Contribution ID : **155**   Type : **Oral presentation**

Toward a Network Analysis of Digital Humanities Discourse

giovedì 30 ottobre 2025 17:00 (15)

In recent years, Digital Humanities (DH) has gained significant visibility both within academia and in public discourse, yet this expansion has been accompanied by persistent debates over the field's identity and intellectual foundations (Hockey, 2004; Nyhan, 2016). This ongoing "soul searching" has produced a steady stream of publications centered on recurring questions such as "What is DH?" (Piotrowski, 2024). In this context, also due to a lack of institutional recognition, informal networks and communication channels have played a key role in shaping the community. In particular, the Humanist mailing list (founded by W. McCarty in 1987) has served as a central hub for exchange and debate.

This study applies a network-analysis approach, adapted from studies of character-word relationships in Homer's Iliad (Rydberg-Cox, in print), to the complete corpus of messages collected in the Humanist Discussion Group archive (1987–2020). The analysis requires systematic preprocessing of the textual corpus, including tokenization, vocabulary filtering, and standardization to extract meaningful linguistic patterns from unstructured email data. We construct a bipartite network where nodes represent message authors and the words they use (excluding stop words and terms occurring in fewer than a specified threshold), and edges connect authors to their vocabulary. Additionally, we examine a complementary network of direct interactions based on quotation patterns within email threads, where authors engage explicitly with each other's contributions.

We explore how this dual network approach can mine large textual corpora to identify central terms that define the DH lexicon, examine the centrality of concepts, investigate the evolution of their popularity over time, and extract latent thematic structures and semantic relationships within the DH discourse. The interaction network provides insights into actual scholarly dialogue patterns and collaborative relationships, offering a more complete picture of community formation and intellectual exchange.

Keywords/Topics

Network analysis Text mining Digital humanities Mailing lists Academic discourse Community detection

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Session Classification : Social Network Analysis in Scientometric Research

Track Classification : Social Network Analysis in Scientometric Research