What's digital about Digital Humanities?

Introduction

what digitality has meant in the digital humanities

Fifteen years ago, the author of this chapter was participating to a digital humanities "unconference"[1]: among the many topics discussed, the participants wondered if 'analog' and 'digital' humanities would one day converge. One answer came out: it would not be possible to see both converge without traditional humanities adopting digital humanities' practices (and for instance unconferences, openness – open access, open data and so on – etc.) Those practices were not all digital *per se* – some were induced by the use of digital tools, but others seem more to be a question of sheer traditions, not necessarily linked to the use of any digital tools. Wikis, for instance, did not invent collaboration. After all, digital humanities did not only relate to Humanities and computing – there was something more, linked to what could be called culture, or traditions.

What's digital in Digital Humanities? The answer seems obvious, but the twod words and the expression they are combined into bear ambiguities and ambivalences. None of them have easy definition, all the more that there are variations from one country to the other. We could also add that their history, their temporality – from a centuries old word (Humanities) to an expression coined around 2004 for Digital Humanities – are quite different. 'Digital' – from latin, related to fingers and by extension numbers under 10 and, starting around 1945, what is related to computer opposed to analog technologies – and 'Humanities', both latin words, but with meanings that are older for humanities, with strong traditions, and more recent with 'digital' (its change of meaning at least), and a tradition that is being built, in a way. That's what's digital humanities is trying to confront, centuries old traditions and a few decades old other one.

Questioninig the digitality of Digital Humanities is questioning those definitions and temporalities and how they are confronting within the term "digital humanities". The aim of this chapter proposal is to evaluate the *digitality* of digital humanities. In *The Archived Web* (Brügger (2018) Chapter 2, "The Digital and the Web"), Niels Brügger notes that many publications about "digital and X" (p. XX) have been published, without much reflection on what *digital* means. If we stand from a particular use of electricity that is at the center of the binary system that is a computer, *digital* means the use of '0' (no electricity) and '1' (electricity) as an alphabet (Finnemann, quoted by Brügger[^finnemann]). The problem of such a definition of *digital* is that 0/1 are to be seen as building blocks. Let's then follow Brügger:

[finnemann]: Finnemann, N. O. (1999). Modernity modernised: The cultural impact of computerisation. In P. A. Mayer (Ed.), Computer, media and communication (pp. 141–159). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

> In the present context, the term digitality is used to capture the specific ways in which the digital bits are materialized and combined in a concrete media artifact and in concrete texts.

So, what's the digitality of Digital Humanities? In other words, what's *digital* in the *digital* humanities? How did (still do) Digital Humanities set up specific ways to transform digital bits, to materialize them into concrete artefacts, and maybe more cultural ones (see notion of 'digital' as a culture (see Doueihi (2012)). There are canonical definitions of Digital Humanities, the oldest one being in *A Companion to Digital Humanities* (2004, see below):

> Especially since the 1990s, with the advent of the World Wide Web, digital humanities has broadened its reach, yet it has remained in touch with the goals that have animated it from

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[1]That happened during THATCamp 2009. For a definition of what were THATCamps, please go to the now archived website: https://thatcamp.org/about/index.html. The anecdote here dates back to THATCamp CHNM 2009. One blog post discussing that can be read here: https://chnm2009.thatcamp.org/06/25/us-vs-them/index.html. The anecdote is narrated as it happened according to the author's memory – it might have happened otherwise.

the outset: using information technology to illuminate the human record, and bringing an understanding of the human record to bear on the development and use of information technology. (http://digitalhumanities.org:3030/companion/view?docId=blackwell/9781405103213/978140 5103213.xml&chunk.id=ss1-1-3&toc.depth=1&toc.id=ss1-1-3&brand=9781405103213_brand) (Schreibman, Siemens, and Unsworth (2004)).

This definition – that also describes the transition from Humanities computing to Digital Humanities – describes a sort of return ticket of the Humanities to information technologies. But this return-ticket does not say much, in the end, of the digitality in the digital humanities, as it sends the definition of 'digital' to information technologies.

