

Interdisciplinary Ignorance

Max Kemman
University of Luxembourg
max.kemman@uni.lu

Digital Humanities (DH) is concerned with the incorporation of digital methods in humanities research practices. Thus, DH aims to use methods, concepts, or tools from other disciplines to the benefit of humanities research, making it a form of *methodological interdisciplinarity* (Klein, 2014). To look into this interdisciplinarity, our research employs the concept of *trading zones* (Galison, 1997), which we describe according to two dimensions proposed by Collins et al. (2007): first the extent to which a trading zone forms a homogeneous or a heterogeneous group, and second the power relations in the forms of coercion.

Most authors reflecting on DH cite Svensson (2011, 2012) who characterizes it as heterogeneous and collaborative, to emphasise the aforementioned interdisciplinarity, as well as the positive nature of collaboration. In this paper we will critically examine the second dimension and ask how this power relation is affected by the lack of technological expertise from humanities scholars. In our interviews with historians in digital history projects, we found several examples of the project not meeting expectations. For example, in one project, the historians noted that the tool that was being developed was so unstable and slow it became unusable. A historian mentioned that they inquired about this problem:

"So what you get is that those [humanities] people say 'yes hello I want to be served', and [the computer scientists] say 'yes no that server is for multiple experiments, you are one of the experiments, [end of discussion].' "

The PI of this project, also a historian, reflected on this:

"But in hindsight I think they should have said more about matters such as the really practical things such as computation capacity, server space, the stability of software, how that is managed, you need money for that too. We didn't [allocate] budget for that in the project, as idiotic as that seems now."

In short, the collaboration suffered from *knowledge asymmetry* (Sharma, 1997); historians were unaware how the computer scientists would perform their tasks, and as a result lacked the power to properly negotiate a tool

that would work to their satisfaction. This paper will therefore argue that knowledge asymmetry with respect to the technological aspects creates a power asymmetry in DH collaborations, resulting in a different type of trading zone than envisioned by DH authors.

References

- Collins, H., Evans, R., and Gorman, M. (2007). Trading zones and interactional expertise. *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part A*, 38(4):657–666.
- Galison, P. (1997). *Image & logic: A material culture of microphysics*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Klein, J. T. (2014). *Interdisciplining Digital Humanities: Boundary Work in an Emerging Field*. University of Michigan Press, online edition.
- Sharma, A. (1997). PROFESSIONAL AS AGENT: KNOWLEDGE ASYMMETRY IN AGENCY EXCHANGE. *Academy of Management Review*, 22(3):758–798.
- Svensson, P. (2011). The digital humanities as a humanities project. *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, 11(1-2):42–60.
- Svensson, P. (2012). Beyond the Big Tent. In Gold, M. K., editor, *Debates in the Digital Humanities*. University of Minnesota Press, online edition.