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Research article

Unstable Users: Coordinating the Configuration of Digital Objects and Projects

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Abstract

Digital objects are inherently unstable and dependent on user interactions and other infrastructures. At the same time they serve as search engines, libraries, calendars, shops, etc. The user also acquires multiple roles, like being a reader, a visitor, or a participant. The future they suppose is connected with specific tasks that configure both users and digital machines themselves. However, the roles of the user are often not explicit. This article aims at revealing the imaginaries of the user's intentions and aims in digital humanities projects. Digital Humanities projects are supposed to be a part of scientific transformation. The scholars from this field transform the "traditional" scientific knowledge into the forms that suppose transformation of the materials as well as the practices of dealing with them. We analyse interfaces and instructions, also including some context of those projects. The results demonstrate that the projects' user is supposed to have some task from the institutional or disciplinary knowledge outside the digital milieu. The digital instruments might serve as tools for the same tasks that can be supported via interface or instruction. If we consider also the plans and the intentions of the DH researchers, we see that the instruments and the user configure each other. The content is transformed itself, becoming adjustable for users' tasks. At the same time the user can act in either way, and the ways of interaction with DH projects are yet to be researched, in order to understand whether the latter configure some digital scholar.

Keywords: Digital objects; Imaginaries; Infrastructure; Instrument; User studies; Digital Humanities

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Научная статья

Пользователь без пользы: Совместная конфигурация человека и цифровых гуманитарных проектов

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Аннотация
Цифровые объекты формируются в отношениях, которые зависят от взаимодействия с пользователями и другими инфраструктурами. Они могут выполнять роль инструментов, служить интерфейсами или инфраструктурами для разных процессов и задач. Пользователь оказывается одновременно читателем, зрителем, а также соучастником этих процессов. Для того, чтобы уточнить и систематизировать множественные роли цифровых объектов и пользователей, в статье анализируются примеры цифровых гуманитарных проектов. Цифровые гуманитарные проекты описываются их создателями как элементы трансформации науки и технологий, позволяющие музеям, библиотекам и университетам создавать новые формы представления своих коллекций и знаний. Однако не вполне очевидно, какие социальные последствия могут возникать благодаря таким проектам. В их интерфейсах, инструкциях и иных формах существования автор выявляет специфику цифровых объектов: как они формируют пользовательские намерения и что могут предложить в качестве решения задач. Предполагается, что будущее, которое формируется с помощью таких инструментов может зависеть как от самих проектов, так и от типов знаний, практик, задач и институций, стоящих “за” ними. Результаты исследования показывают, что проекты в области цифровых гуманитарных наук скорее оказываются посредниками в реализации институциональных, чем создают собственные проекты будущего. Тем не менее, пользовательские отношения с этими проектами могут быть в дальнейшем самостоятельными объектами исследования.

Ключевые слова: Цифровые объекты; Воображаемое; Инфраструктура; Инструменты; Пользователи Исследования пользователей; Цифровая гуманитаристика

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INTRODUCTION

Digital objects are different from other objects, and particularly, technological and natural. The distinctions are widely discussed nowadays, especially when the "digital" transforms into AI-based or "smart". However we rely here on the idea formulated by Yuk Hui (2012), who defines digital objects as those with relation-centered existence. It means that digital objects cannot persist for a long time in a stable condition unless they are maintained by relations of both humans and non-humans. The infrastructure for the support of some objects is not something specific. Cars and refrigerators can work *properly* only if they co-exist with repair stations, wires, and electricity masters. However, proper work of the technological object is sometimes more doubtable and highly dependent on users rather than designers. A person can re-use a car or mend a refrigerator. The destiny of digital objects is far less stable. Misuse or improper use of the digital object can be less obvious but more challenging for the user and his/her relations with their own or common future.

At the same time, media and digital objects "transcend the artificial divide between design and use" (Oudshoorn & Pinch, 2003, p. 16). The relations between the digital objects and users are at least dialectical. The additional complication comes from the fact that digital objects can be at the same time in different roles, like instruments, infrastructures, or even work as spaces and institutional branches. This multiplicity of meanings also problematizes the role of the user: is it different when each hypostase of a digital object is enabled? This dynamic rearrangement of relations can be explained if we pay attention to the metaphors in the sense how Lakoff and Johnson (2008) approach them as key methods of re-arrangement of our understanding of different entities in relation to each other. E.g. Stephan Robert (2008) sets an example of mind and computer:

> This metaphor has generated an entire theoretical apparatus (the brain's "hardware" and "software", "computation", cognitive "pre-wiring", "input", "output"...). However, the analogical process was erased: in the initial approach, it was a question of simulating mental processes using computers, it then became a case of describing them using computers, then it was a question of describing them using the computer as a model (metaphor), lastly, in a third stage, some began considering the brain as being a computer, a thinking machine (whence identification between the two domains, disappearance of the analogy). (p. 74)

Once a metaphor is established in a social context, we can define an object as something specific. Such an approach is popular for knowledge management and analysis. E.g. Snis et al. (2004) demonstrate how metaphors of common information spaces move between "desktop" and "forum", slightly transforming the meaning of all the participants of the network engaged in the interaction with the service. This "interpretive flexibility" (Leigh Star, 2010) means that boundaries of the digital object are something "in flux."

The research might help to understand the of the digital objects and understand whether they match with their names. Search engines, trackers, online rooms, and digital libraries – all these names refer to specific entities. Do they serve as tools that enable an

effect or even an affect for people? Is this a common fate for technology, or is it a unique feature of digital objects or web services?

