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Why do Historians Ignore Digital Analysis? Bring on the Luddites

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Abstract

This article argues that historians have failed to grasp the profound opportunities afforded by computational analysis. Despite the abundance of machine-readable data liberated by digitisation—alongside tools and exemplar studies—there has been no widespread embrace of text mining or revival of cliometrics. This ambivalence has arisen mainly through apathy and side-lining of computational analysis to a specialist methodological niche. The absence of justification is damaging to the intellectual vitality of the discipline and its capacity to face the dawning age of data science.

The article calls for an urgent debate about the historian and the computer. More than anything else, this requires sceptics to come forward to meet the advocates to discuss how we face the future. British political history has a proud tradition of methodological innovation and there is no better subfield in which to begin a debate that has fundamental implications for the whole discipline.

Keywords: digital, computing, text mining, data, cliometrics

SINCE THE MILLENNIUM, modern British political history has been profoundly affected by the march of digitisation. Principally, this has taken the form of the publication (and semantic enhancement) of hundreds of millions of words of parliamentary debates, papers and reports, as well as vast swathes of the local and national press through the British Newspaper Archive and other repositories. In addition, digitisation has greatly increased the availability of tabulated numerical political and social data—for example, election results, parliamentary information, census and local authority reports, and public health and demographic statistics. In British political history—as across the discipline in general—the traditional historian's challenge of source scarcity has been replaced by one of abundance: there is now too much material to read and analyse even in several lifetimes.[1] The opportunity—nay, the necessity—for computational analysis of this vast constellation of liberated data, and a renaissance of cliometrics, seems self-evident. In other fields, text mining (the computerised analysis of huge digital texts) and multivariate quantitative analyses of large datasets have embedded themselves, in the form of 'big data' analysis, at the heart of every academic field where they are viable. Every field, that is, apart from history.

In 1971, during the golden age of historical computing—when historians were analysing vast swathes of data in huge research teams in a quest for all-explaining 'total' historical models—few would have disputed Edward Shorter's prediction in his *Historian and the Computer* that 'tomorrow's historian must be able to program a computer to survive'.[2] For Shorter, this future scholar would abandon their book-lined study for the 'flashing lights and great grey machines of the computer center'. Fifty-two years later, something has clearly happened—or rather, not happened. The reasons for the failure of analytical computing in history are complex, but stemmed from a widespread epiphany in the 1980s concerning its ruinous cost and dependence on

[1]R. Rosenzweig, 'Scarcity of abundance? Preserving the past in a digital era', *American Historical Review*, vol. 108, no. 3, 2003, p. 739.

[2]E. Shorter, *The Historian and the Computer*, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall, 1971, p. 12.

technicians, its overreliance on arbitrary categorisation, its potential to dehumanise the past, and its insensitivities to the ambiguities of language and discourse.[3] In the years that followed, its diminished band of supporters continued to contest the validity of this ageing critique, especially in light of technological developments, and in 2014, Jo Guldi and David Armitage published the provocative *History Manifesto*.[4] They argued that excessive specialisation on small topics, a neglect of the *longue durée*, and methodological conservatism stemming from a residual suspicion of cliometrics, had prevented historians from grasping the magnificent opportunity afforded by the computational analysis of 'big data'; one which might help reverse our discipline's decline in universities and the increasing marginalisation of history scholars in data-focused twenty-first century public debate.

The charge was not one of technophobia, for neither Guldi and Armitage, nor I, would dispute that parts of Shorter's prophecy have come true. Historians all now use computers (albeit through graphical user interfaces rather than by programming) and these have transformed working practices—especially in the domains of source search and access, which have revolutionised the digital archive. Our complaint is that the vast majority of present-day historians are unwilling to turn to computer analysis, despite its self-evident transformative potential. Historians are often (occasionally even proudly) quantophobic and uninterested in social scientific argumentative paradigms such as model building and variable control, or in inferential statistics. Their natural suspicion of pre-agreed categorisation and coding—as well as their preference for single-author publication—makes incremental or collaborative research the exception rather than the norm, and they fit awkwardly into multidisciplinary research teams. Recent historians are deeply interested in language, but in close reading by eye rather than distant reading by machine, which leads to a scepticism of text mining and its associations with linguistic categorisation, empiricism and automation via machine learning. My critique applies even to a subfield like British political history, where the potential for computerised analysis is particularly obvious: we possess an abundance of numerical datasets, digital access to billions of words of political texts with reliable optical character recognition (OCR), supported by a rich historiography of political language, as well as numerous potential synergies with political science colleagues studying similar sources. Vast electoral and machine readable parliamentary corpora remain unanalysed; psephology is now the exclusive property of political scientists; data-led analysis of class is left to sociologists; and quantitative linguistic analysis is performed by computer scientists. British political historians could be pioneers, opening up new frontiers of digital analysis and setting an example to other historical fields. Instead, the chair remains empty—to the bemusement of scholars from other disciplines working with historical political data.

