

## ARTICLE

## Foreword to the Special Issue "Theorytellings: Epistemic Narratives in the Digital Humanities"

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This special issue deals with existing theory narratives and conceptions in DH scholarship. Introducing the neologism “theorytellings”, this special issue invites DH scholars to narrate and discuss their own theoretical contributions to the field.

The status of the Digital Humanities (DH) as an academic discipline in its own right has often been discussed in terms of its theoretical foundations or, more precisely, the lack thereof. “The end of theory” – as proclaimed by Chris Anderson – has been a recurring narrative in epistemic discussions about DH for quite some time. Not only do such narratives have a profound impact on epistemic cultures by constructing research objects and legitimizing questions, they also coordinate and stabilize the social bonds within research communities (Ryan 344). Jean-François Lyotard even emphasizes that such *meta-narratives* produce and transfer knowledge between science and society (Lyotard 18). Epistemic virtues, such as claims to truth and evidence, could be understood through narratives among others (Plotnitsky 515; Daston and Galison 39). In particular, DH’s emerging “epistemic cultures” (Knorr Cetina 1) are influenced by narrative conventions. Therefore, studying reciprocal relationships of existing narratives and practical DH scholarship could help to promote new approaches and dialogues as they address a number of important questions: what does it actually mean for DH’s epistemic cultures to be negotiated through a “lack-of-theory” narrative? What kind of research is stimulated by this narrative and how could DH scholars provide “counter narratives” (Bamberg and Andrews)? What is at stake for enabling critical discourses in DH?

With this special issue, we seek to bring together scholars from different disciplines to rethink and envision new perspectives of theory and its relevance for cultural analytics. To this end, we introduce the neologism “theorytellings” as a heuristic tool, which we understand as being related to the well-established concept of “storytelling” (Harré 85; Brandt 215) in science. Hoping to challenge and reframe existing narratives about the deficient status of theory in DH, we are particularly interested in specific, situated, and subjective (research) stories from DH scholars that can function

as shards to a more diverse, kaleidoscopic view on DH theory. Rather than endorsing ontological commitments or normative claims about theory, this special issue invites DH scholars to tell about heterogeneous and unfinished theories in the plural. With that in mind, we assume that our neologism "theorytellings" is comprised of three relevant functions:

1. Theorytellings refer to an active reporting on the manifold theoretical undertakings in DH, including the supposedly "untellable" and "untold" stories of DH theory.
2. Theorytellings help to support interdisciplinary communication processes, both within the DH and other disciplines as well as to society.
3. Theorytellings reflect and diversify understandings of theory in the humanities beyond socio-material arrangements. In short, theorytellings address not only the needs and issues of DH's scholars as they discuss the status of theory regardless of academic career or discipline, but rather assume that scientific theorizing might be grasped as an effort comprised of participative and collective actions.

However, the question remains open why precisely stories about theoretical contributions might be worth telling in DH. In science and especially in the humanities, "theory" and "theorizing" are semantically highly ambiguous terms. Depending on their disciplinary backgrounds, research community or time, humanistic scholars have different understandings of what theory and theorizing refer to (Abend 175). In Anglo-American contexts, for example, philosophy and theory are often used synonymously (Cassin et al. vii). While DH scholars often use theory in the singular form, to express issues of cultural critique and reflection, theories in the plural form also refer to "canonical" writings and thinkers. This is accompanied by a personalization of theory, which comes at the cost of the representation of diverse geographic and/or gender contexts (Krause 294; Martus and Spoerhase 167). Furthermore, theories in DH are defined as general propositions or explanations for research phenomena in a certain domain, or they embrace specific methodological stances. However, the point to be made here is that the ontological, normative as well as semantic ambiguity of theory is a predestined feature for studying some narrative conventions of DH. The overall aim of this special issue is to discuss the theoretical foundation of DH research as an epistemic perspective that adds to the current focus on research practices in DH, which have been focused on data modeling issues, digital methods, tool building, and infrastructures.

In this special issue, we bring together nine articles dealing with theorie(s) in DH, each of which is characterized by a specific notion of theory. In their contribution *From Concepts to Texts and Back: Operationalization as a Core Activity of Digital Humanities*, Reiter and Pichler start from a minimal

consensus approach towards an understanding of theory as an explanation for observations and experiments in a given domain. These theories mainly serve to explain and predict phenomena. However, Reiter and Pichler analyze the interplay of the praxeology of operationalization and theoretical presuppositions in exemplary DH projects and extrapolate a best practice model.

