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Historical Arguments and the Digital

A White Paper

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Caitlin Burge

Anita Lucchesi

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Introduction

In 2016, Franco Moretti argued that "somehow digital humanities has managed to secure for itself this endless infancy, in which it is always a future promise."[1] Though a number of scholars in the humanities have joined the call for historical arguments in the digital in the years since, the promise and potential of digital humanities remains at odds with the actual practice of it. This paper is not radical, then, in its criticisms of the current state of the field and its relationship with the wider humanities (though it may be less diplomatic in its discussion of these problems), but it also highlights the wider ramifications of this – for those within and without digital humanities – and makes a *start* on (rather than just a plea for) potential solutions.

This start takes the form of our conference, *Historical Arguments and the Digital* (henceforth *HAD*), at the University of Luxembourg in June 2024, for which this paper serves as the opening volley. As per the Call for Papers,

> *This conference seeks to address the 'so-what', promoting conversation as to how new research processes and methodologies might build into and contribute to traditional narratives […] encouraging historical case studies reflecting on the ways in which digital methodologies have offered a means of exploring historical sources and expanding historical narratives and fostering digital history research questions that push beyond merely the descriptive to the interpretative and analytical.[2]*

The aim of the conference is less to present historical arguments as the 'flip-side' or 'hidden benefits' of digital history, but its core defining essence. In short, if you are doing digital humanities without the humanities, you are doing it wrong; or rather, not actually doing digital humanities at all.

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[1] Melissa Dinsman, "The Digital in the Humanities: An Interview with Franco Moretti." *Los Angeles Review of Books*, March 2, 2016.https://lareviewofbof'/s.org/article/the-digital-in-the-humanities-an-interviewwith-franco-moretti.

[2] A key piece to inspire our CFP and these pages itself came out from *the Arguing with Digital History* working group, "Digital History and Argument," white paper, Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media (November 13, 2017): https://rrchnm.org/argument-white-paper/. See also: Ruth Ahnert, Sebastian E. Ahnert, Catherine Nicole Coleman and Scott B. Weingart, The Network Turn: Changing Perspectives in the Humanities, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 88. For *HAD'*s full call for papers, check the conference website : https://historicalarguments.wordpress.com/call-for-pages/

Most importantly, in showcasing digital history case studies – historical arguments *utilising* digital humanities tools and methodologies, not *focusing* on them – the conference goes beyond theorising about the future of digital humanities to doing what this paper, perhaps naïvely, argues is the ultimate solution: **just getting on with it.**

Before diving into the critiques and solutions proposed here, it is crucial to at least recognise the distinctions (or the definitional problem) that surround the central terms under discussion. Most importantly, we must delineate the difference between "digital history" and the broader field of "digital humanities." While digital history specifically refers to the application of digital tools, methods, and platforms to the study of the past, and contemporary historical problems, digital humanities encompasses a wider range of disciplines and approaches at the intersection of computing and the humanities. This distinction is not always clear in practice, as many universities and scholars use these terms interchangeably.

Although we have called for participation in this conference to join a discussion that helps us move past the *infancy* of *challenges & opportunities* debate, for the purposes of this paper, it is essential to underscore that digital history is under the *big tent* of digital humanities, existing as subset of digital humanities, but with its own unique challenges and opportunities. As tellingly put by Ian Gregory:

> *The challenge for digital historians is deceptively simple: it is to do good history that combines the computer's ability to search and summarize, with the researcher's ability to interpret and argue. This involves both developing an understanding of how to use digital sources appropriately, and more importantly, using digital sources and methods to deliver new scholarship that enhances our understanding of the past. There are plenty of sources available; the challenge is to make use of them to deliver on their potential[3]*

Though we will also use these terms - 'digital humanities' and 'digital history' - somewhat interchangeably throughout this white paper, our experiences are predominantly from within the field of history.

As such, it is worth noting - perhaps obviously - that this paper is indeed built on our interaction with digital scholarship: what we discuss and propose over the next few pages explicitly relates to our opinions and our lived experiences. Whilst this is shared by a number of people that we have both independently (and at great length!) discussed this issue with, this is not to say that these ideas or opinions are shared nor endorsed by everyone – and we should say at the start that our aim is to provoke thought rather than provoke offence. We hope therefore that this white paper acts as a

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[3] Ian Gregory, "Challenges and Opportunities for Digital History", *Frontiers in Digital Humanities* 1 (2014), https://doi.org/10.3389/fdigh.2014.00001.

stepping point for a more critical and realistic discussion about the future of the digital humanities, but more radically, that it sparks actual *change* beyond mere discourse. This paper comes in two key parts then: creating our definition, and how to move forward with it.