To narrow these questions, I'll focus on the interaction of the digital object with users, as they seem to be the "final mile" of digital production. I suppose that *speculation of the digital futuring means not only creating the object, but peoples' relation with it.* The central theme of this article revolves around the reconstruction of digital objects as user-centric entities. I suppose that infrastructures coexist with instruments, institutions, instructions, initiatives, and plans. The crux of the matter lies in whether these technologies, brimming with code and words, can articulate their own ambitions. To address this, I turn to Digital Humanities projects, which are expected to be at least reflexive, particularly in their academic and technological nature.

I wonder how these projects are coordinated with instructions and interfaces and enrich the understanding of the relational nature of the digital objects.

INSTRUMENTS, INTERFACES AND INSTITUTIONS: THE WAYS OF ORDERING DIGITAL OBJECT

Evgeny Morozov (2015), a prominent technology critic introduced the concept of "technosolutionism" into the discourse of technology researchers and the general public. Morozov (2013) defined technosolutionism as the idea that technology is capable of solving specific issues, such as environmental, political, or social problems. He problematised the idea that the implementation of a technical solution can lead to the creation of new practices and situations. For instance, sorting and properly disposing of trash can be seen as a means to combat global warming (Morozov, 2011). Morozov's critical attention questioned the idea that establishing a "proper" habit through an app can transform into a social activity. So we'll follow this drift and try to understand technosolutionism from a more academic way of thinking. There are several perspectives helping us to shape an understanding of the role of technology in some relation with intention and function implemented into it and acting upon the user.

– Do artifacts have politics? This question was debated by Langdon Winner (2017). He supposes that artifacts have their own design, and so far, specific ordering of how to deal with them. The "patterns of authority" (p. 143) are implemented in artifacts. However, it is arguable if the digital object is an artifact in the same sense.

– What might be helpful for such unstable objects, is the concept of enactment, introduced by Annemarie Mol (1999). It refers to the pivotal moment when technology meets its purposes in coordination rather than pre-supposed ordering.

– Many studies focus on analyzing technology misuse or refusal to use it (Wyatt, 2003, Kuntsman & Miyake, 2019). I group these studies together because they examine the specific agency of the user and deviation from the "*proper*" purpose of the technology itself. The purpose might be placed into either interface or instrument.

– Is technology synonymous with its function, and who determines the intended purpose of technology? These questions have philosophical roots, particularly in the concepts of presence-at-hand and readiness-to-hand described by Martin

Heidegger (1962). More contemporary affordance research also raises questions about the responsibility of designers developers (Costa, 2018).

The questions presented primarily belong to the tradition of Science and Technology Studies (STS), but they sometimes transcend its boundaries (like the SCOT approach). If we focus on the study of science and technology, we need to define what will be considered science (or knowledge) and what will be considered technologies. Following the general guidelines of STS, we outline a circle in which technology is distinct from its plan and conception, it works in a world where a user emerges or is constructed. Our research is devoted to clarifying the relationships between them.

The general definition of imaginaries, according to Jasanoff, is "collectively maintained, institutionally stabilized, and publicly performed visions of desirable futures" (Jasanoff & Kim, 2019). For the detailed study conducted in this text, such a framework is quite suitable, but it leaves room for future developments and a more detailed reconstruction of organizational cultures, as well as historical, ethnographical, and cultural analysis of the full context.

The difference between *plans and configurations of interaction*, I turn to the works of Lucy Suchman. Lucy Suchman (2007) allows us to see that plans and instructions alongside usage-as-communication with the machine as forms of sense-making. Thus, elements for reconstruction become not only the technologies themselves but primarily their *interface* and usage *instructions*. Prescriptions and affordances will be considered derivatives of imaginaries and plans. Additionally, the research includes organizational conditions of technological project production, mediated by descriptions and reflections in scientific articles.

All of them, interfaces, instructions and reflections might be sources for reconstruction of the role of the user. The construction of the user is supposed to be an important part of technology production (Woolgar, 1990). The user is a type of subject that does not equate to a consumer, citizen, or process participant. Even the name has a utilitarian flavor: the user gains benefit from the product. Unlike them, a consumer can enjoy the product, a citizen may not be involved in any interaction with objects, and the involvement of a participant may only hinder utility.

An entire field of knowledge called UX/UI research is dedicated to the figure of the user. It is widespread in commercial research and interface design. This field of knowledge employs various methods from psychology, sociology, anthropology, and cognitive sciences. These methods aim to help interface creators understand what tasks correspond to particular expectations and intentions of people.

The critical approach emphasizes the production of the user as a process. It allows for identifying power relations: and not just trivially pointing out that people do what the interface rules command (which is often incorrect). The relationships between the user and different logics, *metaphors*, and other elements of technical solutions deserve scholarly attention, and researchers turn to study these solutions (see above mentioned Wyatt, Suchman, etc).

To conclude, we treat digital technology as something that can bring "solutions", as it is called in public critical and descriptive literature. This "technosolutionism" derives from the philosophical and political ways of understanding technologies. In order to

understand the political situation of the ordering, functions and modes of coordination, as well as *improper* usage of the digital objects. I suppose that within the interfaces and via instructions that do not just tell a person what to do, but rather configure the communication between machines and people. The relations between digital objects (that remains interpretatively flexible) and the user will be studied via exploration of the particular field, *instrictions, interfaces and the reflections* of those who co-create the digital milieu we explore.

