# CHALLENGES IN SETTING UP A DIGITAL HUMANITIES CENTRE IN ROMANIA

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**ABSTRACT.** *Challenges in Setting up a Digital Humanities Centre in Romania.* Other than the obvious and well-documented benefits of the Digital Humanities centre, now a common occurrence in western universities, this paper wishes to focus on the very specific challenges encountered by the DigiHUBB team in creating one in Romania. The very first of its kind in this country, the centre was eventually credited by the Babeş-Bolyai University, but yet still struggles due to the fact the domain itself is still no fully recognized on a national scale. Both the issues and the positive aspects, which are indeed many, will be taken into account in showing how a promising this field of research is just as long as scholars and policy-makers keep an open mind.

*Keywords: digital humanities, centre, multidisciplinary, data visualization, research, digital tools.*

**REZUMAT.** *Provocări în procesul de deschidere a unui centru de digital humanities în România.* În afara certelor şi bine-documentatelor beneficii ale centrelor de digital humanities, acum atât de comune în universităţile vestice, această lucrare se concentrează pe problemele foarte specifice întâlnite de echipa DigiHUBB în fondarea unuia în România. Primul centru de cercetare în acest domeniu, din ţară, a fost, în cele din urmă, acreditat de Universitatea Babeş-Bolyai, însă întâmpină în continuare probleme datorită faptului ca domeniul în sine nu este încă recunoscut pe plan naţional. Atât dificulăţile, cât şi aspectele positive, care nu sunt deloc puţine, au fost luate în considerare pentru a putea arăta cât de ofertant este acest domeniu atâta timp cât cercetătorii dau dovadă de deschidere.

*Cuvinte cheie: digital humanities, centru, multidisciplinaritate, vizualizare de date, cercetare, unelte digitale.*

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Digital Humanities, besides being a fairly recent domain of study, contains within its very name a dichotomy which, when first encountered, is rather uncomfortable for most traditional scholars. The joining together of two terms which were until now safely contained to their own seemingly very different spheres makes it sound like an odd hybrid and creates an apparent paradox. Only adding to the already confusing situation is the fact that Digital Humanities is not in any sense a unified field but much more an array of convergent practices (Schnapp, Presner, 2), so that the term functions like an umbrella under which a wide variety of scholarly research are nestled. What they all have in common is the fact that the roots are firmly set in the traditional fields of the Humanities such as languages, history, art history and so forth, but use digital tools and methods to reach a very specific result. It is thus clear that the juxtaposition found in the term is encountered also on a methodological level, as scholars in the Digital Humanities need to at least have a basic understanding of either the humanist field of their research or of the engineering and computing involved in order to ask the most relevant questions or offer the most feasible solutions, respectively.

Digital Humanities is quickly developing mostly due to the nature of computer science and the many rapid advances both in this field and in society's relationship to all things digital. While things have surely evolved since the days of Roberto Busa, the first visionary considered to be the father of this field, and his *Index Thomisticus* in 1948 (Moldovan, 95), the necessity for collaboration and mutual respect between the digital and the humanities has not changed in the least. This brings us to a specificity of Digital Humanities that is less frequently encountered in traditional Humanities research, which is its inclination towards teamwork.

'Interdisciplinary', 'transdisciplinary', and 'multidisciplinary' are trendy words in today's academia. They feel utterly modern and using them is seen as a guarantee of quality and usefulness of the research, especially nowadays, when the usefulness of humanities is frequently questioned. Thus they are used as a lure when seeking funding since (pretending to have) a holistic view upon a subject could eventually push the Humanities forward from the crossroads it has reached in a pragmatic society. Despite their ever more widespread use, these words continue to remain empty as they often go no further than the pages of the grant application, and are not transferred into practice. This is precisely where the Digital Humanities differs greatly from most other areas in the sense that they truly encourage or even need collaborations between scholars in various fields, each with their own expertise, working together on specific projects. This is just one of the ways through which Digital Humanities are of big help in reinvigorating

contemporary Arts and Humanities practices and expand their existing boundaries (Schnapp, Presner, 13).

Team-based research is much more common in sciences such as Chemistry, Biology, and Medicine, especially when concerning statistics or large amounts of data, where help from outside one's field of expertise is imperative. This is not the usual practice so in the case of Humanities where the lone scholar sitting in their ivory tower is still the prevalent model, so the Digital Humanities inevitably provoke a shift in both researchers' mentality and in the administration of the projects. This is not to say that the lone-scholar model is obsolete in the Digital Humanities (Schnapp, Presner, 5; Prescott, 262), but in this case need for a truly multitasking and multifaceted researcher is obvious. An individual (or individualistic) scholar may also come across certain limitations when it comes to more ample and complex projects, as this might entail detailed knowledge and experience in a variety of practices, which is time-consuming and is not always a feasible solution.

