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### Digital Romania: a novelty effect?

**Abstract:** In spite of its universalist claims, a global perspective on digital humanities (DH) should be regarded with cautiousness because the local contexts develop according to a different logic, involving (not always progressively) theoretical exposure, methodological acclimatization, and individual appropriation. After sketching a brief history of the field and discussing a few key issues such as democratization of research, experimentalism, productive theory, computability, digitality, etc., I evaluate what are *the effects of novelty* and *the elements of familiarity* that get to the fore in the process of localization. Indicating not only a post-pandemic aspiration to modernize pen-and-paper public services, the recently coined phrase “Digital Romania” is hence discussed with a view to the new theoretical import (the Romanian DH) that has already brought forth projects, curricula programs, organizations, and other initiatives. A brief analysis of the project titles submitted between 2016 and 2019 shows that the most common definition of DH as an in-between field was only formally embraced by the Romanian researchers because the domain borders — sciences, social sciences, and humanities — are difficult to trespass.

**Keywords:** digital humanities, digital Romania, digitality, computability, practices, localization, novelty effect, avantgarde, newcomers.

#### 1. DH conjectures

The beginnings of “humanities computing” — later called “digital humanities” (hereupon abbreviated DH) — is related to a Jesuit’s endeavor to create, back in the early fifties, an *Index Thomisticus*. Father Roberto A. Busa’s stories about punch cards transported with trucks from a university to another, about kilometers of tape for storing data, about unpredictable batch processing (Hockey 2004), about behemoth machines having the ludicrous processing power of around 600 megabytes, and about people writing Iliad-length code for petty applications (Crane 2004) have already turned into domain anecdotes. Actually, getting rid of the heavy materiality of the computing process became a sort of *foundational narrative* in the field. Experienced DH scholars are now laughing at trivial technicalities, at their

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groping their way through methodological issues, and eventually at their flamboyant failures. Indeed, from far and from close distance, DH scholars act like adrenaline junkies or, better phrased by Stephen Ramsay, like “pataphysicians” endowed with a sound sense of humor; as he remarked, what they are after is “the dream of Descartes tempered by the dream of Leibniz” (Ramsay 2011, ix).

In this vein of thought, it should be noted that the first step away from traditional “pen-and-paper” humanities is not analogue-to-digits transformation, but a change of attitude as far as *the research ethos* is concerned: chiefly, placing oneself in the avantgarde and taking high risks in a field where the most customary risk used to be — in the worst case — losing The Manuscript, printed or handwritten. This is why, over the time, DH scholars undertook some of Karl Popper’s theses on knowledge and actually have embraced a sense of “failure” (Unsworth 1997) and of proud marginality. Still, the same DH scholars are also able to pinpoint both baby-step and grand victories in the field. Wired enthusiasm about the capacity of computers set aside, there are several other “commonalities” in the shared research practices such as “the ambitious generosity”, “the self-conscious and critical approach to the nature and implications of collections”, “thinking through building”, and foremost “the centrality of collections.” (Arthur and Bode 2014, 1-7). As previously argued, there are many other DH gigs such as *scalarity*, *the overlapping of productive and critical theory*, *the shift from cooperation to collaboration*, *the non-narrative logic of databases*, *multimodal scholarship*, *visualization as both rhetoric and investigation tool*, *the focus on the computability of the entities under study*, and *machine learning*, which gave the field’s “revolutionary” aura.

Around 2000, TEI was regarded (or only on the declarative level?) as the most significant advance in DH (Hockey 2004). Around 2010, the field’s strength consisted in its experiential engagements and in its novel (self)critical capacities: “The first wave of digital humanities work was quantitative, mobilizing the search and retrieval powers of the database, automating corpus linguistics, stacking hypercards into critical arrays. The second wave is *qualitative, interpretive, experiential, emotive, generative in character [original emphasis]*. It harnesses digital toolkits in the service of the Humanities’ core methodological strengths: attention to complexity, medium specificity, historical context, analytical depth, critique and interpretation” (Schnapp and Presner 2009). Scholars have also hailed the rise of a third wave, characterized by the “intimacy with software itself” and by the reconceptualization of DH through the lens of “computability” and “digitality” (Berry 2012, 25, 169). With a changed focus, we might also define the three waves as reactions to innovation and novelty: a. “exposure”, which also favors the creation of a research community; b. “acclimatization”, which favors the theoretical and methodological input

from other fields; and c. “individual appropriation”, which favors the emergence of mediators who validate their research options through personal experience (Fotache, Răduță, and Tudurachi 2016). Thus, it is not by chance that in their manifesto *Digital Humanities 2.0*, Jeffrey Schnapp and Todd Presner also point at DH as “a codified set of practices”, as “productive theory” (2009), whose concepts will be tested at some point (Hayles 2012, 19-21). Also, no wonder that DH commentators have turned a smiley face to Michel de Certeau’s theory on “practices of everyday life” (Rieder and Röhle 2012, 77). Indeed, representing DH as a set of *practices of everyday research* proves extremely fit in the current (post)pandemic context, when computers are opening wide breaches into everyone’s privacy. Reloaded because of the 2020 pandemic, DH was invested with the superpowers to sort out academia’s needs to communicate effectively, to carry on with unfinished pre-pandemic research (be that research analogue or digital), and to mediate between daily research practices and the researchers’ private lives (<https://dhcenternet.org/initiatives/day-of-dh/2020>).

