

DIGITAL FORUM

Workflow

Zoe Alker and Christopher Donaldson

In 2013 Tim Hitchcock warned humanities scholars that our growing dependence on digital technology was causing a slackening of academic standards.¹ Whether it be the tendency to pass-off keyword searching as ‘reading’ (the pervasive white lie of modern scholarship), or the dubious habit of treating digital collections as objectively constructed records: our reliance on computationally aided modes of evidence collection has led many of us to be less critically reflexive, and less forthright, about our research practices. Wittingly or not, many of us do not adequately account for the use of automated approaches and digital resources in our work nor reflect upon the impact that processes of digitization, or workflows, have upon digital humanities research.

This trend, as Hitchcock argues, has significant implications for disciplines such as History, whose modern academic foundations are ‘built on a series of practices that are intended to ensure the critical use of evidence and the clear and citable development of argument.’² Academic historians have long stressed the need to attend critically not only to the ends of historical research (to the findings, interpretations, and conclusions they generate), but also to the means by which that research is conducted. The increasing availability and accessibility of new technologies and resources for historical scholarship does nothing to change this. If anything, it makes the need for the clear and rigorous exposition of our methods even more essential. In an era in which the keyboard shortcuts such as CTRL+F (that great ‘open sesame’) are regularly used in the service of historical inquiry, and in which keyword querying constitutes an essential first step in academic research, we need to be evermore scrupulous about providing open and accurate documentation of the practices that inform our scholarly work.

The concept of workflow is particularly important in this context, and it is certainly a topic discussed with increasing prevalence by historians who draw on digital resources and methods in their work. The present installment of the digital form attends to this development

¹ Tim Hitchcock, ‘Confronting the Digital, or How Academic History Writing Lost the Plot, *Cultural and Social History*, 10 (2013), pp. 9–23.

² Hitchcock, ‘Confronting the Digital’, p. 12.

with contributions from three University historians and from Gale, a key provider of digitized historical collections. In what follows we feature perspectives from Melodee Beals (Loughborough University) and Adam Crymble and Katrina Navikas (University of Hertfordshire) whose contributions model approaches for documenting project workflow and pose questions about the challenges faced by historians who engage with digital resources in their work. Alongside these articles, we are pleased to be able to include a contribution from Seth Cayley (Director of Research Publishing at Gale) who reflects on some of the key issues raised by Beals, Crymble, and Navikas, and who discusses how Gale is working to respond to these challenges through the development of resources such as Nineteenth Century Collections Online.

Taken together, the pieces collected in this forum demonstrate how historians and publishers have sought to address the problems to which Hitchcock called attention to four years ago. Crucially, however, they also indicate how far we have left to go.

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