Digital technologies in humanities

Milica Ševkušić
Institute of Technical Sciences od SASA, Belgrade, Serbia
biblioteka@itn.sanu.ac.rs

Abstract

The presentation outlines the key issues related to the application of digital technologies in humanities scholarship with a special focus on the role of open-source software in this area.

Although the application of computers in humanities scholarship dates back to the mid-20th century and spans a wide range of outputs and practices from concordance indices, text tagging, quantitative methods in history and archaeology, to modern-day digital humanities, it is still often inferred that the poor uptake of digital technologies in humanities and the prevalence of print culture have to do with the poor computer skills of humanities scholars and their lack of interest in digital services and infrastructures. At the same time, it is also argued that major services, databases and infrastructures are designed for science and technology, while failing to meet the specific needs of humanities scholars (e.g. multilingual and multi-alphabet support, complex publishing requirements, variety of outputs beyond journal articles and their visibility, etc.).

The major areas of development in digital technologies for humanities include text encoding, text and data mining, natural language processing, semantic tools, visualization tools, publishing management software, library and repository software, and web publishing software. The corpus of available solutions is diversified but it is also marked by the lack of interoperability and coordination among the active projects, which is a significant challenge for long-term sustainability.

As an area of scholarship that is by far less likely to engender profit than science and technology, humanities rely on a considerably smaller research community and are less attractive for investors and IT developers, which is another crucial sustainability challenge. This is one of the reasons why open-source software plays an important role in humanities-related digital technologies. Bearing in mind the fear of proprietary lock-in, which has followed recent research infrastructure acquisitions by commercial publishers, and efforts towards creating open and interoperable international infrastructures (esp. European Open Science Cloud), it is reasonable to expect that the role of open-source software will be even greater in future.

Keywords: humanities computing; digital humanities; open-source software; interoperability; sustainability.

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