Gius and Jacke take into consideration the “Digital Humanities-as-structuralism” narrative often discussed within the literary studies as a critique by non-digital towards digital humanists. In their contribution *Are Computational Literary Studies Structuralist?*, they present structuralism as one example of a theory that can be used in Digital Humanities. Thus, they implicitly define theory as one (of many possible) frameworks of humanities analysis. By accepting structuralism as a theoretical foundation, they demonstrate that the “Digital Humanities-as-structuralism” narrative also is a “Digital Humanities-as-being-theory-driven” narrative and thus a possible counter-narrative to the implications of the lack of theory.

Freybe and Bischof understand theories as presuppositions used in various praxeological areas of Digital Humanities such as tools and data. In their paper *Grounding Theory in Digital Data: A Methodological Approach for a Reflective Procedural Framework*, they argue that the challenge for theoretic DH is to trace back these kinds of hidden theoretic assumptions – that can be various and even conflicting – and to inspect them together under the reflective procedural framework of grounded theory.

Kleymann, Niekler, and Burghardt, however, investigate theory as a concept within DH research. In their article *Conceptual Forays: A Corpus-based Study of “Theory” in Digital Humanities Journals*, they present two case studies, which provide semasiological and onomasiological perspectives on theory as a concept. Taking into consideration DH journals from a timespan ranging from the 1960s to 2020, they are able to show that theories in DH often refer to “canonical” writings and thinkers. In addition to this, their studies of “theory” embeddings with a pre-trained BERT language model hints not only at semantic shifts over time. Rather, they highlight semantic similarities between the concepts of model, tool, method, and experiment.

Not far from the notion of theory Reiter and Pichler use, Roller defines theory as a conceptual model with the functions of explaining, predicting and generalizing the outcome of specific analyses. In her contribution *Theory-driven Statistics for Historiography: Presenting Pitfalls and a Practical Guide by the Example of the Reformation*, she shows how specific theories can be used to generate, test and modify scientific hypotheses. However, contrary to Reiter and Pichler’s contribution, Roller does not understand theories as extensive frameworks that can be reshaped but not entirely verified or falsified

by DH scholarly practice, but as a smaller unit that, although mandatory for research practices, is under permanent (re-)construction and may also be rejected entirely.

In her article *Sailing on Encrypted Seas: The Archive and Digital Memory in African and Diasporic*, Furiasse, who agrees with Freybe and Bischof's idea that digital tools and methods are informed by theoretic assumptions, focuses on practices of memory and storage in digital archives. Starting from the "end-of-archive" narrative, she imagines alternative narratives for using digital media inspired by African and Diasporic Futurism, especially within cultural heritage projects. Furiasse dives deeply into the idea that narratives can not only be part of explicit meaning-making in research practices but also serve as metaphorical and symbolic backgrounds. She creates an outstanding perspective in which fictional and factual narratives complement each other.

In Krämer's paper *Beyond 'rhetoric of depth': cultural technique of flattening, diagrammatic machines and 'deep learning'*, the notion of theory hints at a form of abstract thinking and reflection and thus with – what seems to be – essential humanities work. She chooses hermeneutics as one specific theoretical concept relevant to the DH discourse and aims to critique approaches from "critical digital humanities" based on a rhetoric of depth. Instead of hermeneutizing DH, she argues for an embracing of flatness in the form of surface analysis, applying it as a primary methodological and genuine DH technique.

In *From the Archive to the Computer. Michel Foucault and the Digital Humanities*, Schmidgen, Dotzler, and Stein elaborate on the parallels between Michel Foucault's discourse analysis and current statistical semantics based on Zellig Harris' distributional hypothesis. In doing so, the authors argue for a re-reading of the *Archaeology of Knowledge* and demonstrate how Foucault's discursive aspects (i.e., object, style, concepts and themes) and regularities still address current challenges of computational discourse analysis. Against this background, the authors discuss Foucault's position that discourse emerges as a function which cannot be deductively inferred from features and thus move towards a critique of GPT language models.

In Windhager and Mayr's contribution *Distributed Cognition and the Digital Humanities Notes on New Nootechnology*, theory is, once again, understood as a framework of doing research. As one of such frameworks, they use distributed cognition in order to test its reliability as a stable theoretical background for DH as a field of research. They argue that cognition is not only distributed because of interdisciplinarity and team work. Rather, digital tools developed in this field can be used as an extension of the mind thus further extending the distributed cognition and serving as a means of thinking. They conclude that distributed cognition provides a valuable theoretical lens to reflect on traditional humanities practice while at the same

time guiding design, development and evaluation of DH technologies. They thus tell the narrative of tools developed in DH serving scholarly meaning-making in Digital as well as non-digital Humanities.

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