

# A New Venture and a Commitment to Disciplinary Fusion in the Domain of Digital and Public Humanities

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## 1 Entering an Open Domain<sup>1</sup>

On 5 June 2019, Ca' Foscari University launched the Venice Centre for Digital and Public Humanities (VeDPH) in order to take a proactive role in the digital transformation of society and of the academic landscape. With the ambition of enhancing humanities research and opening up knowledge and practices to a wider public, scholars, artists and programmers have been attracted who are engaged in the application of computer science and emerging technologies in the humanities. Building on the competences and achievements already made at the Department of Humanities, which has been awarded with an excellence grant by the Italian Ministry of Education, Universities and Research (MIUR), a new team of expert scholars and specialists

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<sup>1</sup> This introduction paper was mutually agreed on by the authors, whereas F. Fischer wrote paragraph 1, D. Mantoan paragraphs 2 and 3, B. Tramelli paragraph 4.



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took on the task of establishing interdisciplinary collaborations and a wide range of training activities. In the course of the first year, a masters' study programme in the field of digital and public humanities has been set up, as well as a seminars series, a summer school, and a number of workshops and symposiums. Public events were delivered online under the conditions of the COVID-19 emergency, covering topics ranging from digital papyrology and palaeography to media archaeology and contemporary audio-visual art, from GIS to git, from code to the materiality of a global lockdown. A technical research infrastructure has been developed for facilitating both refactoring digital legacy resources and cutting-edge research. Social media has been explored for communicating and sharing information with scholars and the public. Strategic partnerships with cultural heritage institutions, learned associations and local communities have been created, and existing partnerships have been strengthened. The only missing element, it seemed, was an open access publication venue for genuine research articles at the crossroads of the humanities traditional core disciplines, and the methodologic advancement and technological innovation. Hence, the idea of making *magazén* soon took shape.

## 2 The Making of *magazén*'s Pilot Issue

A year ago, when we set forth to start *magazén*, we were indeed wondering whether the scholarly world needed another journal. The peculiar research niche we were planning to enter, the field of digital and public humanities, is still quite novel but over the last decade it has earned growing consideration inside the academia. Certainly, it cannot be said to be established yet, since some areas of prejudice derived from more traditional disciplines are hard to overcome. Doubts and suspicions often refer to methodological aspects and material boundaries, deemed excessively innovative or too elusive, hence at times they even hinder access to the main platforms of discussion (Kirschenbaum, Werner 2014) for researchers in digital and public humanities. We were pondering that perhaps a new journal explicitly devoted to this emerging field might be of some use, provided that it could become an open space for cutting-edge debates, as well as to define new categories or scientific vocabularies and recognise a varied range of resources and modes of research conduct (Drucker 2003). While this field is still struggling to find a truly theorised version of itself, it also needs to develop research models in an international context, such as to take account of different contexts and cultures around the scholarly world (De Groot 2018). Hence, at the VeDPH, we took up the challenge to create an interdisciplinary journal undergoing double blind peer review which we plan to publish

twice per year in printable version and in a web version, which are both available in open access. Being based at the Department of Humanities at Ca' Foscari University of Venice, our centre is founded upon an initiative of excellence that aims at stimulating an interdisciplinary methodological discourse. As a matter of fact, it is inscribed in our founding principles that we need to create a basis for the collaborative development of durable, reusable, shared resources for research and learning in the field of digital and public humanities. Furthermore, taking the term humanities in its entirety, we intend to be as inclusive as possible with regard to the disciplinary domains, ranging from textual scholarship, history and art history to cultural heritage studies and archaeology. Thus, the journal aspires to constitute an open platform for a wide range of disciplinary fields and methodological approaches sharing the scholarly potential of digital technology and public discourse. In our perspective, a novel journal would make sense only if it is devoted to a wide-open constituency.

Consequently, when we started to think of a name for this unlikely venture, we were looking for something that could hold together this urge towards openness and interdisciplinarity with the peculiar Venetian character of our centre. Curiously, our department is set apart from the main palace of Ca' Foscari, on the Grand Canal, and there is a narrow, almost secret passage connecting the two buildings. One has to cross the Campo Santa Margherita, a lively square at the heart of the university district, and then follow an intricate path between ancient houses: there lies the so-called *Calle del magazzino*, a little alley that appears to lead to a dead end. And it is not the only *calle* - as the streets are called in Venice - that holds this particular name. There is another *calle* right behind the big State Archive at Frari's, the former huge Franciscan monastery where most of the documents from the various institutions of the millenary Venetian Republic were placed after Napoleon's conquest. Several others are to be found when randomly walking through the streets of Venice. At the beginning, the association with the English word *magazine* was reason enough to research further into the etymology of *magazén*, only to find out that it refers to the historical definition of public houses during the *Serenissima* (Tassini 1970, 364-5). Truly, *magazzino* in Italian still means warehouse, while the French version properly refers to shops, and the Venetian variant is not so different, since *magazéni* (in the plural form) were places of diverse human deeds and thriving that included information exchange, commercial bargains and pawn brokerage (Boerio 1971, 382). You would go to your favourite *magazén* to drink a glass of wine, to have a chit-chat, to close a business deal, to bargain your belongings for some money or, vice versa, to find things at a good price; and, yes, sometimes even for an hour or two of love. This little philological research bore good fruits, we had our name, one referring to a very Venetian place

of open exchange, a platform for diverse humanity where everybody was welcome and could mingle with other people. We are committed to make *magazén* such a place for digital and public humanists, today and in the future.

