

Texts, Maps, and Networks: Readings and methods for digital history**Professor Benjamin Schmidt**dighist15.benschmidt.orgEmail: b.schmidt@neu.edu

Office Hours: Tuesday, 3:30-5:30

Overview

This course explores changing methods and practices of history in a digital age. It is designed to expose students to the wide variety of work being done computationally by historians and other humanists today, and equip them to be creative producers of new work and critical and constructive readers of existing projects. We'll look at how the historian's craft in three major units: the creation of digital sources, the algorithmic transformations that computers can enact on cultural materials like texts, and the new ecologies of publishing and scholarly communication made possible by new media.

1. Digital Sources What is a digital source? How do we create them? Looking at both "born-digital" sources and the processes of digitization, we'll explore the theory and practice of bringing artifacts from the analog world into the digital one, of interpreting secondary literature from fields that build heavily on data-as-evidence, and the obligations that the social construction of the digital archive creates on us as critical readers of digital primary sources.

2. Algorithmic transformations Tools and methods developed over the last few decades can be of tremendous value for humanists. We'll spend a week learning the theory and basics of these fields, including network analysis, digital mapping, text analysis and categorization, and analysis of tabular data.

3. Digital Publishing All publishing today is digital. Some digital projects express their final form on paper, some in printed 3D models, and some on phone and computer screens. This section will focus on the debates and possibilities surrounding telling historical story through these various digital media, with a particular focus on building web exhibitions for public history projects and online components for more traditional scholarship.

Note on scheduling

We'll be working together to make this course as useful to your professional development as possible. That means you should feel free to communicate any changes you'd like to see to me; it also means that the syllabus is subject to be updated, with due notice, at any time. The latest version of the syllabus will be the one on the course website; in the event of any conflicts about what to read, first priority goes to any e-mails from myself; second to the latest version on the website; and only third priority to what's listed on the paper copy of the syllabus.

Course Goals

In three course stages, we're going to get our hands messy. To understand the possibilities and the limitations of digital work, there is no substitute for engaging with it directly. That said, you're not expected to come into this class a master programmer, and you shouldn't expect to leave it as one. This is an introductory course to a large and growing field.

Rather than try to completely master any single technique (which other courses at Northeastern will help you do), we'll be trying to get a broad introduction to a variety of tools let us assess and create some of the work

already out there. The worksets are designed to get you started in a number of fields so that you know where to start when the time comes to make a map for a dissertation chapter, to search a large collection of texts for a particular construction, or to make a network diagram for a conference talk.

In this course, you will:

1. Describe the sort of work being done under the banner of digital history today, and be able to participate in some of the debates in the field.
2. Know the practical and social mechanics of digitizing cultural artifacts.
3. Cultivate a base of knowledge that will help you to engage in digital research projects for your own work with texts, geographical systems, or networks.
4. Build and curate online displays that find new modalities for sharing historical artifacts and knowledge.
5. Create and/or further develop a professional online identity.

Requirements

Computers

Most of the assignments for this course will need to be done on a computer; a number of the worksets will ask you to install software for the lab section at the end of class. If your computer is nonexistent, very old, or is in any other way unable to fulfill some particular assignment, you may need to complete certain assignments in a computer lab and arrange to share with a colleague during class.

Readings and attendance

You should complete the required readings and attend class prepared with questions and criticisms. This is a large class for a seminar; it is more likely than usual that you will need to be prepared before class to make useful interventions in it.

Blogging

You are expected to contribute almost every week to the course blog—over the course of the semester, you should have at least 11 posts which cumulatively reach about 4,000-5,000 words. These are not expected to be completely polished pieces of writing, but they should show your engagement with the texts and your peers, and create a ground you can build on in later work. The word limit is not particularly high; you should avoid at all costs pseudo-scholarly throat clearing and generalizations, and get right to the point. Write for the audience of the class.

You should read at least your peers' blog posts for the weeks that you post.

Posts should up by 1pm the day of class.

Topics typically include things like:

1. Reactions to the reading: questions you want your peers to answer, things you don't understand, or angry denunciations of what you think the writers got wrong.

2. Reflections on connections between the readings and issues you've encountered in digital history in other courses or online.
3. Responses to questions posed by your colleagues.

Required posts

Most of your posts will be on topics of your choosing. Others, though, may be required.

In particular, you will write:

1. A very short introductory post in week 1.
2. A description of a crowdsourcing project you've contributed to in week 3;
3. An evaluation of an online exhibition in week 9;
4. A summary of and response to one of the online sources you are following in a week of your choosing.

I also encourage you to **comment** on posts on the website. Well grounded comments count towards class participation; you should feel free to use the comments if you feel like the large class size hinders your ability to contribute to in-class discussion.