DIGITAL HUMANITIES PROJECTS: IS THERE A USER FOR THE SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Digital Humanities (DH) Projects as a milieu

A Digital Humanities project is an infrastructural digital realization of a humanities research object, like an archive, book, or gallery. It can be also broader, including a theme, research initiative, and sometimes even an entire institution. These include various initiatives, from decades-long university projects to visual novels and video games. Tools for analyzing large volumes of literary or scientific texts, recognition of museum objects, archival collections, semantic publications featuring various commentarial traditions, geolocation models, and timelines of historical events make up an incomplete and perpetually unfinished list of what a digital humanities project can be.

The academic field of Digital Humanities claims its own autonomous existence. Its autonomy is ensured not only by the responsibility for creating these projects but also by reflecting on its own subjectivity. DH is often considered an heir to computational sciences and quantitative research (Akleman et al., 2015, Berry, 2011). Sometimes, it is also attributed to "digital" or "communication" fields of knowledge and practices, such as digital ethnography or pedagogy (Gibbs, 2016).

Digital humanities projects exist in universities, archives, museums, libraries, research institutes, and sometimes they emerge independently or within governmental or amateur initiatives. A key feature of DH is the collaboration of specialists in both humanities and technical fields. Creating a project requires working with humanities entities, as well as tools, databases, computational models, and visual solutions. Sometimes projects are based in the universities or beyond, like the cultural institutions or some other modes of institutionalization.

The digital tools and the transformation of the object do not leave the theories and methods the same as before. By placing a computer in the scientist's role, we achieve not just an "efficient project" but also a different mode of production. This difference gains much attention and reflection from the scientific community itself (Berry, 2011; Liu, 2012).

At the same time, digital humanities projects contribute to detailed and diverse research, expanding access to knowledge, scientific approaches, and interdisciplinary dialogue. Of course, the realization of these possibilities (as well as accounting for risks) depends on national university culture and specific disciplines. However, the projects are often supposed to serve as infrastructure, posing the institutions and research fields in

digital and cross-border context (Grumbach & Mandell, 2014). They might also function as educational materials or suppose to visualise/exemplify the previous research and scientific projects (Mandell, 2013).

There are yet not so many projects that have clear results to practical usage, so we can't be assured about their consequences of the digital tools for scientific and practical fields where DH is expanding. One of those examples is the problematization of the literary canon amid the increase in digital humanities projects dedicated to William Shakespeare (Estill, 2019, Galey & Siemens 2008). As Shakespeare's legacy became more accessible for study by various methods, it revived the old discussion about whether he was truly a genius and to what extent. Moreover, the digitization of humanitarian knowledge has made authors who were once in the shadows more visible and enabled access to their works. Archives of women's art, Black history, migrants, and oppressed social groups have come into focus, while archives of the classics of the European canon are not always as fully collected and presented as their collected works. However, this discussion more reflects the half-century-long debate about the role of the Western European canon in general and does not consider the reality of usage.

What is visible from the "macro" perspective is the data and computational turn for science. During the "digitization" of the humanities, they were compelled (or perhaps eagerly desired) to engage with data and information sciences. These areas of knowledge have had the status of "sciences" for not so long, but due to their positivist approaches and high predictive capability, they carry this status with aplomb and significant consequences for epistemic structures (Anderson, 2008).

Humanities and social scholars do not leave this problem unattended. The transformation of knowledge, science, and the way of studying provokes a response of Critical Data and Algorithmic Studies (Luhmann & Burghardt, 2022; Viola, 2023). There are also some rhetorical and theoretical inventions, like "capta" instead of "data" as a key term (Drucker, 2011). However, the problem of entanglement of scientific and technological issues is still valid when we talk about the DH projects. It is also not evident what is the role and type of responsibility of those who become the designers and developers of the DH projects.

Institution, Infrastructure, Instrument: how to Imagine an Instruction and Interface

Social imagination and empathy are not basic virtues of scholars. Neither the structure of university courses (except for occasional elements of pedagogy) nor strictly institutional existence presumes that a scholar becomes aware and engaged in the design of the consequences of their research. Although grant applications feature a section for "social impact," it is often interpreted broadly. However, digital humanists often seem to be much more socially responsible than their "classical" colleagues.

This hypothetical awareness can be explained due to the critical turn of many contemporary scholars or the duty of the project manager who is an obligatory participant in the DH production. The other reason is the role of the *designer/researcher who maintains the DH project as a transformer*, the one who is obliged to *project*, ergo,

provoke, and produce some new infrastructures rather than some pieces of knowledge. We can suppose that visual and digital resources can serve as metaphors here, but they become self-sufficient instruments by themselves, offering some interface.

In high-tech projects, in contrast, futuring, creating the future, imagining, and finding forms of implementation play a central role (Oomen et al., 2022). Often in popular images of the "inventor," they resemble a scientist more than anything else. Figures like Steve Jobs are branded as a kind of genius who is indifferent to people but obsessed with the idea of invention, much like a scientist. This image is not exclusive to the IT world. The word "visionary" is also often added to this description. As far as the vision is not obvious and "objective" according to different epistemic cultures, projects also have instructions or use some supplementary modes of interaction.

