

Linking biographical data to study cultural networks in the Renaissance: the project 'Prosopography in Network'

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Among the many different fields of history where digital humanities have had major impact, prosopography takes an important place. Prosopography – the investigation of the characteristics of a group of people through a collective study of their lives – is well-suited to digital tools and methodologies since it relies on large quantities of data that need to be presented in structured form in order to find patterns in them. It is therefore no surprise that a great variety of digital humanities projects exist that focus on groups of historical actors: for example through the visualization of networks or the creation of large databases. However, this ongoing multiplication of projects also brings with it a serious problem: how to interconnect these various projects?

This paper will present a concrete case study of how a recent digital humanities project at the Centre d'Études Supérieures de la Renaissance in Tours (France), entitled 'Prosopography in Network' or 'ProsoNet' for short, deals with this problem. By means of an exploration of the aims and methodology of this project, I will also address a series of issues concerning interoperability of databases in general.

The Centre d'Études Supérieures de la Renaissance (CESR) in Tours is an institution which focuses entirely on the Renaissance, in various aspects, such as literature, art, music, history, and other ones. It houses a variety of research projects, of which many in the past years have created databases that are freely available for online consultation. These databases exist separately, making it impossible for users to carry out searches in all of them at the same time. The project 'Prosopography in Network' (ProsoNet), carried out in September 2015 – September 2016 by a group of historians, digital humanists, and IT-specialists, proposes a practical solution that allows research groups to carry on with their individual projects without making drastic changes, while at the same time connecting their data at another level. It thereby touches upon one of the main problems of interoperability: narrower categories can make for more precise research, while broader categories make for easier interoperability.

Seven databases are currently present in ProsoNet, but the methodology adopted by the project is flexible and allows for inclusion of other databases in the future. At the moment the seven databases (Architectura, ARVIVA, Bibliothèques Virtuelles Humanistes, Editef, Rihvage, Ricercar, and SaRC) focus on very different aspects of the Renaissance, such as history of medicine, music, and books. Nevertheless, their relative coherence in chronology and geography makes them an excellent case study on cultural, artistic, and intellectual networks in the early modern period, with particular

reference to France but including also other countries. Interconnecting these databases will allow users for example to trace individuals throughout various stages of their lives and through various roles that they may have held. Since most of the databases in ProsoNet have different goals, this can lead to interesting and sometimes surprising results.

An important characteristic of the ProsoNet is that it has been conceived explicitly as something that will be added from the outside: the individual databases will only have to make minor changes. This presents various challenges: for example, the technical structure of the databases is different; not all databases have biographical data as their primary focus; while all databases are primarily in French, a few also have parts in English; some databases are still continuously being updated; and some projects have used internationally known controlled vocabularies while others have created their own lists; and the metadata format is different for the various projects.

The methodology that has been adopted for ProsoNet consists in the construction of a repository, transformation of the metadata format to Dublin Core during automatic exportation of the metadata, exportation of the metadata to a temporary repository (not open to the public), comparison with VIAF, manual disambiguation in cases of synonymy or homonymy, creation of a ProsoNet list of ID numbers for the people that are not yet present in VIAF, addition of either VIAF or Prosonet IDs to the original CESR databases, new exportation of metadata to an operational repository, and finally long-term maintenance by a combination of regular automatic updates and manual disambiguation. This is a relatively light solution, that presents a practical answer to the challenge created by the existence of large numbers of databases. In this way, ProsoNet hopes to become a useful tool for interdisciplinary, diachronic, transregional, and transnational research on cultural, intellectual, and artistic networks in the Renaissance.