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del Rio Riande, Gimena y Fiormonte,
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THE BLOOMSBURY HANDBOOK TO THE DIGITAL HUMANITIES



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*Edited by James O'Sullivan,
University College Cork, Ireland*

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CHAPTER TWO

The Peripheries and Epistemic Margins of Digital Humanities


DOMENICO FIORMONTE (UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI ROMA TRE) AND
GIMENA DEL RIO RIANDE (IIBICRIT-CONICET, ARGENTINA)

EPISTEMIC MARGINS AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY

From the second half of the first decade of the twenty-first century, due to global changes in the historical, cultural, technological, and geopolitical situation, Digital Humanities (DH) began to spread and establish itself beyond its *original* center in North America and Europe. This expansion drew the attention of Northern digital humanists—including those belonging to historically hegemonic communities—to the problem posed by the variety of languages, expressive forms, methods, and tools that these *other* DH used to represent, build, and disseminate culture and knowledge. Consequently, the practices of interpersonal diversity, inclusion, and cultural pluralism emerged among the preoccupations of many DH communities (Priego 2012; ADHO 2015; O'Donnell et al. 2016; Ortega 2016; Fiormonte and del Rio Riande 2017), though mainly as a need of representation of non-Global North scholars in international consortia, projects or conferences.

In this chapter we aim to reflect on what we understand by epistemic diversity (Solomon 2006; Gobbo and Russo 2020), in order to analyze its impact on knowledge production in the field of DH. We also explore the concept of “South” as an alternative way of examining local and global questions about DH and a framework for critical episteme and reflection.

We define epistemic diversity as the possibility of developing diverse and rich epistemic apparatuses that could help in the building of knowledge as a distributed, embodied, and situated phenomenon.

Information and communication technologies have contributed to the production of collective knowledge in the last twenty years. Many societies have started experiencing an epistemic shift towards open and participatory ways of collaborating and learning. Citizen Science projects, makerspaces, and open research practices are becoming part of our life inside and outside academia. In this sense, even though epistemic diversity may have many definitions, we understand it in line with the 2001 UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity as “the dialogue between different knowledge holders, that recognizes the richness of diverse knowledge systems and epistemologies and diversity of knowledge producers” (UNESCO 2021, 9) 

Although this essay is the result of a constant exchange and dialogue between the authors, the content of sections 1 and 2 (second half) are by G. Del Rio Riande and the first half of section 2, section 3 and 4 are by D. Fiormonte. The English translation is by Desmond Schmidt.

We believe epistemic diversity can contribute to a better understanding of DH from a geopolitical perspective, as it moves from the individual representation of scholars and/or their culture and focuses on the inequities in social distribution of knowledge.

However, any such reflection on cultural, interpersonal, or epistemic diversity must recognize all the forces in play, and attempt to confront the evolutionary history, forms of knowledge production, institutional structures, and geopolitical interests that have gradually formed in the course of the already considerable history of DH.¹ All of these are part of what we could call the problem of representation. Representation (Latin *representatio*) is the action and effect of representing (making something present with figures or words, referring, replacing someone, executing a work in public). A representation, therefore, can be the idea or image that replaces reality. Representation is also the way in which the world is socially constructed and represented at a textual and contextual level. The idea of representation is linked to the way in which the idea of subject is produced, that is, the descriptions and sets of values within which the different groups and/or individuals are identified. Moreover, following Davis, Shrobe, and Szolovits (1993, 19) we can also claim that:

[S]electing a representation means making a set of ontological commitments. The commitments are in effect a strong pair of glasses that determine what we can see, bringing some part of the world into sharp focus, at the expense of blurring other parts. These commitments and their focusing/blurring effect are not an incidental side effect of a representation choice; they are of the essence

