'Historical Research in the Digital Age', Part 5: 'Digitising History from a Global Context; and what this tells us about access and inequality'

Origineel bekijken

Since the advent of the Internet and World Wide Web in the early 1990s, historians have gained access to ever increasing amounts of digitised and born-digital sources. The shift to a culture of abundance that the late digital history pioneer Roy Rosenzweig observed in 2003 is a reality in many parts of the Global North. Appearances notwithstanding, however, one of the costs of digitisation, as Ian Milligan pointed out in his first post in this series, is the 'gravitation towards digitised sources and topics at the expense of the (still) "great undigitised"'.

To be sure, historical research has always been shaped by the sources that archives hold and the ways in which access to them is governed. The crucial questions — of why, where, and how we can access what we can access; which histories the documentary record allows us to tell (or not); and who is able tell these histories — long predate History's digital turn. But equally, as historians make increasing use of digital resources in their research, they are questions that have become more immediate and urgent, if we're to better understand the potential and limitations of 'Historical Research in the Digital Age'.

> When we speak about 'abundance', whose abundance are we talking about, who can access it, and why does it matter?

I have discussed some of the broader issues related to this, at greater length, in a recent article on digital history and the politics of digitisation, and available in open access in the journal *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities*. In this post, I would like to focus especially on questions related to digitisation and access in a global perspective: when we speak about 'abundance', whose abundance are we talking about, who can access it, and why does it matter?
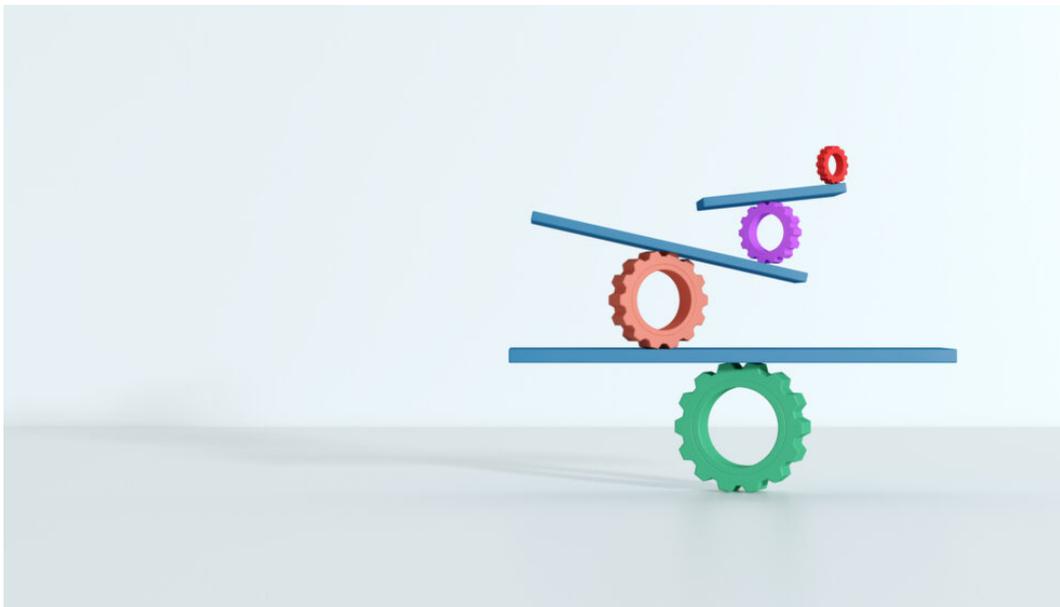
The imbalance of abundance

It should come as no surprise that the global state of cultural heritage digitisation is highly uneven. Inequalities in access abound. Global North / South divisions play a key role, especially in terms of available resources, and are exacerbated by and feed into post-colonial global power and asymmetries of knowledge. Yet the boundaries cannot always be drawn so neatly, as is shown by the existence of 'digital Norths' in the Global South and 'digital Souths' in the Global North.

Without denying the importance and impact of broader North / South inequalities, it is therefore important to remain attentive to variations *within* the Global North and South. Consider, for instance, the digitisation of minority heritage, especially that of transnational communities and peoples. Moreover, while post-colonial legacies can and do impact heritage digitisation in adverse ways, digitisation also functions as a means to address some of these legacies. Think of how digital archives and methods can help to preserve endangered heritage, uncover the stories of those previously unheard, or enable new research avenues into hitherto ignored topics and groups.

> *Even in the case of mass digitisation, increased access to retro-digitised sources does not imply completeness ... Digitisation* always *entails a selection of already selected analogue materials.*

Since its take off in the 1990s, heritage digitisation has become the focus for a wide variety of institutional and non-institutional actors worldwide. Yet there is a difference in terms of the scale of digitisation. While mass digitisation is mostly a phenomenon in and of the Global North, projects in the Global South tend to be more small-scale and targeted. In addition, charitable funding such as that provided by the Endangered Archives Programme plays a more important role. The smaller the scale of digitisation, the more pressing the question of whose stories are digitised, and the bigger the potential political stakes.