The State of the Field: Key Problems

We start, then, by returning to that ultimate key question: 'so what?' But what do we mean by the 'so-what?' The absence of digital arguments is, in large part, because we have spent a lot of time prepping the space nicely to do the work - building databases, creating tools - but then not necessarily doing anything with it. Rather than just pointing fingers at not who or what is not doing the historical arguments, we need to first identify the underlying issues with digital humanities that perpetuates this.

Perhaps the biggest issue – or, more accurately, the root issue – of digital humanities is that despite its growing utility since the 1970s, there remains an absence of a useable and use*ful* definition. Whilst there is a constant stream of papers and workshops and roundtables seek to address this (or at RSA Chicago 2024 'be honest' about it), 'digital humanities' has become an unwieldy and catch-all term for just about anything involving a computer. Jason Heppler illustrated this ironically with the "What is Digital Humanities?" website (https://whatisdigitalhumanities.com/), which pulls quotes from texts published on the Day of DH between 2009-2014. The irony continues as of today, when the random quotes appearing each time a user refreshes the page still demonstrates the somewhat tautological nature of DH. Our view, as discussed further down, is that digital humanities should be understood more as a methodology rather than a standalone discipline. Whilst it is fundamental for the future of *any* research that it remains inclusive and accessible, this does not mean that it is responsible for everything vaguely linked to it: literary studies do not become exclusionary if they do not start teaching algebra just because it uses letters.

This broader problem has led to two core misunderstandings, and therefore misuses, of the digital humanities:

1. *Humanities in the digital age **does not** equal digital humanities.*

Everyone in research uses a computer at some point in the process; whilst there is not the space here to expand on the disparity this inevitably causes in research support and accessibility, it is the reality of conducting research in the digital age. Even those deeply embedded in in-person and manual manuscript work are likely to be searching for documents online, or at least writing up their

findings on a computer. Yes, it is true that Googling or searching on a museum or archive website *is* taking advantage of databases and search algorithms and other digital mechanisms; but this is just the reality of working in the digital age, and cannot in and of itself be considered digital humanities. This is not to say that these fundamental digital skills are inherent in every researcher, and neither should this be assumed; but rather, digital literacy is not the same as digital humanities, and people should not look to digital humanities as the space to teach this. Arguably there is still a necessity for universities to host spaces for this, and should people want to learn these skills, there should be a digital or data studies course.

We also accuse an inadvertent interchangeability of some expressions as *digital age* and *online age*, as well as between *digital* and *digitised,* and yet between *digital* and *virtual.* Much confusion arises from it and the grey zone of what is and what is not digital scholarship is too sheer for us to exhaustively depict it here. However, what can be said without any doubt is that working with digitised sources from the 17th century does not make a digital scholar, but using computational aid, as in information sciences and information technologies in the production of arguments in historical research and the social transfer of knowledge about that past can constitute an example of digital scholarship. However, what we see is still a persistent obfuscation of digital scholarship by other general uses of digital tools in the daily work of researchers, and/or the the processes of building digital infrastructures and digital resources.[4] This is ultimately entirely different to digital humanities, and one concept cannot bear the burden of everything relating to the digital world. Though this may seem pedantic – to draw such a line between humanities in the digital and digital humanities – this has much wider ramifications not only for working in digital humanities, but for teaching, developing methodologies, and, ultimately, winning funding, as we will discuss more below.

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[4] For instance, the Herzog August Bibliothek is an independent research institute focusing on European cultural history from the medieval and early modern periods. Its extensive holdings include manuscripts, incunabula, early imprints, and special collections like graphic art and maps. One of its mass digitisation projects was the "VD 17 mainstream literature", which ran from March 2012 through February 2016, funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG). On the one hand, we can easily imagine how historians, literary scholars, and other scientists in the field of humanities can benefit from the data made available through this project, but building it or simply consulting is not digital scholarship. On the other hand, using co-occurrence analysis as done by Stefan Heßbrüggen-Walter to process a large dataset related to German dissertations and sourced from the German national bibliography of 17th century German prints – the VD 17 – to challenge the established consensus that interdisciplinarity evolved only in the 18th century seems a more explicit and valid form of digital scholarship. See: Stefan Heßbrüggen-Walter, "Interdisciplinarity in the 17Th Century? A Co-Occurrence Analysis of Early Modern German Dissertation Titles", *Synthese* 203, nº 2 (2024): 1–19, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-024-04494-2. Heßbrüggen-Walter's research data and code are also publicly available on Zenodo https://zenodo.org/records/10447430.