This "transformative feature" (Schnapp, Presner, 4) of Digital Humanities, which encourages (if not forces) collaboration, is sometimes hard to digest and to conduct, but is ultimately beneficial for the research, thus introducing an apparently much needed flexibility in the otherwise stiff and bureaucratic environment of the academia. However, there still are a number of reasons why Digital Humanities is not easily suited for the existing academic system and is perceived with a certain dose of suspicion. The *Digital Humanities Manifesto 2.0* cites several of the reasons for resistance against it, such as: the power of tradition, cognitive conservatism, nostalgia and the comfort scholars take in it, and institutional inertia especially when it comes to the tenure and promotions system. (Schnapp, Presner, 11).

The fact that scholarly trust in information found on the Internet is low can be explained through the lack of a proper peer review system. Because essentially anyone can have a website would suggest that there is no guarantee that the facts are correct, and thus they are disregarded. A published journal does not come under the same suspicion, and this is a problem the Digital Humanities is still very much struggling to overcome.

For now, one of the only vouchers for the quality of a Digital Humanities project are the scholars' association to a university, a library, a museum, etc., and by transition to its already established prestige. This also greatly influences the capacity to attract funding, thus confirming once again the quality of the project itself. In the spirit of teamwork and the need for institutions' vicinity and support, existing staff members have gotten into the habit of putting up the foundations for research centres. These are often interdisciplinary or loosely gathered under one disciplinary umbrella or

another in order to narrow down its activity (Prescott, 465) and besides being an idea lab they are usually prolific in securing grants. Seeing as though this proved to be a successful model, there is little wonder that their number is currently so vast and widespread.

A Digital Humanities centre is defined by Diane Zorich as "an entity where new media and technologies are used for Humanities-based research, teaching, and intellectual engagement and experimentation. The goals are to further Humanities scholarship, create new forms of knowledge, and explore technology's impact on Humanities-based disciplines" (Zorich, 4). Most centers are involved in using digital resources and tools for Humanities work, they hold lectures and seminars as well as training in a wide variety of forms. Although there are raising questions about their possibilities for securing long-term funding (Sample) and the lack of stability that comes from this issue, the centers seem to be here to stay. Finding a loophole around the permanent pressure of working on projects, many of them now offer MA or even BAs in Digital Humanities, thus securing jobs for the members involved.

The trend towards building such a centre is encouraged by websites such as centerNET[3] which offers resources, tips, and how-to guides in establishing a new centre if one does not already exist on your campus. The hardships an individual faces in networking without being part of such a centre, also creates a gravitational pull towards this type of establishment, as the opportunities are greatly extended. Organizations such as NeDiMAH (Network for Digital Methods in the Arts and Humanities)[4] and DARIAH (Digital Research Infrastructure for Arts and Humanities)[5] are instrumental in maintaining useful connections and help in navigating the path especially for newcomers. This being said the existence of a Romanian Digital Humanities centre is an obvious need. Its necessity however goes way beyond falling in line with an existing trend, but rather in order to share our unique history and realities with the entire world. Starting local incidentally is one of the foremost pieces of advice for new centers (Terras), since little could be of more relevance than doing just that.

The Transilvania Digital Humanities Centre (DigiHUBB) was born out of the preexisting "Henri Jaquier" Centre in the Faculty of Letters of the Babeș-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca, as its members were interested in geocriticism and thematic cartography. Following fortunate meetings with professors from the Technical University and the Cluj IT Cluster, a new type of

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[3] The centerNet website is available at https://dhcenternet.org/. Accessed 30 December 2015.
[4] The NeDiMAH website is available at www.nedimah.eu. Accessed 30 December 2015.
[5] The DARIAH website is available at www.dariah.eu. Accessed 30 December 2015.

collaboration was considered in order to engage the collaboration of different specialists that would work together in a large-scale project entitled *Next Generation Brained City* (Moldovan, 102). The specific objectives of DigiHUBB are threefold as it focuses on research by applying for projects on the Horizon 2020 platform and publishing in reputable journals in field of Digital Humanities. A second goal is an applicative approach by maintaining a permanent connection with the business environment through joint trainings and endeavours and by developing interactive maps, 3D reconstructions, creating data bases, and applications. On the educational front DigiHUBB strives to form students and young researchers in this innovative domain by offering a variety of conferences, workshops, and summer schools. At the moment this constitutes an applicative research centre and its members come from specializations such as philology, history, art history, sociology, philosophy, media culture, cartography, economics, and informatics.[6]