On the critics’ side, Barbara Bordalejo (2018) deconstructs “the myths of the digital”: accessibility, limitless space, novelty of digital editing (phylogenetic, social and crowdsourcing) and the complexity of the digital paradigm (7-28). In the same spirit, Nan Z Da’s article *The Computational Case against Computational Literary Studies* (2019) touches the sore spot of the most prominent DH areas, that is, CLS and cultural analytics: “In a nutshell the problem with computational literary analysis [CLS] as it stands is that what is robust is obvious (in the empirical sense) and what is not obvious is not robust, a situation not easily overcome given the nature of literary data and the nature of statistical inquiry. There is a fundamental mismatch between the statistical tools that are used and the objects to which they are applied” (601). At the same time, Da’s criticism hits right in the heart of DH’s disciplinary ethos and avantgarde spirit: “There are also disciplinary circumstances that have made criticisms against CLS hard to mount, such as *the mainstreaming of network literary sociology and the semantic reduction of the meaning of form and formalism to trackable units and a study of the patterns made by trackable things*. CLS has also adopted an approach to critical contribution characterized by *modesty, supplementarity, or incrementality, reframing setbacks* as a need to modify methodology and generate more testing... CLS claims to produce exploratory tools that, even if wrong, are intrinsically valuable because exploration is intrinsically valuable. Misclassifications become objects of interest, imprecisions become theory, outliers turn into aesthetic and philosophical explorations, and all merit more funding and more publications [*emphasis added*]” (602).

Obviously, it is not enough to have a ferocious algorithmic appetite, ready to shrink complex knowledge into “impoverishing “binary

subtraction” (Berry 2012, 2), into “technological miniaturization” (Busa 2004) or even into what Jerome McGann has theorized as hermeneutic “deformance/ deformation” (2001, 105-131; 2014, 88). The blend of emotion/experience and computability/mechanical objectivity may sound a bit paradoxical to neophytes or to uninvolved observers, but at the end of the day it is exactly what it needs for “two research cultures” (Hockey 2004) to meet; it is about bringing together, in a democratic embrace, “critics and makers, coders and cogitators, scholars and entertainers” (Schnapp and Presner 2009), “expert scholars” and “expert amateurs” (Hayles 2012, 36) or, to phrase it otherwise, “academics” and “citizen scholars” (Arthur and Bode 2014, 7).

DH developed around “a utopian core shaped by its genealogical descent from the counterculture-cyberculture intertwinings of the 60’ and 70’” but it also owes to the concepts of *mathesis universalis* and *memoria* (Rieder and Röhle 2012, 78). This is why it affirms the value of the open, the infinite, the expansive, the university/museum/archive/library without walls, the democratization of culture and scholarship (Schnapp and Presner 2009). Truth is that the extreme democratization of research, developed in crowdsourcing editions and similar social editing initiatives (Siemens *et al.* 2012, 452-453), raised some brows from the very beginning and then some serious critics (Ramsay and Rockwell 2013, 239-243; Kirsch 2014). Nevertheless, the finally agreed-on values were those beginning with “co-”: “commitment”, “collegiality”, “community”, “comity”, “collaboration”, “cooperation” (Unsworth 2002; Hayles 2012, 34-37; Spiro 2012, 23-30). But as in any co-habitation — be it called “marriage”<sup>1</sup> or, more realistically, “mésalliance”— the gist may be found in the tactics of compromise, which eventually leads to both side’s resigning to something dearly cherished and held as self-defining: “The situation requires both partners in the collaboration to structure their communications so as to be legible to the other. For humans, this means writing executable code that ultimately will be translated into a binary system of voltages; for the machine, it means a ‘tower of languages’ ... mediating between binary code and the displays the user sees... One must therefore be very clear about what one wants the machine to do” (Hayles 2012, 42).

This “quest for universalism” (Rieder and Röhle 2012, 78), representing one of the most influential legacies of the Western thought, has been appropriated by DH as a sort of “Super-ego”. Its “Unconscious”, as I have suggested above, might be seen as a spin-off of the narrative about a superseded materiality. More precisely, the continuous and happy *emergence* of an avantgarde field should be understood alongside with its shadowy twin: *the crisis*. Patrik Svennson (2016) points at the fact that, starting with the 70’, the emergence of DH was encouraged by the pervasive mood of

traditional humanities: the [self]-framing as “a domain in [*permanent*] crisis” (xv). Perhaps such psychoanalytical hints are worth exploring, as long as there is no other domain with a greater narcissist and exhibitionist penchant.

While the term “digital humanities” hovered around 2000 as a shibboleth or as a marketing “tactic” (Kirschenbaum 2012, 415-417) enforced by a strong research community established at the University of Virginia, there were other attempts to name “the *mésalliance*” of humanities and computer science: “computing in the humanities” (Hayles 2012, 24), “digital aesthetics and speculative computing” (Drucker 2009, 3-31), “algorithmic criticism” (Ramsay 2011, 9), “cultural analytics” (Manovich 2012a; Manovich 2012b), “big/ generative humanities” (Schnapp and Presner 2009; Burdick *et al.* 2012, 5; Svensson 2016, 14), or simply by sticking the words “digital”, “computer/ computing” or “informatics” on the prestigious heraldry of traditional disciplines (“digital history”, “archeological computing”, “classical informatics”, “computer linguistics”, and so forth). It is interesting that not all DH practitioners identify themselves as “digital humanists” (Svensson 2016, 14-16). So, if a scholar in the field of music is customarily named *musicologist*, a scholar in DH may or may not assume the field’s hallmark. Besides, even if scholars have tried to go deeper into this matter, there is no clear articulation among the following notions: “digital humanities”, “digital humanism”, and “humanism” (Parry 2012, 429-438).

Nevertheless, there are voices that claim the “digital” sticker will eventually be unglued from the old scholarly brands (such as digital history, digital sociology, digital anthropology) because it will be integrated in the old research infrastructure. After all, “digital humanities” is meant to be “humanities” as usual — that is, “the humanities, done digitally” (Fitzpatrick 2012, 12-15). Working on the concept of “originary technicity”, Federica Frabetti (2012) considers that humanities has always been “digital” and that “the digital humanities need to engage with the concept of the ‘digital’ at a much deeper level than the instrumental one. Surely, *the digital is not something that can just be added to the field of the humanities as we know it [emphasis added]*” (162). Contrariwise, there are other scholars holding that, once the term institutionalized, then there is no way back: “those who insist that “digital” humanities is but a transitory term that will soon fall away in favor of just the humanities once again, or perhaps humanities 2.0, are mistaken. Once a course is on the books as “Introduction to Digital Humanities,” it is there for the long haul. Once a center is named, names are hard to change — who wants to have to redo the letterhead and the stenciling on the wall?” (Kirschenbaum 2012, 416).