Digital humanities projects are ideally suited for understanding the imagined high-tech features because they consist of different ethos. The scientific ethos and mode of knowledge production do not align with business realities seamlessly. In the seam, we can see the matters of different ways of constructing the user. But the foremost question is what is being produced: an instrument, an infrastructure, or a form of institutional existence. All of those mean different modes of usage.

We shall briefly analyze

a) *interfaces,*

b) instructions,

c) research and reflections about the projects.

The analysis is based on the list of the *DH projects in the listed depositories* (teach.dariah and eadh.org/projects). The examples are not supposed to be comprehensive, as the approach to the interface and instruction included a walkthrough method. The research review is based on the authors' personal observations rather than research and includes the above mentioned projects and their authors' articles.

a) interfaces

There are initiatives (such as Wordhoard, Transkribus or Voyant Tools, fig.1) that are supposed to be instruments with some directed way of usage. This way is often describe explicitly or supposes some user heuristics in order to understand the meaning of each interface element. Each interface supposes that the user has a pre-set task or aim, that is however configured with the instrument, that can either function as intended or need some additional configuration (as the user's aim and task).

Similarly, there are well-defined showcases for demonstrating research results (e.g., historical timelines). There are also evident infrastructural solutions for realizing their institutional rules, such as digital archives.

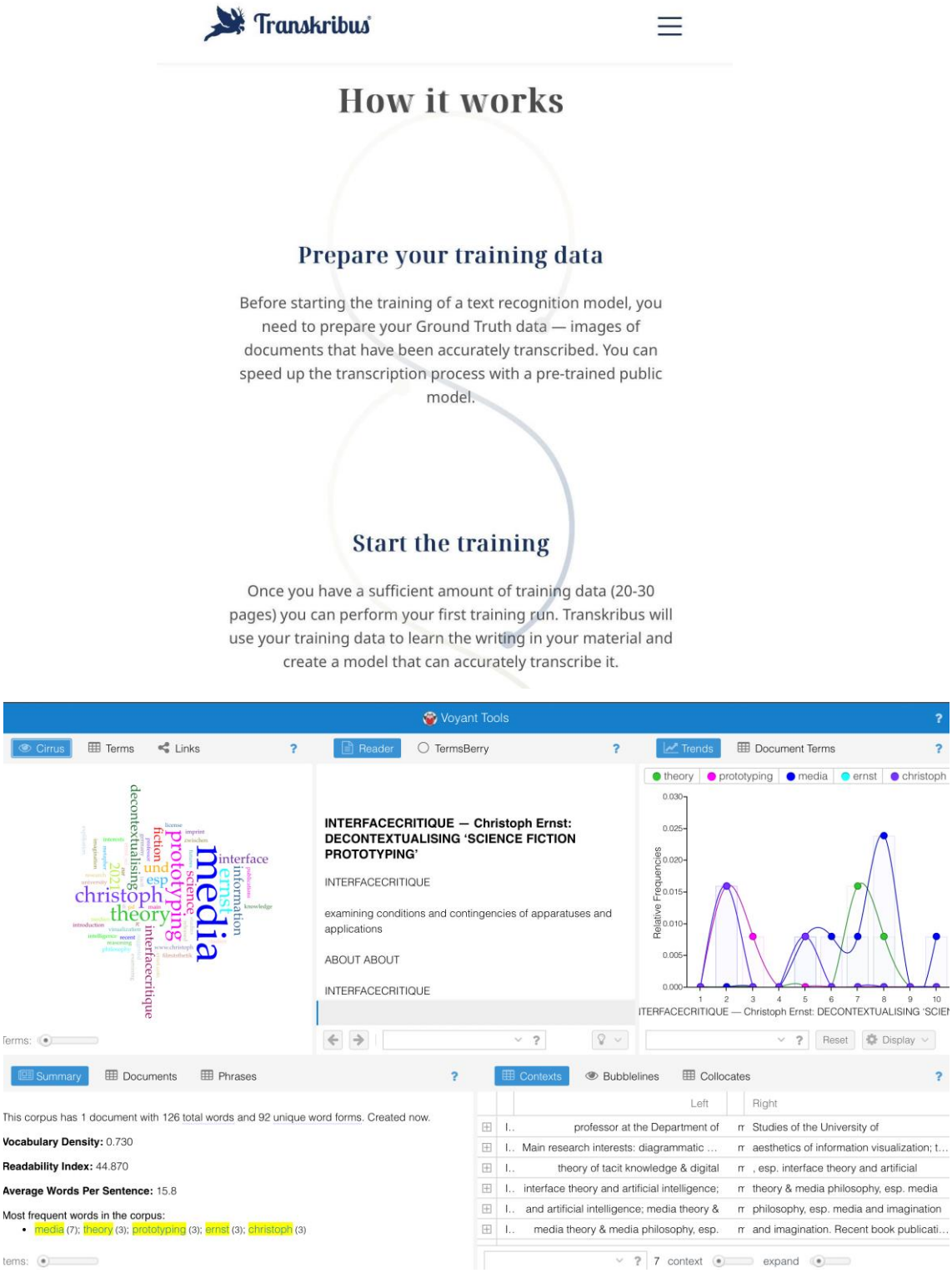

Figure 1. Transkribus and basic descriptions of the instrument in the interface. Voyan Tools with a tool set

However, many projects cannot be reduced to any of these definitions. For example, the Goethe Faust project (fig. 2) presents research results, allows the construction of new hypotheses, and forms an understanding of the method, thus fulfilling an institutional and disciplining task. At least, all these possibilities are potentially embedded in it. How they unfold might be not precisely recognisable form the first glance.