More importantly, by making this distinction, the differences between digital media and digital humanities, and public history and digital humanities, can be more firmly enforced. An absence of a clean definition of digital humanities has led a number of universities to conflate these concepts and approaches and, whilst they may have overlapping interests (as in many subjects in the humanities), they are distinctly different and particularly at higher educational levels, should not be treated as the same. Podcasts, blogs, and websites etc. are more than valid endeavours and outputs in their own right; but are fundamentally *not* part of digital humanities, and belong better as a subsection of media studies, interweaving with historical narratives at the intersection of digital public history and the various forms of *multi* and *trans* media storytelling. Depending on the 'backend' research, these presentation forms or different ways of making history available online might even display and convey new arguments in meaningful ways, but in most cases there is a focus on editing existing analogue research into a 'digital vessel' for broader scientific divulgation instead of applying digital tools and methods for creating new arguments.

The growing hype around Public History and its funding appeal might also be an interesting point of reflection here for us all and could somehow explain the subtle shift towards making scholarship available online vs. producing new digital scholarship. Even the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media (RRCHNM), one of the pioneer research centres dedicated to Digital History in the US, has shown some adherence to this trend in the last few years, a process that has been witnessed and took shape by the creation of their R2 Studios[5], founded in 2021 with a generous grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation towards the mission of democratising history through podcasting. All this speaks up to the evolving nature of history writing beyond the established written monograph model, expanding the debate we are making in this paper to the next front of public humanities. We are not here to say that the meta-reflection on these new kinds of production are not relevant to academia, but to highlight how these formats are more related to communication than interpretation.[6] Historian Claire Brennan engages with the new vast array of digital outputs in the wide landscape of digital humanities, digital history, and digital methods making a plea for the discussion and establishment of fair assessment and reward for digital endeavours. To Brennan, while it is fundamental to value and teach the necessary digital skills for these new modes of

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[5] There are many, but to name but one example of the prestige and growing importance of podcasts within RRCHNM is their *Antisemitism, U.S.A., hosted by* Mark Oppenheimer*,* which recently received a $50,000 gift from the David Bruce Smith Family Foundation. See: https://rrchnm.org/news/antisemitism-u-s-a-podcast-receives-generous-support-from-the-david-bruce-smith-family-foundation/ About the R2 Studios, see https://www.r2studios.org/about/.

[6] Cf. Christian Howard-Sukhil, S. Wallace, e Ankita Chakrabarti, "Developing Research through Podcasts: Circulating Spaces, A Case Study", *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 15 (2021), https://consensus.app/papers/developing-research-podcasts-circulating-spaces-case-howardsukhil/6c0bec7ee5b95a3daf78117d4e0b9a52/.

communicating scholarship, it is crucial to do so 'without losing its traditional strength of critical analysis'.[7]

The inclusion of digitised materials and databases is then the natural combination of these two elements, and the overlap between digital age humanities and digital humanities: neither the accessing nor the building of these resources are *in themselves* acts of digital scholarship. The building and creating of resources is certainly a critical scholarly act, and vital to the progress of an incredible range of historical arguments and narratives, both analogue and digital. But, as Angela Dressen has argued, these are not themselves digital humanities, but rather the first steps towards this; that is to say, they are not analytical or argumentative manoeuvres towards a historical narrative. Rather, those building digitised collections or databases are akin to archivists: exceptionally important and skilled in their own right, and may indeed overlap on occasion with historians, but ultimately not the same.

