The History of Digital History: A Review of Crymble (2021)

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Abstract

In *Technology and the Historian*, Adam Crymble proposes a history of digital history, arguing that understanding the origins and rationale behind the discipline's development is necessary to lead conversations about its future.

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A most basic and overly simplistic definition of history would state that the field comprises tracking and contextualizing change over time, which is exactly what Adam Crymble admirably does in *Technology and the Historian*. The author presents an overdue comprehensive perspective on the birth and growth of Digital History as a new field within the historical discipline. Rather than setting fire to the outdated writings of the past, the author rescues that literature to present the origins and rationale behind the development of what we currently call by Digital Humanities and, more precisely, Digital History. He calls historians to recognize the influence of technology in historical practices and the impact that computers had on historical studies in the information age, independently of their scholarly work being categorized as "digital history" or not. Crymble argues that historians have chosen to gloss over the transformative role of technology for too long and claims that his book is a first attempt to overcome this "blind spot" in historical inquiry. In his own words, "a history [of Digital History] also forces historians to acknowledge that their field is influenced not only by philosophical shifts and theory, but by each new gadget or piece of software coming out of the Silicon Valley" [Crymble 2021, 9]. [1]

One of the main merits of the book, therefore, is an analysis of literature produced utilizing digital methods in the last decades, and how they provide opportunities to understand the synchronic relation between methodological and theoretical demands of the field and computational methods – in the context in which they were created. Rather than trying to define Digital History as a concise field in a "single overarching narrative" [Crymble 2021, 9], the book seeks to present a historical account of digital history in its plurality, with a rationale that created the demand for computational methods and a common vocabulary for historians. He even includes a glossary at the end of the book to uniformize the terminology that historians working with digital methods should use. Finally, Crymble advocates for building a solid and critical historiography of digital history to free digital scholars from the loop of the "eternal present" [Crymble 2021, 3], i.e., the perfunctory rejection of older literature in favor of the most recent one. [2]

The chapters are divided into what Crymble identifies as the five realms of digital history: historical research, archive, classroom, self-learning eco-system, and scholarly communication channels. Chapter 1 seeks to institute the twofold origin of digital history as a set of practices that use computers for scholarly inquiry based on either "records of bureaucracy" for quantitative research (begun by Frank Owsley's *Plain Folk of the South*) or "big data" for "humanities computing" (begun by Robert Busa's project Index Thomisticus). Chapter 2 focuses on mass digitization and archival practices as two intertwined factors that shape one another and, most importantly, not only revolutionize the way scholars conduct research but also the outreach of their scholarly production. The archival turn and the revisionism in library and museum sciences shed light on the ways archival entries (be they texts, documents, or artifacts) are selected and organized into collections and, conversely, how digital collections are built and presented. Digital [3]

collections and the access to them (consider the internet and the different devices we use), according to Crymble, create new spaces that profoundly change the ways scholars and public alike engage with collections and, consequently, with the past. Chapter 3 presents how digital technologies meet the premises of an already ongoing revision of teaching methods undertaken by educational theorists and psychologists in which lectures and teacher-centered methods are called into question in favor of student-centered approaches. Crymble identifies four waves of experiments in the teaching of history (data-centric, audience-focused multimedia, data analysis, return to history with some digital component) to highlight that, although digital methods are not the only innovative initiatives undertaken, the "technology-inflected history classroom" [Crymble 2021, 105] is one of the most obvious places for experimentation.

In Chapter 4, Crymble explores what he calls "the invisible college," or the support network that many historians and historians-to-be need to independently build due to the lack of institutional structures to contemplate computing and technological skills in their curricula. That encompasses an eco-system that provides not only self-learning resources but, basically, advice in what to learn and how. Chapter 5 analyzes how historians used computational technologies such as blogs as a continuation of older practices to share their work and communicate with peers in a space parallel but outside institutional centers of higher education. Challenging long-established and rigid academic hierarchies, historian bloggers create channels for disrupting disciplinary boundaries and build communities with similar goals that might surpass geographical and other limitations in unprecedented ways. Be it by presenting their findings to larger audiences, sharing research (and often activist) agendas, or simply ranting about the hardships of academia, social media certainly has demanded a more self-reflective attitude from history professionals occupying different ranks. Finally, Chapter 6 acts as a conclusion chapter in which the author clearly enunciates the greater contribution of his book: to disprove historiographies that neglect the impact of the not only methodological but also material influence of technology (encompassing computers, scanners, tablets, Kindles, cell phones, and so on) on the history profession in favor of intellectual influences. Moreover, he encourages historians to define their scholarship in specific ways rather than as "digital history," a terminology too broad and even disparate to convey any intelligible information.

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Crymble invites historians to engage in collaborative work that will consider social, not only technical, differences across geographical locations and briefly cites examples of digital histories applied to different social and cultural contexts, such as the activist nature of the historical profession in South Africa, the translation of the *Programming Historian* to Spanish speakers, and the promising scenario in India. Crymble closes the book by remembering Marshall McLuhan's idea of "global village" [Crymble 2021, 170], and highlighting the potential that the digital age offers as a powerful venue for historical inquiry. The book is a thoughtful reflection on the evolution of digital history and digital humanities relevant to anyone interested in the subject, including graduate students in the humanities, historians, literary theorists, linguists, and educators in general.

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Works Cited

Crymble 2021 Crymble, A. (2021) *Technology and the Historian: Transformations in the Digital Age*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.