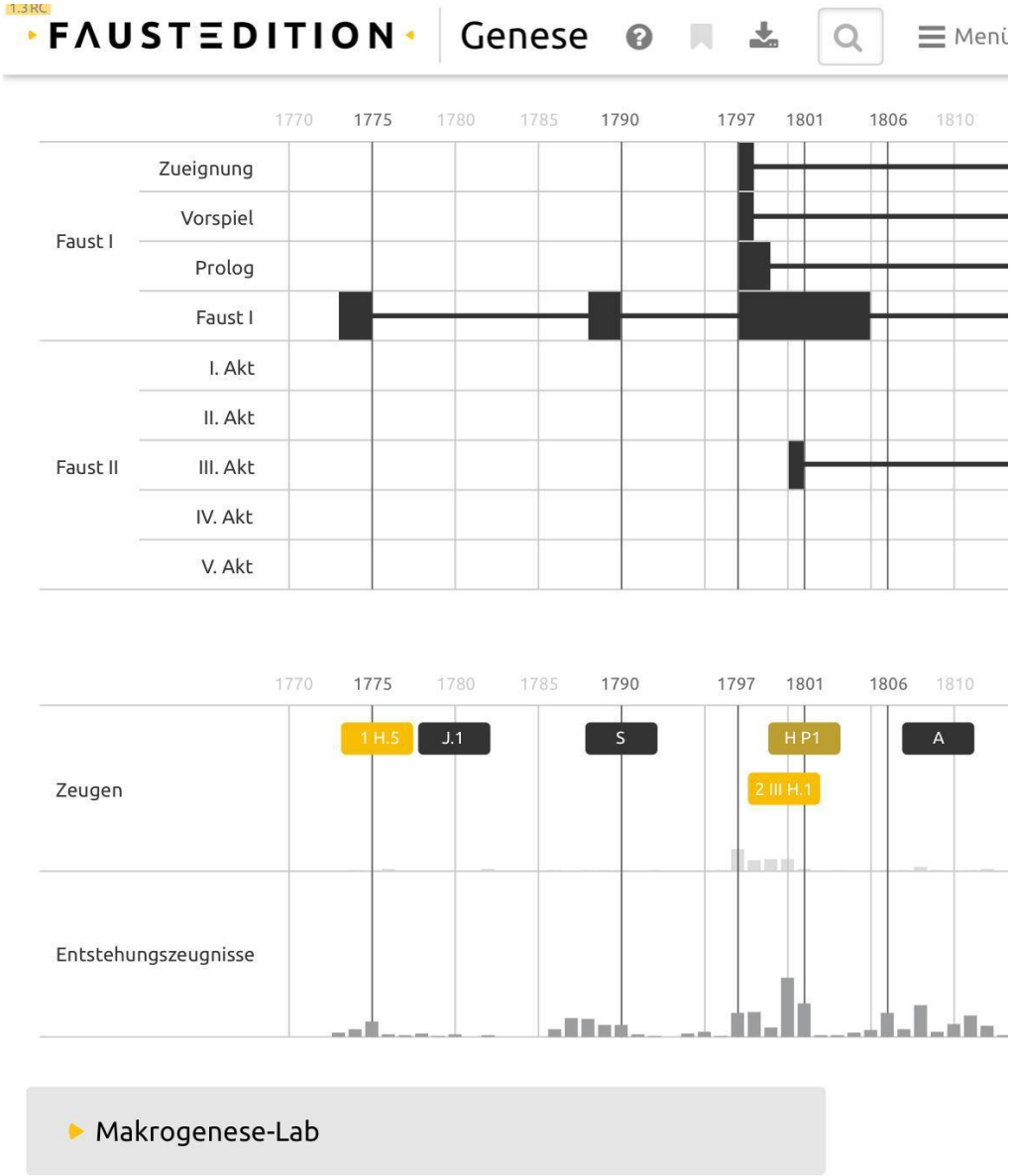

Figure 2. Goethe‘s Faust and visualization of the text

This uncertainty of use remains an enigmatic side of digital humanities projects. The interfaces like the aforementioned ones definitely demand more precise research with the analysis of the way of usage. Sometimes they provide not only an interface, but an

instruction or visual instruments of the way of usage. So far, we move to the next element of the analysis.

b) instructions

The instructions for the projects mostly suppose that the technological part of the project is obscure, while the humanities is quite evident. For example, the Spinoza Ethics project (fig. 3) allows to connect different parts of the book, supposing that the understanding of the latter context is more or less clear to those who start using the project.