Still, even in the case of mass digitisation, increased access to retro-digitised sources does not imply completeness. This means many archival materials are not, and will never be, digitised. Digitisation *always* entails a selection of already selected analogue materials.

It is surprisingly difficult to gauge the global state of cultural heritage digitisation. In 2016 the Economist Intelligence Unit published *A New Age of Culture*, commissioned by Google, which is the only global overview that exists to date. The report included data from 243 heritage institutions located in twenty-two countries and concluded that cultural heritage digitisation 'is extremely uneven across countries and regions, and even within countries'.

The Cultural Digitization Scorecard, which was developed to track the progress of digitisation, ranked Europe and North America highest, though with some very important nuances regarding the Global South. Europe is the only region for which we possess comprehensive and systematically gathered information on the state of digitisation, drawn from the so-called Numeric and eNumerate surveys conducted between 2007 and 2017. As the latest 2017 survey makes clear, much of Europe's cultural heritage remains offline, especially archival materials. Surprisingly, this even applies to information about available heritage: the survey found that less than 60% of Europe's heritage collections has been catalogued in a collection database.


Importantly, digitisation does neither equate to nor guarantee *access* and, as I noted earlier, global inequalities in access to online historical sources are profound. Internet access, speeds and bandwidth vary significantly between and across regions, in some of which mobile internet is more important than broadband. Such unevenness raises a major ethical issue: much of the digitised heritage of the South can be accessed only, or with considerable difficulty, by those in the North. Ensuring and enabling equitable access for those whose heritage is concerned is thus of paramount importance, especially when partners of the Global North get involved in digitisation.

In sum, digital abundance is far from a global phenomenon. Given the symmetries of global power, and the colonial pasts of so many countries in the Global North, confronting how digitisation and inequalities of access to digital

heritage affect historical research is not only unavoidable but a moral and ethical imperative. At the same time, that question should be confronted in such a way as to avoid any form of digital imperialism or adopting the complex of the white 'digital saviour'.

Addressing imbalances and digital deficits

What responses might we offer to the imbalances outlined here? To start, we need more awareness of important work being done outside the Global North, and more global conversations that respect the needs and work of all partners involved and promote equal relations. This is already starting to happen, as — to give but one example — the great work of the African Digital Heritage project shows. When it comes to digitisation, projects like the already mentioned Endangered Archives Programme will continue to play an important role in global digital preservation efforts. Indeed, recent surveys suggest that its projects are certainly not only accessed by users in the Global North.
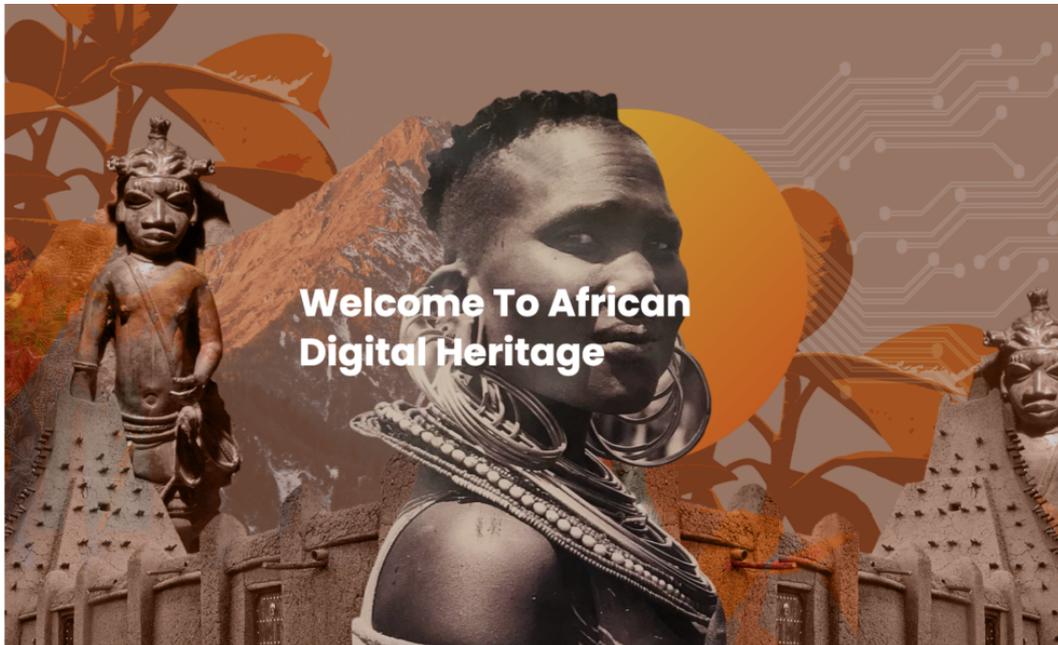
Minimal computing is another suggested solution, defined by Alex Gil and Roopika Risam as 'digital humanities work undertaken in the context of some set of constraints. This could include lack of access to hardware or software, network capacity, technical education, or even a reliable power grid'. Till Grallert, who spearheads the Open Arabic Periodicals project, provides a great example of a minimal computing approach, and outline of some of the key issues involved.