## **2. What do we talk about when we talk about DH in Eastern and Central Europe?**

A global (read “systemic” or “universal”) definition of DH is an impossible mission. As Dave Parry holds it, “rather than asking, *what is the digital humanities?* we can ask, *what do we talk about when we talk about digital humanities?*” (Parry 2012, 431). Moreover, a “global” perspective should be regarded with cautiousness because it encloses a “maximalist reading” of the field’s promises (Kirsch 2014), and because, while going “global”, the local contexts and the “DH peripheries” (Schreibman 2012) are always sacrificed. Of course, the dichotomy global-local may sound as common-stock philosophizing or as pathetic nationalism. However, taking into consideration the circulation of ideas (Clifford 2010), “the localizations” of DH — always perceived as a “cool” avantgarde field — might bring forth a serious undermining of the discourse’s theoretical status and universality claims: “[the avantgarde theories] are twice uncertain in the marginal areas, where the positioning in the avantgarde means, most of the times, both an import and a transfer, in fact an entire process of adaptation, along which *the novelty* is worn out and tamed... The reasons to select an innovative discourse or another might derive from *the effect of eccentricity*... or, contrarily, from *elements of familiarity*. In the latter case... it is the tame-able part of the avantgarde theory that is usually picked up” [*my translation, emphasis added*] (Fotache, Răduță, and Tudurachi 2016).

Various definitions of DH are provided by a rich category of self-expository texts that were aptly called “genre essays” (Kirschenbaum 2012, 3). For its stress on “practices” that go beyond print culture, probably the most cited is Katherine Hayles’s (2012): “a diverse field of practices associated with computational techniques and reaching beyond print in its modes of inquiry, research, publication, and dissemination” (27). Then, Svensson’s (2016) perspective switches the stress from “practices” to “in-between position/ positioning”: “[I place] big digital humanities in such a *liminal position* based on the notion that this position has clear advantages, as does the incorporation of multiple modes of engagement between the humanities and the digital, ranging from big data tools to experimental expressions” (33). As already said, scholars have formulated a host of other definitions, dully listed by bibliographic resources such as Terras, Nyhan, and Vanhouette’s *Defining Digital Humanities. A reader* (2013). Personally, I prefer Unsworth’s (1997) and Burdick *et al.*’s (2012) takes on DH because they touch on *a sense of failure*: “These intertwinings of scholarly method, computational capacity, and new modes of knowledge formation combine to make possible what we term the Generative Humanities, a mode of practice that depends on rapid cycles of prototyping and testing, *a willingness*

to embrace productive failure [emphasis added], and the realization that any “solutions” generated within the Digital Humanities will spawn new “problems”— and that this is all to the good” (5). This sort of endeavor leaves the impression that one may not be called a digital humanist until he/she/it produces a definition of the field.

Developing some hints from Dave Parry’s discourse analysis on DH definitions (2012, 430-434), Fred Gibbs even tries to deliver a typology. Beyond the frequency with which academics resort to a specific type of defining DH, Gibbs’s main finding points at the fact that the “big-tent” DH is regarded by DH-ers themselves as a field sharing few common points with “digitization/ digitalization”<sup>2</sup> endeavors such as scanning printed documents (2013, 292). *The European survey on scholarly practices and digital needs in the arts and humanities* underlines the same idea: 2,177 respondents across 10 European countries considered that “improved findability and access to existing digital research resources” and “digitization of research resources or data currently not in digital form” are *needs* (Chatzidiakou and Dallas 2017), rather than defining features of DH. After a couple of years from its publication, this paper still sounds intriguing: and this is not because of its results that are fairly predictable, but because of its methodology. How the decision on drawing the 6 national profiles and on choosing the 10 languages was made? Could have been the findings influenced by the reasonable digitization level in the 6 national academia(s) profiled by the survey? The questions are obviously rhetorical: at the time of data collection (back in 2015), only 6 national profilers were ready to apply the questionnaire. And the most disquieting finding is that “word processors and spreadsheets are the most common applications used to store and manage research assets [*in DH*]” (Chatzidiakou and Dallas 2017), so there was no significant difference between DH and “analogue”/ traditional research communities. DH did not bring a change of research paradigm because the import was based on novelty effects. It is not only in the Eastern Europe that a *perception* of DH as eccentricity has brought the field to the national research agendas.

Some incentive for European digital initiatives was also bolstered by *The White Paper Bologna Digital 2020*. The main point this document makes can be summarized in the magic phrase “skills for the Digital Age”. As Chitez, Rogobete and Foitoş comment, the asymmetries between the perspectives, needs and capacities of different cultures still vary greatly. Ex-communist countries struggle the most to break with the old system and with the old research habits. Indeed, if we sketched a brief history of DH in Eastern European Countries, this would confirm that the institutionalization of the field began in this part of Europe only around 2010. The same article presents the survey DIGITS, whose finding is that

the Eastern European scholars perceive DH environment as a sort of “accelerator” of their “international” visibility and prestige (2019, 550-554). Naturally, this will to catch the wave has some side effects, chiefly a low solidity of the field: “the incommensurable multiplication of novelties does not drive to knowledge advancement but to diverse and fluctuating positionings” (Fotache, Răduță, and Tudurachi 2016).

It would be perhaps useful to add a few considerations about the integration of DH in the research cultures of the neighboring countries: Hungary, Serbia, Bulgaria, Ukraine, and the Republic of Moldova. No need to mention that, due to their EU membership, Romania, Hungary, and Bulgaria seem to be sharing, at least formally, some lines of development; their neighbors, Serbia, Ukraine, and the Republic of Moldova have found their own routes (Maryl *et al.* 2020; Yesypenko 2020; Ognjanovic *et al.* 2019; Fostikov and Isailovic 2014; Trtovac, Milnović, and Krstev 2021).

