

Digital Humanities in Italy: the tradition of innovation

Over the last two decades, the Digital Humanities has established itself as one of the most important scientific and educational innovations in the field of humanistic research. Despite, and perhaps thanks to a fluid disciplinary definition, this field of study has achieved significant results in terms of theoretical and applicative research, has gained a stable presence in the educational offer and is successful in accessing funding. It also equipped itself with infrastructures and organizations for scientific cooperation at a national and international level that collect and coordinate a very large number of scholars worldwide, organize huge conferences and publish authoritative monographs and periodicals.

If it is true that the most important 'success stories' are placed in the Anglo-Saxon countries and in Germany, even the Italian situation, despite delays, cultural reluctance and the crisis of the overall university system, is very satisfactory.

First, it should be noted that these studies in our country have a decades-long history. The reference to Father Busa, universally recognized as the founder of the entire field of studies, and to his work of digitization and indexing of the works of Thomas Aquinas, started at the end of the 1940s, is quite self-evident. But I would like to point out that Busa's work was not completely isolated in Italy. It is enough to remind that in 1962 the prestigious annual *Almanacco Bompiani* was dedicated to *The applications of electronic calculators to moral sciences and literature*, which shows how even in those remote years Italy produced high-level research at the intersection of information technology and humanities.

Secondly, the Italian tradition of Digital Humanities, even in its internal diversity, has always favored an approach rigorously based on theory and methodology. The major learned figure in this intellectual landscape was Tito Orlandi, around whom, since the 1980s, what will be called the Roman school of Digital Humanities has gathered. What defines the specific character of this experience is the refusal of an instrumental vision of informatics in the humanistic disciplines (which was then already quite widespread if not predominant even in the first experiments at the international level), and the clear preference for a theoretical and epistemological approach. Informatics is understood not as engineering but as a theoretical science of representation and (automatic) processing of information, and on this ground the convergence with the human sciences is evident. The recognition of the value of this tradition has been ratified by the granting to Orlandi of the 2019 Busa Award, assigned by the Association of Digital Humanities Organizations (ADHO) to scholars who have achieved high-profile results in their careers.

Thirdly, it should be noted that the Italian tradition of computer science research in the human sciences had a close and fruitful interaction with the scientific and applicative activity carried out in the cultural heritage institutions, so that we could identify two branches within it:

1. the tradition of research and experimentation of digital and computational methods and tools in linguistic, literary, historical, artistic-historical fields, which took place in the institutions of research and higher education;
2. the tradition of digital initiatives conducted by the institutions for the preservation and dissemination of cultural heritage such as libraries, archives and museums and the related institutions of coordination at local and central level.

The former were usually oriented to academic research, but as it is typical of this world, especially in Italy, they suffered from greater dispersion and lack of coordination (with the result of reducing their impact and visibility and to replicate methodological errors and bad implementation choices).

The latter were generally oriented towards providing efficient services to a wider and not necessarily professional community of users. Therefore, from the beginning, they have attached a great deal of importance to cooperation, sharing and sustainability.

The lively panorama of the Italian research in the Digital Humanities is demonstrated by the recent establishment of a national scientific association. After numerous unsuccessful attempts, since the 1990s, in 2011 the Association for Humanistic Informatics and Digital Culture (Associazione per l'informatica umanistica e la cultura digitale – AIUCD) was founded, achieving excellent results both nationally and internationally. It was the first of several national Digital Humanities associations that were recently formed in various European countries, and formally became an organization associated with the European Association of Digital Humanities (EADH). Among its many activities, AIUCD regularly organizes an annual conference and publishes its open-content journal *Umanistica digitale (Digital Humanities)*.

The overall satisfactory picture I have rapidly painted so far is certainly not without stains and lacerations. Some of these limits are due to extrinsic reasons, determined by the general situation of the Italian university and by the social and economic context of the country. Nonetheless, it must be admitted that the movement also has intrinsic weaknesses.

