antithesis that we need to break.

My claim is not that historians are urged to become programmers or machine wizards, in the lines of what Ladurie wrote back in 1968 – “The historian will be a programmer or he will be nothing” – but that we need to go hybrid not only in combining old and new tools and methods, as argued by Zaagsma, but also in the creative fusion of intellectual and hands-on work. In *Le fin des érudits*, the article subtitled the super quoted passage above by Ladurie, he specifies that: “in history, as elsewhere, what counts is not the machine, but the problem. The machine is only of interest to the extent that it makes it possible to tackle new questions, original by the methods, the contents and especially the breadth.” (Ladurie, 1968, translated from French by me)[[2]](#footnote-2). Indeed, computers and softwares might not be of much help if we do not grasp the problems. The same could be said about analogue archives. However, what may be distinct in the digital age is the fact that not all research begins with a problem at departure as it used to be. Clavert’s project on the First World War on Twitter, for instance, did not begin with a clear research question. As we discussed during a research seminar in 2018, it began by the interest of archiving the tweets for future exploration (Clavert 2018), and as he has developed his collection and started playing around with his digital bricolage, the problems arise.

The core point of reflection seems to be that in the digital age a great deal of problems emerge from the technological mediation itself, brought by the *possibilities* but also the *limitations* introduced by the digital component. From what I could observe from my own experiment, this new breed of problems is intrinsically related to the digital interferences in research. This is, what I addressed in [Chapter 3](#_Chapter_3:_Analysing), the conditioning of the historiographical operation by the digital component. I argued that these **digital interferences** bring about a series of ontological implications that affect the way we do history at methodological and interpretative level.

In this thesis I discussed a concrete case study that demonstrated how the different phases of the historiographical operation – documental, explication, representation – are intricate (Certeau 1988) and how, consequently, digital interferences that may apparently be affecting only one stage of research are, in fact, potentially conditioning the whole research. I argued that **digital interferences** create disturbances, enable and disable heuristic tools for historiography, and that thinking about the said operation as a whole system, in a *360º outlook* so to say, help us perceive the interdependencies and resonances a particular technical detail in one point of the research may have elsewhere in the work. The hermeneutics of practice is, finally, the active posture of identifying these interferences through experimentation, even when, and perhaps above all, when we do not comprehend the tools in their completeness. Hermeneutics of practice, I believe, might be the most realistic path towards a safe navigation of the Data age for historians. Since we cannot expect that a global and evenly distributed training will allow us all to develop the multimodal literacy and criticism needed to deal with all the *more or less* hidden interferences, being able, hopefully, not to become captive of the machines, but apply them critically, aware of their non-neutrality.

While becoming a programmer may not be an urgence though, equipping ourselves to criticize *the digital* in its many facets – tool, object of study, exploratory laboratory, expressive medium, or activist venue (Svensson 2016; 2010) – is at the *ordre du jour.* A true digital source criticism, or data criticism, will necessarily consider all the other aspects of the digital, because, as discussed, the digital interferences are not punctual, but intersectional, transversal and iterative regarding the different layers of the digital work. The value of experimentation in such a context, should be one of rigor. As much as it could sound contradictory, taking risks in working with the unknown seem to necessary these days. In this sense, I ratify Ankersmit’s claim "the most pronounced subjectivity is the condition for the highest degree of objectivity" (Ankersmit 2005, 103). As I pointed out in several passages throughout the thesis, experiments might be different from one another, and this, has also to do with the subjective charge of the experimenter. In Chapters [2](#_Chapter_2:_) and [3](#_Chapter_3:_Analysing), while discussing the development and interpretation of Memorecord I tried to salient this subjectivity. I exposed that often through self-reflexive comments. I believe I made it clear that being transparent in the exposition of my methods was my way to keep my experiment inteligible and objective to other researchers. And this composed a resilient strand in the whole thesis: the importance of documenting the process of doing what we are doing with the digital is fundamental if we want our digital work to be welcome, not only by our “digital peers”, but in the broader discipline of history.

In the direction of building this all inclusive dialogue around the digital history scholarship, finally, I raised the hypothesis that we could be witnessing, among digital practitioners & thinkers the development of a specific *style of reasoning* of/about/in/within digital and digital public history. Styles of reasoning seek objectivity, as we saw with Hacking. Digital hermeneutics, in this context, could be the amalgam to blend digital historians. It could help to establish a culture of documenting and sharing the process of doing digital history and digital public history. With clear enough, shared standards, I believe that historians from within and outside the digital history trading zones could critically engage with digital work. Having reached such a common basis, which see as a popularisation of a particular **style of reasoning of/about/in/within** digital and digital public history, I am convinced, it would contribute to the state of the art of the digital history scholarship, moving forward from definitional debates, and producing, critical historical research with the digital component.

Finally, based on my experience with Memorecord, I proposed an imaginative exercise about what would be the *crucial contexts with short, open and flexible prompts* that I consider key to enable these envisioned best practices for digital history scholarship and digital public projects. To digital history, I played around the metaphor of crossroads, bringing together **openness, collaboration, infrastructuring and training & evaluation** that prepare historians to do digital history research and apply hermeneutics of practice. For digital public history, I expanded the metaphor to the rather open intersection of roundabouts that would combine the same prompts of digital history with two further references that I considered fundamental for digital public history: **shared authority and participatory design**.

This thesis was an overlapping of these prompts, powered by the C²DH experimental ethos and my desire to experience a true hands-on approach blending the **digital history** competences, with its *heuristic triggers* and the **digital public history** approach, with its *empathetic triggers.* Throughout the chapters I described in details and reflected theoretically uopn the implementation of **hermeneutics and/as practice**, underscoring the need for a continuous conjugation of theory and practice, interpretation and participatory projects.

1. Of course, I consider that history experts and the general public may have different styles of reading and likewise, a distinct way to engaged with the discussions of each chapter in a depth that may variate according to the preferences and interest. However, publishing the thesis online was considered to be a way to allow readers, both professional and non professional historians, to get through its contents in a free navigation flow that does not end purely in textual language, but allows the audience to engage with audiovisual material and eventual hyperlinked connections in a non linear fashion. This might, I expect, cause alluring to those not interested in an exhaustive reading, and could benefit from the layered way in which information is structured on the digital platform. See: <http://pupmemo.uni.lu/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Originally written in French: "en histoire, comme ailleurs, ce qui compte, ce n'est pas la machine, mais le problème. La machine n'a d'intérêt que dans la mesure où elle permet d'aborder des question neuves, originales par les méthods, les contenus et sourtout l'ampleur." [↑](#footnote-ref-2)