In self-consciously 'digital' circles, the term 'Luddite' is often used to describe the prevailing attitude of historians to digital analysis. I accept the term, but not the pejorative implications, because there is nothing wrong with being a Luddite (in 1811 or now). There is no divine mandate to be 'progressive' and embrace technological change for its own sake. Similarly, there is no obligation to be optimistic about its ramifications for the historian's craft, or indeed for a traditional scholar to press for a digital future where his or her comparative advantage might be downgraded. Thus, the digital humanities' focus since the millennium on creating large digital infrastructures ('if you build it, they will come') may be seen in retrospect to be naive, and their active advocacy of change overzealous. Digital scholars could have instead offered examples of computerised methodologies fruitfully contributing to established historical debates.[5] In British political history, for example, there

[3]The landmark critique is L. Stone, 'The revival of narrative: reflections on a new old history', *Past and Present*, no. 85, 1979, pp. 3–24. For a more general summary, see L. Blaxill, *The War of Words: The Language of British Elections, 1880–1914*, Woodbridge, Royal Historical Society, 2020, pp. 21–26.

[4]D. Armitage and J. Guldi, *The History Manifesto*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014.

[5]J. Van Zundert, 'If you build it, will we come? Large scale digital infrastructures as a dead end for digital humanities', *Historische Sozialforschung*, vol. 37, no. 3, 2012, pp. 165–186.

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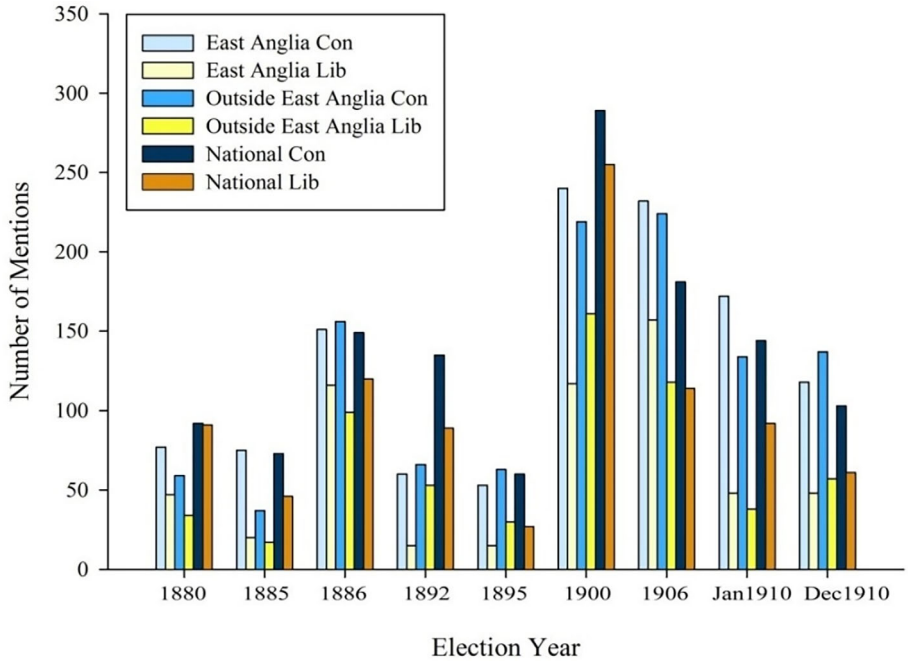


Figure 1: The language of imperialism in general election campaigns, 1880-1910[6]

were precious few examples of text mining delivering agenda-setting interventions in major historiographical debates—only occasional method papers in niche outlets. In other words, we were preaching rather than proving.