Mapping projects produced by the DH community, for example, can help us understand this problem of representation and epistemic diversity. Most of them were produced by the mainstream DH community, so the “South”—or rather “the regions of the South” (Sousa Santos and Mendes 2017, 68)—are underrepresented or absent.³ Although this is not a comprehensive list, let’s revise some of these projects of the last ten years to understand how DH has been and, in some cases, is still represented. For example, one of the most comprehensive maps of DH courses, maintained by the European consortium DARIAH, although currently in progress and open to the community, still excludes many initiatives.² The reason is simple, many communities outside Europe don’t know what DARIAH is or have never heard about this map, so they haven’t added their courses to it. Two other much-cited maps are those by Melissa Terras (2012) and Alan Liu (2015). However, the first one is mainly devoted to North American and European DH and the second one just focuses on disciplines and fields. Other initiatives from outside the Northern academies or its margins include Shanmugapriya and Menon’s (2020) mapping of Sneha’s report (2016), MapaHD (Ortega and Gutiérrez De la Torre 2014), and AroundDH 2020 (Global Outlook Digital Humanities 2020³). This last map follows Alex Gil’s first attempt to give a global, diverse, and inclusive perspective of DH (Gil 2014⁴) and aims to highlight “Digital humanities projects in languages other than English or from minoritized groups worldwide.” We can also mention initiatives halfway between maps and surveys, like Colabora_HD⁵ and Atlas de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades Digitales (Romero Frias 2013⁶), which have aimed at a more extended view of DH.

We think that these examples show that the geography of DH is complex and has never been understood globally. If we want to understand the importance of epistemic diversity within DH, we must contextualize it as part of the issues that are defined beyond geography and under the label geopolitics of knowledge.⁷

GEOPOLITICS OF KNOWLEDGE AND EPISTEMIC DIVERSITY IN THE MARGINS OF DH

As Vinay Lal (2005) argues, battles in the twenty-first century will be for the domination of knowledge and information, which cases like Wikileaks, the Snowden datagate, and the Cambridge Analytica-Facebook scandal demonstrate. These and other recent events, like the artificial intelligence race between China and the US, confirm that the Internet has become the terrain on which the geopolitical balances of the planet will be played out, and reaffirm the radical epistemic violence of digital devices and the cultures that have developed them. And, as noted above, the center of this “new world” will be data. The question is: how was data obtained and managed? We believe the role of DH can no longer be limited to the application of information technology to humanistic problems and objects, DH must also ask itself about the nature and the profound purposes of the technologies they use, and the new objects, traces, and memories they are assembling.

Cultural hegemony and domination over forms of knowledge can be expressed on many levels, but here we will consider those related to the problem of representation and epistemic diversity. The first arises from the linguistic and rhetorical-discursive advantages of the global Anglophone North in the creation of academic knowledge, and the second from the inequities inherent in the infrastructures of knowledge production and communication. Obviously these two levels are closely related, but it is still important to distinguish them.

Inequities of the first kind have been studied in the pioneering work of Suresh Canagarajah (2002) and the questions he raised help to summarize the main points of the problem: what role does writing play in peripheral academic communities? What kind of representation challenges do they face when adopting the epistemological standards and conventions of the “center”? And above all, how are the experiences and knowledge of these communities moulded and reformulated by this process? (Canagarajah 2002). Although Canagarajah’s approach is sometimes based on a vision of a dichotomous center/periphery model, which today, following China’s intrusion into the “market” of scientific production (Veugelers 2017), among other global issues, is weakening, we know that in the academic communities of ex-colonial countries there is a kind of intellectual dependency that has its roots in the education system:

Periphery students are taught to be consumers of center knowledge rather than producers of knowledge. Often this attitude of dependency develops very early in a periphery subject’s educational life Furthermore, Western-based (nonindigenous) literacy practices exacerbate this intellectual dependency. ... From the above perspective it is easy to understand the feeling of many that the democratization of academic literacy should start in schools.

(Canagarajah 2002, 283–4)

Obtaining funds, directing research, developing a project, writing an essay or an article, etc. are intellectual and discursive practices that depend on precise forms of representation and undisputed standards set once and for all by the great “knowledge centers” of the global North (Bhattacharyya 2017, 32). These self-proclaimed “centers” (universities, research centers, etc.) of excellence⁸ base their persuasive and imposing powers on structures and infrastructures of dissemination such as the large private oligopolies of scientific publishing (Larivière et al. 2015) dominated by English-speaking countries.

This is closely related to what Gobbo and Russo have stated about the role of English and the impossibility of epistemic diversity in monolingual contexts. Even though their article is mainly related to philosophy, Gobbo and Russo (2020) demonstrate English is a communicative strategy and the concept of lingua franca is no longer useful. The authors believe that this communication strategy hinders linguistic justice, a concept developed in the 1990s to refer to the uneven conditions that different speakers encounter while speaking the same language. That is to say that in academic communication, clearly English native speakers remain advantaged over non-native speakers and that English, contrary to what is usually thought, is no lingua franca. Epistemic diversity refers, in this context, to the consequences of a monolingual context at the level of the epistemic apparatuses that speakers have or produce, in order to make sense of their world. Language also impacts on knowledge creation. As they clearly state: “English is neither ethnically nor epistemological neutral.”