The answer to those questions depends on *how* Digital Humanities can be defined. And this *how* is far from easy. Based on a database made of *Day of DH* quotes - a yearly event mobilising quite broadly the DH community –, Jason Heppler created the website *What is Digital Humanities* that relies on around 800 different definitions of DH.
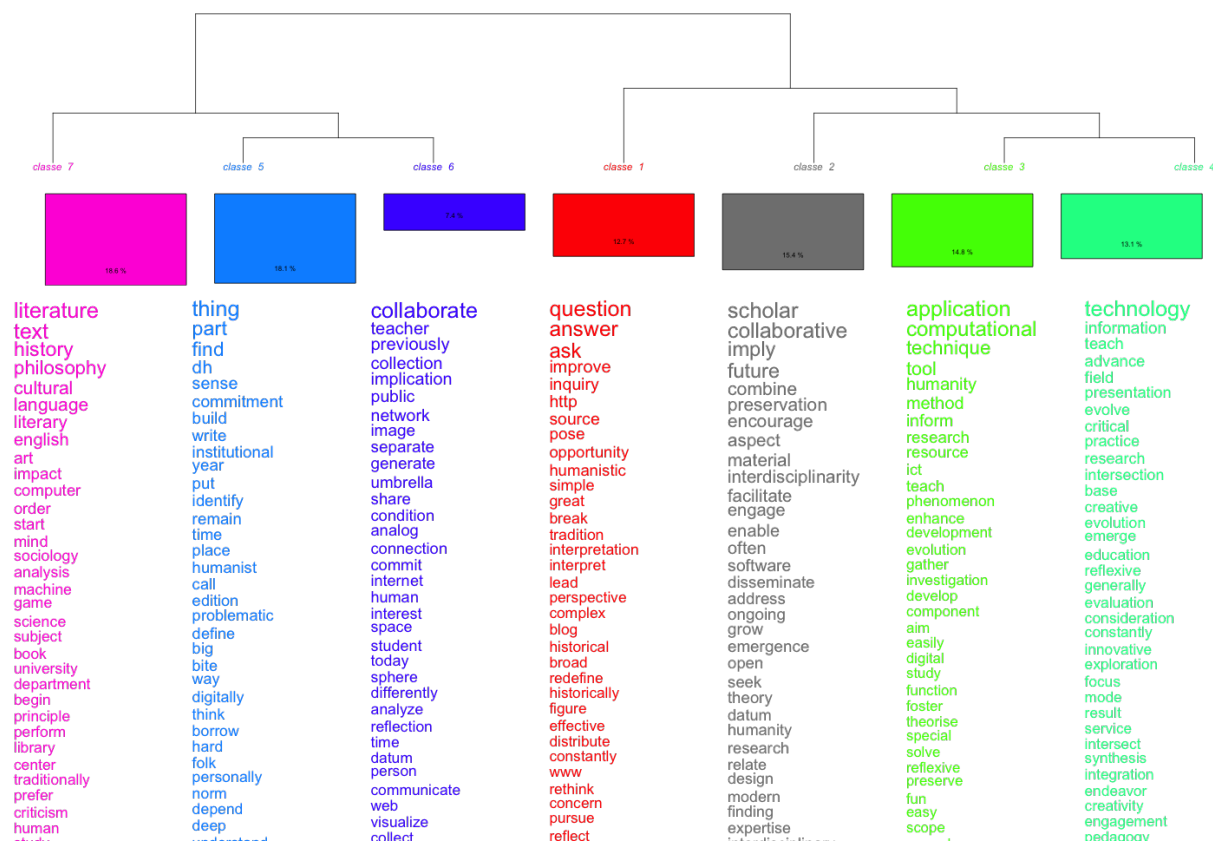

Figure 1: Figure 1 – Clustering (Hierachical desending Clustering, based on Reinert (1993) as implemented in the iramuteq application)

The Figure 1 is a distant reading (a quantitative approach) of those almost 800 quotes that looks for a definition of digital humanities: and there is obvisouly not much about 'digital' *per se¨*. Where are 0s and 1s? What digitality means to Digital Humanities?