My 2020 book, *The War of Words: The Language of British Elections, 1880–1914*, was designed to provide this proof-of-concept in an intensely researched field—late Victorian and Edwardian British electoral history—where new computational methods could be compared with tried-and-tested approaches to the analysis of huge datasets of political speeches. Through adapting a variety of the standard quantitative and qualitative techniques developed in corpus linguistics, I was able to demonstrate, for example, that the language of imperialism was of intermittent, rather than constant, centrality in election campaigns; and that Conservatives mentioned it around twice as often as Liberals, connecting it more frequently with emotionally charged rhetoric (see Fig. 1 and Table 1). On a separate project (working with a computer scientist) I adapted these methods to the study of parliamentary language to examine differences in the speaking patterns of women MPs, demonstrating that they had rhetorically converged with male MPs as their numbers in the Commons grew after 1997 (see Fig. 2 and Table 2). Finally, this time collaborating with political scientists, I measured the extent, distribution and severity of electoral violence since 1832, using the entire British Newspaper Archive, showing, for example, that the democratisation of the Second Reform Act of 1867 caused violence to increase hugely, until it fell sharply following the passage of the Corrupt and Illegal Practices Act of 1883 (see Figs. 3 and 4).

Explanation: Fig. 1 shows instances of the words 'imperial' (and all variants); 'empire'; 'flag' (inc. synonyms like 'Union Jack'); 'British' (and all variants); 'colony' (and all variants) added together. Table 1 is based only on the word 'empire'. Both are derived from the author's corpus of election speeches, as reported in digitised newspapers.

Explanation: Fig. 2 shows the attention given to women by MPs of different genders, 1945–2014. This is measured by a group of words, including

[6]See L. Blaxill, 'The language of imperialism in British electoral politics, 1880–1910', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, vol. 45, no. 3, 2017, pp. 416–48.

Table 1: Words which are lexically attracted to 'empire', 1880–1910, per party[7]

Rank	Con. Collocate	Freq.	MI Score
1	dismemberment	33	12.2
2	disintegration	24	11.97
3	integrity	49	11.69
4	disruption	17	11.59
5	unity	60	11.34
6	glorious	14	10.64
7	Indian	12	10.48
8	safety	11	10.36
9	British	109	9.75
10	maintain	24	9.7
11	united	41	9.57
12	union	18	9.42
13	within	19	9.06
14	vast	10	9.01
15	Kingdom	14	8.9
16	parts	12	8.83
17	danger	12	8.71
18	welfare	10	8.7
19	heart	19	8.54
20	world	31	8.14
Rank	Lib. Collocate	Freq.	MI Score
1	integrity	27	10.82
2	disintegration	10	10.7
3	unity	21	9.76
4	British	69	9.09
5	parts	13	8.95
6	danger	12	8.71
7	part	23	7.63
8	whole	18	6.6
9	great	48	6.59
10	up	18	6.21
11	our	29	6.17
12	the	536	6.16
13	is	19	5.89
14	are	11	5.78
15	than	14	5.61
16	about	14	5.58
17	this	45	5.41
18	of	3 06	5.4
19	one	25	5.17
20	Ireland	11	5.11

Note: 'MI' is the 'Mutual Information' score- a popular linguist's test for lexical attraction.

'woman', 'girl', 'wife', 'mother', 'sister' and all variants, and other terms. Table 2 shows words which are employed significantly more often (as a percentage of parliaments in the period) by female and male MPs. Fig. 2 and Table 2 are derived from a corpus which comprises the entirety of Hansard's parliamentary debates, encoded for the speaker's gender, party, and ministerial rank.

Explanation: Fig. 3 and 4 are derived from a corpus of the entire British Newspaper Archive from these years, plus parliamentary reports and royal commissions concerning electoral corruption. Fig. 3 shows incidents of electoral violence, 1832–1914, measured at three levels of severity. Fig. 4 shows geographical distribution.

As Alex Middleton observed, *The War of Words* (asis written primarily for sceptics—for those historians who remain consciously or unconsciously doubtful that the computerised analysis of large textual sources can radically revise fundamental assumptions about the nature and content of historical language.[8] While I argued that historians wishing to measure extent, power or typicality in a broader field of discourse could benefit from text mining, I did not want simply to act as a salesman for a method. Therefore, I sought to provide an example rather than another manifesto—committing myself to being, in Middleton's word, 'polite'.

