Digital Humanities Are a Two-Way Street
by Ivan Flis, Evina Steinová, and Paul Wouters

In The History Manifesto, Jo Guldi and David Armitage seek a panacea for what they call short-termism—the shrinking chronological focus of historical studies that leads to the overproduction of micro-histories—in “new” longue durée histories that will rely on big data and on digital humanities.24 We agree that big data and digital humanities offer new and valuable ways of making history, including the history of science, and their use should be encouraged. Nevertheless, we would like to point out some of the pitfalls of using big data and digital humanities in history writing, especially in history of science.

We would like to stress that digital humanities do not only entail big data. The History Manifesto blurs the fact that there are many different kinds of historians. Some historians resort to digital humanities because they wish to tackle the lack of data or the data’s disparities, uneven distribution, or low quality. For example, the parchment analysis project at the University of York attempts to identify the species and breed of the animals used in parchment making by means of mass spectrometry; this information will contribute invaluable data about the economy and agriculture of medieval England.25 The physicist Vito Mocella used new x-ray technology to read the charred papyri from Herculaneum buried by the eruption of Vesuvius.26

Big data cannot replace micro-histories, but only complement them. It does not provide a synthesis of the overabundant micro-histories but, rather, a distinct perspective on the historical record that stems from a different methodological basis. Therein also lies its special value for historians.

Digital humanities offer new possibilities to historians of science. However, historians are not the only ones to gain from using digital tools, as Guldi and Armitage note when they compare historians with social scientists. The History Manifesto (p. 94) supports Michael Friendly’s proposal that historians should become technical experts in time-series analysis in virtually all

Ivan Flis is a Ph.D. candidate at the Descartes Centre, Utrecht University. He studies the disciplinary formation of psychology in the twentieth century, with a special focus on large-scale literature analysis. His main research interests are history of psychology, digital humanities, and philosophy of social science. He often writes for blogs such as the JEPS Bulletin and coedit Shells and Pebbles, a Ph.D. candidate–run blog on history of science. Descartes Centre, Utrecht University, Utrecht, Netherlands; i.flis@uu.nl.

Evina Steinová recently completed a Ph.D. in medieval studies at the Huygens ING, an institute of the Dutch Royal Academy of Arts and Sciences. Her research deals with special technical notation used by early medieval scholars in Western Europe. She is also interested in medieval glossaries and annotation practices, Judeo-Christian dialogue, early medieval science, and digital humanities. She writes for several research blogs and online history magazines such as Mittelalter and Historyweb. Huygens ING, The Hague, Netherlands; evina.steinova@huygens.knaw.nl.

Paul Wouters is Director of the Centre for Science and Technology Studies and Professor of Scientometrics at Leiden University. He has published in scientometrics and on the history of the Science Citation Index. He also studies the role of information and information technologies in knowledge. With Anne Beaulieu, Andrea Scharnhorst, and Sally Wyatt, he recently edited Virtual Knowledge: Experimenting in the Humanities and Social Sciences (MIT Press, 2015). CWTS, Leiden University; paul.wouters@cwts.leidenuniv.nl.

24 Jo Guldi and David Armitage, The History Manifesto (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2014), http://historymanifesto.cambridge.org/, pp. 7–8 (overproduction of micro-histories), 9 (big data), 89–95 (digital humanities). Subsequent references to the manifesto will be given in the text in parentheses.
25 To Guldi and David Armitage, The History Manifesto (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2014), http://historymanifesto.cambridge.org/, pp. 7–8 (overproduction of micro-histories), 9 (big data), 89–95 (digital humanities). Subsequent references to the manifesto will be given in the text in parentheses.
fields. Although we are not sure whether historians should have this rather grand ambition, we do think they have something that might be in even greater demand: historical sensibility. By this we mean an awareness of the historicity of data representations (graphic or otherwise) and an understanding of the context they represent, especially when they relate to social and cultural developments. This is a skill that those who already employ digital tools, but who have not received training in history, may lack. The result may be studies that are impressive at first sight but that cannot withstand critical scrutiny or fall prey to misinterpretation.

The creation of historical maps of science is an example: anyone with access to the data can now visualize the development of citation relationships among documents that are recorded in citation indexes. The inventor of the Science Citation Index, Eugene Garfield, saw his tool as a way to write the history of ideas quantitatively. Since then, a number of tools have been developed that create bibliographies of particular concepts or fields. It is tempting to see these maps as the history of the relevant ideas. However, this would be an alarming narrowing of what it means to write history. Each published article in the citation index is embedded in a rich tapestry of scientific practices, chance events, and informal communications that are not recorded in the literature. Although we think that historians of science should use such tools more often, a citation-based bibliography is only one source, among the myriad of others, used for writing the history of science. If these maps are to inform choices in science management, policy, and teaching they should be enriched with historical knowledge of the scientific practices and institutions that created the cited documents.

If some historians were to become general time-series data specialists, we run the risk of treating digital humanities as a separate subfield, rather than as an auxiliary to historical disciplines. Digital humanities should not be encrusted into a separate body within the history-making profession; nor should digital historians become a new subtype of computer scientist who engage with the digital but have little understanding of the nature of their data. What we should aim for is a minimal level of computer literacy needed for historians to use and evaluate digital tools in their research. The newly founded centers for digital humanities should be a place to offer such training, a safe space for interdisciplinary interaction and for developing ways of complementing historical (or, in general, humanists’) methods with the digital. An excellent example of such a measured approach to using digital humanities was published last year in Isis, where the exploration of archives on psychological sex research in the twentieth century was complemented by analysis that produced multispecies networks of animals used as research subjects.

With its polemical tone, The History Manifesto helps guard against the potential insularity of digital humanities by opening up a discipline-wide discussion about standards and practices for using digital tools in historical research. Historians of science should participate and debate the usage of digital tools as a matter of shared methodological approach with other historians. This will not only open history to digital tools, it will also open computer science and linguistics, as the producers of these methods, to history; it’s a two-way street where historical sensibility can improve the tools as well as the interpretations.

28 Two examples are HistCite, by Eugene Garfield: http://www.garfield.library.upenn.edu/histcomp/, and CitNetExplorer, by CWTS at Leiden University: http://www.citnetexplorer.nl/.
Last, but not least, we should be concerned about a different kind of short-termism than the one outlined by *The History Manifesto*: the short-termism that expects faster, more definitive, and grander results in ever shorter times and at diminishing costs. There is a danger that university administrators will seize on the manifesto (and digital humanities in general) to promote the use of big data so that scholars can produce seemingly more abundant and relevant results, to the detriment of quality. Such an uncritical acceptance of digital tools as the method to end all others for producing supposedly measurable and marketable research should be resisted. In this, historians of science—precisely by virtue of their interest in the development, reception, and propagation of viewpoints on science and scientific methods in society—are natural critics of such misuse of big data and digital humanities.