



## Conference Report—“*Creating Historical Knowledge Socially: New Approaches, Opportunities, and Epistemological Implications of Undertaking Research with Citizen Scholars*”

**German Historical Institute**

**October 27-28, 2017**

**Washington D.C., USA**

The German Historical Institute (GHI) in Washington, DC, presented its second annual conference in Digital Humanities, October 27–28, 2017, with a focus on Citizen Science. The full conference title was, “Creating Historical Knowledge Socially: New Approaches, Opportunities, and Epistemological Implications of Undertaking Research with Citizen Scholars.” The GHI in Washington is one of six German Historical Institutes (also in Rome, Paris, London, Warsaw, and Moscow) supported by the Max Weber Foundation. Each of the institute directors is encouraged to select a theme for investigation of historical relations with Germany; Simone Lässig, director of the institute in Washington, has chosen to focus on digital humanities, thinking that GHI can focus broad discussion on identifying new directions in this rapidly developing field. The first such conference, in 2016, focused on mapping in digital history; there will be several years of additional conferences.

The thirty conference participants came from origins and basis in Germany, the UK, Canada, and the U.S. Because of today’s travels and multiple identities, one cannot identify participants unambiguously but, allowing for one identity per person, I tallied four participants each from Germany, UK, and Canada, and about 18 from the U.S. The principal talks underscored several



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key issues associated with “creating historical knowledge socially,” and made clear the range of participants and backgrounds.

Describing the numerous talks is more than can be done in a concise review, but much of the character of the meeting can be conveyed by listing the topics of several of the speakers. Mia Ridge, Digital Curator of the British Library, spoke on teaching historical thinking with crowdsourcing, with the objective of advancing research on cultural heritage. She made clear the intricacy of the problem and the high bar for research skills (as historical thinking involves technical skills, source skills, and interpretive skills) and offered fascinating examples of research advances, such as studies tracing the course of the 1918 Spanish flu through ships’ logs. Rebecca Kahn, of the Humboldt University Institute for Internet and Society, spoke based on her role in the Pelagios Commons ([www.commonspelagios.org/](http://www.commonspelagios.org/)), a community forum for using open data methods to document historical places. Raymond Siemens, of Victoria University, spoke on the concept of open social scholarship as advanced at the Canadian Social Knowledge Institute (C-SKI). Vladimir Zadorozhny of the University of Pittsburgh, who bridged the gap of digital humanities and data science as the one information-science specialist among the participants, described the work of the Computational Social Sustainability group, focusing on creating infrastructure for data integration that can support analysis of social contestation. Samantha Blickhan, postdoctoral fellow at the Adler Planetarium and a key staff person for humanities projects at Zooniverse ([www.zooniverse.org/](http://www.zooniverse.org/)), described not just the research projects but each project’s object-oriented discussion forum, “TALK,” where the major discoveries seem to emerge. Laura Coyle, Collection Manager at the National Museum of African American History and Culture, described work in building a “culturally responsive database,” using volunteer work in several projects, including transcribing the two million pages of the post-Civil War Freedman’s Bureau. Denise Burgher of the University of Delaware described the Colored Conventions project ([coloredconventions.org/](http://coloredconventions.org/)), documenting nineteenth-century conventions of African-American activists through the local archives of African Methodist Episcopal Churches. In this work, communities of AME churches have dug enthusiastically into their records to retrieve detailed evidence on the conventions and their participants.

Three of the presentations were retrospective—that is, they explored quantitative studies conducted before the recent advances in computers. These presentations highlighted research design, reliance on strong community connection, and the remarkable success and legacy of certain of the projects. Matt Hiebert of the German Historical Institute described the “Mass Observation Project” in London, 1937–1965, which collected and analyzed data from diaries and questionnaires; and Constance Compton of the University of Ottawa described the Text Encoding Initiative which is focusing on encoding the work of Donald McLeod’s, elaborately documented

Canadian Lesbian and Gay Liberation Archive, created from the 1960s to 1980s. Katharina Hering of the Georgetown Law Library presented on two earlier projects. In the Baltimore Neighborhood Heritage Project, 1977-1981, despite support from the National Endowment for the Humanities, insufficient community liaison resulted in the decline of the project. For the “Land Ownership Study Application” in West Virginia, 1977-1981, the Appalachian Alliance of community and academics (with support from the Highlander Center in Tennessee) collected and published six volumes on land and mineral rights, corporate and absentee land owners, and tax remittances.

