

# Why is there a lot to be said in favour of - and what would be - auxiliary digitality? Between a genuine digital pragmatics for the humanities and a philosophy of science of digital procedures

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**Abstract:** How we understand the digital transformation is not only important for the nature of a digital philosophical analysis in general. It also has an impact on what philosophy expects of the digital humanities. The author discusses this thesis with regard to discourses on digitality on the one hand and the relationship between DH and philosophy on the other. As far as the latter is concerned, she argues in favour of a phase of relaxed experimentation under the auspices of a merely auxiliary digitality instead of exaggerated avant-gardisms.

**Keywords:** Digital Humanities/DH, History of Digitality, Philosophy of Science of the Humanities, Metaphilosophy, Auxiliary Digitality

- <sup>1</sup> The so-called digital transformation is still a largely understood phenomenon. This is due to its plasticity and to the speed with which its phenotypical appearance changes (a.). Furthermore it is also due to fundamental conceptual difficulties, which even philosophy only partially addresses (b.).
- <sup>2</sup> Of course, this does not prevent us as disciplined scholarly labourers from understanding digitality as relevant to the present and promising for the future: I can find the digital appealing or repulsive, I can devote myself to describing the change, I can try to think through the digital in sections, so to speak, or I can simply shrug it off and integrate it into my everyday life. Under any of these conditions, digital tools invite me to experiment. However, I consider it (c.) unsat-

isfactory to simply adapt research supported by digital services in the field of the humanities, as it has established itself under the title DH (Digital Humanities) and has also quickly sent out certain avant-garde signals. Here are some considerations regarding all three points - the change, the basic concepts and the question of how to conduct research. In terms of research pragmatics, I argue for an auxiliary role of digitality that is genuinely tailored to humanities methodologies. At the same time, I believe that we urgently need a philosophy of science of digital processes. And the handling of existing digital services should also be an aid to this. Ultimately, my aim is to ensure that philosophy does not merely utilize DH methods, but that it can make its own genuine demands on their design that are tailored to the subject.

- 3 a. Digitality essentially exists to put machine languages into operation for machine systems, it gains reality by means of technicality. So-called digital technologies are therefore generic on the one hand (even bivalent barcodes "digitize"), but on the other hand digital technologies are meta-technologies that are based on a long and complex evolution of technology - which is also reflected in the "faces" (i.e. interfaces) that digitality has. In fact, we have experienced the digital age under the impression of very different paradigms, and these change amazingly quickly. After the mid-20th century, when all was about computing - with the parallel processing computer as the calculating machine -, computers mutated into "ICT", information and communication technology. Now digitality was telemedia or a new media technology and it was also discovered in theory - including images and audiovisuals - as a "medium". In rapid succession, we have since come to understand digitality as a ubiquitous "network" or network of networks, as a jumble of codes, algorithms and sensors, as the art of data analysis and simulation on massive amounts of data, as a tinkering, possibly somehow "neural", technology, as a digital "token", i.e. a token of value (not only on the blockchain) - and finally as a babbling chatbot, backed by such a gigantic amount of performance that you interact with an archive of "world knowledge", so to speak.
- 4 In purely phenotypical terms, our image of digitality therefore lags behind the malleable innovations and product lines of the technology markets. And so our evidence of what we should even talk about when it comes to the digital remains summative: in addition to the large and small electronic brains, there is the realm of the virtual and immersion, the global network, a multiple abundance of digital artifacts stored in "data spaces", ever new interfaces to humans - and, what is more, a great many black box effects, i.e. the actually obscure or even inscrutable as a new second nature.
- 5 b. Is "information" really the basic concept that provides the key to the digital age - a kind of quasi-materiality of signal-like signs, which we imagine to be the basis of machine-machine semantics (comparable to cellular or intracellular life processes)? One might doubt it. Today, we tend to associate machine-machine processes with concepts such as "formalization" (the mathematical version of basic technicality), calculus (a script-based form of automation), "algorithm" (a descendant of calculus), "code" (the generic artificial languages used to interact with machines) or with "data", which has become a basic term not only due to sensor technology, or the

dawning new universal buzzword of "infrastructures".