I have come to realise, however, the flaw in my approach. The greatest obstacle to the adoption of digital analytical methodologies in history is not Luddite scepticism, but apathy and ambivalence, with historians continuing to ignore the fundamental methodological challenge posed by the second coming of humanities computing. In linguistics and literary studies, this debate began decades ago, involving titans such as Noam Chomsky and Stanley Fish, and continues to this day. But historians—insofar as they take an interest—still lean heavily on Lawrence Stone's brilliant 1979 critique, which banished computing and cliometrics almost completely from the field, leaving the next generation of sympathetic scholars to eke out careers in politics departments or in the semi-detached subfield of economic history, which swiftly reclassified itself as a social science. Despite the march of technology having greatly weakened many of Stone's original critiques (concerning cost, manpower and technological entry barriers),

[7]Ibid.

[8]A. Middleton, '*The War of Words*: *The Language of British Elections, 1880–1914*', *Reviews in History*, December 2020; https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/2432

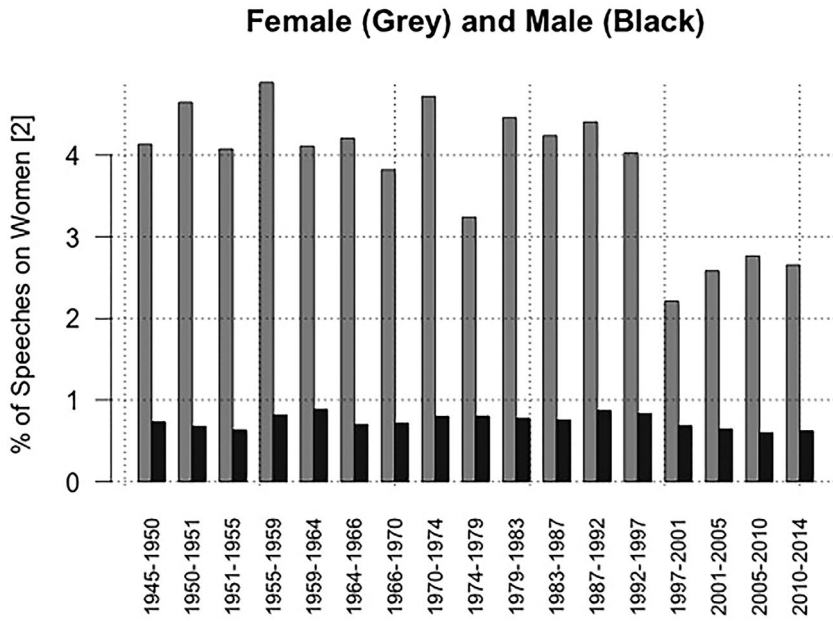


Figure 2: The language of women in the British House of Commons, 1945–2014[9]

there seems little appetite for reopening the methodological debate on the historian and the computer. In British political history, digitisation has populated the tree's lowest branches with juicy fruit that have never been easier or cheaper to harvest. Nonetheless, data science in history continues to be labelled a 'specialist' preoccupation promoted by a small handful of those who (like me) inevitably sound like salesmen, conveniently pigeonholed to footnotes listing 'alternative approaches' or given occasional platforms to make outspoken contributions to panels on method or in special issues. As it was for Shorter in 1971, the computer is forever touted as the future of historical analysis, but somehow never quite yet.

In the remainder of this article, I will explore this problem more deeply by critiquing historians' (especially British political historians') view of the digital humanities, and then—to put the boot on the other foot—vice versa.

Historians and the digital humanities

In history departments, digital humanists can sometimes be viewed as technicians, creating digital assets that enable traditional historians to practice their existing methodologies more conveniently. Even collaborations which have embraced big data analysis have tended to maintain a sharp divide where computer scientists, data scientists and software engineer serve historians, rather than producing genuinely interdisciplinary scholars who are often the product of digital humanities training.[10] Scholars who call themselves 'digital historians' risk finding that their genus will be unapparent to traditional historians, who are generally more preoccupied with place and period than with method. This has the effect of provoking the sort of exclusionary question I was asked at a recent academic job interview: 'What sort of a historian are you *really*?'

[9]For full discussion of method and measuring technique, see L. Blaxill and K. Beelen, 'A feminized language of democracy? The representation of women at Westminster since 1945', *Twentieth Century British History*, vol. 27, no. 3, pp. 412–49.

[10]This is a tendency that the Turing Institute's 'Living with Machines' project has made its mission to address. See R. Ahnert, E. Griffin, M. Ridge and G. Tolfo, *Collaborative Historical Research in the Age of Big Data*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2023, pp. 56–71.