This two-day meeting was clearly a conference rather than a project workshop—as it ranged across topics, the discussion turned to posing steadily more general issues, rather than narrowing to specific decisions and plans. The conference addresses social history and the documentation of communities previously neglected in historical documentation and publication: African American, indigenous, and more broadly underprivileged rural and urban populations. For this reason, there is a significant overlap between “digital humanities” and research that might be classified as “digital social sciences.” There was a brief and inconclusive discussion on the links and distances relating humanities and social sciences in digital research—perhaps this is an issue for future attention. Further, while the conference conveyed a sense of digital historical advance across a broad front, it was also clear that “niche projects” have a particular advantage. Thus, “Transcribe Bentham” but also “Colored Conventions” have elicited community researchers more effectively than general topical appeals.

Conference participants were relatively balanced between those employed in academic departments and those employed in museums and libraries. Participants from the various museums of the Smithsonian Institution were impressive in their individual and collective strength. They noted that the Smithsonian’s Museum of American Art had combined with the Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan Museum in a group seeking to create consensus on defining an “object.” Academics at the conference discussed questions that have risen in the context of digital humanities: how best to collaborate; under what conditions can historians become willing to submit data to digital archives; the value of a blog post as compared to a monograph in a tenure dossier; how to deal with old platforms; and the emerging relationship between the transcription and the original manuscript.

The relationships linking project leaders and volunteers was of course central to the conference. Participants noted the skepticism with which many researchers (especially those outside the project in question) have faced the work of volunteers but showed that such skepticism has often been overcome with practice and experience. It was agreed that volunteers do need good tutorials for their work, and that there is great variety in the quantity and quality of individual volunteer contributions. Overall, however, volunteer work has been remarkably accurate, and, at

the top end, there have been some “superstar” volunteers who have contributed extraordinary work. How to label these volunteers is not entirely resolved. Since the term “Citizen Science” arose in the natural sciences, one question was whether to maintain that term or modify it for digital humanities work. Terms such as “citizen history” and “citizen scholar” have been used by some groups. Further discussion noted that the term “citizen” is not unproblematic, in that it is focused on the national level rather on the local or potentially transnational scope of some projects.

Two types of summary brought the meeting to an end. One was spontaneous, as Ursula Lehmkuhl of the University of Trier identified clusters of issues that she observed in the discussion. To begin with she identified two clusters that played off against each other: 1) a cluster of *knowledge*, including production, archives, power, gatekeeping; and 2) a cluster of *infrastructure*, including data, quality, scale, and fusion. After further discussion she offered 3) a cluster of *access to information*, including research process, epistemology, institutional restrictions, who produces, and the interactions of academics and public. She concluded with 4) a cluster of *ethics*, including responsibility, authority, capacity-building, inclusive media, epistemic change, and the question of how scholars can give back. These heuristic clusters confirmed the range of issues under discussion and their interplay with each other.

In the formal summary, conference director Simone Lässig observed that the conference, in articulating perspectives of scholars in four national groupings, also assembled digital humanities scholars from many subfields and suggested new approaches simply by exchanging current initiatives. She appreciated the honesty of the discussion, as in references to the failure of some projects. Dr. Lässig noted differences in Anglo-American and German academic culture: she was impressed to see the openness of American teachers in involving students; she noted that North American DH was intertwined with public history and democratization, while in Germany it was critical editions that got the work going. The National Endowment for the Humanities funds educational projects in the US, while funding agencies are more skeptical in Germany. She concluded with thanks to the conference staff and to participants and suggested that the digital humanities conference for 2018 might focus on networks in history, though there are other attractive topics.

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