*2. Digital humanities should be a methodology, **not a standalone discipline.***

Again, the delineation between these two concepts and what this means for the definition of digital humanities may not seem drastic; but framing the digital humanities as a distinct discipline has ultimately created the sense that it is a closed off space with an 'inside' and an 'outside'. In many ways, this paper has already fallen prey to this mentality, considering it as an independent 'field' and seeking to find solutions for both those 'within and without the digital humanities.' It is a difficult concept to break away from, especially with the perpetually increasing number of separate digital humanities departments at universities across the globe, but ultimately this has promoted a sense of discord between humanities as disciplines, rather than encouraging the use of digital humanities as just one part of a vast set of skills and tools that any humanities scholar is able to wield.

The backbone of the reasoning above is the consideration that digital humanities is inherently interdisciplinary, drawing upon methods and perspectives from a wide range of fields, including computer science, library and information science, and various humanities disciplines.[8]As such, it is most effective when integrated into existing humanities research practices, allowing scholars to combine digital tools and methods to revisit their analogue repertoires, possibly gazing at new epistemics and heuristics to approach both long-standing and emerging research questions. By treating digital humanities as a methodology rather than a standalone discipline, we call for its

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[7] Claire Brennan, "Digital Humanities, Digital Methods, Digital History, and Digital Outputs: History Writing and the Digital Revolution", *History Compass* 16, no. 10 (2018): e12492, https://doi.org/10.1111/hic3.12492.
[8] See: Anne Burdick et al., *Digital Humanities* (Mit Pr, 2016).

application across diverse humanities fields, from history and literature to philosophy and cultural studies. This integration allows scholars to leverage the strengths of digital approaches while remaining grounded in the intellectual traditions and research priorities of their respective disciplines. Successful digital humanities projects, such as *Torn Apart/Separados* often emerge from collaborations between scholars with different disciplinary backgrounds, bringing together expertise in data analysis, visualisation, and humanistic inquiry to engage with pressing contemporary issues.[9]

The flip side of this is the implications for those *in* those digital humanities departments; walls are, after all, as good at keeping things in as keeping them out. Though this is certainly not the case everywhere, there is a growing sense of isolation from a digital humanists' 'home' department - as much as analogue scholars may feel unable to access digital methodologies without transitioning into an explicitly digital space, neither do 'digital' historians feel connected to their historical scholarly community, especially when they may be the only one in their respective digital departments studying a certain period or topic.

Nowhere is this more keenly felt than in the conference sphere. Though finally able to speak to other scholars knowledgeable about the historical debates to which they are using digital methodologies to contribute, digital humanists in 'traditional' humanities conferences are often bundled together with other 'digital' scholars in hodgepodge panels, isolated from any real useful discourse. At Renaissance Society of America 2022 in Dublin, co-author Burge's paper on Thomas Cromwell's epistolary network was placed on a panel with other historians using digital approaches discussing religious choice during the schism of Utrecht; the Plant Humanities Lab, a digital and visual database; and Leonardo da Vinci's treatise on paintings. Whilst each rich and interesting papers in their own right, there was nothing to connect them beyond the use of digital methodologies: none of which, should be noted, were the same. Though this was, to some extent, Burge's own responsibility for explicitly applying to the digital humanities strand that year in the hope of demonstrating the potential of quantitative social network analysis in this debate, the reality is that isolating digital methodologies from the debates and topics with which they engage in the end makes their discoveries underwhelming and, ultimately, under-attended. Anecdotal evidence suggests that more and more scholars then seek to *hide* their use of digital methodologies in

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[9] "Torn Apart/Separados" exemplifies an interdisciplinary digital humanities project that combines data visualisation with an analytical take. Emerging in response to the 2018 U.S. border crisis, the project maps and visualises the network of detention centres and facilities associated with the immigration system. Beyond presenting raw data, it provides context and explanations to illuminate the human impact. The project's two volumes include argumentative sections, such as "Textures" and "Reflections,". The project's interdisciplinary nature is evident in its credits (https://xpmethod.columbia.edu/torn-apart/credits.html), showcasing collaboration between scholars, activists, and digital humanists. While supporting social justice, "Torn Apart/Separados" also enables users to navigate the data and draw their own analytical conclusions based on the findings and interpretations presented through the project's data visualisation and contextualization.

applications and abstracts so as to ensure that the actual argumentative contributions are more fruitfully situated and therefore acknowledged. While empirical data on this issue is limited, conversations with colleagues and discussions on digital humanities forums indicate that this is a growing concern within the community. Needless to say, however, even in these panels, these arguments come second-place to the methodology and, most frustratingly, the fifty per-cent of the paper required to explain the basic terminology for the approach. In no other field is an in-depth methodological set-up and terminological background needed in order for basic understanding of the paper. Whilst this is sometimes necessary with more complex ideas, common terms and approaches have been around long enough now that we can be justified in, once more, *getting on with it* and wasting no more precious time in explaining the basics.