Table 2: Words prioritised by MPs of different genders, 1945–2014[11]

Female Words	% Parl. where used signif. more	Male Words	% Parl. where used signif. more
child	1.00	argument	0.82
woman	1.00	force	0.82
health	0.94	proposition	0.76
age	0.94	corporation	0.76
mother	0.94	defence	0.71
care	0.94	army	0.71
family	0.94	doubt	0.65
husband	0.88	nuclear	0.65
elderly	0.88	british	0.65
work	0.88	parliament	0.59
help	0.88	states	0.59
parent	0.88	europe	0.59
young	0.88	military	0.59
person	0.88	affair	0.59
girl	0.88	kingdom	0.59
baby	0.82	united	0.59
women	0.82	sense	0.53
lady	0.82	balance	0.53
home	0.82	party	0.53
maternity	0.76	industry	0.53
life	0.76	interest	0.53
medical	0.76	foreign	0.53
doctor	0.76	land	0.53
need	0.71	aircraft	0.53
aware	0.71	treaty	0.53
pay	0.71	political	0.53
clinic	0.71	reserve	0.53
group	0.71	european	0.53
able	0.71	event	0.53
nurse	0.71	point	0.47
marriage	0.71	substantial	0.47
hospital	0.65	northern	0.47
standard	0.65	purpose	0.47
school	0.65	sort	0.47
male	0.65	american	0.47
patient	0.65	western	0.47
treatment	0.65	house	0.47
social	0.65	air	0.47
food	0.65	expenditure	0.47
married	0.65	constitution	0.47
education	0.65	company	0.47
staff	0.65	americans	0.47
department	0.59	consequence	0.47
boy	0.59	sea	0.47
disease	0.59	major	0.47
nursery	0.59	business	0.47
equal	0.59	wrong	0.47
pregnancy	0.59	principle	0.47
nursing	0.59	civil	0.47
daughter	0.59	judgment	0.47
children	0.59	capital	0.47
benefit	0.59	word	0.47

(Continues)

Table 2. Continued

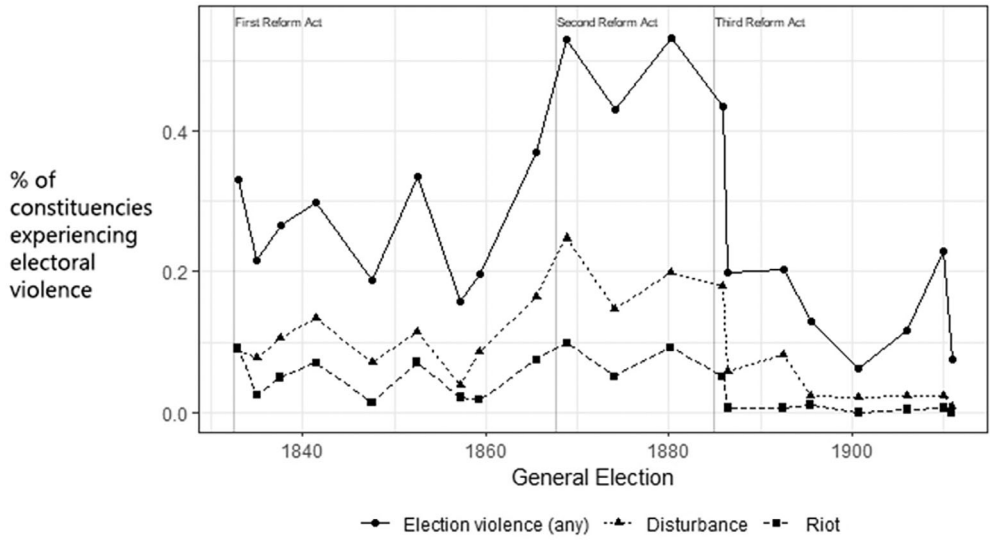
Female Words	% Parl. where used signif. more	Male Words	% Parl. where used signif. more
sex	0.59	lord	0.47
wife	0.53	weapon	0.47
increase	0.53	germany	0.41
worker	0.53	asset	0.41
pregnant	0.53	troop	0.41
teacher	0.53	conclusion	0.41

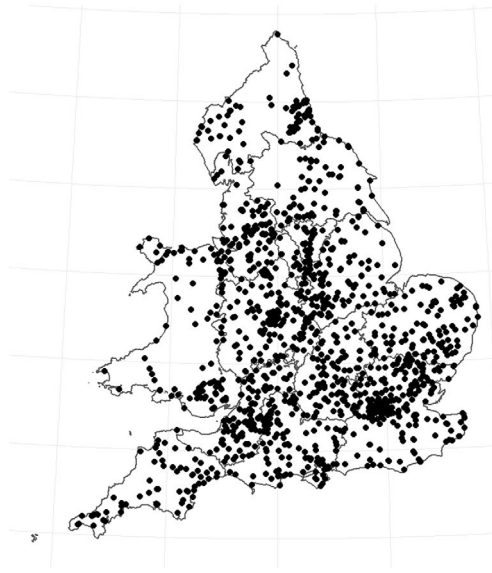
It seems difficult to imagine historians of other subfields (for example, of race or gender) being obliged to self-justify in this way.

