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Commentary

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In her thorough book review – for which I am most grateful – Rianne Dekker situates my book as a methodological passage to digital humanities. As I am largely in agreement with Dekkers’ diagnosis, in this response I aim to take a modest next step. Drawing on theoretical and methodological concerns raised by Dekker, I offer two provocations in order to advance the field in a more critical, reflexive, and ethical way.

Firstly, conceptually, Dekker wonders whether digital practices that young people describe as “trivial ways of killing time” online can be seen as subversive. This important question touches upon the fundament of contemporary cultural analysis and allows me to highlight the importance of recognizing everyday practices as always political. Dekker is right in stating that young people commonly trivialize their own digital practices on social media, for example 15-year-old SouSou did initially dismiss her use of discussion forums as “just nonsense”. Young people may do so for two related reasons: 1) few of the 150 interviewees of the last 7.5 years see themselves as engaged with formal politics, nor would they like others to perceive them as such. Formal democratic participation is about as uncool as it gets for most children and adolescents. 2) Voices of young people are unheard and they usually have little say in decision-making. Young informants were often surprised when they sensed I was sincerely interested in learning about their lives from their point of view. Following the feminist adagio “the personal is political”, young people’s participation in digital culture – instead of formal politics – exemplifies micro-political action. Quotidian choices they make on Facebook, Twitter, or Snapchat may seem superficial. However, through clicking, typing, posting, uploading, and hyperlinking, migrant youth – as non-mainstream users – give an account of themselves and sustain or subvert broader societal, gender, ethnic, and religious power relations. Bringing various disciplines into dialogue, I sought to conceptualize the politics in these medium-specific practices. This theoretical exercise was grounded in empirical data, but I purposely used metaphors and built in a level of flexibility in order to be able to speak to past, present, and future manifestations of digital culture.

Secondly, the methodological passage Dekker observes provides me with an opportunity to reflect upon how we conduct digital humanities research. In recent years, the abundance of available digital data that is increasingly ‘naturally’ (and often unknowingly) created by Internet users has been hailed as bringing about the end of theory and human interpretation. Rather than epistemology, algorithms automatically processing the ‘data-fied’ archives of everyday life would provide us with

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superior and more objective, disembodied, and value-free self-explanatory numbers. Others, at the other end of the continuum, condemn the 'big-data' regime of power/knowledge that lacks attention for history, culture, and context, and blame it for leading to "methodological genocide" (Uprichard, 2015). The way forward lies somewhere in between these extremes, but both positions highlight the importance of opening the black box of data-gathering – which is especially poignant, given the fact that humanities scholars do not commonly reflect upon how they arrive at their findings and conclusions. Being reflective and critical goes beyond describing the tools used, because we need to be held accountable about what we do exactly while pursuing digital humanities research: whose data do we scrape, what ethical standards to we abide by, whose permissions do we seek, and 'Where do we press the button for "critical analysis"?' (Wilson, 2014: 348).

I am championing a digital humanities approach with attention for gender, racial, and geographically specific power relations, dependencies, temptations, and awareness for benefits and harm. In order to do justice to its history, the future of digital humanities will have to acknowledge the autonomy of the informants and embrace complexity, reflexivity, relationality, responsibility, and the micro-politics of subjects.

References

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