Blog Privacy

If you'd like to have more ownership of your posts, I encourage you to set up your own web site and post there. Talk to me if you wish to know more about doing this. Just make sure to link to them from the course blog.

You may have good reasons not to want your name associated with your blog posts or Internet presence—if so, we can make your posts private or (preferably) pseudonymous. But remember, conversely, that building up a strong professional online presence can be enormously beneficial. Student blog posts from this class have, in the past, ended up on the syllabi for graduate courses at other universities. There is much to gain, as more senior graduate students will tell you, from developing a public professional identity beginning early.

Worksets

Each week we will begin a *practicum*, learning to use some set of tools. At the end of class you'll receive a short list of tasks to accomplish. By the end of the course, you will have begun acquiring the skills to make a map, mine a text, create a network diagram, and set up an online exhibition.

Completing each workset is required, but the individual tasks will be handled on a pass/fail basis. If you do every workset, you get full credit for this portion of the course. I encourage you to talk to other students while completing the worksets (much frustration can be avoided not doing it alone), but unless otherwise indicated you must do the tasks yourself, even if someone else tells you how to do it.

You should **give evidence of having completed the assignment** to Dave DeCamp before the start of the next class. This may be screenshots, some brief textual reflections, or a description of a website you visited. Use common sense here; Dave can help tell you what he needs if you're confused. Late or incomplete worksets can receive partial credit.

If you want to go above and beyond the basic assignment—adding a colored layer to the maps we build, say, you can post to the blog. Certain worksets will tell you to create a blog post—in those cases, you'll get credit for completing practicum as well as towards your blog post quota.

Projects

As we take on classroom exercises in the second third of the course, you should think about which one(s) you want to expand into a longer form. We'll also try to get a trip to the archives in so that you can practice some digital curation on your own.

Projects may be collaborative. In general, public history students should be predisposed towards a collaborative project, and world history or comparable students towards an individual one. Collaborative projects should have a sensible division of labor, and include individual statements of the work done.

You will submit a proposal for your project by November 13th: projects are due December 11th.

Digital Engagement

It is incredibly easy to engage with scholarly activity in the digital humanities by reading and posting online. As part of this course, you should set some goals to build your digital engagement.

Pick five blogs that you'll be following: one should be the blog "Digital Humanities Now," which aggregates posts every week that many different digital humanists have been discussing. Follow them using an RSS reader like Feedly, or a social media site like Twitter. As described in "Blogging," one of your posts should be a response to issues raised in them.

Grading

1. Class participation/attendance (and blog comments): 25%
2. Blogging assignments: 20%
3. Practicums: 25%
4. Projects: 30%

Required Texts

Most of the texts for this class are available online; digital humanists are good that way. Some are also available for physical purchase.

- Jockers *Macroanalysis*.
- Tufte *Envisioning Information*.
- Presner, Shepard, and Kawano, *HyperCities* (Harvard, 2014)
- Fogel and Engerman *Time on the Cross., Time on the Cross*. (Just volume 1; this one you can find online cheap used, particularly the 1974 edition; it would make sense to share this one or get it on course reserve rather than new).

Schedule

Unit 1: Digital sources

In the first unit, we'll be exploring how digitization changes the sort of sources—primary and secondary—that historians work with. What are the biases and inherent assumptions in digital scholarship? What gets digitized, and what doesn't? What sort of answers are computational works of scholarship bringing to historical practice?

Week 1 (Sep 9): Introductions

- Cohen et al. "Interchange."
- Spiro "Getting Started in Digital Humanities."

Practicum: Setting up your blog account.

Week 2 (Sep 16): Digitization as a social condition

- Benjamin "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility (Third Version, 1939)."
- McLuhan *Understanding Media.*, Introduction and chapters 1-2.
- Manovich *The Language of New Media.*
- Liu "The Meaning of the Digital Humanities."
- Cecire "When Digital Humanities Was in Vogue."

Practicum: What is digital text? Regular Expressions.

Week 3 (Sep 23): Data as a source

- Gibbs and Owens "Hermeneutics of Data and Historical Writing."
- Fogel and Engerman *Time on the Cross.* (Methodological appendix on reserve; skim it, but read the book for content and method.)
- Haskell, Review of *Time on the Cross*
- Gutmann, *Time on the Cross* review/Slavery and the Numbers Game
- Ruggles "The Transformation of American Family Structure."
- Gitelman "*Raw Data*" *Is an Oxymoron.*, Introduction

Practicum: Tapping into the world of social science historical data from IPUMS, OECD, ICPSR, etc. Practicum w/ blog post: Crowdsourcing participation.

