

Digital Humanities. Metodi, strumenti, saperi, edited by Fabio Ciotti, Roma, Carocci, 2023.

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Abstract

The volume *Digital Humanities. Metodi, strumenti, saperi* edited by Fabio Ciotti provides a comprehensive overview of the Digital Humanities (DH) field, with a specific focus on the Italian context. Structured in two parts – *Metodi, strumenti e infrastrutture* and *Campi e saperi* – it combines theoretical frameworks with disciplinary applications, offering both a foundational and advanced guide. The volume addresses key questions about DH practices, education, actors, and evaluation criteria, proposing a synthesis of methodological, pragmatic, and critical approaches. Featuring contributions from leading Italian scholars, it highlights the country's significant role in DH discourse. Ciotti's “galaxy” metaphor effectively captures the complexity of the field, emphasizing its interdisciplinary and evolving nature. The volume is an essential resource for students and scholars seeking to understand the epistemic foundations and future directions of the field.

Keywords: Epistemology, Methodology, Computational modelling, Scholarly digital editing

Il volume Digital Humanities. Metodi, strumenti, saperi a cura di Fabio Ciotti offre una panoramica approfondita del campo delle Digital Humanities (DH), con un'attenzione particolare al contesto italiano. Strutturato in due parti – Metodi, strumenti e infrastrutture e Campi e saperi – combina cornici teoriche e applicazioni disciplinari, proponendosi come guida sia introduttiva sia avanzata. Il volume affronta domande chiave sulle pratiche, l'insegnamento, i protagonisti e i criteri di valutazione della ricerca nelle DH, suggerendo una sintesi tra approcci metodologici, pragmatici e critici. Attraverso i contributi di importanti studiosi italiani, mette in luce il ruolo significativo dell'Italia nel dibattito. La metafora della “galassia” proposta da Ciotti descrive efficacemente la complessità del campo, sottolineandone la natura interdisciplinare e in continua evoluzione. Il volume è una risorsa fondamentale per studenti e studiosi interessati alla riflessione epistemologica e agli sviluppi futuri del campo.

Parole chiave: Epistemologia, Metodologia, Modellizzazione computazionale, Edizione scientifica digitale

The volume *Digital Humanities. Metodi, strumenti, saperi*, edited by Fabio Ciotti and published by Carocci in July 2023, aims to provide a comprehensive overview of a relatively young and rapidly evolving academic field, through the multiplicity of voices and perspectives that represent its

richness and diversity (p. 19). The focus is primarily on the Italian context: although it is impossible to fully delimit or localise research, Italy has produced scientific excellence that has significantly contributed to the global debate within the field, despite the strong dominance of the Anglophone world (p. 32). The manual is primarily intended for students, but also for scholars in the humanities and a broader audience that may be interested in the vast possibilities the digital transition holds for the humanities (p. 34).

In the introduction, Fabio Ciotti clearly lays out the objective of the volume: to define the field and identify a shared and coherent epistemological basis (p. 23). This need arises from the heterogeneity (already evident in the indecision surrounding the choice of terminology) of the expressions used to denote the field itself: *Digital Humanities (DH)*, *Humanities Computing*, *Informatica Umanistica*. This heterogeneity stems, on the one hand, from the ambiguity of the term “humanities” itself and, on the other, from the rapid evolution of digital technologies, which tends to make any definition obsolete (p. 21). The need for self-definition has been, and still is, a central concern from the outset. This ongoing debate was aptly captured by Stephen Ramsay’s provocative question at the 2011 Modern Language Association annual convention: *Who’s In and Who’s Out?* [12].¹

The text thus aligns with a body of scholarship that has been, since its beginning, concerned with defining the field, and that often did so in contradictory ways – which underscores the continuing relevance of this open debate. In the introduction (pp. 21–22), Ciotti refers to some of the most recent and significant titles in this literature: Berry’s *Understanding Digital Humanities* [1], the two volumes of *Debates in the Digital Humanities* edited by Gold [4] and by Gold and Klein [5], *Defining Digital Humanities* edited by Terras, Nyhan, and Vanhoutte [14], *The Emergence of Digital Humanities* by Jones [6], *Big Digital Humanities* by Svensson [13], *Digital Humanities: Knowledge and Critique in a Digital Age* edited by Berry and Fagerjord [2], and several articles by Piotrowski ([9];[10];[11]). As for historiographical literature, Ciotti mentions the volumes by Nyhan and Flinn [8], Jones [7], and, in relation to the Italian context, his own article [3].