The History of Digital Humanities as a myth

The usual narration of Digital Humanities history starts with a meeting between Roberto Busa, a Jesuit, and his project of indexing Thomas Aquinas' full work, with IBM chairman, Thomas J. Watson, in

1946. As Roberto Busa passed away in 2011 at 97, most generations of researchers in Humanities computing and, then, Digital Humanities could still read his foreword to *A Companion to Digital Humanities* (**busaCompanionDigitalHumanities?**).

Busa's project, the *Index Thomisticus*, indexed, in the end, more than 10 millions words, in 56 volumes. The first of them was published in 1974 and the publication of all volumes was completed in 1980. In the end, the *Index Thomisticus* was a *digital* project – in the sense that it used *digital* machines that were mainframes – with paper (it began using punchcards) or analog (tapes) inputs and paper outputs (books). The project was then transformed into CD-ROM (19192) and into a website (2005). In the end, this project bears analog as well as digital caracteristics, influenced numerous other projects, but also bears some aspects of a myth: a key person (Roberto Busa), an influence over several generations, the insistance on text and on ways to transform text inot something that can be computed and structured (lemmatization, concordances, etc).

Other usual steps of a traditional history of Digital Humanities include the creation of two associations - the Association for Literary and Linguistic Computing (ALLC) in 1973 (today, the European Association for Digital Humanities) and the Association for Computer in the Humanities (1978), the former more european and the latter being more north-american. Starting in 1988, the two associations organised a conjoint annual conference. With the Association for Computational Linguistics, both created the Text Encoding Initiative (TEI) consortium – a major actor in Humanities computing and today in Digital Humanities that shows how Humanities Computing were rooted into the study of text. The TEI has has as a main mission to encourage *via* a common markup language the encoding and semanticization of the digital version of texts. The strong influence of computational linguistics but also of English departments ((**kirschenbaumChapterWhatDigital2012?**)) is often emphasized to explain tis part of DH history. In itself, the work within and between associations is a rather traditional (in the sense, here, of non-digital) one.

A more digital step if this history is the creation of the *Humanist* Discussion Group – *Humanist* and not *Digital Humanist* – by Willard McCarthy.

Further steps (with switch to Digital Humanities): - 2004 Blackwell Companion to digital humanities => switch from - 2005 Creation of ADHO - 2006 first Digital Humanities conference (based on the joint conferences of ACH ALLC) at the good old Sorbonne!

Several interpretations about the switch to Digital Humanities:

- The immediate origins of Digital Humanities – a discussion between researchers and a publisher (Blackwell): a mere rebrand (see the origins of the *Companion*)
- others (including myself) give it another meaning: consequence of datafication (of text and humanities sources in general) / networkization (the advent of the web).
- new practices and newcommers? DH Hype.

Roberto Busa: firther comments / elements to insert:

- Reactions to his death –> see a text by S. Ramsay on his former blog (but not easy to fin, blog erased).
- Why Busa, and what does it say of DH and their digitality / the importance of digitality for DH.

The Great Rename: when Humanities Computing became Digital Humanities
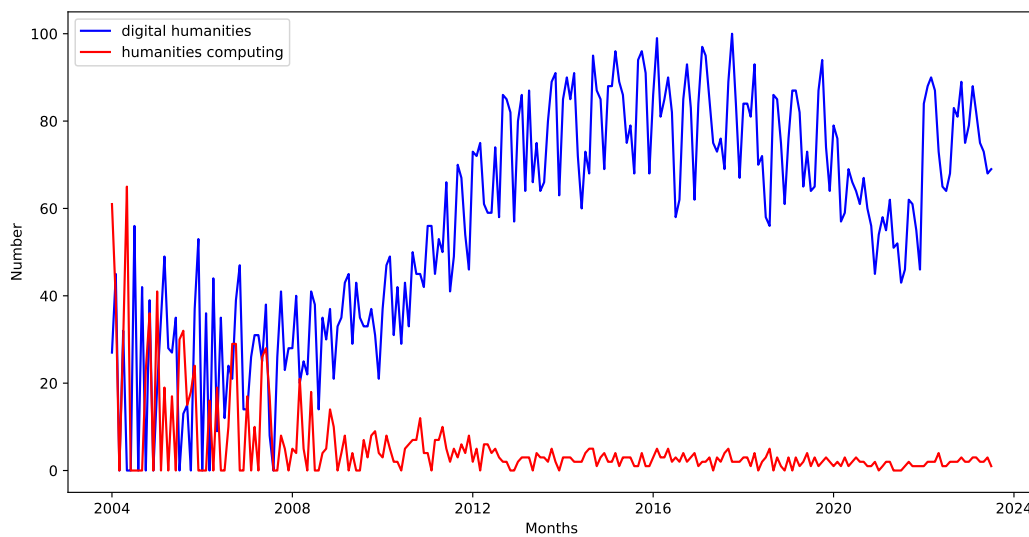
Further elements to insert / comment:

Figure 2 – Google trends: Humanities Computing and Digital Humanities.

A counter-history of Digital Humanities?

Many other disciplines that linguistics and litterary studies have used computers. Example of the Schoole of the Annales:

- 1959: first article in the *Annales*, mentionning the use of computing, use of mainframes in article from 1961 (archaeology) => same mainframes as Busa (*ie* mainframes facilities from euratom).
- of course, all quantitative works of the Annales (Leroy Ladurie => "L'historien sera programmeur ou ne sera pas") and the braudelian *longue durée* frame that fits quite well with the use of computers.

In a way the Annales were integrated into DH after 2004, *via* Moretti and Distant Reading + History Manifesto and *longue durée* (linked to distant reading too).

To be linked to Ted Underwood's article on distant reading in litterature history => is not obligatory 'digital' (ie with computers).

What does it says about the importance of the digital and which digital was important in DH? Why linguistics was digital but not quantitative history? Whereas Busa - who also used the Euratom facilities in Italy for his project – worked on the same mainframes than some French and Western-European researchers (Euratom).

Current reassesment of digital humanities' history. Insistance on labor / digital labor (Busa, see Nyhan).

- Busa and digital (gender) labour (Nyhan)
- Demands for more inclusivity / diversity, etc (GO::DH and Fiormonte et al. 2021)?
- DH and the toxic turn (Gold / Klein 2019)

(what about Svensson – Landscape, etc DHQ –?)

Digital Humanities beyond digitality

Sources of this part: Will be based on manifesto of DH 20.0, which is in the end partly digital only. + introduction to the 4 volumes of debates in the digital humanities.

- manifesto of DH 2.0 (Presner, Drucker, etc)

=> DH as a community, as *avant-gardesque* of humanities and (for some aspects) social sciences.

- manifesto Paris

=> strong focus on interdisciplinarity

Conclusion: a multilayered digitality?

Conclusion would be more around the notion of digital culture, and DH as part of something larger and cultural.

Digitality as set of bits or sort of culture (Milad Doueihi, *Pour un hupanisme numérique*) -> digital as culture, not as digital *stricto sensu*. Gives a better hint of what are Digital Humanities: use of computers in Humanities, but also specific practices, even, maybe, specific set of research questions, etc (more collective, more community-ish, supposed to be more open). But still being part of Humanities for other kind of practices (academic association).

In fine, DH as caracterized with non-digital elements and digital ones. But question is: non-digital elements are still partly based on an encounter with the computer.

Could we talk of a sort of multi-layered digitality of Digital Humanities?

- digital *stricto sensu* – no DH without computers
- transformation of bits into cultural digital objects
- Traditions / practices around those cultural digital objects

Brügger, Niels. 2018. *The Archived Web: Doing History in the Digital Age.* Cambridge, MA, USA: MIT Press.

Doueihi, Milad. 2012. *Pour Un Humanisme Numérique.* Washing Machine. Paris: publie.net.

Reinert, Max. 1993. "Les 'mondes lexicaux' et leur 'logique' à travers l'analyse statistique d'un corpus de récits de cauchemars." *Langage et société* 66 (1): 5–39. https://doi.org/10.3406/lsoc.1993.2632.

Schreibman, Susan, Ray Siemens, and John Unsworth. 2004. *Companion to Digital Humanities (Blackwell Companions to Literature and Culture).* Hardcover. Blackwell Companions to Literature and Culture. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Professional.