NEW CHALK TALK

Exploring the Digital Humanities at AUC #DHAUC

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> The digital brings different playgrounds and new kinds of interaction, and we must incessantly ask questions of it, disturbing the edge upon which we find ourselves so precariously perched. And what the digital asks of us is that every assumption we have be turned on its head. Jesse Stommel

The Digital Humanities (DH) are a diverse set of academic practices that have spread internationally in the last decade, and have only now begun to gain traction in the Arab world. On Wednesday September 30, 2015, The Center for Learning and Teaching held the first Digital Humanities event in Egypt, entitled "Exploring the Digital Humanities", at the American University in Cairo New Campus. The idea of the event came to us when we first met at the American University of Beirut in March 2015 at THATCamp Beirut organized by David, following a weeklong digital humanities training event there. The Cairo event included a keynote workshop on mapping and visualization by David, a keynote session that involved exploration of sentiment analysis on Twitter by author and professor of computational linguistics at Ain Shams University, Khaled el Ghamry, and a panel of scholars from different institutions exploring the opportunities and challenges the Digital Humanities pose for the Arab World. Panelists included Iman Soliman from AUC's Center for Arabic Study Abroad and Arabic Language department, Mark Muehlhaeusler from the AUC library, Marianne Nabil from Cairo University and Dalia Assem, a social researcher and writer for Asharq Al-Awsat newspaper, and former part-timer at Bibliotecha Alexandrina.

The Digital Humanities are, in a nutshell, innovative ways of practicing the humanities in a world of digital technologies that blur the line between the quantitative and qualitative. Some examples include electronic text encoding, digital archiving, text mining, digital mapping, and network analysis. These innovative practices are not only the domain of research, but are also beginning to make their way into classroom pedagogy (consult the website "Around DH in 80 Days" for an overview of digital humanities projects in various parts of the world). It is not uncommon for digital humanities to take on different contours in different environments, since they often bring together different members of a university community--faculty, students, librarians, IT, staff, etc. to work on common projects (refer to the website, for a variety of different definitions by DH practitioners).

The AUC event was well attended throughout the day (around 40 faculty, librarians, deans, faculty developers and IT staff) and was live tweeted at the hashtag #dhauc. A storify of the tweets is available. In the first workshop, participants explored a number of projects in the spatial humanities and tried their hand at some basic map visualization and customization. David's workshop (outline available on his website) blended a lecture-style presentation, live demonstration and hands-on exercises. David was impressed by the active engagement throughout the morning session and how the AUC community was imagining how they might incorporate data-driven aspects in their research and teaching. Faculty feedback included "I appreciated the opportunity to learn about this field that I know little about, and I enjoyed the hands on session - it made the whole idea less intimidating." – Ghada El Shimi, Associate Dean for Undergraduate Education, & senior instructor, Rhetoric & Composition and "I could immediately envision lots of possibilities for using it in my research and/or teaching." – Michael Reimer, Associate Professor, History.

Khaled ElGhamry's presentation focused on his study that involves quantitative and qualitative analysis of the Sunni-Shia hate speech on Twitter. He shared a heat map showing the geographical distribution of the hate speech on Arabic-language Twitter, a temporal curve tracking the growth and intensity of hate speech from 2006 to mid-2015, along with a qualitative analysis of the forms hate speech takes; such as dehumanizing and othering language. One faculty member said that this talk "raised some important issues and gave an example of the benefits of using digital tools for our kind of research but also the ethical challenges." – Amina El Bendary, Associate Professor, History.

All the participants in the panel agreed that research material is not lacking in our part of the world, and yet to make such inquiry possible, new ways of designing and carrying out digital projects need to be acquired. Important questions and conversations that came up included the interlinked quantitative/qualitative dimensions of emergent research, the affordances and limitations of the digital, the potential for the Arab world to speak for itself rather than be spoken about from outside, ethical concerns of open research about the turmoil of our region today, as well as the larger risks we face in terms of surveillance and loss of privacy as our lives become more and more digital. At the event there was a palpable interest in how social media in Egypt and the region opens up both special opportunities and problems for digital research.

Some faculty raised concerns over the feasibility of applying what was learned at the event given their current skillset and time constraints. Academic institutions worldwide have faced this challenge, and the learning curve can be step for some, and yet for others it involves digital skills they already possess. Pursuing digital humanities research takes time and collaboration, but there are many entry points now and the results can be transformative. Most large digital humanities projects that we know of involve a collaborative effort across units of a university--bringing together content expertise of faculty members, library staff and IT with meaningful opportunities for graduate and undergraduate student participation in research projects. There are also organizations willing to fund such projects, particularly when they involve cross-institutional collaboration. Another perpetual problem at such events is, of course, attendance. Nate Bowditch, Dean of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at AUC said, "we need to engage our colleagues more fully when it comes to opportunities like this. Everyone in attendance was enthralled. The only problem is that more people should have been there".

The feedback from attendees was overwhelmingly positive, and many called for opportunities to continue the conversation, and we already have plans to do so. Beirut has created an annual event for digital humanities training whose next meeting will be in January 2016 (dhibeirut.org), and The American University in Cairo will be hosting a Digital Pedagogy Lab Institute in March 2016 (in collaboration with Hybrid Pedagogy, sponsored by AMICAL and the Ford Foundation). It is our hope that our two American-style universities, that are leaders in so many domains, will explore further avenues of cooperation--in training, curricular design and research projects—and therefore open up opportunities for the Arab world to speak for itself more and more strongly in the digital realm.

References

Stommel, J. (2013, September 2). The digital humanities is about breaking stuff. Hybrid Pedagogy. Retrieved from http://www.hybridpedagogy.com