### ***3. The pipeline of localization***

“If... theory circulates lately on an unpredictable route, with many comebacks, reconfigurations and new exportations towards the former center... the legitimate question would be now whether the conditions that make a theory mobile and functional have somehow changed. Seen until recently in direct connection with the system of disciplines – because theoretical circulation is enabled by the disciplinary dominant of a certain period –, these conditions acquire variable importance since the customary narrative of the West-to-East transfer has lost its unidirectional character, as well as the traditional distribution of power poles” (Fotache and Răduță 2015, 6-7). To the point of DH localization to Romania, there are 2 questions that maybe should be considered henceforth. The first one concerns the status of DH as a “discipline” or as a “field” (Svensson 2016, 36-41), the second one concerns appropriation (read “strategy”, according to de Certeau aforementioned distinction), thus its turning from a “tactical convenience” into a strategic endeavor: *Can a field, with its multiple historical sources, be imported wholesale to a national research agenda? What goes in and what goes out from various DH conjectures when they are imported, for instance, to the Romanian academic landscape?*

In the context of DH critical theory, the name “Romania” might be very tricky. Without disambiguation, it is also used by Franco Moretti to challenge Curtius’s notion of a unified European literature: “[Romania] is a single space, unified by the Latin-Christian spirit that still pervades those universalistic works (*The Divine Comedy, Faust*) which seem to establish separate ‘national’ literatures, but in fact pre-empt them” (2013, 4-30). While the intersection of the two concepts “Romania” and “digitality” holds

some promises for further critical thought, in the present article I use “Digital Romania” as an English translation of a phrase whose usage in Romanian has recently broadened: “România digitală” (<https://www.adr.gov.ro/adr/>; <https://www.romaniadigitala.ro/>; <https://www.caleaeuropeana.ro/>). Before any consideration on contexts and occurrences, I briefly remark the fact that whereas the majority of DH-related concepts (<https://github.com/dhtaxonomy/TaDiRAH>)<sup>3</sup> follows the common route of English-to-Romanian — *distant reading* = “lectură distantă” (Mudure 2016), *data mining* = “minarea datelor” (Jurubiță 2021, 98), *deep learning/ machine learning* – “învățare profundă”/ “învățare automată” (Ciortuz, Munteanu, and Bădărău 2020) — “România digitală” [*Digital Romania*] seems to be a genuinely Romanian concoction and, for many reasons, a candid wishful thinking.

Stepping on Moretti’s traces, the Romanian literary scholars acted as mouthpieces for the term “Digital Humanities”, often phrased in English in order to make it sound more poignant. As in many other instances of localization, “the sign of modernization seems to be... the permanent attention to the Western trademarks of novelty, configured as themes, methods or, seldom, as disciplines” (Fotache, Răduță, and Tudurachi 2016). Accordingly, prestige engines — literary journals, conferences, critics’ hubs, and suchlike — helped DH doxa to surface in the academic debates and to create its own ecosystem governed by a “stardom” logic, by agents whose popularity is being engineered by the Facebook algorithms (Sinclair 2011; Kirschenbaum 2012, 424). At the same time, the link between textual studies (and its traditional prestige) and DH quickened the phrase’s wide spreading. Initially, DH occurred in articles grounded on authority references: all the good DH people were invoked, which was a sure sign that the field’s basics had been oared to the Romanian shore and that they were on the brink to be acclimatized on our droughty lands. The concept’s enforcement called for local conjectures and for fits of criticism on *distant reading* (Patras *et al.* 2019). Unfortunately, a deeper localization of the DH tenets did not happen because, in order to succeed, the Romanian academia should have engaged in a dialogue with the Other (Fotache and Răduță 2015, 7): not only the human Other, but also the posthuman “algorithmic subject”, the enunciative instance of the computer script (Drucker 2021, 26-34; Margento 2018, 6-13).

As it has been noticed, we might briefly describe the localization mechanisms of DH by applying Bourdieu’s profiling of “newcomers”: it is about “peripheries agitating from outside” (Schreibman 2012, 46). Only the innovations that guarantee fast visibility and individuation are selected for import (this explains Moretti’s fandom in Romania). Then, the promoters of innovation behave as both knowledgeable (by showing an old and sure

familiarity with the DH terminology) and dynamic (by tuning in on what is fresh on the international market). But the newcomers also avail of limited resources as far as memory is concerned: embracing novelty implies that, raising interest only for a short span of time, a lot of ideas, references, tools and methodologies will be evacuated as residual matter (Fotache, Răduță, and Tudurachi 2016), without even being tested. No need to repeat that testing and practice is a *sine qua non* of DH, and its necessity should delay both processes: novelty import and novelty waste.

In order to get a better picture of the Romanian DH, I will briefly exemplify several strategies spawned by the broader process of localization. The pandemic incensed many publications that centered, in the spirit of “genre essays”, on the particularities of the Romanian DH (accepting that we could profile a field and a discipline on a national scale). Nevertheless, the main point has not changed too much over the last decade: it is something about us, Romanians, that makes local (DH) researchers prefer to assume disciplines individually rather than to collaborate. Truth is that the recent developments came with — on the Romanian academics’ side as well — a choice: it is either *retrieving data for analysis* or *speaking about data analysis* (Gibbs 2013, 292). Both of them are useful as long as they enlarge the critical mass of local DH researchers and enforce global DH communities.

Commenters of the Romanian DH have already pointed at challenges that must be addressed as soon as possible: a. faults and oversights of the existing resources (or faulty digitization); b. inappropriate tools for digitising texts; c. poor expertise in conducting DH studies and projects, thus poor expertise in evaluation such endeavors; d. low level of DH institutionalization for higher education programs (Schöch *et al.* 2021). Chitez, Rogobete, and Foitoș (2019) insist on the institutional challenges: 1. Lack of “systemic [sic] education in digital humanities”; 2. Financial and administrative support/ third-party funding; 3. Logistic (generous rooms and expensive equipment).

