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LAUREN TILTON, DAVID MIMNO, JESSICA MARIE JOHNSON, EDS. *COMPUTATIONAL HUMANITIES: DEBATES IN THE DIGITAL HUMANITIES*

University of Minnesota Press, 2024, 344 p.

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BOOK REVIEW

Computational humanities is a field of scientific inquiry at the intersection of information technology and the humanities. It uses digital and computational approaches to transform traditional humanities research methods, enabling us to ask questions we would otherwise not be able to ask. CH directs the humanities to the center of debates about computational technologies and how to use them to understand the world. At its core, however, it retains the style and subject matter characteristic of research in the humanities, making it very welcoming to researchers coming from a non-technical background.

The book *Computational Humanities* was published in September 2024 by the University of Minnesota Press. Its editors are Jessica Marie Johnson (associate professor of history at Johns Hopkins University), David Mimno (associate professor of information science at Cornell University), and Lauren Tilton (E. Claiborne Robins Professor of Liberal Arts and Digital Humanities at the University of Richmond). Each of the editors is already a recognizable figure in the digital humanities community. The book is available as a paperback, a hardcover, or as an e-book. At the end, I worked with an e-book, because the digital workflow suits me better, eliminates the need to wait for shipping, and is arguably more sustainable.

The main goal of the book is to introduce the idea of computational practices as a mode of inquiry to the reader. It raises the topic of what perspective they can provide to a humanities-oriented scholar. Its additional goal is to show how CH can expand the methodological and evidentiary repertoire of the field, along with the adoption of good practices from data science, such as the FAIR data principles. Lastly, it can show new applications of methods to those already familiar with CH.

The book consists of 15 titled chapters and an introduction. Each of them originates from a different author(s). These are separated into two sections, which I will outline later. Each chapter delves into a different research that has taken place, which here serves as a case study of how and why particular computational methods were used. This is a stimulating way to get us thinking about our own options for using computational methods and to rethink our pre-existing research

workflow. Contributing authors include several prominent researchers such as Ted Underwood, Marieke van Erp, Barbara McGillivray, David Bamman, Mark Algee-Hewitt, and others.

Each of the two book sections has its own purpose and point of view. The first is titled “Asking With”, which explores how we can utilize computational methods to enhance and advance our humanities-oriented research. In other words: “What can asking with CH bring to us?” Rather than discussing CH itself and what constitutes them, this section discusses the perspective these methods can offer us. How can they shift and transform the traditional style of humanities inquiry? For example, Chapter 1 emphasizes the distinction between interpreting the outputs of computational tools (metrics such as Pearson correlation, regression analysis, etc.) and the artifacts created by their use (projections of embeddings in semantic space, maps, etc.). Furthermore, selecting specific computational tools already adopts a particular interpretative approach and perspective, just as subscribing to a specific interpretative theory steers us toward a specific interpretation. The impossibility of a clear separation between close and distant reading is also discussed here. Both approaches require some portion of the other, and total isolation between them would not only be detrimental but also harmful to the research. Focusing on only one type of inquiry can deprive us of important context and knowledge.

The second part of the book is titled “Asking About” and takes on the task of reflecting the computational methods themselves and how they are viewed in the field of the humanities. This section highlights some of the institutional challenges that CH researchers may face. These stem primarily from the fact that this field originated in humanities-oriented departments. Given their historical context, these spaces tend to favor single-author monographs. In the past, it was rather unusual in the humanities to encounter author collectives and interdisciplinary research published through journal entries and conference proceedings. These are more common in STEM, from which CH draws this research approach. CH commonly sees groups of authors in which each member is an expert in a respective domain, joined by common ground and research interest. In some countries (as is the case in Czech academia), this creates a difficult environment for publishing computationally oriented research. These are often humanities-oriented topics, but they are explored in an unconventional way. Reviewers who have not encountered this type of research may be very critical of the form and presentation of the results, even though the topic and issues are consistent with the journal's target subject matter.

Another problem is the evaluation of science. In the humanities, it is generally unusual for an article to have three or more authors. As a result, credit is shared, despite the proportion of the actual workload of each individual researcher. The authors of the book perceive this state of affairs as an obstacle to the growth of interdisciplinary research in the humanities. Not to mention the fact that programming, analysis, data aggregation, and data management are not considered full-fledged outputs that would advance a researcher's career, despite how integral they are to the research. Nevertheless, it has to be done, but since it is usually treated as something supplemental, it reflects poorly on the quality of coding and analysis. Articles also often take on the task of explaining the methods used in the analysis. This often gives the text a more technical character, which may not be preferable for all journals. These issues are discussed in particular in chapters 12, 13, and 14.

The only shortcoming of some chapters is their thematic focus on research from the United States. European researchers reading this book may have little experience with topics related to North American history and may therefore be unfamiliar with the core issue. However, this does

not detract from the research, methods, or perspective that each chapter sets out to present.

The book is aimed both at people who are just setting out to discover CH and those already part of the community. It achieves this by exploring questions about CH, which helps to unravel what differentiates them from traditional approaches and, at the same time, presents novel research. I recommend it to anyone in the humanities who wants to broaden their research perspectives. This book can bring a breath of fresh air to classical armchair approaches. It can give the reader an idea of why to conduct interdisciplinary research, what counts as data science, or how much work computational analysis takes. Even if the reader does not intend to pursue this type of research themselves, reading it can increase their awareness of the field and thus foster more collaboration within their department.



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