> *Access to cultural heritage starts with access to its descriptive metadata and cataloguing; yet much of our cultural heritage cannot be discovered online. The challenge of cataloguing thus remains of fundamental importance.*

Rethinking and reevaluating the purposes and uses of digitisation is important too. It is increasingly (and misleadingly) common to describe non-digitised heritage as *hidden*, but that label suggests digitisation as a miracle cure that will magically solve all supposed problems of accessibility. The real problem, however, is that much of our cultural heritage cannot even be discovered digitally through institutional collection databases, a question addressed by Anna Mcnally in Part Three of this blog series. Access to cultural heritage starts with access to its descriptive metadata and cataloguing; yet much of our cultural heritage cannot be discovered online. The challenge of cataloguing thus remains of fundamental importance. This applies not only in many parts of the Global South, where digitisation can divert crucial resources away from basic cataloguing work, but equally in the Global North.

Beyond these considerations, scholars of the Global North should become aware of their own (often unconscious) biases and agendas, some of which derive from the privileged positions we gain by birth. Such privilege should instil humility and comes with responsibility. This goes beyond not taking that privilege for granted. Among other things, it also entails making conscious efforts to include projects, resources and scholarship produced outside of the dominant, mostly Anglophone, international scholarly world of the Global North (work that is often under-cited, under-valued, and excluded from citation indexes).

Finally, it's worth restating the benefits we derive from approaches like this. Despite inequalities and impediments, by virtue of its ability to transcend borders, digital (or should we say *digitised*) history holds great potential for historical knowledge produced on a more equal and equitable footing.

About the Author

Gerben Zaagsma is an Assistant Professor at the Centre for Contemporary and Digital History (C²DH) at the University of Luxembourg. His main research and teaching interests are modern Jewish history, digital history and music history. Within the context of digital history, Gerben's principal interest is in the

epistemological implications of using new technologies in historical research, and especially the politics of digitisation and digitised cultural heritage.

He currently works on a new book project that explores the history and genealogies of digital history, set within the broader context of the ways in which technology has shaped historical research practices since the late 19th century.

Gerben's recent publications include ['Digital History and the Politics of Digitization'](#), which is available Open Access in *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities* (2022), and the co-edited collection, *[Jewish Studies in the Digital Age](#)* (2022). Gerben is also project lead and one of the editors of the portal [#DHJewish – Jewish Studies and Digital Humanities](#). His first monograph, *[Jewish Volunteers, the International Brigades and the Spanish Civil War](#),* was published in 2017. More on Gerben's research and digital projects is available from his [personal website](#).

'HISTORICAL RESEARCH IN THE DIGITAL AGE': ABOUT THIS SERIES

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['Historical Research in the Digital Age'](#) is a 6-part series of posts on the Royal Historical Society's blog, published between December 2022 and February 2023. The series is designed and hosted by Ian Milligan, Professor of History at the University of Waterloo, Ontario. It's prompted by Ian's new book, *[The Transformation of Historical Research in the Digital Age](#)* (available Open Access via Cambridge University Press, 2022), which considers the impact and implications of digital resources for contemporary historical practice.

In addition to his own essay, ['We Are All Digital Now: And what this means for historical research'](#) (December 2022), Ian invites four contributors to continue the discussion from several perspectives:

- the **builder** of digital tools for historians: <u>Part 2, with William J. Turkel</u>
- the **archivist-interpretator** who **mediates** between resources (and their commercial providers) and users: <u>Part 3, with Anna Mcnally</u>
- the **collaborative and interdisciplinary researchers** who bring historical and computer science knowledge to big data: <u>Part 4, with Ruth Ahnert</u>
- the **many without access** to such resources given the many 'digital disparities' of infrastructure and sources that exist: <u>Part 5, with Gerben Zaagsma</u>
- the **historian-user** who applies digital resources to their work, and the implications of this: **Part 6, with Jo Guldi**

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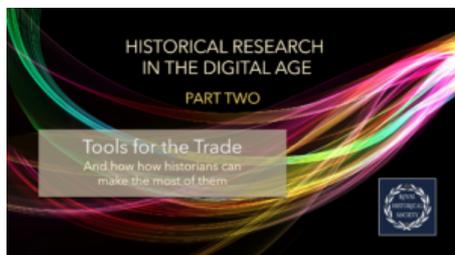
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