The INTELLIT platform, for instance, endeavors to localize the models of *Encyclopedia Britannica*, *Gallica*, *Manuscriptorium*, and *Europeana*, and is advertised as more than an aggregator of digitized resources (dictionary, chronology, canonic authors’ complete works). In fact, INTELLIT is envisaged to become the understructure of “Biblioteca Virtuală a României”, thus it is supposed to stand on an open architecture: “the aim of the INTELLIT platform is to facilitate access to data and literature, in a friendly online environment, through features like advanced search, semantic analysis, recommendations, statistics, predictions on the national book market [*my translation*]”. Several “innovative solutions” are proposed to solve “the diminished enhancement of literary heritage” and “the loss of

elements that define Romanian culture and our essence as nation” (Gavrilă *et al.* 2021, 97-110). The authors’ statement sounds extremely interesting: the “novelty avantgarde/ eccentricity effect” does not reveal the intention “to catch up” with the DH novelties, but the actual need “to recycle” the Romanian heritage. Accordingly, the really “innovative” part of INTELLIT is to be found in the local particularities of the 3 datasets (DGLR, CVLR, OPERE) and in the pre-processing solutions for heritage literature (e.g., replacing legacy diacritics with modern diacritics). The local particularities of the Romanian heritage datasets are also enhanced by other initiatives such as “ASTRA Data Mining: Muzeul Digital al Romanului Românesc”, which aims at “digitalizing and transforming into a smart archive enabling thematic and conceptual search” of Romanian novels, “SemRO”, which spawns from CoRoLa, and “DeLORo”, which aims to use deep learning to transliterate old Romanian texts.

Curricula also caught a light buzz from the air. Indeed, in the last 3 years there have been launched Master’s Programs (University of Bucharest) and introductory lectures (“Babes Bolyai” University of Cluj Napoca). At first sight, the following disciplinary considerations may sound tedious. However, their usefulness can be tested if one needs to compare and select among various educational offers. They are also informative for the progress of DH from eccentricity to disciplinarity. UniBuc’s DH program (taught in English) was initiated by the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures in 2019, which was also reflected in the range of disciplines included. Its site presents the curricula as “innovatively” integrating “digital technologies (representation methods, editing, processing, visualization, and interpretation)” and “humanities (linguistics, literature, classical philology, history, sociology, cultural heritage)”. In the first year, students go through the following courses: “DH introduction”, “Digital methods in cultural heritage (Tools and methods for text edition)”, “Concepts of Modern Grammar”, “Digital representations of Text Encoding”, “Linguistic Text Analysis”, “Cognitive Computing and Social Media Analytics”, “Vizualization Methods for Digital Humanities”, “Corpus-based Methods and Tools”, “Digital Cultural Heritage in the Balkans”, “Dimensions of Linguistic Variation”, “Databases for Humanities”, “Foundations of NLP and Applications”, “Ancient Greek: words, concepts, histories”, “A Typological Perspective of Partitivity”. In the second year, “Computer Science for Humanists”, “Biblioteconomy and Information Organization”, “Language Structure”, “Statistics and probabilities for Humanities: Experimental Methodology – Working with R”, “Formal and Distributional Semantics”, “Modern Languages in Indo-European Perspective”, “Introduction to Greek origin lexicon” (<https://romanice.ils.unibuc.ro/programe-de-studii/masterat/>). The Center for Continuous Learning of UBB Cluj-Napoca also lists some DH-related

lectures: “Digital Tools for the Optimization of Didactic Research Activities”, “Sentiment Analysis – Concept and Algorithms”, “Solving Real Problems by Using AI”, “Introduction to Digital Humanities” (<https://elearning.ubbcluj.ro/category/cursuri-deschise/>). In the master’s program of Ancient and Medieval Philosophy at the Faculty of History and Philosophy, I could also track down a lecture entitled *Digital Humanities pentru sursele filosofice medievale* (2020-2021) whose structure reflects a good knowledge of basic DH tools and principles (<https://www.mihaimaga.ro/dh/pdf/DH-00-plan-beamer-En.pdf>). Then, of course, a special mention should go to the programs clustered around the discipline called “computational linguistics”, which was very present starting with 2000: The Romanian Association for Computational Linguistics (<https://arlc.ro/>), “Solomon Marcus” Center for Computational Linguistics of the Faculty of Letters – UniBuc (<http://clc.litere.ro/>), the Master of Computational Linguistics of the Faculty of Computer Science (UAIC). As in the case of projects aforementioned, “the novelty effect” should be discerned from novelty as such.

There are also a few centers and hubs that provide infrastructure and human resources for DH. Except for the two institutes of The Romanian Academy, which are not DH centers proper (<https://www.racai.ro/>; [http://iit.academiaromana-is.ro/iit\\_grants.html](http://iit.academiaromana-is.ro/iit_grants.html)) and DigiHUBB - Transylvania Digital Humanities Centre (<https://dighubb.centre.ubbcluj.ro/category/events/>), the rest of centers and hubs were established around 2019, so a little bit before the Covid pandemic. Currently, The Research Institute for Artificial Intelligence of the Romanian Academy [ICIA/ RACAI] offers support for processing data on 3 modules (text, translation and voice) integrated in a work-in-progress platform called “The Romanian Portal for Language Technologies”. Even if somehow aslant, the Portal also offers access to RoWordNet, Machine Translation text and speech (EN to RO and viceversa), NER, the MARCELL punctuation restoration service, several corpora, and pretrained language models such as the CoRoLa word embeddings. The Institute of Computer Science Iasi (IIT) functions as a subsidiary of ICIA/ RACAI, with a focus on image processing and signal processing. CODHUS introduces itself as the interface of the Centre for Corpus Related Digital Approaches to Humanities: “*the centre is not about philologists who discovered programming, nor about IT scientists who understood that there is applicability potential in the Humanities* [emphasis added]. It is about the complementarity between research and digitalization... The applicative character of the centre is highlighted by two directions: (a) connection between corpus-related digital methodologies in the humanities and the wider topic of applied linguistics and (b) building synergies with other disciplines...” (<https://codhus.projects.uvt.ro/?lang=ro>). In the examples provided above,

the traditional link between DH and textual studies (corpus linguistics, computational linguistics) should be emphasized rather than concealed.