To define the field, a practice as necessary at the theoretical level as at the practical one, Ciotti proposes four fundamental questions the book seeks to answer: Where are the DH carried out? What is taught in the DH? Who does DH? How are DH research products and projects evaluated? (p. 23). The volume is a structured attempt to address these questions. The starting point is the survey, found in Ciotti’s rich introduction, of the key paradigms in the discipline’s history (pp. 24–29): from the “methodological” paradigm, which saw the DH community united by a shared set of computational methods and digital languages for the modelling of phenomena and processes traditionally belonging to the humanities; to the pragmatist paradigm of the “community of practice”, which locates coherence in the performative and applicative nature of DH; and finally to the most recent developments that do not form a paradigm per se but instead converge in a “critical theory” approach, reasserting the need for a shared theoretical-critical stance towards reality and its social and cultural imbalances. Ciotti ultimately proposes, following Svensson, a pluralistic synthesis of these three perspectives, envisioning a community grounded in the notion of infrastructure: “DH offers an infrastructural and intellectual platform for carrying out work placed between the humanities and the digital” [13].

¹ “The term [DH, ndr] can mean anything from media studies to electronic art, from data mining to edutech, from scholarly editing to anarchic blogging, while inviting code junkies, digital artists, standard wonks, transhumanists, game theorists, free culture advocates, archivists, librarians, and edupunks under its capacious canvas” ([12], 239).

Before delving into the two sections, the volume opens with three foundational contributions. First is a preface by Dino Buzzetti – to whose memory the volume is dedicated – on the complex and still unrecognized institutional profile of DH in Italy and the negative consequences of this lack of recognition for both research and education. This is followed by Ciotti's extensive introduction, which provides a theoretical framework and clearly articulates the motivations, challenges, and objectives of the volume. The editor emphasizes how the field, though dynamic and multifaceted, rests nonetheless on shared foundations and methodologies that justify its recognition as a distinct domain of study. The third contribution, by Tito Orlandi and Francesca Tomasi, provides a concise history of *Informatica Umanistica* in Italy from the 1940s to the present, contextualizing it within the international landscape (Ch. 1).

The volume is structured in two parts. Ciotti explains this organization using the metaphor of the “DH galaxy” (pp. 29–32). As in a galaxy, the field of DH can be envisioned with a core (focused on general theoretical and methodological issues, infrastructure, and enabling technologies), a disk (the spiral arms, the “strong” digital versions of traditional disciplines, which frequently collaborate and are particularly fertile, especially within the Italian context), and an outer edge (border areas where traditional disciplines are touched by but not transformed by computational research). The volume does not address this third area, instead focusing on the core and spiral arms of the DH galaxy.²

The first part of the volume, titled *Metodi, strumenti e infrastrutture* (*Methods, Tools, and Infrastructures*), constitutes the core of the DH galaxy and includes nine chapters. It begins with a chapter by Arianna Ciula and Cristina Marras, centred on the notion of models and modelling – a key concept in DH methodology (Ch. 2). This is followed by chapters on text modelling and encoding, and quantitative text analysis methods (from classical stylometry to distant reading, topic modelling, word embeddings, and sentiment analysis) both by Fabio Ciotti (Ch. 3 and 4). Elena Pierazzo and Roberto Rosselli del Turco discuss digital scholarly editions, understood not as end-products but as methodological processes relevant to all areas of humanities research (Ch. 5). Francesca Tomasi and Fabio Vitali explore semantic annotation tools and languages for cultural heritage data (Ch. 6). Simonetta Montemagni contributes a chapter on methods, tools, and challenges in computational linguistics and Natural Language Processing (NLP, in Italian *Trattamento Automatico del Linguaggio*, TAL) within DH (Ch. 7). Maristella Agosti reviews the history and future directions of digital libraries (Ch. 8). Monica Monachini and Francesca Frontini present a discussion on research infrastructures promoted by the European Union, particularly CLARIN and DARIAH (Ch. 9). Paola Castellucci concludes this section with a short essay on Open Access, outlining its history and highlighting its importance for the future of research that values and respects the right to access information and knowledge (Ch. 10).