But the problem is also how hegemonic forces define (and manage) knowledge for their own benefit. Already in 1983, Eugene Garfield, the inventor of the impact factor, argued that Western journals controlled the flow of scientific communication almost as much as Western news agencies monopolized the agenda of international news (Guédon 2008, 9). Fernanda Beigel (2014) makes it clear when she discusses the arbitrariness of the current structure of global academic research and shows how scholars, forced into an international pseudo-competition, are evaluated on the basis of their contribution to mainstream journals:

Over the second half of the 20th century, American academia played a main role in “universalizing” a set of criteria to define scientific “quality” as a research agenda. The Institute of Scientific Information (ISI, now the Web of Science-Thomson Reuters) created citation indexes and journal rankings supposedly based on objective procedures. It was mainly due to the Science Citation Index (SCI) that *international publishing* became the most valorized academic capital and the most relevant indicator for institutional evaluations worldwide. This perpetuated the notion of “core journals” and the impact factor became a yardstick for “excellence” in a publishing system in which the English language became progressively dominant.

The strategy of knowledge monopolies (Fiormonte 2021) is not to close or limit these flows, but to perpetuate their own hegemony, institutionalizing dependence to the ways in which knowledge is represented in those journals, and maintaining the subordination and invisibility of locally produced knowledge.

In the field of DH, the results of this epistemic disparity have been highlighted by some quantitative studies that reveal the linguistic, cultural, institutional, and gender imbalances and inequalities in ADHO conferences (Weingart and Eichmann-Kalwara 2017). Another more restricted study (Fiormonte 2021) deals with an often-overlooked aspect: the languages of the sources of articles published in the main DH journals. These sources, cited in the form of bibliographic references and notes, are a key indicator of how humanists and social scientists work. Even more than the language in which an article is written, the sources reveal valuable information about the content of the research and the author’s skills (known languages, theoretical trends, methodological choices, etc.). The use of sources, which shows itself the references cited, can reveal the skills of a medievalist, the cultural background of a new media expert, the geopolitical orientation of a historian, and so on. The aim of the experiment was to collect information about the language(s) of the sources used by the authors who published in six journals, which in 2014, at the time of data collection,

represented a mixed sample reflecting both linguistic and scientific interests: *Caracteres (CA)*; *Digital Humanities Quarterly (DHQ)*; *Digital Medievalist (DM)*; *Digital Studies/Le champ numérique (DSCN)*; *Jahrbuch für Computerphilologie (JCP)*; *Informatica Umanistica (IU)*; and *Literary and Linguistic Computing (LLC)* (since 2014 *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities, DSH*). All journals, except *LLC/DSH*, are freely available online. Only *CA*, *IU*, and *JCP* have a defined geolinguistic location, but all frequently publish articles in English. Unfortunately, the majority of DH journals are published in English-speaking contexts and this limits the possibilities for comparison. To try to correct this, *Caracteres (Estudios culturales y críticos de la esfera digital—Cultural studies and reviews in the digital sphere)* was added to the group, which at the time was one of the few online Spanish-speaking journals that dedicated some space to DH.⁹

The conclusions are clear enough: while English-speaking journals are essentially monolingual (94 percent of *LLC/DSH* sources are in English; 97 percent in *DHQ* and *DSCN*; 83 percent in *DM*), the authors who published in Italian, German, and Spanish journals cite sources in multiple languages. What does it mean to be “international” for an author who publishes in a DH journal? Contrary to popular perception, the data show that the more “local” a journal is, the more attention it pays to the outside world, demolishing the myth of “cultural provincialism.” We believe all this strengthens the idea that, as in biocultural diversity (Maffi and Woodley 2010, 8), there is greater diversity in the margins than in the center.¹⁰

THE SOUTH AS A METAPHOR OF A MORE DIVERSE DH

In *Theory from the South*, South African scholars Jean and John L. Comaroff (2012) argue that contemporary historical, social, and economic processes are altering received geographies, placing in the South (and East) of the world “some of the most innovative and energetic modes of producing value” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012, 7). In other words, it is no longer possible to consider the South as the periphery of knowledge, because it is precisely the South that is developing as the place where new assemblages of capital and labor are taking shape to prefigure the future of the global North (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012, 12). In this line of thought, we can recall the epistemologies of the South, by Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos. The epistemologies of the South are a set of analyses, methods, and practices developed as a resistance against the systematic injustices and oppressions caused by capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy. This approach implies opening the way creatively to new forms of organization and social knowledge (Sousa Santos 2018).