In theory, conferences explicitly for the digital humanities should provide a solution to this: a space to explore concepts and conclusions without the need for the methodological primer. And yet, recent years have faced a growing problem: where the humanities themselves are increasingly pushed out of digital humanities conferences. This is not merely the increasing use of these spaces to demonstrate and advertise tools and software or digital collections and databases, without examples of the ways in which they might contribute critical and analytical arguments to the scholarship. Over a decade ago, taking a slightly different stand than we do, Tom Scheinfeldt addressed a similar 'so-what' tabu in his blog post "Where's the Beef?". "Eventually - he wrote – digital humanities must make arguments. It has to answer questions. But yet?". Bearing in mind the *longue durée* of sciences itself, Scheinfeldt admits a certain 'buffering time' for the new tools and methods to produce a robust scholarly impact in argumentative format. He argued that, much like the development of scientific instruments in the 18th century, the digital humanities need time to evolve before they can fully address theoretical questions. He explored a parallel between the prolonged period of tool-building and experimentation in early science (e.g. Francis Hauksbee's "electrical machine") and the current state of digital humanities.

> *Like eighteenth-century natural philosophers confronted with a deluge of strange new tools like microscopes, air pumps, and electrical machines, maybe we need time to articulate our digital apparatus, to produce new phenomena that we can neither anticipate nor explain immediately. At the very least, we need to make room for both kinds of digital humanities, the kind that seeks to make arguments and answer questions now and the kind that builds tools and resources with questions in mind, but only in the back of its mind and only for later. We need time to experiment and even, as Bill Turkel and Kevin Kee have argued, time to play.[10]*

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[10] Scheinfeldt, Tom. "Where's the Beef? Does Digital Humanities Have to Answer Questions?" In *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, edited by Matthew K. Gold, 56-58. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012.

Yet Scheinfeldt argued for this 'playtime' in 2012, as we approach *HAD* in 2024, it is clear that the balance between these two aspects has not been achieved. How long should this play last? While the period of experimentation and tool-building that Scheinfeldt described was necessary, it has in many ways overshadowed the crucial role of humanities scholarship. The proliferation of digital tools, databases, and methodologies has not been matched by a corresponding growth in the application of these resources to substantive humanistic questions and debates.

This imbalance has contributed to a troubling trend in the treatment of humanities scholars within digital humanities spaces, perhaps, the biggest problem of all in the digital humanities, the one that ultimately this white paper and its associated conference seeks to address: the slow and increasingly worsening treatment of historians and humanities scholars in computational spaces. We have seen a concerning trend towards the marginalisation of humanities expertise within the more computational spaces of DH forums. This manifests in various ways, from the increasing focus on tool demonstration and promotion at digital humanities conferences to the suggestion that humanities scholars themselves are not a necessary part of the process. Again, this is not to say that this is the case everywhere; but, quite disturbingly, there is a growing perception that the digital aspects are too complex for humanities scholars to grasp, while the humanities knowledge is quick and easy for computational experts to master - a deeply problematic and counterproductive view that undervalues the scientific rigour and nuance of humanities scholarship.

The emphasis on digital tools and methodologies over the core argumentative and analytical character of the humanities is not merely an issue isolated to a community of practice or idiosyncratic to a few individuals. It is embedded in a long-standing political game that repeatedly puts the humanities in a state of crisis. This is not solely an epistemological debate on the impact of the digital component on humanities theories and practices; it affects the entire knowledge production ecosystem in research institutions. As we will discuss shortly, this has created a funding landscape that favours projects prioritising technological innovation and quantifiable outcomes over substantive engagement with humanistic questions.

The consequences of this shift in priorities are far-reaching, affecting both individual scholars and the broader academic landscape. If our reader identifies as a digital historian they might recognise they have been in a particularly challenging position. The immediate impact of these dynamics on those who end up marginalised from both the computational field and the analogue one is to keep them stuck in an uncomfortable no-man's land: unable to properly speak about the digital aspects of their work within the humanities and struggling to assert the value of humanistic inquiry in the digital realm.