However if all the aforementioned issues were problematic for the development of Digital Humanities in other countries, one can imagine these difficulties were only increased in the Romanian realm. Tradition bound, Romanian academics usually pursue prestige in its classical sense which usually just means publications. The environment is also one that rarely encourages inter-departmental collaboration so the very fundamental characteristics of Digital Humanities were regarded with scepticism. More problems were encountered on the way, but it must surely be admitted that in reality the foreign advice and help was instrumental in the founding of the centre which still remains largely unknown both on a national and on a local level and within the University itself. This is one of the paradoxes observed that easily exemplify the challenges that an innovative approach faces in both the institutional environment and the investment in the research framework in Romania. The rapidity with which DigiHUBB gained international support and assistance[7] was curbed by the resistance of the existing research infra-structure, although it is well known that Romanian research in general is less internationalized and underperforming in all major university rankings.[8] In the second instance, although the IT industry in Romania, and especially in

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[6] The DigiHUBB website is available at digihubb.centre.ubbcluj.ro/. Accessed 30 December 2015.

[7] Immediately after its creation DigiHUBB was put on the "Around DH" map (courtesy to Alex Gill from Columbia University Libraries), http://www.arounddh.org/. The response of the Digital Humanities Community to the first call for assistance launched on Humanist Discussion Group was impressive. Accessed 30 December 2015.

[8] As reported in http://ec.europa.eu/research/horizon2020/pdf/country-profiles/ro_country_profile_and_featured_projects.pdf#view=fit&pagemode=none. Accessed 30 December 2015.

Transylvania, is productive and lucrative, it addresses the quotidian aspects of digital work and not the innovative part.[9] Moreover, there is a visible mismatch between the skills needed by the knowledge market and the qualifications provided by the academia, result of a visible lack of a long-term vision at the political level and the absence of awareness of the added value of Research & Innovation in the economy. Although Romania has adopted a National Strategy for R&I with a strong relevance through a component of "smart" specialization (the clusters creation being underlined as a positive aspect), the under-financing has created a brain-drain effect, Romania being worldwide known as an important exporter of researchers.

The challenges that DigiHUBB faces are complex and they target several important issues that go from the generic ones (the misunderstanding of the concept, the lack of confidence in its epistemological value, the supremacy of the published paper book over electronic publications, the absence of systemised pedagogy in Digital Humanities, the minimal funding from the University or governmental institutions) to more specific ones, which are even more complex to engage with.

DigiHUBB has been involved in a variety of activities related to the Digital Humanities since its inception. For example in January of 2014 the keynote speaker for the inaugural conference of the centre was Professor Susan Schreibman of Maynooth University – a veritable pioneer in the field. This was followed by a conference held by Doctor Julyanne Nyhan, from UCL, in March 2014 as well as by many informal meetings with other key members of the international Digital Humanities community. The lobbying and promoting of Digital Humanities also included participation in national and international academic events, like Leipzig Summer School, or by publishing articles on the subject. (Moldovan, 286-294)

One of the following steps the centre took towards integration and validation was to create a training event. Thus in April-May of 2014 DigiHUBB organized a one-week workshop on TEI (Text Encoding Initiative) and data visualisation financed by NeDIMAH and the European Science Foundation, and co-organized a symposium on textual digital analysis within the Babeș-Bolyai University.[10] There was a strong involvement in networking and studying the activities of other Digital Humanities centres in Europe that continued

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[9] The key challenge is, as shown in a 2015 European Commission report, the low level of competitiveness; the innovation culture is still underdeveloped in Romania.

[10] "Editing texts in a digital world: text encoding and data visualization", workshop, Cluj-Napoca, 27 April-3 May 2015, "Explorations in textual digital analysis for the humanities and social-sciences", symposium, Cluj-Napoca, 14-15 May 2015.

through the following years. We now can strongly declare that the first and maybe the most important action in setting up such a centre is the community building exercise, both on an institutional level, and with the international organizations, private companies, and the local community. However much more remains to be done, especially in managing to reach the "stray practitioners".

As stated before, in the process of setting up our centre we had to fight a very specific attitude that still characterizes post-revolutionary Romanian society, which we can characterize as "non-digital humanist", as it is, in most cases, individualistic, speculative, traditional, and change-resisting, in comparison with the collaborative, hands-on, innovative and co-creative features of Digital Humanities:

> The digital humanities, therefore, not only widens the scope and processes of disciplines within the university, but contributes to national innovation agendas, creating new possibilities for the traditional scholar within an increasingly competitive academic and economic context. As such, the collaborative nature of digital humanities research contributes to the innovation ecosystem, understood as the productive interaction between people, ideas, flows, processes and outputs. (Byrne, Schreibman)

Our goal is therefore to make our peers aware of the birth of a "new kind of digital humanist who combines in-depth training in a single humanistic subfield with a mix of skills drawn from design, computer science, media work, curatorial training and library science" (Burdick et. al., 12). We strongly embrace the evidence that the digital turn has changed most if not every, aspect of our lives and thus deeply modified people and scholars. The new type of scholar often has a mixed formation and proves very adapted in switching between various areas of expertise in an efficient and open-minded manner. The acceptance of the net-world in this new systemic thinking is essential. So maybe it is not by fortune that more and more Renaissance workshops can be found in cultural environments all over the world, like for example the Renaissance Workshop & Artist Salon to be found in New-York,[11] open to anyone who wants to learn "the craft and science of art", a creative environment where practice and theory go hand in hand.