Drawing to an end, I would like to add a little note about our initiatives of establishing a DH community at the Institute of Interdisciplinary Research of “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iasi. The Digital Humanities Laboratory (UAIC) was defined as a “research infrastructure” and its mission has been formulated along with the projects we are being involved in<sup>4</sup> (<https://eeris.eu/ERIF-2000-000D-4551>). An agile organization framework and the endorsement of the open access policy allows us to address research questions with relatively modest resources: low research funding and exhausting purchase procedures have taught us that DH in general and computer literary studies (CLS) in particular are not about new devices and software; instead, we tried to focus on acquiring expertise, on recycling open access data, and on networking with the global DH community. Beside exposing the promises of the new paradigm, we try to acclimatize its tools/ methods and to underline the experiential side of our research engagements.

The common keynote of all these initiatives — hubs, programs, institutions, policies, projects — is a subversive attitude hinting at the traditional research institutions and meaning to ensure visibility, recognition, and possibility for long-term achievement: by exposing the whereabouts of a genuinely Western theoretical paradigm, by acclimatizing tools and methods to locally-produced data, and by appropriating the field’s principles.

#### 4. *Digital Romania?*

Ironically, first things come always last. *Digital Romania* is, in fact, the name of a project-based site that was launched in 2003 and just recently has released an updated version of *A Digital Atlas of Romania*, which combines topographic details and micro-routes such as tourist mountain paths (<https://www.romaniadigitala.ro/>). However, *Digital Romania* also refers to a legion of other things and, after the pandemic blast in 2020, chiefly to projects of “digital transformation” in areas like Romanian environment, health services, education, and administration (<https://www.caleaeuropeana.ro/>).

A paper titled “Raport pentru Transformarea Digitală a României. Februarie - Aprilie 2020” [*Report on the Digital Transformation of Romania. February – April 2020*] and issued by *The Authority for the Digitalization of Romania* under “#DigitalizămRomânia” makes it clear that “Digital Romania” stands for “[the digitalization of public services](#)”. However, national legislation needs to be adapted and apparently its applications are wider than public services. Mainly, this new and digitally-inflected legislation should regulate several general principles such as interoperability, common

archival practices, fast-track purchase of IT services and should introduce some DH “[commonalities](#)” . In one of his interviews, Sabin Sărmaș, the head of *The Authority...*, stresses on “good/ quality digitalization,” thus implying that Romania may provide examples of “[bad/ faulty digitalization](#)”.. As it is at the present moment, the organization and mission of *The Authority...* has been molded by both European Directives and local civic initiatives such as Code for Romania. *Code4Romania*’s story goes back in 2015, just after the “Colectiv” fire, when the Romanian society experienced a critical moment termed as “restart” (Patras, Grădinaru, and Postolea 2017, 47). Very quickly, *Code4Romania* became the second largest civic technology organization in the world and their strategies within the frame of Recovery and Resilience Plan for Romania may also inspire a series of DH-targeted policies: 1. Higher education programs for UX/ UI (user experience/ user interface) design; 2. Interdisciplinary teams for identifying digitalization needs and projecting adequate and interoperable systems; 3. Continuous learning for IT personnel employed in public institutions; 4. Open source policy and recycling of publicly-funded IT products; 5. Legislation establishing quality standards (reutilization, availability, scalability, security, flexibility, integrability, data representation, data formatting, data distribution, and accessibility) as far as software solutions for public institutions are concerned; 6. Civic hall, that is, the consolidation of digitalization hubs (<https://code4.ro/ro/blog/ce-facem-cu-miliardele-de-euro-pentru-digitalizare-de-la-ue>).

To understand how “digital humanities” research might fit in the frame of “Digital Romania” and to determine its “added social value”, maybe we should refer to the paper titled “Agenda Digitală pentru România” [*Digital Agenda for Romania - DAR*] and voted by the Romanian Parliament in 2014. Back then the sum for ITC in Education, Culture and Research and Innovation was 13 % from 3.9 billion Euros. While culture was supposed to go digital with 2%, research and innovation were expected to crack hard nuts and to make the Great Leap Forward with a ridiculous 1% from the total sum. Naturally, the proposal for the distribution of funds was received with reluctance by the Brussels officials, and it was precisely research and innovation the chapter they indicated as unacceptably under-budgeted (Irimie 2014, 38-39). After 6 years and with the pandemic just around the corner, research was grouped with e-commerce rather than with education. Still, the specific actions under each direction are worth mentioning, particularly the funniest of them all, which is of course the Romanians’ “minimal contribution” to the library Europeana: “digitalizing Romanian cultural heritage”, “achieving minimal contribution to the European Library (europeana.eu)”; “digitalizing cultural content, specific to European communities”; “adjusting digital cultural content to each region”;

“applying a modern ITC infrastructure in public libraries”; “promoting cultural experiences through ITC”, “continuous training and the usage of the ITC-based electronic infrastructure for interconnecting, as well as facilitating the cooperation between the research teams from different geographical areas”; “increasing the Romanian participation in international projects on ITC research-development-innovation, throughout European programmes and resources”. Obviously, in 2014, DH looked cool and eccentric, so our digitalization strategists wanted show-up “modern” and “international” without bothering much about basic principles such as interoperability, availability, scalability, security, flexibility, integrability, data representation, data formatting, data distribution, and accessibility.