Across the board, more and more digital humanists are distancing themselves from this title, presenting themselves as historians or literary scholars as a reaction to the increasingly humanities-less world of the digital humanities. However, as we hope it becomes clearer by now, the ramifications of this over-computation extend far beyond individual scholars. As the growing number of university departmental closures across the globe demonstrates, the arts and humanities are under increasing pressure and instability. Whilst it overstates the case to lay the blame entirely on the increased emphasis on the sciences as an important aspect of study, it would also be entirely naive to suggest that it has not contributed to this. The digital humanities is not to blame here; but if computational scientists are able to (supposedly, and ineffectually) 'replicate' the humanities approach, they inevitably justify and feed into the diminishment of the humanities as disciplines, and the politically motivated shutdowns of 'non-profitable' departments. Why keep an entire department of educated and dedicated scholars if the computers can do it, whether or not they actually do it properly? In the face of this dilemma, it is understandable that analog humanities scholars in 'traditional' departments increasingly push back against the overwhelming and often unnecessary emphasis on digital humanities, especially when the field (for want of a better phrase), as it is becoming, reduces their work to blocks of un-interpretative code.

Solutions

Framing the state of this 'field' in such a way seeks to outline that the implications of a poorly defined and poorly *practised* digital humanities goes well beyond those typically associated with a 'passing fad' in research (as we have heard digital humanities described on a number of occasions). But, as we hope to show in this paper, there are also a number of potential solutions that focus above all on re-centering the importance of the *humanities* in digital humanities.[11] By returning once more to contexts, narratives, and *arguments* as the core - even *only* - purpose of digital humanities, it is possible to redirect the digital into a better place as an applied methodology for what it always promised: exciting approaches to history.

Though this is a broader ideological solution, there are also much more practical ones that build on this that we look to propose:

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[11] Alan Liu argues that the question of what the digital humanities means as a discipline is larger than just the internal debates around defining the field's identity and boundaries. See: Alan Liu, "The Meaning of the Digital Humanities", *PMLA* 128, no 2 (2013): 409–23, https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2013.128.2.409.

1. *Create digital **centres** not **departments**.*

This linguistic distinction between two almost synonymous terms holds more weight when we consider it in terms of structures for teaching and research. Whilst a department normally sits as a standalone discipline, a centre is more normally interdisciplinary in nature, hosting a theme or approach and bringing together scholars from a broad range of departments with a similar interest: see the Centre for Renaissance and Early Modern Studies[12] at the University of York, or the Center for Science and the Imagination at Arizona State University[13]. Framing digital humanities as a centre like this again refocuses its place as a methodology; making it a standalone department, where the only connection is the use of - often wildly different - digital methods only perpetuates the backgrounding of historical and humanities narratives and arguments. Instead, by following in the footsteps of those such as Cambridge Digital Humanities that bring together people who *primarily teach in other departments,* means that digital humanities can be offered as an approach grounded in a humanities background.

In addition to - and as a by-product of - this restructuring, digital humanities should also be integrated into all first-year humanities introductory courses. This is not to say that all humanities approaches should automatically become digital; in fact, we propose the complete *opposite.*

Digital methodologies are *not* appropriate for all historical questions, or indeed all researchers, and no person or project should feel forced into an approach that they do not like or are not comfortable with. Rather, in integrating as just one week in an opening course that introduces *all* different approaches to a discipline, it once more reinforces its place as just one methodology amongst a plethora of others. You might not like it, you might not ever use it again - but, just like Foucault, you should at least know what it has to say and understand it when other people use it. Finally, doing it in such a way also ensures that all introductions to digital humanities are done as contextual teaching: no tools or methods without a question or debate in mind, foregrounding once more the role of the digital in creating and contributing to historical arguments.

2. *Fund substantive scholarship, not technological novelty.*

Change starts at the top - or at least, change starts where the money is. Whilst it cannot directly influence it, this paper calls for funding bodies internationally to reconsider the ways

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[12] See: https://www.york.ac.uk/crems/
[13] See: https://csi.asu.edu/

funding is awarded in the humanities and the ways this relates to digital foci. In many cases - both in funding and in descriptions for job applications - the emphasis is placed on including a digital approach without accounting for whether this would be appropriate or even result in the best scholarly outcome. Digital humanities needs to stop being treated as a tick-box exercise to make a project seem 'current', and funding needs to stop going towards tools, softwares, or teams that cannot demonstrate their immediate value to a humanities discipline or topic, and especially those that do not even have a humanities specialist at the helm or even on board.

