Digital Humanities. A God of many faces.

María Gimena del Rio Riande.

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Digital Humanities: A God of Many Faces

16
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Gimena del Rio Riande, National Scientific and Technical Research Council of Argentina

These days, no scientific research is carried out without the use of digital media for the production or dissemination of knowledge. The term 'Digital Humanities' reflects this process and it constitutes, for the first time, a scientific field where humanists not only aim to use a certain software, but also to understand research using quantitative semantics. However, digital infrastructures are not the same globally, nor are all academies prepared to reformulate their curricula to incorporate this 'digital turn'. In her talk at the HSE April International Academic Conference Dr Gimena del Rio Riande from National Scientific and Technical Research Council of Argentina addressed various issues that arise in connection with digital humanities.

The presentation dealt with the most pressing questions in the field of Digital Humanities: 'Can we still talk about the so-called Global Digital Humanities or should we focus on a regional or local scale?', and 'How does the technological development of a country impact on a scientific field in which digital infrastructures are needed for research and teaching?'

Dr del Rio Riande reflected on Digital Humanities both from a geopolitical and a technocritical perspective by addressing various contexts and conditions of possibility.

What are the Digital Humanities?

Computational methods have been applied in the humanities since the early 1950s. This has only increased over the past decades as the world has become digital. Now, the humanities are being studied in a different way due to the emergence of new possibilities – the availability of electronic texts, the development of methods for these texts' automatic analysis, new capacities for storage and processing, and new tools for working with data.

There is no exhaustive definition of the digital humanities however [Anastasiya Bonch-Osmolovskaya](), Associate Professor at HSE's Faculty of Humanities, explains it as a way of 'creating interactive maps of correspondence between French enlighteners, building social networks using the letters and journals of the great poets, constructing 3D models of Ancient Rome, and automatically turning Hollywood screenplays into images.'

Digital Humanities as Translation

The field of Digital Humanities is related to naming, and particularly, to naming as an act of translation. Even the term 'Digital Humanities' is an English term, coined in an Anglophone linguistic and cultural context. It is now a scientific canon, providing order and structure for what has become a scientific field. However, what does this canon hinder?

According to Dr del Rio Riande, it hinders diversity and multiculturalism. There are very few geopolitical and technocritical approaches outside the Anglophone academies that question and problematize the hegemonic position of the English language inside the field, as well as how to deal with this hegemony in order to build a more real and representative Digital Humanities.

We don't only translate among languages, but also among cultures. Digital Humanities is nowadays being done in many countries, however this is a process whereby practitioners from all around the world are adopting a certain paradigm and transforming it in their own way according to their specific context. This is also an act of translation, namely, a cultural translation, where the word is recoded, rearticulated and re-contextualised, such that it resembles the former either only somewhat or not at all.

If we don't stop to consider what is inside the term 'Digital Humanities' locally, as opposed to globally, and what methods, academic spaces, infrastructures and encoding are used, as well as who does it and how, it will remain a fully formed western Anglophone project. Consequently, the dominance of the English language and the Anglophone perspective inside and outside the academy will continue to be naturalized. An example of this is the discriminatory indexing performed by web search engines which impacts on what we find when we look for information on the web in a certain language.

Digital Humanities as Technology

The Digital Humanities push researchers in the humanities field to master skills and knowledge that were once completely uncharacteristic– data analysis, data science, text mining, network theory, and geoinformatics, for example.

Unmistakably, software and digital structures are at the core of the digital humanities. They decide how a project is run and how it is published, consulted and preserved. In this sense, software and infrastructure are the 'medium and the message', as well as the technical and technological knowledge of the people involved in a project – they guarantee success.

For Gimena del Rio Riande, the question as to how technology intersects with epistemology is key in the Digital Humanities. Technology is always social and interrelated with other institutions. There can also be cultural forms, such as television. The World Wide Web created the false illusion of a natural democratization of knowledge 'at a click'. However, search engines tend to discriminate everything that is not in English and also tend to work at a local level. There is no such thing as 'global knowledge'. The web is therefore not neutral and transparent. Rather, it is filled with ideology and massively organizes the circulation of culture.

Digital technologies are often perceived as being neutral, however they are in fact the result of material inequalities that play out among the racial, gender, national and hemispheric lines. Not only are these technologies the result of such inequity, they also reproduce this inequity through their very use which is dependent on the perpetuation of global networks of economic and social disparity and exploitation.

Latin America groups 20 countries that suffer from wealth inequality, the impact of labour-saving technological change and a lack of adaptation to technological advancements. Is it possible to do Digital Humanities in this environment? There is a severe lack of funding, research institutes have obsolete technology and the obvious problems with digital literacy have blurred Digital Humanities landscape in Latin America. This digital divide has rendered it a field where researchers in Latin America are more interested in writing theory about media and open access policies than in carrying out a long-term, funded project. Moreover, the absence of institutional support has helped the growth of self-organized communities of practice, and the feeling that the Digital Humanities is just a kind of experiment, investigated with the aim of writing a paper on it.

Therefore, a critical eye is necessary. Technology needs to be critiqued in order both to know better the artefacts that are part of the Digital Humanities field as well as to improve the different cultural translations of Digital Humanities on a global scale.

Who is This God of Many Faces?