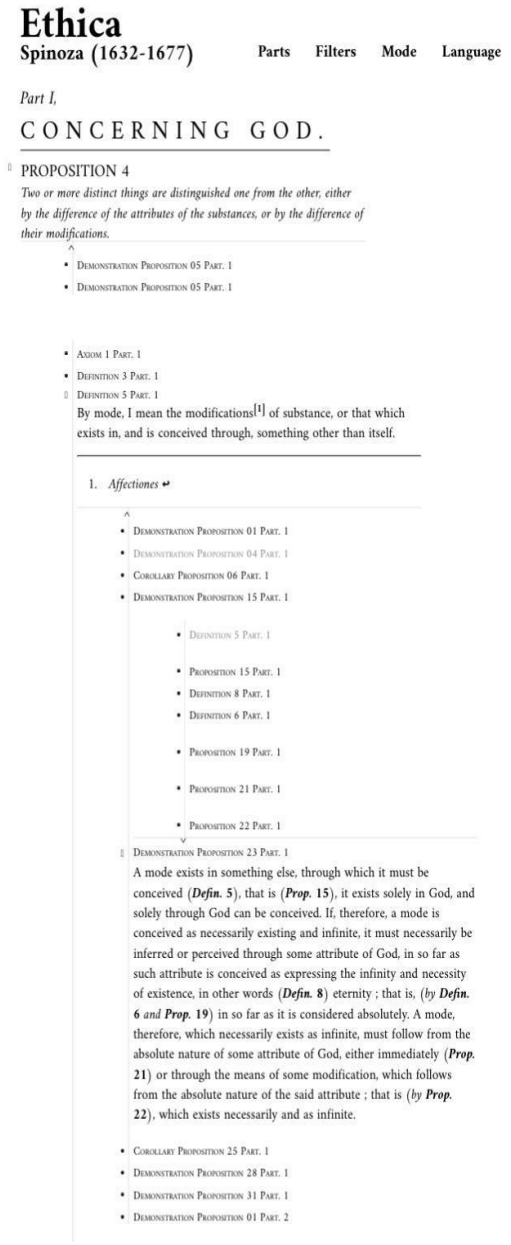

Figure 3. Spinoza Ethica and visual instructions for the user.

Probably one may suppose that the book with hyperlinks is itself an evident cultural form; however, it is not as clear for people who meet it for the first time in online form (never seeing it in previous form before). The interface is itself "instructive", as it contains the elements of the analysis: one can follow the links with hypertextual navigation and at the same time keep the basic text in fromt of him/her. The material (text in "Ethics" example) itself contains the guidelines and becomes an instrument for the navigation.

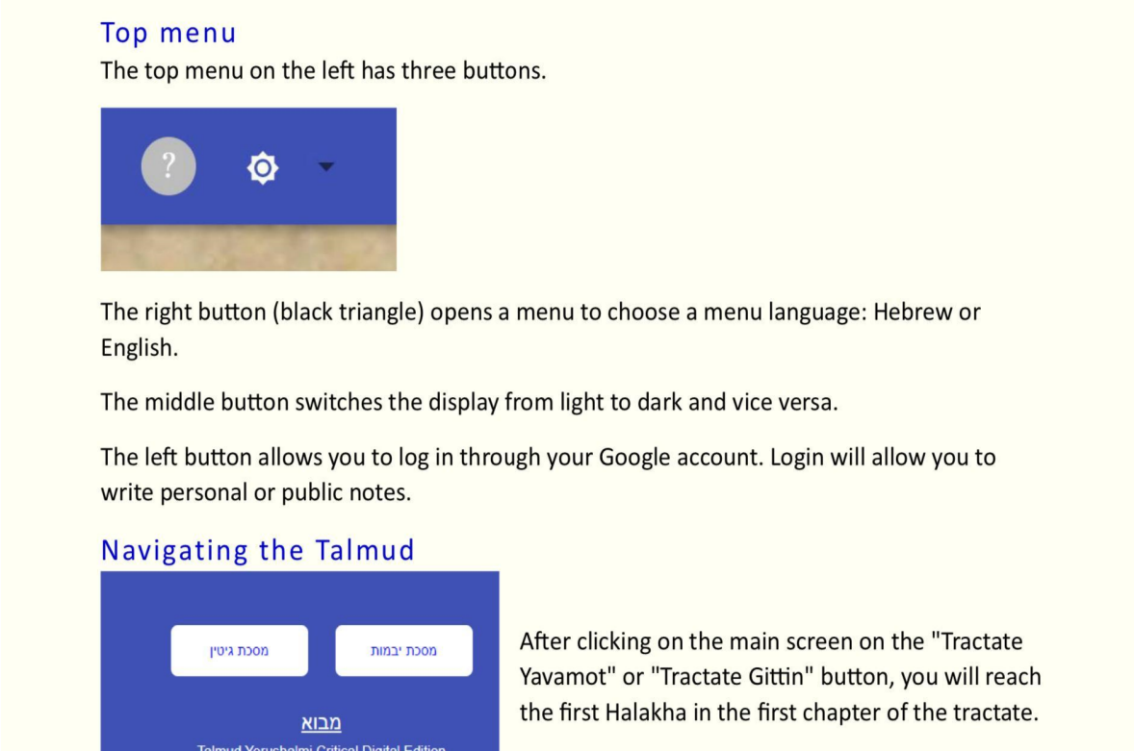

Figure 4. Talmud digital instructions

There are also projects that inherit the organizational culture of those who have been working with the texts or objects in this or that way. See, for example, the Talmud instruction or the description of how the vaynt tool instrument works (fig. 4). Despite being quite different, they both demonstrate the rules of a scientific tradition incorporated into the instrument. The projects like this do not become an infrastructure but rather can be used in some particular context yet to be organised or pre-existing around them. What is explicated here, is a role of the buttons and modes of arrangement of the text, which remains untouched but users can arrange the mode of their own work with it.