Ryan Cordell's observations in "How Not to Teach Digital Humanities" shed light on the challenges faced by digital humanities scholars, particularly those hired to spearhead DH initiatives at institutions without proper infrastructure or tenure guidelines that recognize the unique nature of DH work.[14] Moreover, Cordell's concern that junior faculty hired as 'the DH person' often face steep challenges in making their work legible to colleagues during tenure evaluation is particularly salient. Many institutions eager to embrace digital humanities and secure grant funding may not have fully considered the necessary infrastructure and support systems required to truly integrate and sustain digital humanities efforts. So why keep funding and fostering either digital methods experts to carry the DH piano if they might end up isolated and facing difficulties communicating their work and being fairly rewarded for that? This lack of institutional readiness can hinder the ability of scholars working as digital humanities specialists to thrive and contribute to their respective fields effectively.

This issue also requires then a pivot of what funding bodies expect as an output; rather than offering funding to projects where the *only* outcome is a digital innovation, such as a collection or database (or again, tool or software), outcomes *must* include something with an argumentative practice and contribution, and not merely one that reflects on best practices or the process of creation. Projects such as Living with Machines[15] and MacMorris[16] are undeniable proof that this is possible: creating a digital object *and* historical argument narratives. There is, therefore, no excuse why this cannot be standard practice. And whether we like it or not, what funders decide is or is not worth paying money for ultimately shapes what the future of research looks like.

3. *Finally and most important: **get on with it!***

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[14] See: Ryan Cordell, "How Not to Teach Digital Humanities", em *Debates in the Digital Humanities 2016*, org. Matthew K. Gold e Lauren F. Klein (University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 459–74, https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctt1cn6thb.39.

[15] See: https://livingwithmachines.ac.uk/

[16] See: https://macmorris.maynoothuniversity.ie/

This perhaps oversimplifies things (and, again, relies partly on fixing the funding problem first), but ultimately the onus is on us - those who wish to continue practising digital humanities - to do what we are asking for, and produce historical arguments using these methodologies. Spaces like our own conference foster this kind of work, and allow papers to succeed by not explaining ideas but reconnecting with those in our field, sharing outcomes and historical arguments, re-engaging with debate, and ultimately, doing what we love. Whilst this conference remains explicitly for those using digital humanities, it will focus on the historical arguments by arranging panels with periodical or topical connections: and this practice should continue into existing 'traditional' historical conferences, who should not separate digital methodologies from their historical context but reintegrate these back into 'normal' panels.

Explicitly methodological and process focused papers can then in themselves have their own separate conference, rather than taking over and becoming the focus of digital humanities spaces; this could then include software or tool expositions, perhaps a better space for these anyway than traditional academic papers. Again, this is not unusual in analogue humanities: library and archival practices often have distinct conferences, reflecting that whilst these are linked to the humanities they are ultimately *separate disciplines.* Combining the two together benefits no-one; separating them out again allows the expertises and contributions of both to flourish and receive appropriate, knowledgeable feedback in ways that can then come back together.

This then can extend back into articles and books based on digital humanities methodologies; rather than continuing to spend time introducing and explaining concepts and approaches, more energy should be spent in engaging with humanities debates and delivering arguments. This requires a change in expectations, both in terms of authors and editors. For better or worse, no historical text requires an extensive introduction to archival practices before engaging in textual analysis: it is assumed as prior knowledge. The same should be extended to digital humanities work, and in many ways, relies on the shift mentioned in solution one, where digital approaches are taught at entry level to university. In this way, knowledge of digital practices can be assumed in the same way that it is for any other humanities approach, and we need only dedicate space to how it relates to our specific contexts, or explaining something explicitly tailored to and created for our research. A number of scholars are already doing this to great success; but until what is expected of a digital humanities text is fundamentally altered - until we can dispense with an 'introduction to digital methods' chapter in

every historical book seeking to use these methodologies - we will be unable to contribute effectively to historical arguments and answer this perpetual 'so-what' question.[17]

This is not a plea to disengage with the specificities of our digital methods and tools, but to articulate them more closely with the arguments we make in our research so that it is meaningful to the understanding of our work. Instead of isolating them into sterile methods enunciation, scholars should document the process of building, share datasets, and explain key-decision making regarding methods as proposed by co-author Lucchesi with her demonstrated exercise of what she called 'hermeneutics of practice' in her case study about memory of migrations in Luxembourg.[18] This is to say, we are not calling for a ban on meta-reflection, which are very much welcome when they overcome the descriptive character of siloed methods' sections; but we ask instead that they actively engage theory and practice towards a better understanding of how the use of such digital component contributes to the analytical or hermeneutical layer of their work.