This is reflective of a more general retreat from explicit methodological debate amongst recent political historians. In the past, high political historians were often actively self-conscious of their focus on the key power players at the top of politics (hence the so-called 'Peterhouse School'), as were many sociological historians working with Marxian, Weberian or Thompsonian conceptions of class. Similarly, scholars influenced by post-structuralism (whether radicals like James Vernon and Patrick Joyce or moderates like Jon Lawrence) were aware that they were part of the revisionist scholarly movement which became known as the 'linguistic turn'. However, among more recent generations of political historians—interested in such intriguing issues as identities, genders, races and cultures—clear examples of robust methodological debate have disappeared, which seems surprising given the more explicit focus on methods training at undergraduate level. Granted, there is a considerable interest in new approaches to British political history (for example black and queer history) but these centre on focus and interpretation rather than advocating methodological changes in how the past is researched and evidenced. Indeed, growing specialism (in subject and chronology), and the more general reluctance to offer broader explanatory models on causation in British political history, have had the effect of siloing recent scholars in niche specialisms, creating a more consensual environment in which historians can plough specialist furrows. This has diminished the incentive to reflect, in print, on many intriguing general questions which remain unresolved, including (but not limited to): why 'class' became so unfashionable a scholarly focus in political history and whether it still should be; why historians of 'politics' have been replaced wholesale with historians of 'political culture'; why history and the social sciences continue to diverge methodologically when we often study the same sources; why quantitative history has been beaten to the fringes of the discipline; how and why so many historians moved towards reconstructing the past and away from explaining it; and why it is that, despite such favourable winds, there has been no second coming of computing in history or an associated revival of cliometrics. The methodological debates surrounding computing have been sidestepped to such an extent that there has been negligible introspection even on room-devouring elephants: for example, how overworked historians can avoid succumbing to the lure of search interfaces which can plunder archives for quotations to-order, to support pre-existing positions through jet-propelled cherry picking. And that is to say nothing the rapid advances in artificial intelligence, with Chat GPT-4 already being comfortably able to produce strong 2-1 undergraduate essays even from the constrained source base it is permitted to access.

There are many excellent arguments—some which lean on Stone and others that are new—for why historians should leave methods like mine, and analytical computing in general, behind a *cordon sanitaire*. These include their proclivity to present glorified statements of the obvious, or produce conclusions from arbitrary categories; their reliance on various statistical or algorithmic black boxes; their tendency to tell the stories of majorities rather than minorities; and their potential to diminish the human story at the heart of history.

[11]Ibid.





Figures 3 & 4: Electoral violence in England and Wales, 1832–1910[12]

However, these concerns should be a stimulus to use digital methods more effectively, rather than to ignore them. A failure to do so risks the arrival of a new generation of aggressively empirical (and much less polite) scholarship that risks pushing history uncritically towards data science—where the past is treated as a crunchable data repository with which to solve problems of the present. The time to have a debate on method is now and we need Luddites to sally out from their departmental fortifications to make their case.[13] Where the status quo is found wanting, however, it should

[12]'Causes and consequences of electoral violence', ESRC/AHRC research project, Durham University; https://victorianelectionviolence.uk/

[13]An example of informed Luddism from the domain of literary studies is N. Z. Da, 'The computational case against computational literary studies', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 45, no. 3, 2019, pp. 601–39.

change. This debate would also be assisted by taking digital history seriously as a subfield and recognising that, while asking its practitioners for methodological introspection is quite reasonable, this requires historians to accept that methodological contributions to scholarship are not, *per se*, less valuable than contributions at the level of content. At present that is simply not the case, and methodological work is openly afforded a second-class status by journals and on the job market, whose entry criteria is based chiefly on subject. A historian who contributes nothing to content, but profoundly to method, should be rewarded the same accolades as one whose contribution is the reverse. This view is controversial—but it is one of many questions which needs to be debated.

