

Interview with Andreas Fickers (Luxembourg Centre for Contemporary and Digital History), by Santiago Pérez Isasi

Andreas Fickers is Professor for Contemporary and Digital History at the University of Luxembourg and the Director of the Luxembourg Centre for Contemporary and Digital History (C²DH), 3rd interdisciplinary center at the University of Luxembourg and head of its Digital History Lab. He's also principal investigator of several projects such as Popkult60 (*Populärkultur transnational - Europa in den langen 1960er Jahren*) or LuxTime (*Luxembourg Time Machine*).

Prof. Fickers focused on the hermeneutical foundations of Media and Television Studies, in publications such as *Communicating Europe: Technologies, Information, Events*, before shifting his main interest to Digital History and Digital Humanities. Currently, he is the editor of the *Journal of Digital History* and co-editor of the book series *Studies in Digital History and Hermeneutics* published by De Gruyter Oldenbourg.

Santiago Pérez Isasi: Your background is in television and media history; what made you move towards Digital Humanities or Digital History? Was this a change of direction in your career, or just a natural evolution?

Andreas Fickers: It was rather a natural evolution than a conscious career switch. During my time as assistant professor of television history at Utrecht University I got involved in a European project aiming at building a digital European television archive, EUSCREEN. My role was mainly to build bridges between archivists and historians and to think about new ways of doing transnational media history. One important result of that ambition was the creation of the first peer-reviewed, multi-media and open access e-journal in the field of television studies called *VIEW – Journal of European Television History and Culture*, on which I served as one of the editors in chief. The journal aims at exploring new ways of transmedia storytelling online and to use audiovisual media as part of historical argumentation, demonstrating the added value of publishing scholarship in an online environment rather than a printed journal.

SPI: Does Luxembourg (located in the heart of Europe, but with an inherent multilingual and multicultural dimension) constitute a privileged location from where to study European culture and history, with digital tools?

AF: That I ended up doing digital history at Luxembourg University is because this young university (it celebrates its 20th birthday this year) advertised the first position for a full professorship in digital history in Europe in 2012. I applied and got the job – not knowing that I would be able to build the Luxembourg Centre for Contemporary and Digital History (C²DH) some years later. But the multilingual environment of both the country and the university attracted me a lot and certainly shapes the way we do transnational Luxembourgish and European history at the centre. When the Luxembourgish government decided back in 2016 to create a third interdisciplinary centre on contemporary history at the University, I applied for the job with a strategy to make the critical reflection on how digital infrastructures, tools, and data shape the way we do, think, and tell contemporary history the focus of this new centre. This conscient decision to concentrate on what I call “digital hermeneutics” proved to be a rather successful strategy in giving the centre a clear mission and international visibility.

SPI: Teaching and training is an essential part of your work in Luxembourg. Would you say that digital tools should be taught transversally in all Humanities degrees?

AF: Digital literacy – or better multimodal literacy – is definitely key for all humanities and social science disciplines as much as it is a challenge for the sciences. Critical thinking when it comes to the creation, management, curation, analysis or visualisation of “data” should therefore be taught transversally in all degrees at a University. Based on my interdisciplinary collaborations with computer scientists or data scientists, I believe that the hermeneutic tradition of humanities has much to offer when it comes to tackle contemporary challenges in dealing with big data and

data-driven science. History as a scientific method and science is based on the concept of “source criticism” and the digital transition therefore asks for a specific update of this competence to what I frame as “historical data criticism”. To help students to train their competences in this domain, we have developed an online tutorial for digital source criticism called Ranke2.0. But basically all humanities disciplines are confronted with methodological and epistemological interferences of the digital in both research and teaching practices and need to train appropriate skills such as algorithmic criticism, data criticism, tool criticism and interface criticism.

SPI: You have stated, if I remember correctly, that Digital Humanities are now going through a “critical wave”. Could you explain what do you mean by that?

AF: As mentioned above, digital hermeneutics are based on a number of skills or competences, aiming at critically reflecting on how we produce evidence and scientific arguments. While the so-called first wave of computational humanities was driven by a small group of computer-literate scholars in the 1950s-1990s, the mass digitization of cultural heritage and the building of large databases were at the heart of the second wave of what then became known as the “big tent” of digital humanities (1990s-2010). The last decade is less characterised by the ambition to build ever more and bigger databases or to create constantly new tools, but by a more critical reflection of how the available (and already abundant) data and the rich digital toolbox can be at the service of a critical advancement of knowledge production in the humanities. This also implies a shift from more “hypothesis-testing” research designs (we test existing state of the art in a field – often produced on close reading – by a data-driven or distant reading of a much larger corpus) to argument-driven research designs. What new questions and answers can we produce by combining explorative and interpretative methods, that is by experimenting with the heuristic potential of scalable reading.

SPI: The sudden generalization of AI like ChatGPT have brought forward the need for critical (ethical, legal, philosophical) reconsiderations of digital innovation. Are we, generally speaking, blind to the implications of the algorithms and tools that we use in our daily life?

AF: I wouldn't go as far as to say that we are blind, but that it becomes ever more important to open up the “black boxes” of digital applications we constantly use in our daily lives. We can only critically investigate the challenges and potential of new innovations when we confront ourselves with these tools. I therefore encourage my students to put their hands on such new tools and experiment with them rather than brushing them aside. This is what we call “thinkering” at C²DH – the combination of playful tinkering with new tools and the critical reflection on what these tools can offer and where their limitations or biases lie. As the historian of technology Melvin Kranzberg once said: “Technology is neither good, nor bad, nor neutral”. Rather than getting caught in moralizing discourses of “good” or “bad”, we should study and try

to understand the non-neutrality of technology, that is what it does to us as individuals and society.

SPI: Have Digital Humanities evolved in recent years towards greater equality (in socioeconomic terms, in terms of access to funding and infrastructures, in terms of data availability...)? What strategies would be needed to close (as much as possible) those gaps?

AF: I fear that it didn't. I've recently organized a very interesting workshop on "epistemic virtues" in Japan where we discussed the question of how the digital is creating new or reinforcing old epistemic injustices, be it through the building of large digital research infrastructures or the production of "data colonialism". Despite the fact that the digital promotes new epistemic virtues such as accessibility, sharing, or openness, the power relations that are written into the economic and technological structures of the field of digital humanities remain very asymmetrical. To overcome such inequalities, DH actors and institutions in the Global West need to invest in the incorporation of non-Western knowledge into large digital corpora. This also means to fight against the dominance of de facto "English-only" standards in many DH initiatives and to continuously stress the importance and cultural richness of multi-lingualism in the field of digital humanities. At C²DH we try to systematically share our tools and data on open access platforms such as Github and promote the sharing of scholarly content based on creative commons licences. This is an epistemic responsibility of a research centre in one of the wealthiest countries in the world.

Works Cited

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Relações Literárias Ibéricas (1870-1930), and he coordinates the project *IStReS – Iberian Studies Reference Site* with Esther Gimeno Ugalde, with whom he also edits the *International Journal of Iberian Studies*.

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