

Invisible Interpretations: Intellectual History in the Digital Age

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The impact of digital humanities on history is undeniable. At its most accessible level – digitization – the number of projects has exploded. Early English Books Online (EBO), Eighteenth-Century Collection Online (ECCO), and the British Library 19th Century collection collectively hold 350,000 texts, searchable and accessible anywhere by anyone (with the proper login credentials and an internet connection). Smaller, but no less impressive, projects are just as important to scholars, and proliferation continues steadily. In addition, the emergence of new tools and techniques used to engage with digitized data offer ever more possibilities for researchers. These new avenues for researchers have been noted. To point to one high-profile example, David Armitage and Jo Guldi's *The History Manifesto* (2014), a book-cum-webpage published by Cambridge University Press under a creative commons license, is a call to arms for historians to embrace and create new digital tools. However, there is a shortage of serious reflection as to what the methodological impact of these new sources and tools may be – especially in reference to intellectual history. This paper offers a survey of these issues.

To do this it first offers a brief overview of the field of intellectual history. Specifically the methods which emerged in the mid-twentieth century, often referred to as the Cambridge School initiated by Quentin Skinner in 1969, which places emphasis on deep and varied contextual readings. It then flags some of the specific areas which are problematic for intellectual historians with specific reference to access and analysis of historical texts.

In regard to access, the survey concludes that digital humanities have been hugely successful. Most intellectual historians are already engaging in some form of digital research and thus we may want to conclude that the digital humanities have been hugely successful in being integrated – almost without reflection. However, it is this lack of reflection which is worth reflecting on. One may initially want to conclude that increased access to documents through digitization, and the proliferation of texts as data, is an unquestionably positive thing for the discipline. As Dan Edelstein has noted: “Books that lay forgotten for generations can now be rediscovered thanks to the magic of search engines” (p. 1). However, when “magic” becomes a tool in the researcher's arsenal, serious methodological concerns need to be raised. To this end issues around data overload, decontextualized and exploratory research methods, incorrect data, the presumption of data neutrality, and the (re)presentation of data are examined.

These potential problems are compounded when we reflect on analysis. The way one accesses data is not changing as quickly as the data itself is increasing. Digital databases largely mimic the structures of the archive or library. While this may not be a problem in the archive where there is a natural limit to what can be accessed – that is, the number of texts we can read – as these natural

limits disappear the strategies or tools – the “magic” – we use to limit or direct our results needs to be reflected on. While a topic modelling tool, or even a search engine, may appear to be neutral, what takes place when we use these new resources is a shifting of the decision making process away from the researcher and on to a piece of software (or those who coded the software). Thus, the survey also touches on the misuse and misunderstanding of digital tools and the quantitative shift in the discipline as a whole, again, highlighting issues from a methodological perspective.

Ultimately, the problem is this: First, the quality of data available is hugely variable at this stage, yet there is little awareness of this fact by those using these databases. Second, many of the tools that digital humanists and forward thinking historians are using require radically different forms of knowledge than those contained by current practitioners of intellectual history – and in many cases these tools and techniques were initially developed to engage with very different types of data. Thus, to truly understand what these tools are doing with the data we input into them, and what the outputs may actually mean, requires a re-evaluation of the skills necessary to do intellectual history in the digital age. Thus, the paper concludes by noting that as new ways of engaging with ideas emerge, deeper methodological understanding of the tools and techniques used are necessary to ensure good scholarship. By engaging with these issues it hopes that an awareness of these methodological concerns and limitations can be raised (in regard to access) and initial thoughts on best practices can be crafted (in regard to analysis). While traditionally intellectual historians have concerned themselves with mastering Ancient Greek or Latin, it is argued that Python and R may also be necessary for the next generation of practitioners.

References

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