History departments' priorities also require refocussing. In the UK, while grant-making bodies such as the AHRC, ESRC and Leverhulme Trust have been anything but Luddite in their investment in digital humanities projects and resources, the digital turn has had virtually no effect in transforming the substance of undergraduate curricula. Undergraduate historians are not taught text mining, database design, visualisation, the spatial humanities or coding. They are not taught even basic inferential statistics and are not introduced to any of the fundamental analytical paradigms which predominate in social and political science research. Oxford University's wide-ranging 'Disciplines of History' undergraduate method course lacks any classes on digital history, and the same is true of Cambridge's equally wide-ranging equivalent 'History, Argument and Practice'. The prevailing attitude seems to be that digital history is interesting enough to postgraduates to be worthy of its own dedicated masters programmes, but not something to which undergraduates should be exposed. This disparity misses the potential for students trained in historical data science to graduate with a better-rounded skillset that STEM-biased employers might value.

Additionally, I would suggest that departments offer permanent jobs to digital historians—something which has petered out after a seeming brief fashion in the late noughties when 'e-research' was in vogue. In British political history, the problem is still more acute, simply because scholars in this field (of any stripe) have barely been hired at all for over a decade. Accordingly, those advocating challenger digital methodologies have been denied the chance to take tenured footholds in departments. Indeed, where younger scholars have acquired permanent positions, it is seemingly often after an initial period providing temporary cover for a tenured historian, a gateway that similarly privileges continuity rather than challenge.

Digital humanities and the historians

We turn next to the digital humanities' characterisation of historians. Perhaps its greatest error has been to erect a largely false dichotomy between progressive digital and reactionary non-digital historians, which stifles its ability to speak to the whole discipline. Few growing constituencies of brilliant technologists can entirely restrain Whiggish impatience, and the digital humanities has long considered itself a vanguard with a moral imperative to delineate the arc of progress. While its introspection is invariably thoughtful, provocative and challenging, the field's reputation for jarring evangelism since the millennium has not been unwarranted. An example is a 2009 report entitled 'The digital future is now: a call to action for the humanities', which contended that the non-digital historian (pejoratively caricatured as the non-collaborating 'lone scholar') should evolve twenty-first century methodologies rather than spending 'months or years alone in the dusty archive'.[14] More zealous and self-consciously confrontational was the *Digital Humanities Manifesto 2.0* which criticised traditional disciplines as potential 'bastions of small thinking, clerical privilege, and intellectual policing', unable to adapt to the digital age on account of their 'cognitive conservatism … nostalgia … [and] institutional inertia'.[15] Indeed, the much discussed scholarly reluctance—particularly in history—to adopt digital methods has been subject to various

[14]C. Borgman, 'The digital future is now: a call to action for the humanities', *Digital Humanities Quarterly*, vol. 3, no. 4, 2009.

[15]J. Schnapp, T. Presner, P. Lunenfeld, J. Drucker and other digital contributors, *The Digital Humanities Manifesto 2.0.*, 2009.

diagnoses and suggested cures, such as P. F. Wouter's 2007 study, 'Conservative culture or diverging identities? Studying resistance to technology in academia'.[16] Another report on scholarly practices in the humanities in 2011 solemnly concluded that 'none of the participants in our study is yet ready to abandon print and manuscript resources in favour of digital ones … such behaviours are likely to persist for some time'.[17] The *History Manifesto* of 2014—a vitally important work now almost a decade old—is perhaps the best-known entry in digital humanities activism. In the course of making many important points, it did more than any other work to ruffle important feathers and encourage a debate (which sadly petered out) on big data and the state of the field.[18]

The obvious downside of this confrontational approach has been polarisation, since this encourages scholars to fortify themselves in their respective fields and avoid interaction. The decision of digital humanities practitioners to become a separate discipline (and within history, the evolution of a separate digital history subfield) has created departments, research networks and conferences which primarily support and engage those who have already taken the 'digital turn'. Journal articles by digital historians are usually confined to specialist outlets like *History and Computing*, *Culture and History Digital Journal*, *Literary and Linguistic Computing* and *Digital Humanities Quarterly*; monographs and edited collections are invariably dedicated to digital history itself rather than particular historical topics. Additionally, a great deal of this work is published online on blogs, in discussion groups (such as the *Humanist* and the *Programming Historian*) and through digital colloquia—channels that are unlikely to engage historians who do not deliberately seek them out. Indeed, practitioners of digital history are often linguists, computer scientists, literary scholars or library and information studies professionals before they are historians. To the digital humanist, this interdisciplinarity enhances the richness of their field and ameliorates methodological and epistemological inertia—but to historians, they risk being perceived as a rag-tag group of scholars from other fields who have accidentally stumbled into history. Existing as a separate discipline offers digital humanities scholars much-needed support for pioneering interdisciplinary research and methodological debate, but at the same time weakens their ability to reach out to oft-caricatured monodisciplinary 'lone scholars' who (for better or worse) continue to represent most historians. The proponents of digital methods are thus perhaps too often guilty of preaching to the converted and failing to engage mainstream historians.