The philosophy of “the minimal contribution” was also reflected in the research applications submitted between 2016 and 2021 at the calls of The Executive Unit for Financing Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation – UEFISCDI. Starting from the premise that the project titles could be relevant as pointers to the Romanian researchers’ interest in the “digital/ digitality” — more than any other titles, project titles must be descriptive — I parsed through lists of TE (“young teams” call) and PD (“post doc” call) applications from 2016, 2019, and respectively 2021, and found that both levels of research experience present approximatively similar levels of distribution per year. The only exception is 2019, so just before the DAR’s bottom line, when applications for “young teams” call were a bit more turned to the “digital” than application for the “post-doc” call.

<b>a) Distribution of the key-word “digital” in the titles of project proposals submitted in UEFISCDI calls<sup>5</sup></b>			
<b>b) Name of the call/ Year</b>	<b>c) No. of total applications</b>	<b>d) No of applications including “digital” in the title</b>	<b>Percent</b>
e) PD 2016	f) 947	g) 4	h) 0.42%
i) TE 2016	j) 1133	k) 5	l) 0.44%
m) PD 2019	n) 535	o) 7	<b>p) 1.30%</b>
q) TE 2019	r) 899	s) 15	<b>t) 1.66%</b>
u) PD 2021	v) 368	w) 5	x) 1.63%
y) TE 2021	z) 743	aa) 12	bb) 1.61%

The lemma “digital” occurred in contexts including keywords such as: “trauma”, “media”, “database”, “scientific investigation/ restitution/ valorizing” (PD 2016), “technologies”, “dictionary”, “skills/ capital”, “life”, “culture” (TE 2016), “framework”, “restoration”, “means”, “fingerprint”,

“society”, “chronologic tables”, “supply chain” (PD 2019), “era”, “solutions”, “heritage/ integrated model”, “epoch/ aggression”, “space”, “processing”, “dictionary”, “media”, “mass/ heritage”, “editing” (TE 2019), “globalization”, “mapping”, “library”, “map”, “humanities”, “supply chain” (PD 2021), “space”, “knowledge”, “Romania”, “platforms”, “education”, “systems”, “platforms” (TE 2021). These keywords do not make for a deep analysis, but they might point at the local conjectures as far as “digitality” — and, indirectly, “digital humanities” — is concerned. A special mention goes to the 2 projects that use “Digital Humanities” and “Digital Romania” as conventional phrases.

In Figures 2 and 3, I show the distribution of the lemma “digital” according to domains. What the data indicates is the fact that humanities and social sciences projects (code SH) endeavored to explore “digitality” to a larger degree than exact sciences (code PE) and life sciences (code LS). Since “computationality” is the second concept involved by DH (Berry 2012, 161), further exploration is required for other keywords such as “computer”, “DL” or “AI”. Nevertheless, the same data indicates that DH’s most common definition as an “in-between field” was only formally embraced by the Romanian researchers (Hanganu 2019, 189-201); in fact, it was not useful for either applicants or evaluators because the domains were distributed in separate boxes.

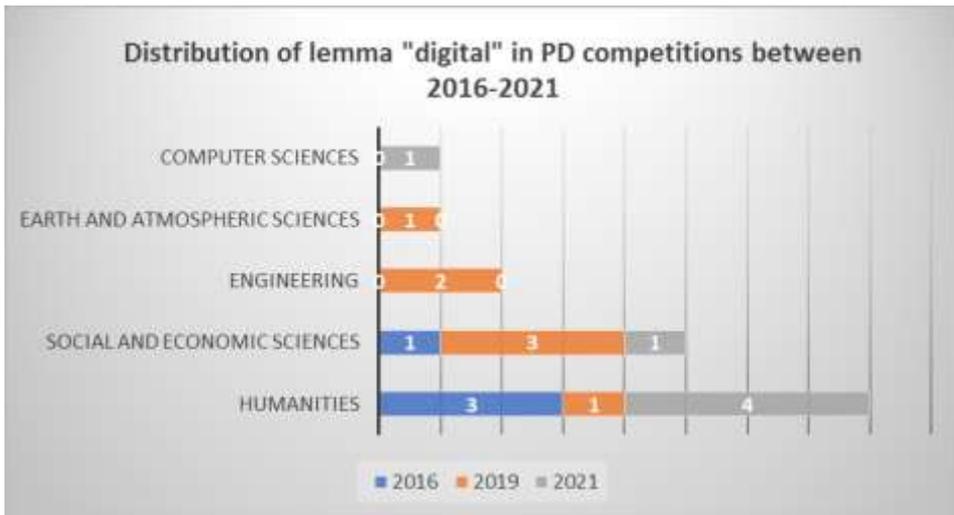
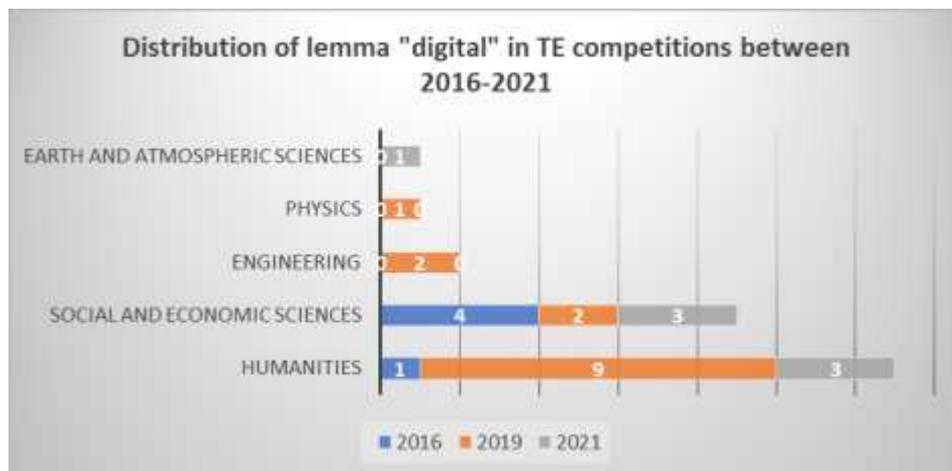