### 3 Looking for Fusions of a Broader Kind

In 2020, for our inaugural volume, we resolved to devote the two semestral issues to the intertwining landscape emerging from the recent development of digital and public humanities. For this reason, the international call for abstracts we launched in February simply bore the title ‘Fusions’, a straightforward term with no further frills, in order to leave the debate as open as possible. As a matter of fact, in the last two decades much effort was placed in defining separate disciplinary fields, in order to canonise and validate the use of digital methodologies or public approaches in the specific subsets of the humanities. Such is for instance the case of Digital Art History, which is still focused on the definition of its own research scope, while trying to legitimise the adoption of big data analysis for art historical knowledge (iconographic comparison, image matching, material analysis etc.) as well as establishing best practices in digital archiving systems specifically for the arts (Drucker 2013). A similar development may be traced in Digital Textual Scholarship where a variety of scholarly approaches created a wide range of standards for visual and critical representation and developed a vast array of digital methods and means for palaeographic, genetic, stylistic, linguistic and semantic analysis of texts and documents (Pierazzo 2015; Berti 2019). As far as archaeology is concerned, the extensive use of digital tools (GIS, spatial analysis, 3D modelling, network analysis, simulation, image analysis etc.) significantly expanded the understanding of the human past and unlocked new paths for archaeological enquiry and dissemination, such that all archaeologists today are ‘digital’ in their own right (Morgan, Eve 2012, 523; Costopoulos 2016). Eventually, the relationship between public and digital history recently occupied many scholars, since the process of digitisation of primary and secondary sources, in particular for historians, called out traditional approaches and methods of research, analysis, communication, and dissemination (Cohen, Rosenzweig 2005). However, evidence suggests that digital and public challenges facing individual disciplines are actually common to the entire field of the humanities, thus favouring a cross-disciplinary approach rather than thematic isolation. Indeed, the impact of digitisation and public involvement offered a unique opportunity to the humanities: a window for experimentation with merged methodologies, blended sharing practices, joined representation modes, interpenetrated material research (Cauvin 2016; Leon

2017). In this process, new actors, factors and agents that are about to consolidate today's landscape in the digital and public humanities emerged; however, standards and best practices that apply to the entire field still need to be developed.

Following this strain of thoughts, for the first volume of *magazén*, we were adamant to examine the concept of 'fusions' as the very backbone of recent developments in the realm of digital and public humanities. After all, the term serves well to embrace every possible kind of merger, interrelation, joint, blend, interpenetration, interdependency, cross-contamination that affected or still informs the processes, approaches, and practices of research in this wider field. Hence, we invited scholars to submit contributions that span from theoretical debates to methodological reflections, as well as the examination of particular case studies. The research scope should cover the widest possible chronology and typology of topics without any distinction of methodological approach, provided that it is convincingly presented and suitable to address the concept of 'fusions' in the digital and public humanities. We were particularly eager to find experimental research or works making use of media and code, with special attention to articles dealing with best practices or committed to an open source policy. Specifically, we intended to urge prospective authors to engage with an open concept of 'fusions', though at the same time clarifying how they would position themselves across a set of transversal domains that we believe need to be addressed with due awareness, in order to establish digital and public humanities as a coherent field inside academia. These dimensions refer to: 1) the kind of materials (e.g. monuments, documents, works of art, born digital artefacts); 2) the media of representation (e.g. image data, textual data, audio-visual data, 3D data); 3) the applied methods (modelling, epistemology, collection, processing, visualisation, analysis, hermeneutics); 4) the modes of sharing (publication, participation, communication, preservation, afterlife); and 5) actors, factors and agents of the chosen field (society, institutions, communities, technology, environment, discourse). This task could not be accomplished by the authors solely, as they needed the members of our editorial board to accompany them on this path, while from our side we also had to identify reviewers capable of appreciating cutting-edge research in an open domain. Despite our first call for abstracts and the subsequent peer review process happening in the midst of the worldwide emergency situation, we were astounded by the considerable participation and warm reception that this issue of *magazén* earned from scholars all over the globe. Apparently, a new journal in this domain was indeed desirable and the chosen topic just hit the nail on the (scholarly) head.

## 4 Five Takes on an Ever-merging Field

Considering fusions as an open concept and as the place to start the journal's discussion on the different dimensions of digital and public humanities summarised above, we were particularly pleased with the selection of this issue's contributions, which provide us with different and yet connected interpretations and reflections on the topic.

The first article written jointly by Dennis Del Favero, Ursula Frohne and Susanne Thurow presents the authors' research on interactive immersive aesthetics conducted by the iCinema Research Centre at the University of New South Wales in Sydney, which seeks to re-conceptualise access and engagement with cultural datasets via digital platforms, with the ultimate aim of enabling new forms of experience, exploration and insight. The analysis of the Centre's milestones across the past two decades opens up a methodological discussion on the fusion of technological and artistic frameworks that guide the development of its digital methodologies.