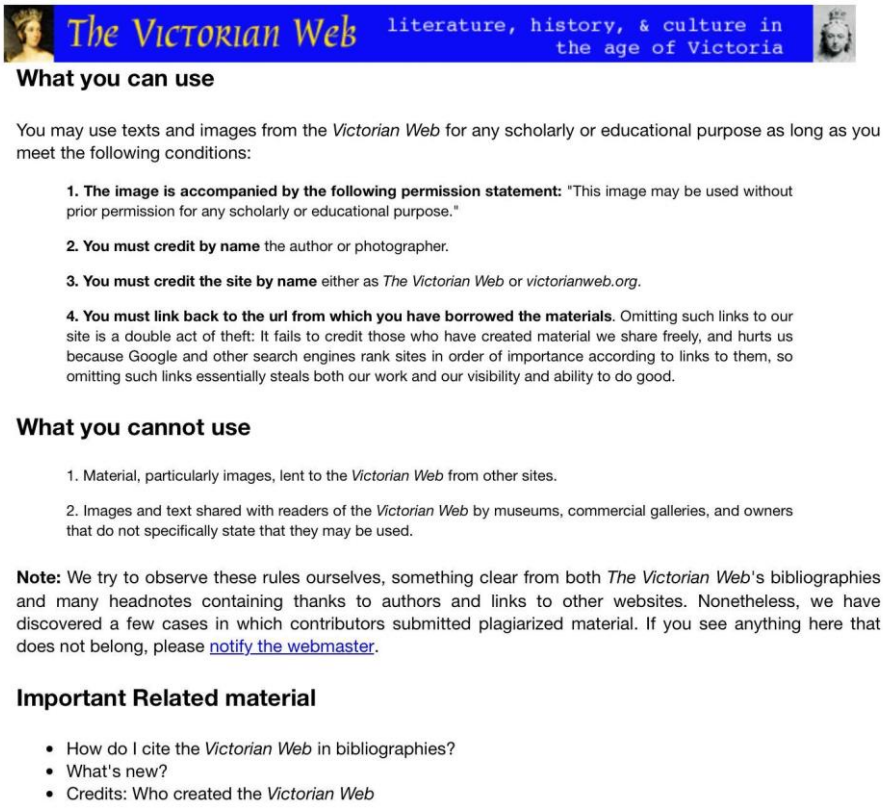

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Figure 5. User guide and instruction demonstrating how to deal with the interface

The exceptions like the Victorian Web provide strict rules (fig. 5). They divide the usage modes (proper/improper) into the gatekeeping rules per se. It also helps to find and formulate the aim and task for the usage.

Of course, these are not the only examples, as we can also see projects that have served as the basis for academic research (as the abovementioned Transkribus). These ones create not only the instrument but also suppose the way of working with the data or representation mode and create the research or other intellectual products. Such projects are often observed as examples of re-institutionalization of the humanities or, in contrast, in neoliberalization and the institutional crisis (Allington et al, 2016) or some stage of humanities development (Alvarado, 2012).

So far, the instructions mean that DH is merely a community-based product and enables coordination and engagement plans for those who become users. However, this analysis is still not complete if not looking for the answers the creators of the projects give themselves.

c) research and reflection

Whereas the Digital Humanities is supposed to be an interdisciplinary field, it is mostly oriented at those who already understand the aim and ethos of the discipline and/or at least scientific and intellectual issues themselves.

The articles about the digital transformation of society/industry do not appear in the same journals as the DH scholars' articles. The word "capta" still remains a term inside the community close to the academy. The "democratization" of the digital infrastructure is not yet reflected, or probably, it is rather demanding special research projects. The user research (Warwick, 2012) presents a rather vague frame that is far from sufficient to understand how the projects work in cultural or social means. Probably it is a matter of further and futuring projection of how the people might become engaged into the DH projects and co-reconfigure with them.

