Historicidagen 2024 – Commentary of Keynote Jo Guldi

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Let me start by thanking the organizers, for the invitation to give this comment.
And I'd like to thank you, Jo, for this amazing, though-provoking talk.

I'm honored to have been asked to provide a comment to it. At the same time, I'm also a bit intimidated by the daunting task of having to add something original to an argument written up by one of the worldwide leading scholars in digital history – an argument that is as compelling as it is knowledgeable.

I can only try my best.

While reading your paper, I was reminded of one of my project meetings just before the Summer. I'm running a project that aims to trace how sentiments towards fossil fuels and renewable energy have changed in Dutch public media since the Second World War. So, at this meeting, when I was just about to close, one of the engineers responsible for the machine learning techniques that we base our analysis on said she had a couple of minor questions to ask. And one of these was "when does history actually start"? I was taken somewhat aback by this, contemplating on how to answer this question satisfactorily in our remaining five to ten minutes. I will tell you what I answered her in a minute, but I bring this up because I later thought that this actually was a wonderful question – at least from the computer engineer that she was. Had she been a graduate student in history, I would probably have been less pleased. But coming from her it was very fitting, for at least three reasons.

When does history start?

It is a really good reminder of what it means to run an interdisciplinary project. Historians working together with data and computer scientists, with engineers, is, I believe, exactly the kind of history you, Jo, argue for. I like this very much myself,

because it broadens your scope and teaches you new skills. I was very happy with my colleague's question, because finally I could return the favor when it came to explaining. Usually, these meetings are dominated by my questions about how this or that technique, or our machine learning pipeline in general, works, again. This point has been made more often and better than I can – think Max Kemman's trading zones – but I still think it's an important reminder that the kind of history that you, Jo, call for, and that originated from the urgent questions of today and the opportunities of data and tools, brings forth a kind of scholarship that is all but solitary. It is collaborative, interdisciplinary and, as such, requires a new way of working – and sometimes having to explain when history starts.

When does history start?

The second reason why this question was an appropriate one is because of tool criticism. In this particular case my colleague wanted to try whether we could employ OpenAI's GPT-4 model to do the labeling for sentiment for us. However, GPT is trained on present day data, not on historical ones. It is, therefore, a relevant question whether the model can ever be able to satisfactorily understand sentiments in historical Dutch newspaper articles. Since hardly any natural language processing tools are natively geared towards the study of history, one might wonder how useful, fruitful, promising these tools and methods are for our field at all. And historians do this all the time.

You have a strong opinion about this in favor of text mining tools, to which I fully adhere and to which I will come back to this later. What I want to say here is that the question was a good reminder that it should always be clear under what conditions we might use new techniques – and that it can be an interesting challenge to create those conditions if they aren't in place already. In other words: doing digital history forces us to reconsider existing notions of methodological rigour and source and tool criticism, but also to reflect on what "history" these methods are suited for. This brings me to my final point.

When does history start?

There is a third reason why I considered the question “When does history start?” to be a good one. History is a field – if you will allow my provocation – whose advancement is partly determined by the disclosure of archives that had been previously locked. In the case of state archives, this can leave us with decade-long gaps. And even if records are available, some historians live by the convention that we do not start to study the past before it becomes ‘strange’ or ‘foreign’ to us – say after 20 or 30 years or so have passed.

This is not what you argue for. I found it one of the most interesting things about your talk, Jo, that you as an historian argue for actively and continuously monitor the past in the making. No 20-year embargo, self-imposed or otherwise, but keeping a finger on the pulse of what is going on now in the light of what has happened before. It is bringing into practice Frank Ankersmit’s observation that “History’s point of gravity shifted from the past to the future”, in *Theory of History* a few year ago, in his surprising defense of unintended consequences as focal points for the long-term study of, what he calls, “the Anthropocene Epoch in which we live”. I fully adhere to this, because the environmental questions that you have raised ask for this: they have long histories, but make their impact felt presently – or will only do so in the future. So this was my answer to my colleague as well: history starts as we speak.

As with the two previous points about interdisciplinarity and tool criticism, the focus on the longue durée and on history-in-the-making has some serious implications on how we do our work. It means not (or not only) relying on existing archives, but compiling our own. It, thus, means keeping track of a flood of data and having the skills to process them – so also working with this thing called ‘data’ in the first place.

Now, nothing of what I said is particularly new. They have been part of discussions about the impact of the digital humanities and digital history for at least twenty years – if not much longer.

However, many of the current developments in the digital humanities are, you could say, technology-driven. They are offers and opportunities – of cutting-edge tools and heaps of data -- looking for demands. And these are not always there. Discussions about the impact of DH, consequently, are usually held in the future tense: we will become interdisciplinary, we will have to turn to new elements of source and tool criticism, we will focus on new questions and problems, etc.

What I admire about your approach is that it proposes not only exciting digital methods, but also a compelling reason to use them. I think this is really important for the field, both when it comes to focusing on important questions like the ones you pose and on being open to new methods in doing so. What I equally admire is that your approach is refrained from any rhetoric about the transformative power of cutting-edge technology. I believe that there is a huge potential in AI and large language models for the study of history, but they are mostly just that: potentials. Finding out what that potential is, exactly, and I'm speaking from experience, is often something quite different from getting to work on those questions.

What is more: our field does not necessarily need cutting edge techniques to do innovative and exciting research. For history, the "old-fashioned", proven technique of counting words can be super interesting. This is what you have convincingly demonstrated. Never before were we able to trace language use on long-term scales like this: by counting frequencies over time, but also combinations of words, associations between words, or semantic similarities between words.

And one of the biggest assets in my view is that we can add to the big words -- the "geschichtliche Grundbegriffe" that historians of ideas have studied since long -- "banal" and "everyday" words. Words that are used widely and in unexpected places and that hint at larger narratives all the same, from all the people that through time were denoted as "strangers" to study the Other, to the things rendered "healthy" or rather "unhealthy" to study food or medical history. From the different ways in which "pollution" or "livability" ["leefbaarheid"] was defined through time – to stick to the theme of today -- to things considered viable "alternatives" to the status quo. What did

people mean by these words? How did this change over time and between different domains or media? Knowing that we have robust tools to pursue questions like these should be an exciting outlook for all of us. So thanks again, Jo, for showing us this.

And on this positive note, I will stop. Thank you.