

Elias Muhanna (ed.),

*The Digital Humanities and Islamic & Middle East Studies,*

Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2016, vii+271 pp., ISBN 978-311-0374-54-4.

Digital Humanities has been in the agenda of Islamic and Middle Eastern studies for almost a decade and eventually its first outcome in the form of an edited book came out in 2016.<sup>1</sup> Edited by Elias Muhanna who leads the Digital Islamic Humanities Project at Brown University, the book is the product of a conference, the first of the initiative's scholarly meetings. In his introduction, besides the routine goal of reflecting on the subsequent chapters, Muhanna offers modest typological principles for the readers who are familiar with Islamic and Middle East studies in non-digital forms. Opening the discussion, the principles he offers demonstrate the ambiguous but promising nature of Digital Humanities in relation to Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies (IMES).

The first two chapters of the book focus on issues related to digitization of Islamic resources, still one of the dominant endeavors in digital IMES. With an impressive review of relevant digitization projects, Travis Zadeh demonstrates the anatomies of digital texts and archives. He reminds that digitization is a process rooted in the analog forms of textual production and dissemination. By proceeding through this long-running process, Zadeh designates various layers such as social focus of a single resource, "the conflation of Islam with a body of texts" and "particular modes of reading" (29), existence of a community interested in the preservation of texts and above all, multiple forms of power relations. According to him, all of these layers involve changing mechanisms of exclusion, which challenge the idea of openness and comprehensiveness that Digital Humanities (DH) suggests. As a result, the digital corpora of Islamic resources exist in a fragmented condition with limited interrelation and unity.

Similar to Travis Zadeh, Dagmar Riedel also deals with the digital corpus of textual resources. Pursuing the discussions from the previous chapter, Riedel offers two useful arguments for understanding the development of digital efforts in IMES. He argues that the text has been privileged over its physical forms in

<sup>1</sup> In fact, a previous compilation was published 12 years ago not with the scope of DH, but with a focus on geographic information systems (GIS): Okabe Atsuyuki (ed.), *Islamic Area Studies with Geographical Information Systems* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004).

the Islamic intellectual traditional and this custom influences scholars' attitude towards digitized resources in IMES. However, such a tendency neglects concerns about originality and/or material culture. Secondly, Riedel contends that the scale of a field shapes the amount and direction of digital efforts in that particular field, besides other factors. Even though these arguments require further elaboration, Riedel's attempt for giving an account of IMES' particular case within wider DH is remarkable.

The rest of the chapters deal with specific research projects or cases. Chip Rossetti, an academic researcher and publishing professional, reflects on his experience with the Library of Arabic Literature (LAL) series. LAL is a collaborative attempt to publishing "Arabic editions and English translations of significant works of Arabic literature."<sup>2</sup> As the editorial director of the series, Chip Rossetti focuses on digital tools used for creating the digital texts of LAL's facing-page editions, particularly the Extensible Markup Language (XML). Also he demonstrates how developing a workflow with the right tools contributes to the project's sustainability, adaptability, and compatibility. More importantly, he relates LAL's translation and editing approach to basic modes of DH such as crowdsourcing, team-based work, and collaboration. This is an important goal for reminding the reader that DH does not simply mean using digital tools for scholarly craft but taking advantage of principles promoted by digital culture.

Even though working with social media content is highly popular among DH scholars, this tendency is reflected in historical projects in a limited way due to concerns about provenance and originality. In the only chapter that deals with social media, Nadia Yaqub focuses on Facebook groups found after the Tall al-Za'tar camp, a Palestinian refugee settlement in Lebanon between 1950-1976. By asking the questions whether these Facebook groups can be considered as grass-root archives and what sort of opportunities and controversy they offer to DH scholars, Yaqub shares useful insight about dealing with social media content, at least for the study of near history.

One of the major criticisms towards DH has been its inclination to working with big data sets and neglecting other forms of scholarship. In the fifth chapter, Maxim Romanov addresses this fundamental discussion by putting emphasis on the difference between close and distant readings. Distant reading refers to renouncing details for the sake of working with big data sets while close reading

2 <http://www.libraryofarabicliterature.org/about-the-series/>, accessed October 3, 2016.

refers to the opposite. Since the digital tools offer new ways of dealing with big data more than ever, it is considered as a threat that turns humanistic inquiry into statistical study. On this issue, Romanov reminds the importance of working with models and elaborates on his own models for the study of Islamic elites. Based on Al-Dhahabī's bibliographical dictionary *Tārīkh al-islām*, Romanov attempts to explore social transformations of the Muslim community during a period of seven centuries.