6 "Digitization" itself, i.e. the retranslation of a more complicated syntax into simple (at the deepest level, binary) circuits, or "computing", which is reminiscent of the executing device, somehow seem more overarching, but are difficult to relate to the other concepts. At present, neither the philosophy of technology, nor science studies, nor the methodological terminology of the digital disciplines can offer us fundamentally sound perspectives for understanding the digital. The result? People look backwards. In the library-related DH research-community, the three-step approach of "data - information - knowledge" is established and in use; in the research-based DH scene, there is even talk of "empiricism" or "quantification". What also characterizes the situation: Researchers cultivate a kind of perceived power-user jargon, so they talk about "tools" and call program packages by their proper names. This does not advance the understanding of digitality. It also has little to do with a methodological discourse for digital humanities that is satisfyingly capable of the subject.

7 c. This brings me to the question of digital research pragmatics that would be conducive to humanities, admitting that we still lack a philosophy of science of digital procedures - as procedures sufficient for the demands of philosophy. For what would "digital hermeneutics" be? "digital ideology critique"? "digital structuralism"? Or what would even a "digital heuristic" or a "digital source criticism" be for philosophical or philosophical-historical research?

8 It seems important to me to start by actually asking these questions with sufficient self-confidence. You then realize how far the path from the tool to the research question is and that it is also better to go in the other direction, namely from the question and the methodology to the requirements for possible tools. What's more, historical-hermeneutic research is not backward if it thinks about digital methods before using them. Nor does it mean that what is at all relevant on the desks of researchers who are engaged in highly specific, intertextually diverse theory formation with theoretical intentions is what - let's say - georesearch, sociological network analysis (admittedly a field that is notoriously confused in terms of its modeling and hardly goes beyond the illustrative) or what linguistics finds interesting about digital tools. Analyses that provide interesting statistics for subjects that view texts as bags of tokens (or terms) will initially have the utility value of a paperweight for work based on reading in the narrow sense. Similarly, digital editions quickly reach their limits from the point of view of dialogically reading work that only branches out philologically at certain points. From what I hear, the usage figures for high-performance digital editions of the "great classics" type are miserable. This may not only be due to the backwardness of the specialist community, but also points to a mismatch between digital edition philology and the intellectual work requirements and therefore probably also the methodologies of philosophers.

9 Conversely, however, it should certainly also be conceded that there is a lack of explicit methodologies that integrate the tools into the methodological work and that also show these to be productive with regard to the research question. And one reason for this is certainly the difficulties indicated under (a.) and (b.), because I suspect that these stand in the way of philosophical work

and also the conversation between philosophy and DH in a particular way.

10 For what shaped and shapes DH? Certainly not a philosophically compatible methodological discourse. Somewhat hastily - and without contact with something like a philosophy of science in the humanities, which would also have had to be formed first - textual research initially declared the digital change to be a revolutionary break in media (no more "print", instead multimedia and clickable linking) and then a revolutionary break in methods (machine evaluation and the aforementioned quantification, as well as visualization). After a *computational turn* in the text sciences, which was more concerned with editing, a second, algorithmic-analytical wave, in which the evaluation of data volumes counted, as well as research into "born digital" phenomena. "Third waves" are now already rolling in, which are, for example, focusing on the reflexive question of *computationality* as a general condition for knowledge, intellectuality and perhaps even being human. The next avant-gardes are to be expected. Everyone is currently talking about generative text AI and collaboration with chatbots, i.e. prompting. Soon, machine philology will be researching 'texts' in a way that can only be achieved through autonomous interaction between computers.