The South thus emerges for us as a critical category able to adopt horizontal approaches and draw on the imagination of a transnational political actor and producer of *resistant* culture rather than on the margins than the periphery. This reflection leads us to consider the category “South” from a geopolitical point of view, and as a discourse of resistance and innovation from the margins.

We are aware that the relations between margins and center, between center and peripheries, between North and South, can legitimize hegemonic discourses and systems, but also reinforce dualistic visions. Reality, however, almost always turns out to be profoundly ambiguous. Even technology, as Walter Benjamin had predicted in the 1930s (Benjamin 2006), plays a double and ambiguous role: on the one hand, the processes of concentration and standardization that arise from it (Bowker and Leigh Star 1999) are accompanied by the exploitation of resources and by the absorption of marginal or subordinate cultures. On the other hand, it can also provide an opportunity to preserve, spread, and make Southern cultures more aware of their own strengths.

Tensions always exist wherever different cultures and knowledge come into contact, whether from a geographical, cultural, or epistemological perspective. The field of DH is no exception to this rule. What can be seen today is a potential alliance between the ambitions of the South in their search for legitimacy (the oppressed who seeks to resemble the oppressor, as Fanon [2004] and Freire [2017] ¹¹, ¹² observed) and those who want to continue to be a “center,” by extending and consolidating their own hegemony. It is a well-known pattern in postcolonial studies where one speaks of reabsorption of subordinate subjectivity or appropriation of the emergent by the dominant (Kwet 2019).

It may be instructive at this point to recall a little-known episode in the technological relations between North and South. In 1985, at a historic moment when Brazil supported a policy of protection and incentives for its national technology industry, a local company, Unitron, designed and produced the *Mac de la periferia* (Suburban Mac), the first clone in the world of the Macintosh 512 KB (also known as *Fat Mac*). Unitron obtained about ten million dollars in funding from the Brazilian government and managed to produce five hundred machines at a low cost for the national market and the rest of Latin America. However, when the computers were ready to be sent, the project was blocked by the local arm of Apple:

Though Apple had no intellectual property protection for the Macintosh in Brazil, the American corporation was able to pressure government and other economic actors within Brazil to reframe Unitron’s activities, once seen as nationalist and anti-colonial, as immoral piracy. In exerting political pressure through its economic strength, Apple was able to reshape notions of authorship to exclude reverse engineering and modification, realigning Brazilian notions of intellectual authorship with American notions that privilege designated originators over maintainers and modifiers of code and hardware architecture.

(Philip-Irani-Dourish 2010, 9–10)

This story suggests some considerations (and questions) that would add up to a “classic” postcolonial critique, and connects also to the “informatics of the oppressed,” an expression coined by Rodrigo Ochigame on Freire’s pedagogy of the oppressed to describe the counterhegemonic beginnings of computer science in Latin America (Ochigame 2020). The early death of the Suburban Mac not only cemented the victory of the (future) giant from Cupertino and the defeat of a pioneering project in the South, but marked the beginning of the leaking of talent, creativity, and resources from the South to the North (the intellectual emigration of the 1980s and 1990s). But above all, the case is emblematic of a loss of cultural, technological and epistemological sovereignty which implies the refusal (and in some cases denial) to invest in technology and innovation. What would Brazil be like today (but in reality the same argument could apply to Southern European countries, including Italy [Secrest 2019]) if thirty years ago it had the opportunity to develop its own IT industry? What would Brazilian DH be like today if a whole industry could support research? Reflecting on this point means starting to think about a historical revision of scientific-technological innovation and, above all, laying the foundations for a geopolitics of the digitization of knowledge (Fiormonte 2017).