Different cultural translations of the Digital Humanities should not be part of a totalizing strategy which normalizes meaning and invalidates peculiarities which are not only linguistic but also social, cultural, techno-critical and geopolitical. One approach which overcomes the issues raised here might be to extend the cultural systems of the web to one where, taking into account the possibility of simultaneous coexistence of multiple forms of the same text, the web becomes a process of inter-semiotic translation. If we truly hope to understand the possible modes by which we, the digital humanists, might be capable of transforming humanistic research or how this might improve our understanding of digital culture, we should start by addressing the obvious fact of forced homogeneity in the Digital Humanities.

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Jennifer Millar

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About persons

**Anastasiya A.
Bonch-
Osmolovskaya**

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New Master's Programme at HSE Will Give Humanities Scholars New Digital Tools

The new Master's Programme 'Digital Humanities' now welcomes applicants for its first cohort, which will begin in the 2019-2020 academic year. Programme Head Daniil Skorinkin discusses how digital methods empower researchers, what the programme will cover, and why both humanities scholars and techies are welcome the programme.

Admissions　　　master's programmes　　　digital humanities

Expert on Authoritarian Regimes to Speak at April Conference

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Mar

2019

While much of the focus on politics and global affairs over the past several decades has been on democratization, the most striking thing about this period has been the survival and spread of authoritarian regimes, argues Graeme Gill, Emeritus Professor in the Department of Government and International Relations at the University of Sydney. Professor Gill is one of the presenters at the upcoming XX April International Academic Conference on Economic and Social Development, scheduled this year for April 9-12 at the Higher School of Economics.

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political science

The Role of Personal Preferences in Economics

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Mar

2019

Prof. Dr Thomas Dohmen from the Institute for Applied Microeconomics, University of Bonn, Germany is to deliver an honorary lecture at the upcoming April Academic Conference at HSE University April 9 – 12. HSE News Service spoke with Dr. Dohmen about his work on the Global Preferences Survey (GPS), an international survey of epic proportions that he helped develop and analyze in order to learn whether individuals differ in terms of economic preferences by country, and more.

Research&Expertise   HSE guests   HSE April Conference on Economic and S…

preferences

Social Media as a Lens on Collective Emotion

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Mar
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During the XX April International Academic Conference on Economic and Social Development, scheduled this year for April 9-12 at the Higher School of Economics, Dr David Garcia of the Complexity Science Hub Vienna and the Medical University of Vienna, Austria will present a report entitled 'The digital traces of collective emotion' at a session on 'The Wellbeing of Children and Youth in the Digital Age.' Ahead of the conference, Dr Garcia spoke with the HSE News Service about his conference presentation, his research, and plans for ongoing collaboration with HSE colleagues.

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HSE April Conference on Economic and S…

Unfit: Why Seniors Don't Care about Their Health

15

May
2018

Seniors in Russia are not responsive to public promotion of healthy living. Their behaviours follow eight different patterns, and a healthy lifestyle is far from being the most popular one. Only 17% of elderly people live what can be termed a 'healthy' lifestyle, Elena Selezneva discovered. The results of the study were presented at the XIX April International Academic Conference on Economic and Social Development at HSE.

'The Biggest Priority in Education Is World Class Professional Development Programmes'

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Apr

2018

The report entitled 'Twelve Solutions for New Education', prepared by the Higher School of Economics and the Centre for Strategic Development, was presented at the XIX April International Academic Conference. Professors Martin Carnoy and Tomasso Agasisti, international experts on education and conference guests, have shared their views on the issues and initiatives highlighted in the report.

Research&Expertise   HSE guests   expertise   education

HSE April Conference on Economic and S…

How Are Russian Cities Different from Western Cities?

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Apr

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One of the roundtables held during the XIX April Academic Conference featured a discussion of the report on morphology of Russian cities presented by Robert Buckley, Senior Fellow in the Graduate Program in International Affairs at The New School, US. The report looked at what Russian cities look like in terms of population density, how the patterns Russian cities exhibit compare with those of other cities around the world,

and what individual behaviours might have contributed to the appearance of
a certain pattern.

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urban studies

Marx's Capital Was a Work in Progress

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2018

The notion that Karl Marx's works have been studied inside and out is
fundamentally incorrect. The huge body of his manuscripts has still not been
completely processed, and his seminal work, *Capital*, was only recently
published with the final edits of the author. The 19th April Conference at the
Higher School of Economics included the section 'Methodology of Economic
Science' which was devoted to the work of the German philosopher and
political scientist. Independent researcher and professor from Berlin,
Thomas Kuczynski, gave a presentation at the conference which pointed out
numerous aspects of Marx's continuous rethinking of allegedly fixed truths.

Research&Expertise   HSE guests   economics

HSE April Conference on Economic and S…

Russia's Economic and Social Development Depends on How It Responds to Technological Challenges

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During a plenary session of the HSE XIX April International Academic Conference, participants discussed the technological future of the Russian economy and how it relates to objectives such as speeding up economic growth and improving the quality of life.

Research&Expertise   research projects   HSE April Conference on Economic and S…

We Must Reconsider the Government's Role in the Economy

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Slower GDP growth rates over the last several years were brought about by changes on international markets and the exhaustion of transformational bonuses due to the transition from a planned economy to a market economy, and this slowdown proves the necessity of looking for new solutions for stimulating the economy. The authors of the paper 'Structural Changes in the Russian Economy and Structural Policy' conducted a large-scale analysis on structural policy in Russia and around the world, as well as on possible ways for this policy to develop further. The first presentation of the paper took place as part of the plenary session called 'Structural Policy in Russia: New Conditions and a Possible Agenda,' which closed out HSE's XIX April International Academic Conference.

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structural policy

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