The second contribution by Franco Niccolucci discusses the widespread use of digital applications in archaeology, questioning the critical use of Big Data. Starting from the issue of the 'data deluge' already raised in 1999, the author critically analyses different approaches on how to manage the increasing amount of information available online, suggesting the need to re-think the digital approach using a 'data-centric methodology', a fusion of artificial and human intelligence in order for researchers to be able not only to interpret but to re-use the data collected during their archaeological investigations.

Stoyan Sgourev, in the third article, starts from the traditional definition of 'fusion' in physics - a process during which part of the content of two atoms is lost, though a qualitatively new entity is created - to engage the reader in a challenging discussion on the benefits of interdisciplinary exchange, and on the need to overcome the aversion (in all fields) to external influence and in opening up. He argues that technological and methodological developments are facilitating a more malleable state of disciplines, and he presents as an example his data on the students of Antoine Bourdelle, ultimately pointing out that much is to be gained by the interaction of computer algorithms, sociological methods and historical data, which can be of great help to address (and solve) substantive questions in the history of art.

The last two contributions in the issue offer two intriguing and innovative case studies on specific topics, respectively on early modern Italian music and Byzantine sigillography.

In their article, Angela Fiore and Sara Belotti give us preferential access to the world of 17th century Modena, presenting musical manuscripts, historical maps and archival sources as engaging primary sources whose comparative study is particularly apt to get an

insight on the different relationships between the spaces of 'knowledge production' in the early modern Italian city. They present the *in fieri* project *Este Soundscape*, based on the construction of a digital platform for the research and dissemination of the cultural and documentary heritage, which involved the *fondi musicale e cartografico* of the Biblioteca Estense Universitaria. The platform will serve as the basis for the reconstruction and exploration of the historical soundscape of early modern Modena and will give a new interdisciplinary perspective on the field of early modern studies.

In the final contribution of this first issue, three authors, Alessio Sopracasa, Martina Filosa and Simona Stoyanova present SigiDoc, the new-born encoding standard for Byzantine seals, as the first attempt for this intrinsically interdisciplinary discipline to benefit from the Digital Humanities. The paper illustrates the digital genealogy of SigiDoc in the broader context of TEI and its relationship with open source initiatives and tools such as EpiDoc and EFES (EpiDoc Front-End Services). This provides the readers with a clear and meaningful example of how the creation of a new interoperable encoding standard can lead to the enhancement of an entire discipline, allowing for the exploration of exciting materials and new insights into the historical, administrative, economic, socio-political, prosopographic and iconographic aspects of the Byzantine empire and beyond.

## 5 A Big Community and Sincere Acknowledgments

Presenting different methodological approaches and materials, the contributions collected in this first inaugural issue of *magazén* give us a glimpse of the heterogeneous and evolving scene of Digital Humanities and of its scholarly community. More articles on this subject will be included in the second issue of 2020 to further fuel this interdisciplinary debate. We hope that this journal will become a starting point for discussions on the interconnected methodological aspects, in between innovation and tradition, of this ever-changing field. Just like a Venetian *magazén*, this journal is a virtual place of exchange and knowledge sharing, an open platform of discussion where researchers and experts in the field can share their work, stimulate novel research paths and create new connections.

With regard to the journal setup and this pilot volume, in the end we would like to attribute exact responsibilities - for better and worse - and make various necessary acknowledgments. Franz Fischer is General Editor and Diego Mantoan is Associate Editor of *magazén*, while the latter and Barbara Tramelli curated the present volume. Eventually, we must express our most sincere thanks to the many scholars involved in this venture, first and foremost to Giovanna Cresci and Paolo Eleuteri who led the way on this Excellence In-

initiative at the Department of Humanities of Ca' Foscari and allowed us to experiment freely in the field of digital and public humanities. We are further grateful to the members of our advisory board for the international prestige and precious suggestions they provided at the kickstart of this journal. Many thanks go to the editorial board members, who actively participated in the entire process flow with their disciplinary expertise and allowed a careful selection of abstracts, the subsequent directions to the chosen authors and finally the support to peer reviewers. We would like to name all of them, in alphabetical order, given that this volume would not have been possible without the concurrency of their knowledge and connections: Federico Boschetti, Elisa Corró, Stefano Dall'Aglio, Holger Essler, Tiziana Mancinelli, Paolo Monella, and Deborah Paci. We must also highlight the fundamental work done by our reviewers, who are among the most reputable scholars worldwide. There were so many reviewers to ensure the double-blind peer review process, with two scholars for each paper, that we would like to thank them all for their efforts and time. Last but not least, we would like to thank our publisher, Edizioni Ca' Foscari directed by Massimiliano Vianello, for the constant support and useful advice, as well as for planning a special HTML-version of this journal that will be ready in 2021. These acknowledgements are of course extended also to the coming issue of this inaugural volume, which will devote another five papers to the topic of 'fusions'.



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