

Chapter 18

Conclusion

Abstract In this concluding chapter we explore some of the ways that the oral history interviews included in this book can be ‘read’. We give particular attention to an approach to the interviews that we find intriguing and productive: how they reinforce, extend or problematize current scholarship on the history of DH, or the history of computing more generally. A case in point is the nature of the relationship that existed between DH and the wider computing industry, especially from the 1950s–1970s. We argue that the interviews included here, and the oral history methodology that underpins them, help to recover a more nuanced picture of the origins and history of DH (and computing in the Humanities more generally). They grant insights into the social, cultural, intellectual and creative processes that shaped the field’s uptake and development and address how such processes were sometimes aided and sometimes hindered by external circumstances. They also provide new insights into the role of individual agency in the way they address some of the experiences and motivations of individuals who contributed to the development of this field. Such experiences are otherwise very difficult, if not impossible, to investigate using the extant professional literature. In this way, we believe that this book pushes forward the current boundaries of scholarship on the history of DH.

The interviews included here provide new information about, and reflections on, the history of DH. They include insights into the social, cultural, intellectual and creative processes that shaped its uptake and development and address how such processes were sometimes aided and sometimes hindered by external circumstances. They also provide new insights into the role of individual agency in the way they address some of the experiences and motivations of individuals who contributed to the development of this field. Such experiences are otherwise very difficult, if not impossible, to investigate using the extant professional literature. Thus, the interviews included here and the oral history methodology adopted help to recover a more nuanced picture of the origins and history of computing in the Humanities and allow questions related to this to be further explored. In this way, we believe that this book pushes forward the current boundaries of scholarship on the history of DH.

It is possible to ‘read’ these interviews in many ways. Each individual interview may be read in an immersive way. They may also be read non-consecutively and dipped in and out of in a more thematically-driven fashion (of course, the print format is somewhat limiting in this regard but the common core of questions that each interview is built around will aid the reader in this, to some extent). They may be read for what they contain or equally for what they do not contain. By reading them in conjunction with their audio recordings they may be read as much at the level of narrative as meta-narrative (for example, in terms of the interaction between interviewer and interviewee, or taken as a group, between the individual and the academic discipline as a community that shared stories and ways of sense-making). In turn, they may be interpreted according to any number of analytical frameworks drawn from areas such as literature, linguistics or psychology. Indeed, a further book that will take up the analysis and interpretation of all the interviews we have conducted is planned.

Another approach to the interviews that we find particularly intriguing and productive is to read them in terms of how they reinforce, extend or problematize current scholarship on the history of DH, or the history of computing more generally. A case in point is the nature of the relationship that existed between DH and the wider computing industry, especially from the 1950s to 1970s. Aspects of this relationship are brought out in the extant secondary literature. For example, it is often mentioned that Roberto Busa benefitted from the funding and technical expertise of IBM for almost 30 years. Jones (forthcoming) has done much to illuminate the nature of their relationship during its first 10 years, from 1949 to 1959. It is also known that John W. Ellison received the technical support of Remington Rand to complete his concordance to the Bible which was published in 1957. In Chap. 1, we mentioned how many early DH conferences were sponsored by IBM and Vanhoutte has also written how:

The first monographs about computers in the humanities, however, came from the computer industry. In 1971, IBM published a series of application manuals on computing in the Humanities: *Introduction to Computers in the Humanities ... Literary Data Processing ...* and *Computers in Anthropology and Archaeology*. Almost a decade later, and after thirty years of computing in the humanities, supporters on both sides of the Atlantic were treated to two textbooks on the topic which appeared in the same week in January 1980 (2013, p. 130).

The interviews published here have provided new information on another aspect of this relationship, namely the training that a number of Digital Humanities scholars received from or in the computer industry. This training was formal in the sense that they took formal courses or informal in the sense that it was possible for them to acquire their computing knowledge partly as a result of the conditions that they encountered when working with such companies. For example, regarding the interviews contained in this book, in the mid-1960s, Harris (see Chap. 8) was initially trained in computing by IBM at the Jet Propulsion Lab (JPL) in Pasadena, California. Rutimann (see Chap. 11) also took training courses with IBM at the end of the 1960s. Around the same time Malloy (see Chap. 7) took training in FORTRAN in the Ball Brothers Research Corporation, where she then worked. Hockey recalled that she learned FORTRAN in the 1970s at the Atlas Computer Laboratory (which was not a commercial business but was set up by the British government to support the

educational sector) partly through self-instruction and partly through attending what seem to have been informal tutorials and asking her colleagues for assistance.

Relevant also are the wider opportunities that were opened to interviewees as a result of their connections with the computer industry. For example, Ott (see Chap. 4) mentions how his initial connection with Bonifatius Fischer in the late 1960s came about through Dr Hübner of IBM (who had earlier worked in the Classics Department in Tübingen before he went to IBM). As Nitti explains in his interview (see Chap. 9), he did not take training from industry but was deeply inspired by the computer hardware shows that he attended. The partnerships that he forged there allowed him to apply bespoke technologies that would otherwise have been unavailable to him to use in his lexicographical research.

To the best of our knowledge, this aspect of the wider connections that existed between the emerging field of DH (especially at the earlier Humanities Computing stage) and the wider computing industry has not received sustained attention in the literature on the history of DH. Indeed, it is often assumed that those working at an earlier stage simply would not have had access to training in computing because Computer Science as a formal discipline was not established until c.1965. The interviews that we have so far conducted show that this is an oversimplification in that it focuses on the university context only and DH researchers were clearly able to gain access to training via other routes. Thus, it seems reasonable to suggest that the nature of the relationship that existed with the wider computing industry deserves more attention. Mahoney’s research on the formation of the fields of theoretical computer science and software engineering argues that “people engaged in new enterprises bring their histories to the task, often different histories reflecting their different backgrounds and training” (2005, p. 120). In the context of the history of DH, the interviews included in this book suggest that we should look further than the immediate context of the Humanities and the University in order to more fully understand such backgrounds and training.

Reference

Mahoney, M. S. (2005, June 1). The histories of computing(s). *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews*, 30(2), 119–135. doi:[10.1179/030801805X25927](https://doi.org/10.1179/030801805X25927).

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