Figure 2. Distribution of lemma "digital" per domains in PD competitions



**Figure 3. Distribution of lemma "digital" per domains in TE competitions**

Before ending this snippy discourse analysis of project titles, perhaps I should also underline that the “Information package” defines “The Romanian-specific research domains” (Romanian language and literature and Romanian law) as well as “subdomains” and “research areas”, but does not define “digital humanities” as a field. There are, indeed, 3 research areas that appear to belong with “the big-tent DR”: “SH3\_13 Digital social research”, “SH6\_1 Historiography, theory and methods in history, including the analysis of digital data”, “PE6\_10 Web and information systems, database systems, information retrieval and digital libraries, data fusion” ([https://uefiscdi.gov.ro/resource-825020-information-package\\_te-2021\\_english-version.pdf](https://uefiscdi.gov.ro/resource-825020-information-package_te-2021_english-version.pdf)). But as long as they are bunched together with many other “areas”, competence and experience in the evaluation of DH projects is highly debatable. This type of documentation evinces the precariousness of the traditional research organization; and “the greater the precariousness of research structures, the bigger the quantity of imported [and wasted] ideas” (Fotache, Răduță, and Tudurachi 2016).

### **5. Conclusion**

Most of the times, “importing novelty also means importing the history of novelty” (Fotache, Răduță, and Tudurachi 2016). Hence, the

necessity of sketching, in this pipeline of localization, the conjectures, definitions, and principles of DH from its dawn in the 50' to the present day. It is now obvious why the Romanian DH — and this is probably valid for all localized versions of DH — acts and discourses as if having a history and a doxa of decades. With the forthcoming institutionalization of the new research field on the sill (newly-introduced curricula, projects, hubs, etc.), we should also keep an eye both on the elements of familiarity that will be embraced and on the unappealing ideas/ practices that will be thrown away. If theory circulates on unpredictable routes, then it would be interesting to explore what will happen with this field marked by empiricism, by “thinking through building”. Does the process of localization work on the “productive theory” as well?

Practices are supposed to be the steady ground of DH and their safe circulation and transmission will be ensured by the use of a *taxonomy*, which should serve as a “controlled vocabulary” (Kelpšienė 2018). Additionally, data analysis can and should be improved by keeping an eye on a few principles that must be taken into consideration when DH research is carried out: Findability, Accessibility, Interoperability, and Reuse of digital assets, shorthanded FAIR (<https://www.go-fair.org/fair-principles/>).

The way to “digitality” and “computationality” should aim at the formation of a critical mass of local (regional) DH researchers sharing common practices and principles. And this will be achieved by training local experts, on the one hand, and by engaging (international) experts, on the other. At the same time with involving the international “expert scholars”, the Romanian DH should open up to “citizen scholars” or “expert amateurs” from NGOs and other professional organizations. A democratic and inclusive approach will favor the emergence of mediators who will validate their theoretical and methodological choices through personal experience and who will eventually enable the appropriation of the field

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Williard McCarthy and others name the junction between the two research cultures with the tender term “marriage” <https://m-gorynski.medium.com/lessons-in-digital-humanity-an-interview-with-willard-mccarty-db402a88ec72>

<sup>2</sup> For the sake of argument fluency, I will not go into further details about distinctions that have been made between “digitization” (analogue-to-digital conversion) and “digitalization” (integration of digital technologies). I will just mention the fact that in Romanian the calque “digitalizare” (coming from digitalization) refers, most of the times, to “digitization”.

<sup>3</sup> In this respect, the participants to TADIRAH have worked on aligning DH taxonomy in 4 languages: English, German, French, and Italian.

<sup>4</sup> CA 16204: Distant Reading for European Literary History (2017-2022), Hai-Ro: Hajduk Novels in Romanian During the Long Nineteenth Century: Digital Edition and Corpus Analysis assisted by computational tools (2019-2021), Pop-Lite: Romanian Popular Novels

and Their Sub-genres during the Long Nineteenth Century: digital editing and corpus analysis (2022-2024); Digilibero (2020-2022); CEEPUS Network Women Writers in History (2020-2022).

<sup>5</sup> For raw and parsed data check Roxana Patras, *Distribution of lemma "digital" in PD and TE projects* (2016, 2019, 2021), [Data set], Zenodo, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.5636141>.

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Web:

A Digital Atlas of Romania,  
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[https://codhus.projects.uvt.ro/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/DH\\_publications\\_in\\_Ro.pdf](https://codhus.projects.uvt.ro/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/DH_publications_in_Ro.pdf),  
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<https://dhcenternet.org/initiatives/day-of-dh/2020>,  
<https://digihubb.centre.ubbcluj.ro/category/events/>,  
<https://eiris.eu/ERIF-2000-000D-4551>,  
<https://elearning.ubbcluj.ro/category/cursuri-deschise/>,  
<https://elearning.ubbcluj.ro/category/cursuri-deschise/>,  
<https://revistatransilvania.ro/mdrr/>,  
<https://romanice.ils.unibuc.ro/programe-de-studii/masterat/>,  
<https://uefiscdi.gov.ro/resource-825020-information-package-te-2021-english-version.pdf>,  
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[https://www.adr.gov.ro/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Raport-trimestrial-Transformarea-Digital%C4%83-a-Rom%C3%A2niei\\_1.pdf](https://www.adr.gov.ro/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Raport-trimestrial-Transformarea-Digital%C4%83-a-Rom%C3%A2niei_1.pdf),  
<https://www.go-fair.org/fair-principles/>,  
<https://www.mihaimaga.ro/dh/pdf/DH-00-plan-beamer-En.pdf>,  
<https://www.racai.ro/>,  
<https://www.romaniadigitala.ro/>.