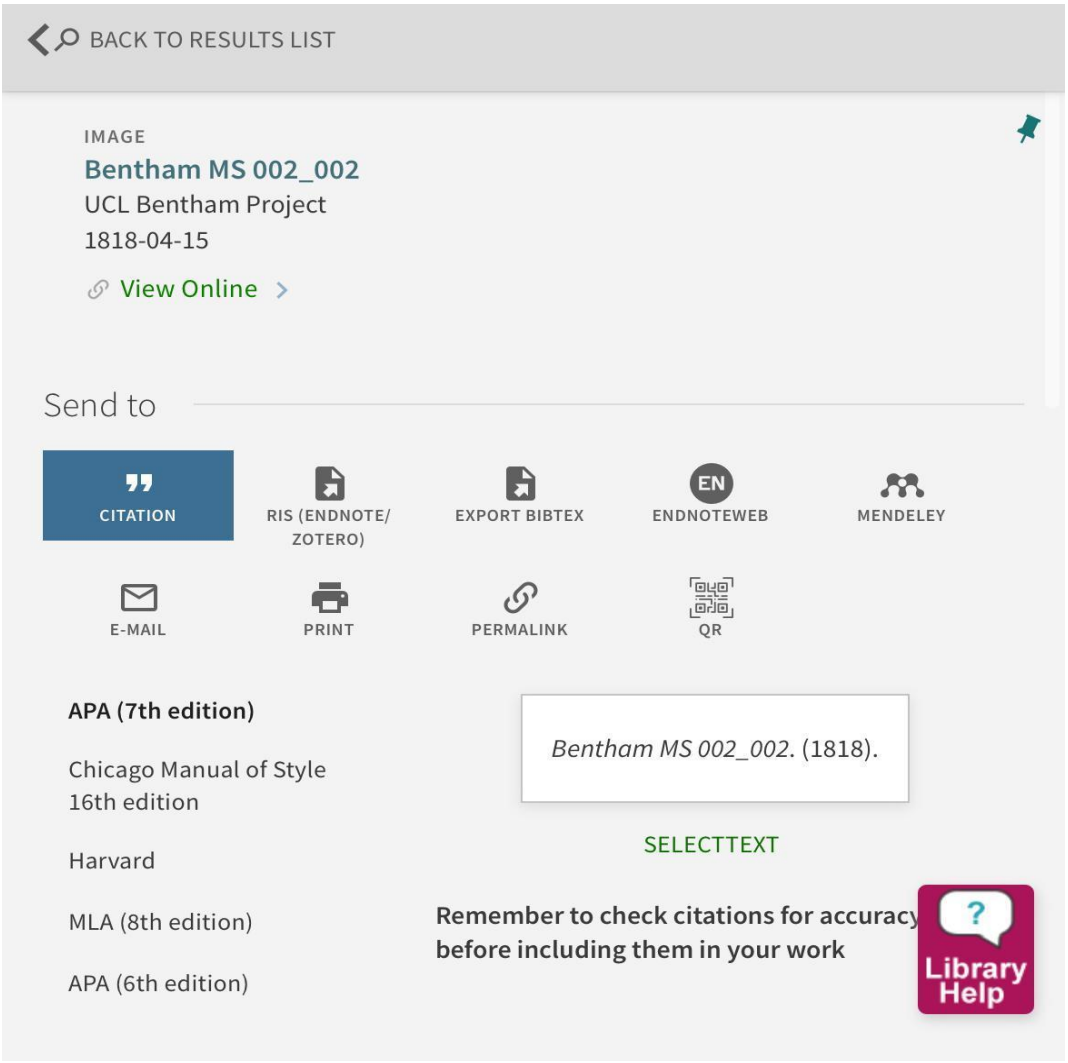

Figure 6. Bentham archive as a result of user collaboration

What is different is another type of person engaged in the DH projects, the participants or those who collaborate for the project. They might be students, or even the amateurs, like the Betham's archive (fig. 6) or Prozhito social history archive. The role of these users is not always visible, but we can find academic publications about it (Causer & Terras, 2014).

Unstable User in Digital and Humanities Context

Technologies co-exist with imaginaries and speculations. Moreover, a plot, a plan, or a dream precedes technical objects. An idea can emerge in conversation, transform into a description or task, a drawing or graph, a text, or a technical assignment. It can rather stay without any implication, being a comment on another technology, a critical article, or a dystopian TV series. We rarely see and perceive technologies themselves in their materiality: some are tightly packaged in cases of phones or apps, separated from us by kilometers like the servers and data centers, or do not exist in the world of sensations and everyday knowledge at all, being something like an enchantment or a code.

The digital objects at the same time include their documentation, instructions and have rich interface, allowing to trace these plans. It is often contaminated into the word “project”. The frame of “project” preceding “object” or co-existing with it when we speak about “digital”, supposes the multiplicity of the roles both for the user and the ones who organize the objects.

The articles explored Digital Humanities projects in order to understand what are the interfaces, instruments and other material elements of those enabling the configuration of the user and his/her situation and future.

Digital humanities projects we’ve analyzed do not provoke any social or cultural issue or problem to be solved by them solely. In contrast, they state that their aim is to be a solution to the problems that pre-existed in the scientific or cultural field. The instrument, infrastructure, and institution come together, constructing a user with a capability of coordination who can curate their own experience and aims. DH projects become a gatekeeping or reconfiguring element for the “pre-digital” situation. However, the interfaces, instructions, and papers by those who create the projects help to observe the imaginaries of techno-scientific virtues of humanities research. The “solutionist” perspective of the digital humanities projects, turns to be two-folded: both the user as a researcher can solve the puzzles from inside the humanities agenda, or the instruments can configure his or her interest. They also sometimes enact the potential of the digitalised objects (like hypertext or multimodality of the archaeological artifacts) rather than social change.

The researcher and DH-projects creators come to the project in a role of those who translate the order of their own discipline or field and reflect on what is going on with the projects, knowledge, and culture.

One might argue that the same is true also for the homepages (Lialina, 2023) or other web-projects that are not obviously produced with any explicit aim. However, we might underappreciated the pre-digital analogues of those and probably it could be fruitful to expand the analysis of metaphorical and material objects of the digital objects to understand them properly.

Of course, this analysis is preliminary and can be trivialized, as the digital objects themselves are not “mediums” or universal producers of some type of user. However, I hope that it rather draws the distinctions of how we can further understand the elements of what we call “digital”. We try to unfold it properly with the attention to what is metaphorical and what is material in each situation, and hope that it can be developed by future researchers.

APPENDIX

Digital Humanities projects:
dariahTeach. https://teach.dariah.eu/
European Association for Digital Humanities. *Projects*. EADH. https://eadh.org/projects
The Victorian Web: An Overview and Introduction. The Victorian Web. https://victorianweb.org/index.html
READ-COOP. Transkribus. https://www.transkribus.org/
Bar-Ilan University. Talmud Yerushalmi. https://www.talmudyerushalmi.com/
Faustedition.net. https://faustedition.net
Voyant Tools. https://voyant-tools.info/people/
University College London. Bentham collection. UCL Digital Collections. https://www.ucl.ac.uk/library/digital-collections/collections/bentham

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