Digital History Projects As Boundary Objects

Digital history is concerned with the incorporation of digital methods in historical research practices. Thus, digital history aims to use methods, concepts, or tools from other disciplines to the benefit of historical research, making it a form of *methodological interdisciplinarity* (Klein, 2014). This requires expertise of different facets, such as history, technology, and data management, and as a result many digital history activities are a collaboration of scholars and professionals from different backgrounds.

Such collaborations would fit Svensson's characterisation of digital humanities as a *fractioned trading zone* (Svensson, 2011, 2012). Simply stated, this means first that digital humanities functions as heterogeneous collaborations, i.e. with participants from different disciplinary backgrounds, and second that the participants act voluntarily.

In this paper, we will investigate these two aspects in the context of digital history to understand how digital history projects function as heterogeneous collaborations, and what the participants' incentives are for entering such collaborations.

We will look at digital history projects as *boundary objects*, a concept developed by Leigh Star and Griesemer to describe an object that maintains a common identity among the different participants, yet is shaped individually according to disciplinary needs (Leigh Star and Griesemer, 1989; Leigh Star, 2010). This concept could be used for example to refer to the tool under development, or the data on which the tool and historian will work. However, in this paper we will approach the project itself as boundary object; the project binds the participants together, and all participants subscribe to a common description of the project's goals, while at the same time the participants shape the project according to their own needs. As one digital history project coordinator described it in an interview:

> "[Y]ou have a research idea, and you fit that to the call you're applying to, and then you get funding [. . .] And if you then hire researchers, yes they too have their own idea of course, and their own line of research they're working on, and they try to fit that in the research project."

This leads us to investigate the *incentives* for collaboration. When writing

about interdisciplinary collaboration in digital history, this is almost always done to underscore the positive or even necessary effects (e.g. Eijnatten et al., 2013; Hitchcock, 2014; Sternfeld, 2011). However, such collaboration is not trivial and requires dedication and investments from all involved, e.g. as shown by Siemens (2009; 2012). In order to investigate the activities of individual participants we will follow the work of Weedman on incentives for collaborations between earth scientists and computer scientists (1998). For several digital history projects based in the BeneLux, we have interviewed the participants and inquired about their reasons for joining the project, their individual goals with the project, and the expected effects of their participation after the project has ended. For example, in an interview one historian noted about their project:

> "[W]e're supposed to be advising the team developing the tool. And trying to then carry out research on a specific case study. And so originally it was like wow we're going to be able to use the tool, but very quickly it became clear ok actually probably we're not going to be able to use the tool."

By looking into the incentives of all the participants of a project, we will unpack the trading zones of digital history projects, to gain an understanding of how heterogeneous, interdisciplinary collaborations work, and how participants shape these collaborations. This will allow us to look into why a situation as described above by this historian occurs, and how individual shaping of the project can lead to this. Moreover, we will argue that these incentives go beyond disciplinary boundaries, which means that the trading zone in a digital history project is more complex than the (in)famous Two Cultures as described by C.P. Snow.

This research is part of PhD research on how the interdisciplinary interactions in digital history affect the practices of historians on a methodological and epistemological level (Kemman, 2016). By unpacking digital history projects, we aim to gain better insight in how digital history functions as a coordination of practices between historians and collaborators from different backgrounds, and how individual incentives shape this coordination.

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