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CFP: Panel “The Potential and the Limits of the Digital Humanities” at the 15th International Conference of the German Semiotics Society (DGS) “Borders: Contact – Communication – Contrast” (Passau, 12th–16th September 2017)

Deadline for abstract submissions: 20th Nov 2016

For decades, humanities scholars have routinely used the internet and computer software in their daily work, such as for the collection, annotation, statistical analysis, editing, and interpretation of texts and other semiotic artefacts. In recent years, however, the use of new software-based research methods, the growing importance of digital archives, and the development of new technologies such as 3D scans and virtual modelling have raised the question of whether we are just witnessing a quantitative increase in the use of computer-based research, or rather a qualitative change that could alter our understanding of the humanities as a whole.

As often in times of rapid change, the discourses around the Digital Humanities are defined by opposites. While some hope for new research perspectives, increased economic impact and opportunities for third-party funding, others fear that the core strengths of the humanities such as qualitative methods, critical thinking, and intellectual depth will be lost in the rush for supposedly modern algorithmic methods, gleaming websites, and showy infographics.

The panel seeks to ignite a debate about the possibilities and limitations of the Digital Humanities that moves beyond these dichotomies. A specific focus lies on questions regarding the possible removal of barriers, the hope for wider access to culture, education, and participation, and the risk of new exclusions. There is no doubt that the knowledge needed for participation in our increasingly digital cultures, as well as the qualifications of humanities scholars interested in understanding these cultures, are changing. At the same time, the internet can vastly increase the reach of exhibitions, archives, and repositories. What does it mean when manuscripts or first editions that were previously only seen by a few experts become available in high resolution, and may even be annotated in crowd-sourcing initiatives? Will, for example, museums strive to become more democratic with online exhibitions, and opera less elitist with live-streamed performances? What new exclusions will result when humanities scholars are suddenly expected to be conversant with specialised software and coding techniques, and are expected to market their research on internet platforms?

Semiotics, the theory of signs, offers the conceptual tools to analyse these developments. In recent decades, the spread of digital media and multimodal textuality have significantly changed the “semiosphere” (J. Lotman) of our cultures. Can the “limits of interpretation” (U. Eco) be pushed further by the algorithmic promises of our time? Or should the humanities prepare to form a hermeneutic barrier against the digital, as a sort of final frontier against the nemesis of a computerized world?

The panel is open for discussion contributions, lectures, and presentations (in German or English) on current research trends in the Digital Humanities. The semiotic perspective may be explicit in the use of terminology and theories, or implicit in the reflection on the interpretive dimensions of humanities research and/or specific digital methods.

Please send abstracts by 20th Nov 2016 to: Ralph Knickmeier <ralph_knickmeier@t-online.de> and Martin Siefkes <martin.siefkes@phil.tu-chemnitz.de>.

Selected panels will be published in the conference proceedings. Alternatively, the panel contributions may be published in the form of an edited volume.