The first of these is the endemic lack of coordination between experiences and projects. As already noted for anthropological, cultural and social, institutional and economic reasons, these research initiatives have rarely had the capacity to coordinate, to share tools, approaches and knowledge, with the exception of a few cases based on personal relationships. The second big issue is of course the funding. In the present European economic phase, and in particular in our country, investment in research is undergoing drastic downsizing. The only way to continue the development of high-quality research is building relationships, sharing resources and technologies, cooperating in the construction of projects able to access the few sources of funding available at European and national level. From this point of view, the establishment of a research infrastructure at European level for Humanities and Arts, which Italy joined too, is to be considered with great favor. I refer to the Digital Research Infrastructure for the Arts and Humanities (DARIAH) and the European Research Infrastructure for Language Resources and Technology (CLARIN), funded in the context of the European Strategy Forum on Research Infrastructures (ESFRI) community initiative.

The development of national and European research infrastructures is a central element for addressing and resolving historical critical issues in the exploitation and sustainability of research, even more so at a time when the debate on Open Science has assumed a central importance in the political and institutional debate.

But the real laceration in the picture, which makes our beautiful landscape look like one of Burri's sacks, is that of the academic and institutional recognition of digital and scientific competences in the humanities disciplines, and the consequent possibility of accessing and progressing in the academic career for young and old researchers who dedicate themselves to it. This is a complex and delicate problem, and it would be unfair and untrue to say that it is only an Italian problem. However, the crisis and the institutional rigidity of the Italian university system makes the question certainly more complex. In recent years, AIUCD made a tactical choice, based on the inclusion of digital skills within the traditional disciplinary sectors and for job openings, and on the addition of reference journals of the field of Digital Humanities to those used for research evaluation. However, I believe that there is now a space for the creation of a vast autonomous disciplinary framework where the most methodologically perceived component of the Digital Humanities converges with

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Information science and with some 'traditional' disciplinary areas oriented towards the theory and methodology of the human sciences. This is undoubtedly an arduous path, also linked to the effective desire of the university governing bodies to proceed with a renewal in the organization of knowledge. But I am convinced that it is at least useful to start discussing the feasibility of this convergence.

The issue of the institutional recognition of digital approaches to humanistic research is a complex one also because it hides a broader subtext that concerns in general the relationship between traditional Humanities and Digital Humanities. After many years of growth and expansion without any manifest hostility from the traditional sectors of the human sciences (at best a barely concealed arrogance), today the situation seems to present a turnaround. Despite the difficulties we have mentioned, the Digital Humanities represent a rapidly expanding movement and are able to attract a large amount of funding, subtracting it in part from traditional humanistic research. This led some members of the humanistic world to react with strong criticism that in some cases, especially in the United States, got to the point of linking the expansion of the Digital Humanities to the ultraliberal transformation of education and research within universities.

This debate in Europe and in Italy had different nuances and, on prestigious stages such as the cultural pages of important newspapers, attacks to Digital Humanities are frequent, often led by more or less young scholars who complain about the imperialistic ambitions and the threat to the cherished values of humanism. It seems to me that the terms of the question are diametrically opposed. The argumentative strategy professing the nobility of the humanistic education, which apodictically bases its social relevance on the fact that it forms the critical and historical consciences of the citizens, does nothing but move the problem elsewhere: who can demonstrate today the social relevance of that sort of critical and historical self-consciousness? I am obviously being extreme, but the point is that it is not enough to assert the ownership of an illustrious past and lost prestige to counter the decline of the humanistic knowledge. In this sense, I believe that the specific themes and methods of the Digital Humanities (modeling approach, critical use of computational methods, technologies and data, innovative models of representation and dissemination of cultural products, collaborative research, crowdsourcing, Public Humanities and Open Science) can provide the whole domain of humanistic knowledge with the tools and arguments for a renewed social justification of their existence, up to the challenges of the times to come.

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