A final way we digital historians have done ourselves no favours is by shrouding our endeavours in excessive technical mystique. This fuels the perception that such methods are open only to specialists: namely, scholars with expertise in programming and statistics and (most perniciously) those who are in receipt of huge grants for digital resource creation or involved in large multidisciplinary projects. Lone historians who wish simply to dabble in digital methods—for example, using text mining as an auxiliary part of a traditional historical project—are frightened away rather than encouraged. Indeed, John Unsworth, a pioneer of what was once called 'humanities computing', once described such dabbling scholars as 'charlatans' because they 'undersell the market by providing a quick-and-dirty simulacrum of something that, done right, is expensive, time-consuming, and difficult.'[19] In his defence, Unsworth was principally commenting on literary studies—a field where numerous 'have a go' digital scholars had produced voluminous substandard scholarship—but in history, the opposite problem is true and scholars are afraid even to try their hand. Important, if pedantic, discussions of digital resources—such as whether text encoding initiative (TEI) protocols have been followed, whether metadata is properly encoded or whether OCR falls below certain

[16]P. Wouters, 'Conservative culture or diverging identities? Studying resistance to technology in academia', Third International Conference on e-Social Science, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 2007.

[17]M. Bulger, et al., *Reinventing Research? Information Practices in the Humanities*, Research Information Network Report, 2011, pp. 6–7.

[18]D. Cohen and P. Mander, 'The history manifesto: a critique', *American Historical Review*, vol. 120, no. 2, pp. 530–42.

[19]J. Unsworth, 'What is humanities computing and what is not?', *Jahrbuch für Computerphilologie*, no. 4, 2002, pp. 71–84.

thresholds—similarly serve to dissuade curious scholars from considering how far and in what ways text mining might augment their research. In reality, the main challenge is choosing the right sort of research question and deploying the outputs of computer analysis in persuasive historical argument, because on a technical level, all that is really needed to begin analysis on the simpler end of the spectrum is a large text with good-quality OCR, a piece of free software such as Antconc, and access to one of the many introductory texts or online courses on electronic text analysis.[20] A focus on promoting digital analytical methodologies as supporters, rather than leaders, of otherwise traditional historical projects might help convince more adventurous historians that they can dabble without having to take the full 'digital plunge'.

Conclusion

I have pulled no punches in outlining a case that might be applied to most fields of history, not just the subfield to which this special issue of *Political Quarterly* is dedicated. But, British political history could form a vanguard in a second coming of computational analysis in the wider discipline, not just because of the amenability of its sources and research questions to quantitative analysis, but also because it is entirely in keeping with our rich tradition of methodological innovation. The focus on 'high politics' borrowed from both prosopography and psychoanalysis; 'electoral sociologists' leant heavily on political science; and the 'new political history' was indebted to literary theory and philosophy. These innovations, and many others, did not occur without substantial methodological debate on what allied disciplines could teach us; they also required a pragmatic appetite to embrace the new where it deserved to be embraced. The first wave of historical computing may have faltered—and perhaps the second will too—but it should not be condemned before a jury of apathy and ambivalence. Let us have this debate: but to do so, we require the Luddites to come forward and—politely or otherwise—reply. It won't just be political historians watching.

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[20]It is still hard to beat S. Adolphs, *Introducing Electronic Text Analysis*, London, Routledge, 2006. For free entry level courses for historians to learn text mining, see L. Blaxill and K. Beelen, 'Text mining for historians' and 'Statistics for historians', *Hypotheses*, Max Weber Stiftung, 2022; https://wissen.hypotheses.org/2783. For a course on parliamentary discourse, see D. Fišer and K. Pahor de Maiti, 'Voices of the parliament: a corpus approach to parliamentary discourse research', *Clarin*, University of Ljubljana, 2021; https://www.clarin.eu/content/voices-parliament-corpus-approach-parliamentary-discourse-research