11 In contrast, I do not want to start of with thinking the digital penetration of the complex research processes in the humanities in terms of ever new generations of digital devices, and I also advise to resist the race for ever more advanced tools. In any case, research cannot mean being a test user for software developed for non-specialist purposes.

12 Instead of hastily adapting algorithmic procedures by a haphazard avant-gardism with regard to real research questions, I would therefore like to make a clear plea for an *hilfswissenschaftliche*, i.e. an "auxiliary" function of digital research tools in the humanities. At the partly analog, partly digital desk, it is almost always a matter of combining many different methods anyway. And in my experience, supposedly unspectacular digital options play a key role here in improving theoretical work - without breaking completely new methodological ground. After all, it has to be about "better" in the sense of a comparison with what has already been possible: We primarily need ways to fulfill given methodological requirements better, faster, more precisely and more comprehensively - and not a completely new methodology. Or even a new subject.

13 Finally, I should give some examples. I will give three. Firstly, I consider generic search and research tools that support cross-over reading and finding all possible sources to be more important than platform-bound access to specialized databases, especially databases on just one author. Unfortunately, catalogs and directories on the web are still in a deplorable state (and even where DH projects are underway, they seem to rely entirely on commercial search engines instead of developing some kind of science-wide discoverability infrastructure). Perhaps there is no need for philosophical tools in the narrower sense, but as a philosopher I can work better if I can research faster, more broadly and more remotely (and ideally without tracking). I want my own pragmatics - in other words, I don't need an all-integrating "work environment", the unbearable word clouds of topic modeling or an AI assistant that summarizes text content for me.

14 Secondly, I see a great opportunity in the low-threshold availability of digital audio materials -

recordings, such as shipping and playback options and also editing, including transcription and even automated translation. - For a subject such as philosophy, which is tailored to "verbal" practices, i.e. talking to each other, much more can be done with audio tools than is currently the case. Both solo work and, above all, conversations - including informal shop talk - can or could be effortlessly documented without us really making use of them yet. DH for philosophy: audio media could create new resources here, but also new seriousness. It's the spoken word that counts. Perhaps digital documentability could even provide us with a new culture of orality?

15 Thirdly, I think it is promising to continue developing tools for digital co-production, and this goes beyond products of the "Google Docs" type or merely to "fill" publication platforms. The fact that video conferencing is now possible around the globe is also a real benefit for philosophers. But what else does digital co-authorship need? For example, the opportunity to spend time together in virtual libraries, or perhaps even the possibility of freeing ourselves from the obligation to identify ourselves individually online in order to produce as a collective instead? And shouldn't the possibility of surveillance also be rejected? In fact, I dream that both software that monitors (most VC systems unfortunately belong to this category) and author identification systems such as ORCID, as well as the instruments of individualized performance measurement - in short: all tracking to which research is exposed - should be able to be undermined in favor of a free formlessness of theory production. For me, such a question would therefore also be a specific requirement for a DH culture in line with the philosophy: how do we undermine the obligations to personalize every activity as an "achievement", which are unimportant for the core of what we do, perhaps even disruptive, but which apply by default in the digital world? Or, to put it another way: a philosophy of science of digital procedures should not primarily serve to increase efficiency of work steps in digital spaces - as if Socrates, cleverly but precariously, were still standing around in marketplaces of that kind. Rather, a philosophy of science of the humanities should always attentively pose the question of power. Beyond technology and tools.

16 Does (c.), i.e. the return to expectations of an auxiliary digitality in the good sense of the word, have anything to do with (a.), the still outstanding understanding of digital change, and (b.) the work on basic concepts? I think so. Because what we need, instead of the often invoked but misleading demand for interdisciplinarity at eye level - according to which auxiliary scientific tasks would no longer exist at all - is first and foremost a new willingness to reflect on and understand the digital within philosophy itself. We must learn to find our way between genuinely humanities-based digital pragmatics and a philosophy of science of digital processes to a conceptual world that supports discussion, to contemporary methodological discourses and to our own demands.