Week 4 (Sep 30): Digitization as a practical endeavor

SPECIAL DIGITIZATION TRIP, NEW MEETING PLACE: Meet at 4:30 at the Boston Public Library for a discussion of digitization with Tom Blakesadf

- KMNL, keycoding standards; read for an extreme example of selection priorities.
- Bill Turkel's blog posts on digitizing text. (Links on web site).
- Melissa Terras, "Digitization's Most wanted": <http://melissaterras.blogspot.com/2014/05/digitisations-most-wanted.html>
- Trevor Owens, [4-part series on crowdsourcing](#)

Practicum: Begin to digitize a historical object yourself. Do this with (at least) an image and a text. Try to pick something that you're legitimately interested in, which will save you work down the line in finding sources that you can work with. You should post it to the course website, and you should be prepared to discuss the digitization process in class. **If the object is under copyright, make sure to post it privately on the web site.**

Unit 2: Historical Computing

For years, much of what's now called the "digital humanities" was called, instead, "humanities computing." The term tended to denote a more circumscribed set of practices than all the digital publishing, public history, and new media studies that are now part of digital humanities; it was, specifically, about the possibility of digital techniques to transform the ways we do research. This unit aims to get your hands dirty with some of the research techniques you might be able to use taking full advantage of your computation.

Week 5 (October 7): Texts (small)

- Ramsay *Reading Machines*.
- Witmore "Text."
- Cameron Blevins, "Topic Modeling Martha Ballard's Diary"
- Rhody "Topic Modeling and Figurative Language."

Practicum:

- Voyant Tools (no installation needed, online)

Week 6 (October 14): Texts (large)

- Michel et al. "Quantitative Analysis of Culture Using Millions of Digitized Books."
- Jockers *Macroanalysis*.
- Goldstone and Underwood "The Quiet Transformations of Literary Studies."

Practicum

- Software: RStudio: R-Mallet (no installation required)

Note: the following three weeks have been rescheduled from the original syllabus

Week 7 (October 21): Maps

- Richard White, [What is Spatial History](#)
- Knowles "Placing History," Chapter 1 and Dust Bowl chapter.
- Browse through the Orbis Project, Stanford.
- Presner, Shepard, and Kawano, *HyperCities* (book and web site).

Practical:

- Install QGIS from [here](#) (this can be complicated, particularly on OS X: leave 45 minutes at least).
- Review Map Projections at [jasondavies.com](#).

Unit 3: Creating Digital Scholarship.

The sort of work historians create and share matters as much as the sort of work they do.

You could use the techniques from unit 2 and produce a wholly conventional work of scholarship; and you could create a groundbreaking multimedia installation without using any algorithms or even programming. This unit focuses on the opportunities for scholarly communication afforded by the web and other digital media.

Week 8 (October 28): Digital Collections and exhibitions.

- Wyman et al. “Digital Storytelling in Museums.”

Aside from the one museum collection, we’ll be doing presentations on born-digital exhibitions.

There are a wide variety of professional digital collections and exhibitions. Rather than have each of you explore all of them, find one and explore it at length, bringing several URLs to class to discuss as successes or failures of design, narration, and public engagement.

Some possible online archives/exhibits to present on:

- “Our Marathon,” Northeastern
- Rumsey Historical Maps
- September 11th Digital Memorial.
- The Old Bailey Online
- Mall Histories, CHNM
- Digital Harlem

Practicum

- Workset: Building with Omeka.

Week 9 (November 4): Networks**Guests: Nick Beauchamp (Political Science)**

Note—we’re doing network methodologies here because of rescheduling needs, but thematically they’re part of the second unit of the course.

- Weingart “Demystifying Networks, Parts I & II.”
- Winterer “Where Is America in the Republic of Letters.”
- Shin-Kap Han, “The Other Ride of Paul Revere”

Software: Networks with Gephi

No class/office hours Nov. 11, Veteran’s Day

Project proposals due Friday 11/13

Week 10 (November 18): Visualizing Data

- Theibault “Visualizations and Historical Arguments.”
- Tufte *Envisioning Information*.
- Drucker “Humanities Approaches to Graphical Display.”
- Klein “The Image of Absence.”

Practicum: visualizing in R: the “grammar of graphics”

No class/office hours week of November 25, Thanksgiving

Week 11 (December 2nd): Stories in New Media

- “Snow Fall.”
- MacAskill and team “NSA Files Decoded.”
- Bagnall and Sherrat, “Invisible Australians: Living under the White Australia Policy”
- Something TBD, hopefully something released this fall; suggestions welcome.

Practicum: Workshop on Public History project

Week 12 (December 9): Publishing and sharing research

- Ayers “The Valley of the Shadow.”
- Thomas and Ayers “The Differences Slavery Made.”
- Thomas “Writing a Digital History Journal Article from Scratch.”
- Dan Cohen, “The Social Contract of Scholarly Publishing,” *Gold Debates in the Digital Humanities*.
- Fitzpatrick, Planned Obsolescence, selections.

Practicum: none

Acknowledgements

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Full Citations

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