Digitised historical sources and non-digital humanists: an interdisciplinary challenge?

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Abstract.

The digitisation of sources has opened new perspectives for humanists. Digitisation allowed a larger access to sources, removing some financial and geographical limits, and the use of digital tools provided new perspectives for humanists, who are able to read the sources differently. However, working with digitised sources also created new challenges that humanists are not always equipped to overcome.

The 'MedIcal Literature and Communication about Child Health' (MILC) project uses historical medical books for a non-specialist audience to analyse discourses on mothers and children's health in England, France and Italy between 1850 and 1914. Despite being born a non-digital humanities project, with a focus on manual qualitative analysis and a combination of history and literature methods, it took a digital turn when using digitised sources, with issues of digitisation and OCR among others. The team working on the project is composed of three humanists, with limited computer science skills. This required us to find digital humanities and in general IT tools adapted to our skillset, and adapted to our needs. However, these tools did not always fit all our needs, and often presented issues in terms of accessibility and compatibility with the general standards of digital humanities.

Using examples from the issues faced by this project, and from the solutions found, this paper will argue that the challenges encountered by humanists are interdisciplinary, not only because they overcome the traditional disciplinary boundaries inside the humanities, but also because they mirror challenges that computer scientists are working to solve. This paper will also argue that collaboration is a necessity which would benefit both humanists and computer scientists in their work on the improvement and development of new tools, with the help of AI for example. Using the work done by a team of non-digital humanists, it will argue that accessibility is a central issue in digital humanities and in the creation of IT tools, which needs to be addressed.

Keywords: Digital Humanities, Digitised Sources, Accessibility.