

Title: Into the Macroscope: Systematic integration of micro- and macro-scale study of digital reading

Authors: Francesca Benatti and Alessio Antonini (Open University, UK)

Abstract:

The emergence of digital reading platforms is opening up new avenues for the empirical study of how readers interact with literature. Such study of digital reading requires a deep structured and explicit integration of micro- and macro-scale research methodologies. In our vision, empirical studies are of critical importance to address Humanities questions, but they must be reconciled within the scope of the Humanities. In this scenario, we propose a vision and framework for DH as a structural integration of both empirical studies on reading and Humanities studies (such as reception studies and book history). A case study based on webcomics will also be included as an example.

Keywords: Digital Humanities; methodology; critical studies; empirical studies

Summary (600-800 words):

The emergence of digital reading platforms is opening up new avenues for the empirical study of how readers interact with literature. Such study of digital reading requires a deep structured and explicit integration of micro- and macro-scale research methodologies. In our vision, empirical studies are of critical importance to address Humanities questions, but they must be reconciled within the scope of the Humanities.

In this scenario, we propose a vision and framework for DH as a structural integration of both empirical studies on reading and Humanities studies (such as reception studies and book history).

The study of web comics is emblematic of DH. For instance, the comments on [Lore Olympus](#) (Smythe, 2018) could enable a study of reader engagement, emotional responses, comparative reading and more. Indeed, the amenability of such sources to mass download and analysis makes them ideal for approaches such as those practiced by DH “distant reading” scholars (Moretti, 2000; Underwood, 2019). However, denying them the in-depth attention reserved usually for scarce historical sources risks diminishing their status as objects of Humanities research.

As support of this view, the initial difficulties of studying “non-book texts” (McKenzie, 1999), have been overcome and contemporary digital sources are by now accorded equal dignity with historical ones (Lang, 2012; Bode, 2012; Murray, 2018; Rettberg, 2019). The tension between these perspectives must still be addressed, as highlighted by Tim Hitchcock, who envisioned a “macroscope” to explore data both at large scale and at the level of the single data point (Hitchcock, 2014). Lastly there is a rising awareness in the DH community of this methodological gap, as evidenced by the DH2019 panel “Digital Humanities for the Study of Social Reading”.

Consequently, we believe that studies on digital reading could benefit from an operational framework providing a systematic integration of critical studies and empirical data-driven research within DH. Indeed, both macro scale experimental projects and micro scale interpretive projects are likely to encounter a barrier when switching research logic at later stages. For instance, UK-RED (Eliot, 1995) is one of the longest-running DH projects, collecting in 20 years 40k curated testimonies of reading. As a corpus, UK-RED provides ideal conditions for both large and micro scale research but, as a matter of fact, this has not happened yet. From an opposite direction, Benatti’s study on webcomics (Benatti, 2019) was framed as classical Humanities research but on a digital reading source. Addressing the webcomic *Strong Female Protagonist*, it presents limitations concerning a) how representative the comic is in the field and b) measuring the reception of the specific comic from thousands of comics and comments.

To reconcile the two perspectives, we provide a general framing of research based on three key components:

- a) the research programme: what do we want to know?
- b) the operational constraints: what sources are we studying and what is their information value?
- c) the value of research: what have we found and who does it benefit?

In this view, macro and micro research (i.e. experimental data-driven and critical studies) differ by taking a different stand on the operational constraints:

1. the type and quantity of sources
2. their informative value
3. the rationale approach to their study.

These operational constraints could change during research development. Indeed, macro-scale studies identify both significant clusters and their most representative cases which feed into an in-depth micro-scale study. On the other hand, a micro-scale analysis identifies hypotheses about topics, forms, context to be verified and scoped through a macro-scale study. Therefore, DH research programme should address both context and depth by: 1) exploring the field identifying topics, 2) profiling the audience, 3) outlining the genre, 4) identifying emerging practices, 5) assessing the impact on readers, and 6) evaluating their role in the cultural discourse.

Summarising, a study of digital reading has an intrinsic high-level complexity which should be firstly identified, then mapped into a plan including cross-disciplinary collaborations and turning points. Indeed, a DH research programme should have a Humanities aim to be delivered through a multi-method strategy. Furthermore, DH research programmes should define a schedule (or hierarchy) considering the logical interdependency between the experimental activities and the critical interpretive studies (e.g. exploration to identify significant representatives, in-depth analysis to formulate hypothesis to scope). We will reflect on how this framework can be applied to a case study of webcomics, comics that are published and read entirely online.

As a final comment, the structuring of research is just half of the problem. Digital Humanities research on reading is in essence a cultural challenge. Humanities research cannot be individual or intra-disciplinary any longer. This is a challenge for training future researchers in humanities, and place in a central position the well-known issues concerning career progression, research evaluation and interdisciplinarity.

References:

- Benatti, F. (2019). Superhero comics and the digital communications circuit: a case study of Strong Female Protagonist. *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, 10(3), 306–319.
- Bode, K. (2012). *Reading by Numbers: Recalibrating the Literary Field*. Anthem Press.
- Hitchcock, T. (2014). Big Data, Small Data and Meaning. 9 November. http://historyonics.blogspot.co.uk/2014_11_01_archive.html.
- Lang, A. (ed.) (2012). *From Codex to Hypertext: Reading at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century*. University of Massachusetts Press.
- Moretti, F. (2000). Conjectures on World Literatures. *New Left Review*, 1, 54–68.
- McKenzie, D. F. (1999). *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts*. Cambridge University Press.
- Murray, S. (2018) *The Digital Literary Sphere*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Rettberg, S. (2019). *Electronic Literature*. Wiley.
- Smythe, R. (2018) *Lore Olympus*. www.webtoons.com/en/romance/lore-olympus/list?title_no=1320.
- Underwood, T. (2019). *Distant Horizons*. University of Chicago Press.