Looking at the conference programme, it's evident that *Historical Arguments and the Digital* has brought together an impressive array of case studies that exemplify the integration of digital methodologies into historical research and analysis. The panels cover a diverse range of topics, from conflict narratives and war voices to politicised spaces, marginalised voices, criminal proceedings, knowledge sharing, networks of power, migration, and modern democracies. Though extensive, this still only begins to touch on what can be achieved when we actively apply digital methodologies to answering historical questions and engaging with debates. We hope that this white paper and the conference at its heart sit not merely as another volley in the decade-old discourse; nor do we seek to antagonise or alienate those within and without this so-called 'field' with our critiques and suggestions. Rather, by *getting on with it,* by engaging with and actively demonstrating the possibilities for digital humanities, we aim to provide examples and meaningfully contribute to scholarship to answer the 'so-what' once and for all – and we hope you will join us there.

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[17] For recent examples see: Ruth Ahnert and Sebastian E. Ahnert, *Tudor Networks of Power,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023); Blaine Greteman, *Networking Print in Shakespeare's England: Influence, Agency, and Revolutionary Change,* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021); 'Special Issue: Network Analysis and the Early Modern Archive', *Huntington Library Quarterly* 86, no. 2 (Summer 2024); and more broadly the *Journal for Historical Network Research*
[18] See: Anita Lucchesi, "For a new Hermeneutics of Practice in digital Public History: Thinkering with memorecord.uni.lu" (PhD Thesis, Esch-sur-Alzette, University of Luxembourg, 2020).

About the Authors:

Dr Caitlin Burge (she/her) is a historian of Early Modern England, with a background in History, English Literature, and Digital Humanities. She holds a BA in English Literature and History (2017) and an MA in Renaissance and Early Modern Studies (2018), both from the University of York, and completed her PhD at Queen Mary, University of London in 2022. She is currently a postdoctoral researcher and co-Principal Investigator on the Digital Humanities Advanced Research Projects Accelerator (DHARPA) and the Centre for Contemporary and Digital History at the University of Luxembourg, and a member of the Historical Network Research Community committee. She also regularly teaches and guest lectures on the application of digital methods, particularly network analysis, to historical and literary questions, and recent research has been nominated for Best Paper prizes at *DH2023* and *Joint Computing and Digital Libraries 2023* conferences. Burge's research interests focus on using digital approaches and methodologies from network analysis to explore traditional historical queries, primarily considering questions of power in Tudor England, the career of Thomas Cromwell, and his lasting legacy on administrative processes and institutions at court. Her current research examines the evolution of the Privy Council in the reign of Henry VIII, digitising and connecting available archival materials to offer a new history of the early modern institution.

Dr. Anita Lucchesi (she/her) is a Brazilian historian. She holds a PhD in History. She currently coordinates a project on scientific promotion at the Research Department of History of Sciences and Health at the Oswaldo Cruz House (DEPES/COC/Fiocruz). She is also a co-investigator for the digital image management tool Tropy in collaboration with the Corporation for Digital Scholarship, and a collaborating lecturer in the Postgraduate Program in Education at the Federal University of Sergipe. She obtained her doctorate from the University of Luxembourg (UNILU) in 2020, carried out a postdoctoral internship at the Center for Contemporary History in Potsdam (ZZF) in the same year, and subsequently at the Center for Contemporary and Digital History (C2DH, UNILU) from 2023 to 2024. She holds a master's degree in Comparative History from the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ, 2014) and a bachelor's degree in History from the same university (2011). Since 2008, Lucchesi has been involved in research and teaching related to digital technologies. She is a member of the Study Group of the Present Time (GET/UFS), the Brazilian Network of Public History, and the steering committee of the International Federation for Public History. Her research interests include digital public history, historical theory and methodology, oral history, memory studies, and scientific dissemination of history.