The sixth chapter of the book is composed of two parts both of which reflect on a project conducted as part of a graduate seminar at University of Pennsylvania with a focus on a Quran manuscript dated to mid 12<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup> In the first part, Alex Brey, one of the participants of the seminar, elaborates on the usage of high dynamic range images for examining the production of the manuscript. By using HDR imaging, the participants of the seminar found out that the frontispiece of the manuscript underwent a modification and they were able to hypothetically reconstruct the manuscript. In the second part, he turns to the usage of quantitative analysis applied to the *sūra* headings. At the first glance, the two parts of the article seem disjoint. However, they connect over a fundamental discussion on the nature of historical resources: To what extent is the creative aspect of a resource personal or collective? Yet, this chapter provides an example of using multiple digital tools and methods for a multi-layered inquiry of the same subject matter. Even though authored by a single person, this chapter mainly shares the findings of a collaborative work and provides a powerful example for the importance of collaborative study in digital scholarship. Furthermore, this chapter gives an example of how close and distant readings can be blended in a single study.

In the next chapter, Till Grallert explains how the amount of the data and the results he was trying to achieve guided him to develop a digital workflow, which involves both data mining and visualization. In his research Grallert deals with a bulk of historical newspapers to understand how "the news reports from and on Damascus between 1875 and 1914 perpetuate the state's discourse on the provision of public order for generating legitimate Ottoman statehood" (196). His workflow is composed of three phases (storing and processing data, serving data to the mapping tool, and mapping) and in each phase he aims at

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<sup>3</sup> For further information please visit <http://web.sas.upenn.edu/nep27wksp/>, accessed October 4, 2016.

facilitating tools that require less computational skills but provide sustainability and adaptability.

One of the main themes throughout the book is the fragmented state of digital text collections in IMES. While challenging the idea of accessibility attached to the digitization projects this fragmented status of the resources also bring further difficulties for researchers who aim to handle texts from various databases. For coping with this issue José Haro Peralta and Peter Verkinderen have developed an open-source textual analysis toolkit. In their co-authored chapter, they share the basic principles and workflow of their toolkit named Jedli, developed by using Python programming language. Since other researchers can either use the custom version of Jedli or modify its scripts based on specific needs, the documentation and tutorial-like content provided in the article seems helpful.

The only article in the compilation that speaks of using DH tools in undergrad curricula is Joel Blecher's chapter which addresses a project on the transmission of early Islamic law. By using simple tools such as an HTML-based data form and spreadsheets, the students collaboratively created a database out of 'Abd al-Ḥayy al-Laknawī's bibliographical dictionary and turned their findings into visualizations. Apparently, the students had limited knowledge of the resource and the skills necessary for a comprehensive study of it. Therefore it is exciting to see how the use of digital tools for the study of the dictionary brought out original results that the students would not achieve otherwise.

The compilation concludes with Dwight F. Reynold's chapter which was given as a keynote at the conference. With the inclusive and anecdotal power of a keynote, Reynolds reflects on his own experience with textual and aural materials in anthropological survey. Throughout a story of a few decades, he warns scholars against the transitory nature of digital formats and tools by putting emphasis on the importance of public humanities. Reynolds' persistence on public humanities and digital archives reminds us the possibilities that DH offers for "political criticism" even though he does not use this concept.

It is important to note that most chapters in the book are written with a sense that fits the principles promoted by the rise of DH such as openness, transparency and sharing of all resources, data and research procedures. In line with this, most authors share their workflow and provide documentation not only in the chapters but also in additional platforms such as personal sites or repositories. Yet, most chapters demonstrate how their work is articulated with previous

scholarship and their findings. Hence, even though the book seems to be the product of a “pre-digital mode of scholarship” as noted by Muhanna (3), the scope of the chapters fit the idea of DH pretty strongly.

The chapters widely differ in their length and “genre,” if that would be the right term. While some authors develop a more comprehensive content, others prefer either sharing their personal observations or providing documentation. Even though this shift between the content and style of the chapters makes it difficult to associate them, the book provides a detailed introduction to the field for readers with different backgrounds. Dealing with subjects and methods exhibited in this book and comparing them to those in the wider agenda of DH would enable the readers to have an understanding of the current state of digital scholarship in IMES. There is no need to say that approaches, methods, and tools used in DH projects are not limited to those exhibited in this book. What is missing here is most probably what will be coming up in the next few years.

In 2001, Lev Manovich, one of the founding fathers of digital media theory, was warning us about the nature of interactivity, a characteristic of almost all digital entities. According to Manovich, interaction does not happen by simply interacting with an interface but with the psychological intervention of the individual by “filling-in, hypothesis formation, recall, and identification”.<sup>4</sup> Muhanna ends his introduction with an advice resembling Manovich’s warning. He writes “what was once analogue-then-digital tends to become analogue again, as a result of our own interpretations and narratives” (9) for emphasizing the human intervention into digital scholarship. At the end of the day, this intervention happens in form of humanists’ traditional tools. That is to say, the opportunities offered by DH become real as they are intertwined with traditional scholarship.

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<sup>4</sup> Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge/London: The MIT Press, 2001), p. 57.