As for the Digital Humanities pedagogy, it was stressed out that the ideal open digital humanities certificate should have the following characteristics: open, net-worked, global, modular and flexible, community-driven, technological, and experimental. Lots of progress has been made in

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[11] Or the Google Campus in London, the Nextspace in California but also ImpactHub in Cluj-Napoca.

designing the curriculum, organizing the content, implicating the community and re-thinking the assessment and the certification. However, the implementation of such a program requires facing several challenges, first of all at an administrative level: the resistance of the academic community to new forms of communication is obvious, especially regarding the ethos of sharing and opening the research to a wider community (through crowd sourcing for example). The Digital Humanities Centre plays a leading role in shaping the digital scholarship (with more than 200 centres on each continent, and growing). However, recent criticism underlines the danger of transforming these centres into "boutique digitization"; opening to a bigger scale is possible through importing interdisciplinary methods, for example managerial skills or by creating online/virtual platforms that aim to social-networked learning, such as DariahTeach.

If we are to follow the organization of a S.W.O.T chart we can easily identify the positive as well as the negatives aspects of DigiHUBB's endeavours. First, it is important to recognize the undeniable strengths of the centre which mostly lay in the fact that its members are not only dedicated scholars, but also a number of them have obtained their PhDs with themes closely associated to Digital Humanities research (digital storytelling, data mining, digital mapping, linguistic analysis). All the members of this multilingual and multidisciplinary team are focused on innovation and creativity and there is ample participation on their behalf to a number of international conferences and summer schools. This of course points to a high degree of interest in networking in order to increase the centre's opportunities. In fact, a DH centre exists because ambitious, enthusiastic and dedicated scholars exist as well as their "serendipitous" coming together.

The weaknesses must however also be acknowledged mainly due to the fact that the members lack systemic education in Digital Humanities, which in some cases renders the project ineligible for certain funding programs, as well as making it impossible for the members to further participate in a number of personal development programs, where a diploma in this field is required. As Digital Humanities in itself is not as of yet a recognized domain in Romania, this means minimal or no funding on behalf of local institutions and is a further blockage in proper development. The lack of proper equipment also constitutes an issue, but the biggest concern comes from the fact that all members are currently volunteers. If this situation is not resolved it may cause a lack of motivation and affect the time they are willing to dedicate to the centre as they focus on their day jobs. The University must recognize the opportunity to build programs of

excellence into a clear strategy of research and innovation, inter and trans-disciplinary studies. There are three trajectories that describe the value of digital humanities (Byrne, Schreibman, 10):

- The value of scholarship (the contribution of DH to the academic research by creating new innovative methods results and knowledge in a co-creative way.[12]
- The added value (by public engagement, by creating new intellectual properties, by so-called "emotional branding").
- The cultural and social value new audiences for cultural institutes, new practices in studying, and an increased access to a "shared cultural heritage".

The opportunities regarding DigiHUBB are numerous especially since there is an increasing interest in multimedia and interdisciplinary projects from funding organizations as well as greatly benefitting from a tight collaboration with many Digital Humanities networks especially ones from abroad. On a national level, besides the IT Cluster's desire to collaborate, Romania is also the home to a young tech-savvy population. This inevitably points to a growing interest in Digital Humanities and the openness it provides. However most important is the presence of a large array of unexplored multicultural heritage sites which are suitable for applying method specific to this area of expertise. For example if we are only to focus on tapping into the touristic potential of the country, the possibilities for a Digital Humanities approach are already apparent and numerous: from creating thematic maps for monuments in Cluj-Napoca and around the country, to applications that involve placing QR codes all around the city. The uniqueness of some of Romania's assets such as the wooden churches would also benefit from such an approach, which would also make them more easily available to researchers from all over the world.

Understood as a HUB, our centre has multiple possibilities of offering innovation, at all levels of the research-economic-social chain. We also consider it as a new cultural model, a real co-working space opened to all the actors of our multicultural and multilingual region. Characterized by a conflicted atmosphere of cooperation and competition, it will stimulate many of the features that have been proven so invaluable for to a modern, successful research.

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[12] "Co-creation" is the key-word for most of the topics covered in the Horizon 2020 Program, especially those regarding education, policy-making, public services and the promotion of European public and cultural space.

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