The second part, titled *Campi e saperi* (*Fields and Knowledges*), represents the disk of the DH galaxy. It contains eight chapters, each addressing a traditional discipline that has integrated digital methodologies to such an extent that they can now be regarded as “digital versions” of these

² While the editor acknowledges that any attempt at such a broad systematization inevitably entails “elementi contraddittori o scarsamente determinati” (contradictory or weakly defined elements) (p. 31), he highlights its advantages in the possibility it offers: “da un lato identificare i contorni di un ambito disciplinare [...] E dall’altro di avere un criterio di individuazione, selezione e valutazione di ciò che propriamente possiamo annoverare come ricerca digitale e computazionale nell’area umanistica” (on the one hand, to identify the contours of a disciplinary field (...) and on the other, to provide a criterion for identifying, selecting, and evaluating what we can properly consider as digital and computational research in the humanities) (pp. 31–32). All translations are by the author.

fields. The section begins with the historical sciences, with a chapter on Digital History and Digital Public History, by Enrica Salvatori and Marcello Ravveduto (Ch. 11). Rachele Sprugnoli and Timothy Tambassi follow with a chapter on digital geography and Spatial Humanities (Ch. 12). Raffaele Viglianti offers an introduction to the rich history of interaction between musicology and computational methods (Ch. 13). Paola Moscati then presents a chapter on digital archaeology (Ch. 14). Antonella Sbrilli contributes a chapter on art history and the digital, from Digital Art History to digital art (Ch. 15). Monica Berti explores the intersection between digital technologies and the study of Greek and Roman antiquity – deeply transformed in areas such as philology, databases, digitization, and textual analysis (Ch. 16). Cristina Marras's essay addresses digital philosophy (a term followed by a question mark), both methodologically – examining tools and computational methods for philosophical research – and epistemologically – what does it mean to do philosophy in the digital age? How do fundamental categories change in this context? (Ch. 17). The section ends with a chapter by Silvia Orlandi on epigraphy and its encounters with the digital, from online resources to the use of digital methods and tools (Ch. 18).

The volume closes with a valuable contribution by Domenico Fiornante and Gimena Del Rio Riande, who, by focusing on issues such as diversity, marginal cultures, and the geopolitics of knowledge, contribute to the recent debate – especially of the past decade – on the political implications of DH research in a world (including the digital one) still marked by deep North-South and centre-periphery imbalances (Ch. 19).³

The appendix includes an extensive bibliography and biobibliographical notes on the contributors, who are among the leading voices in the field of Italian DH scholarship.

This volume represents a valuable and needed contribution to the Italian academic landscape, filling a notable gap in DH textbooks thanks to the breadth and depth of its approach to this wide-ranging field of study. While international – especially Anglophone – bibliography on DH is plentiful, this volume stands out for being conceived, edited, and written entirely in Italian, with a strong focus on the national context, without forgoing the international dimension of the debate. The editor's conviction is that the Italian intellectual and methodological tradition – distinctive for its predominantly theoretical and methodological approach to the intersection of computing and the humanities – can make a substantial contribution at this historical moment for the discipline. After a phase of vigorous expansion under the banner of the Anglo-American “Big Tent DH”,⁴ the field now needs to draw some boundaries, both internally and externally, “that are not neat lines but fuzzy regions” [3].⁵ Rigorous and rich, the text offers a detailed, up-

³ The South is here understood as “spazio subalterno e come alternativa al discorso dominante [...] In altre parole, useremo la categoria di Sud in opposizione al canone e all'epistemologia che la cultura occidentale e il Nord hanno costruito e imposto alle istituzioni accademiche di tutto il mondo” (a subaltern space and as an alternative to the dominant discourse [...] In other words, we will use the category of the South in opposition to the canon and the epistemology that Western culture and the North have constructed and imposed on academic institutions worldwide) (pp. 352–353).

⁴ A view of the DH as a broad and diverse community engaged in various ways with the intersection between the digital and the humanities. Introduced at the 2011 *Digital Humanities conference* in Stanford (p. 26).

⁵ Regarding these boundaries, it is also interesting to recall what Ciotti himself wrote a few years earlier – namely, that such boundaries are invisible when one is immersed in them and can only be discerned from a distance: “In a galaxy, especially if you are immersed in it, it is impossible to

to-date, and multidisciplinary overview of the transformations taking place in the humanities under the influence of the digital transition. The galaxy metaphor proves effective in accounting for the complexity of a still-evolving field, which nonetheless has sufficiently solid common foundations to justify its epistemic autonomy. The two-part structure enables a layered reading – from foundational theoretical-methodological issues to the most advanced disciplinary applications – making the volume useful both for newcomers and for those seeking deeper insight.

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identify clear borders. Nevertheless, if you look at it from a distance, it is possible to identify a core, a disk with its spiral structure, and an outer rim" [3].

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