The Accidental Digital Humanist: Applying Digital Technology to an Oral History Ph.D Project

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The Accidental Digital Humanist:
Applying Digital Technology to an Oral History Ph.D Project

- Background to the study
- The Local Dance Band Scene
- The Research Project
  - Planning & project management
  - Data acquisition, processing & storage
  - Coding and analysis
  - Visualisation and presentation
  - Writing up
- Conclusions
  - Lessons learned
  - Future plans
Background – Humanities and Sciences

- Popular Music degree
  - Member of planning team for course development and validation
  - Led to Ph.D proposal & project
Background – Why Study Dance Bands in Chester?

- Wirral based wind band and dance band
  - Heard a lot of anecdotes about local dance bands in earlier decades, & observed overlapping social networks of musicians
  - Curious!

‘Rescue archaeology’

- If not me, then who?
- Approached the problem using all of my academic and professional experience:
  - Arts, sciences, humanities and business
  - Didn’t encounter Digital Humanities as a discipline until after the research was complete

Research Questions

- Finnegan (2007) refers to the ‘invisible but organised’ underlying structure of local music-making
- My study was based on a detailed investigation of a specific local scene, in this case, dance bands in Chester & North Wales
- Goal: to contribute to a better understanding of amateur and semi-professional music-making in a regional landscape
The Local Dance Band Scene

- Oral history project
- Based on Chester
  - Also taking in Cheshire, North Wales, Wirral, Liverpool, plus other places in UK & overseas
- 30 interviews
- 200+ photographs and images
- Most of this information was not available in public archives
- 3 minute video
- A flavour of what my interviewees were talking about..
Planning and Project Management

- Advantages & disadvantages of doing humanities research while employed as a scientist (with a business background & a classical music degree)...
  - PRINCE2, M_o_R, Gannt charts, mind maps, Ishikawa diagrams... 😊
  - Spreadsheets, databases, backups, digitisation, audio and image processing... 😊
  - Epistemology? Oral history vs. ethnography? Pierre Bourdieu? :-(
    - Generally, methodology was more of a minefield than I expected it to be
    - & has proved very useful since finishing the Ph.D

- It definitely helps to be organised, & digital technology can help with that
  - But it won’t learn about (e.g.) *habitus* for you
  - Cheap e-books, Evernote and MindNode help, even then
Data acquisition, processing & storage

- Raw data = audio recordings of interviews + photographs, newspaper cuttings, etc.
- Recordings were on cassette tape(!)
  - Transferred to .mp3 for remote transcription
  - Or to music software for cleaning up & separation of tracks
    - A slow process...
- Apple image software was a huge help with the photos and cuttings
  - Separating & tidying up
  - Tagging, annotations, automated collections
Starting from the data: While waiting for the interview transcripts, I started work on the images, which raised some interesting questions for further investigation.

Timeline showing a selection of the photographs and newspaper clippings collected as part of this research project, in the context of wider historical events and contemporary Western popular culture. (H. Southall, 2009)
Coding and analysis - Characters and categories

- Working with the transcripts
  - 100,000+ words
- Highlighting people, places, events etc in transcripts
  - Done manually...
- Excel spreadsheet (flat file)
  - Soon got too complex for this
- Bento database (Relational, with forms, queries, & links to iPhoto), with tables for:
  - Interviews
  - People
  - Bands
  - Venues
  - Musical Styles & Activities
  - Dances
  - Historical Context
Coding and analysis – Looking for relationships

Used Bento (single-user FileMaker-type database) due to cost, ease of use on Mac, & links to Apple image software. (A larger research team would have required something like NVivo.)
Coding and analysis – Looking for relationships

- Geographical and social networks
- How many...
  - bands?
  - venues?
  - musicians?
  - fans?
- Wilf’s diary
  - “… I know a man who can…”
- How to..
  - analyse, describe, visualise, explain?
  - Social Network Analysis, via “Throwing Sheep in the Boardroom” & NodeXL
Visualisation and presentation - Geography

Bands, Venues & Promoters (in Space)
Visualisation and presentation - Musical social networks

Musical social networks for Chester dance bands – early versions
Visualisation and presentation – Musical social networks

Teasing out the patterns

Colour-coded clusters

n.b: These diagrams ended up in an appendix to the thesis, but were critical in identifying key themes and relationships for the final theoretical analysis. There is plenty still to investigate here.
Writing up

- iPhoto & Bento
- Evernote
- EndNote (or equivalent)
- Dropbox (ditto)
- Scapple & MindNode
- Scrivener
  - Designed for really big documents
- Word
  - **Not** designed for really big documents
- Time Machine
- [phdcomics.com](http://phdcomics.com)
- Facebook & Twitter
- Version Control
- Logical file naming conventions
Conclusions

- Lessons learned
  - Digital techniques are just that: techniques
    - Need sound theoretical frameworks, appropriate to the discipline(s), as well
    - Sometimes, if you wait a while, technology catches up (& saves you a job)
    - Backups. Lots of them.
  
  - The dangers of having “Two Cultures” that don’t collaborate enough are still with us:-

"Today, bereft of understanding of fundamental issues and writings in the development of liberal democracy, computer geeks devise ever better ways to track people... simply because they can. ... Humanists on the other hand do not understand the underlying technology and are convinced, for example, that tracking meta-data means the government reads their emails.”

Ilves (2014).

- Future plans
  - 44TH ICTM World Conference, July 2017
  - Work with the Digital Humanities Centre
    - Virtual River Park Ballroom
      - with Lee Beever & University of Liverpool
    - Virtual Weirdstone / Harry Potter
    - Cholera & Climate Change – Tipping Points
References

- Hansen, Derek, Schneiderman, Ben, & Smith, Marc A. (2010). *Analyzing Social Media Networks with NodeXL: Insights from a Connected World*