Recovering cultural and epistemological sovereignty is directly connected with the role of DH in the South. Southern digital humanists cannot excuse themselves from their responsibility to address the geopolitical implications of digital knowledge and its decolonization. What kind of knowledge are we building with the technological tools we use? What are the social, political, cultural, and

other implications of the digital tools we use every day? Is it possible to create independent models that are sustainable from a socio-economic perspective, or are we bound to always incorporate the paradigms and standards of the Global North—to be part of mainstream journals and media?

REFLECTIONS FROM THE EPISTEMIC MARGINS OF DH

There are many examples of Southern innovation that do not easily find a parallel in a world crushed by the GAFAM oligopoly (<https://gafam.info/>). From the recovery of indigenous communities in Peru (Chan 2014) to the decolonization of university curricula in South Africa (Adriansen et al. 2017), from movements for open knowledge and technologies (Barandiaran and Vila-Viñas 2015) to community networking experiments in Latin America (Aguaded and Contreras-Pulido 2020), from the Africa of digital rights (<https://africaninternetrights.org/>) to the India of knowledge commons (<http://www.knowledgecommons.in>) and Net Neutrality, a grassroots movement that in 2016 led to the “defeat” of Mark Zuckerberg (Mukerjee 2016). One could easily add many more examples. The *peripheries* are transforming themselves into models of proactive resistance for the rest of the world. This is also witnessed by various educational projects that aim at a genuine revision of policies, technologies, and new models of community education, as evidenced by experiments and real projects in Latin America (Guilherme and Dietz 2017) and Asia (Alvares and Shad 2012).

Digital humanists of the South today have the opportunity not so much to replace or overlay the technological realities that still dominate, but to become the reference point for multiple and sustainable models of conservation, access, and communication of knowledge in digital format. In this sense, the epistemic margins of DH can become its center.

NOTES

1. Nyhan and Flinn (2016) offer a historical perspective based on “oral histories,” interviewing European and North American pioneers. Although it is an extremely interesting work, not only is there no reference to the non-Western world, but pioneers from southern Europe are absent, such as the Spanish Francisco Marcos Marín (the term “Spain” occurs twice in the entirety of the 285-page volume and it’s related to the chapter on the Hispanic Seminary of Medieval Studies at the University of Wisconsin).
2. Boaventura de Sousa Santos is right when he states that “There is therefore a dual modern cartography: a legal cartography and an epistemological cartography” (Sousa Santos 2018: 195).
3. DARIAH Course Registry, <https://dhcr.clarin-dariah.eu/courses>.
4. <http://arounddh.org/>.
5. <http://arounddh.elotroalex.com/>.
6. <https://emapic.es/survey/bCGfKO4>.
7. *Atlas de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades Digitales*, https://grinugr.org/proyectos_internos/atlas-de-ciencias-sociales-y-humanidades-digitales/.
8. We hope that the forthcoming collective volume *Global Debates in the Digital Humanities* will help changing the current imbalances by publishing global DH research results in English with little or no visibility in the Global North (<https://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/page/cfps-gddh-eng>).
9. There has been a heated debate on how to build, measure, and certify this excellence for some time; we limit ourselves to pointing out some contributions, such as Hazelkorn (2017).
10. The maximum time frame taken into consideration was five years, preferably 2009–2014 if all were available, but CA started publishing in 2012 and IU and JCP stopped in 2011, so in the first and second cases we extracted references from all available numbers. In the case of the third journal (JCP) five

years were chosen but in the range 2004–2010, since some years were not present. While it is true that the total number of references extracted from each journal varied greatly (more than six thousand from *LLC/DSH*, but less than three hundred for *IU*), percentages based on the extracted totals still give a fairly representative picture of the linguistic tendencies of each journal.

11. Trend confirmed by the creation in 2017 of the *Revista de Humanidades Digitales (RHD)*; <http://revistas.uned.es/index.php/RHD/index>. The *RHD*, founded by a group of researchers and professors from UNED (Spain), UNAM (Mexico), and CONICET (Argentina), is the first open access academic journal entirely dedicated to DH that has adopted Spanish as its main scientific language. The *RHD* also accepts contributions in English and other Romance languages, such as Portuguese, French, and Italian.
12. At some point in its marginal existence, the oppressed feels an irresistible attraction to the oppressor: “Taking part in these standards is an unconstrained aspiration. In their alienation, they seek, at all costs, to resemble their oppressor” (Freire 2017: 62).

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