CfP: The Value of the Digital. #DHJewish Conference and Hackathon

Potsdam, April 10-12, 2024
Organized by the Moses Mendelssohn Center for European-Jewish Studies together with the Luxembourg Centre for Contemporary and Digital History (C2DH); generously supported by the European Association for Jewish Studies (EAJS) Conference Grant Programme in European Jewish Studies.The Hackathon is co-organized by the Network Digital Humanities, Potsdam.

Following on a series of conferences that addressed the specifics of Digital Humanities (DH) approaches within the field of Jewish Studies and a hands-on DH Jewish-hackathon, this conference aims to critically (re)assess the value(s) of the Digital for the field of Jewish Studies as it has been developed and discussed over the past ten years.

Including all phases of research and dissemination from collecting and exploring to constructing and communicating, we seek presentations that highlight the benefits and pitfalls of the Digital in general and for the field of Jewish Studies in particular. This can be done both from a retrospective – what has worked well and which promises have and have not been fulfilled – and from a forward-looking perspective – highlighting directions that might be worth pursuing. In doing so, we take up the recent critical turn in DH and apply it to the field of Jewish Studies.

The event combines a hands-on-hackathon on the opening day, and two days of panel sessions inviting contributions on the different values of the digitized, the reconstructed/deconstructed, the reenacted as well as the shared and co-constructed past.

The question of the "value of the past" is playing an increasingly important role in societal self-understanding. The digital plays a paradoxical dual role in such debates: On the one hand, new media have massively facilitated the dissemination of fake news. On the other hand, they have enabled memory institutions to present their rich collections for the first time to a much wider audience than their traditional on-site visitors. Such shifts to the digital therefore have profound implications on questions of evidence and factuality that need to be addressed in both research and outreach.

For DHJewish 2024 we invite contributions on any aspect of the intersection between Jewish Studies and Digital Humanities. However, we are especially interested in contributions that address the following four key aspects of the digital turn in Jewish Studies:

- The digitized,
- The reconstructed/deconstructed,
- The re-enacted,
- The shared and co-constructed past.

The section on the value of the digitized past develops the need for digital methods to make large collections of printed and handwritten texts (machine-)readable. The central challenges of multilingual and multiscriptual DH characteristic of the field of Jewish studies can now be addressed thanks to HTR techniques and new machine learning platforms such as Transkribus and eScriptorium. Natural language processing and translation techniques hold great promise for bringing new insights to non-specialist audiences, but questions of quality control and the authority of such results need to be discussed. Large corpora of testimonials can also be used as training material for large language models such as those popularized by OpenAI's ChatGPT.

Such questions naturally extend into the section on the reconstructed past. 3D reconstructions e.g. of synagogues that were razed to the ground in 1938 promise new insights into remnants of the past that are no longer visible. Similar efforts target 3D recordings of Holocaust survivors or reconstructed avatars. What pasts do such models preserve, and is there a deeper historical value beyond serving as an attractive eye-catcher?

Concerning re-enactments, computer games have been a major driving force behind re-enacted digital pasts. The young field of historical game studies has increasingly focused on how they represent historical narratives and shape conceptions of the past. As games play a major role in how people come to know the past, there is a pressing need to investigate their role in shaping understandings of Jewish history. This tension between stereotypical and generalizing representations will also become a central question as readily available image generators based on AI methods such as Dall-E 2, Midjourney or Stable Diffusion are increasingly being used to generate authentic representations of a nonexistent past.

As important as methods of digitally analyzing and reconstructing remnants of the pasts are those digital methods that enable collaboration and communication about a shared and co-constructed past. From Facebook groups that share and investigate family documents to crowd-sourcing projects by Arolsen Archives such as #everynamecounts or #LastSeen, small- and large-scale collaborations between memory institutions, academics and engaged citizens have demonstrated valuable new modes of interactions that benefit both research and society at large.

In addition to these panels, a more hands-on hackathon will be scheduled on the first day of the event. We ask data-providers, research projects as well as individuals to suggest their challenges. Challenges can be the development of software prototypes, the execution of digital analyses, the processing (cleaning, enrichment, etc.) of a data set, the design of a data model, the discussion of standards or ontologies, the testing of new workflows and much more. Due to the limited time frame of the hackathon, we aim to provide remote access to the challenges to support initial exploration and team building through an online communication platform well in advance.

Please send a short CV and paper abstract of no more than 500 words by **January 8, 2024** to tagungen-mmz@uni-potsdam.de.Though there is no general reimbursement for travel, hotel or attendance expenses, thanks to the generous support by the EAJS Conference Grant Programme, we are able to cover travel expenses if you have limited institutional support. Please indicate your need for financial assistance when submitting your proposal. For further information regarding the event's format and conceptualization, please contact tagungen-mmz@uni-potsdam.de.

Program Committee:
Daniel Burckhardt (co-convener, Moses Mendelssohn Center for European-Jewish Studies, Potsdam)
Amalia S. Levi (Bonn Center for Dependency and Slavery Studies)
Michelle Margolis Chesner (Norman E. Alexander Librarian for Jewish Studies, Columbia University)
Dr. Itay Marienberg-Millikowsky (Department of Hebrew Literature, Ben Gurion University)
Dr. Anna Menny, (#DigitalJewishHistory, IGdJ Hamburg)
Dr. Yael Netzer (Digital Humanities, Ben Gurion University and Haifa University)
Prof. Dr. Miriam Rürup (co-convener, Moses Mendelssohn Center for European-Jewish Studies, Potsdam)
Dr. Sinai Rusinek (Digital Humanities, University of Haifa)
Prof. Dr. Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra (Directeur d'Études, École Pratique des Hautes Études)
Dr. Gerben Zaagsma (co-convener, Luxembourg Centre for Contemporary and Digital History (C2DH))
Nina Zellerhoff (co-convener, Moses Mendelssohn Center for European-Jewish Studies, Potsdam)