Digital Humanities Scholarship in Africa: Prospects and Challenges

by
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Introduction:

Computer and Digital Technological advancement have facilitated learning and research in Africa. The availability of online digital academic resources has resolved the problem of limited access to books and academic in Africa. Also, the use of digital medium of communication has enhanced both oral and visual communication with other scholars across the globe. Furthermore, Digital scholarship is growing rapidly in Africa, and its development is centred around the use of Digital tools in resolving traditional humanities questions. Within the past three years, summer schools, workshops, and conferences have been organised in Africa to promote the use of DH Technologies for research among the humanists. In this research, I intend to explore issues surrounding use of Digital Humanities (DH) tools by humanists in Africa (using Nigeria as a case study). I used online surveys to inquire about the difficulties experienced by these Scholars while using DH tools such as AntConc, Voyant Tools, Zotero, Mendeley, Open Refine, etc. I shall briefly outline the challenges obtained through those surveys, and state ways in which DH scholars in Africa are currently resolving those restraints and the prospects therein.

Challenges

Survey A:

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/16AuDCa1l8iEBK9vNP2E8YxBnFCXIdGrcDenzaohMQQ/edit#responses

In 2018, I organised a day Workshop on the use of Computer for academic research, and I conducted a survey to access the attitude of African students to deployment of Digital technologies within the academia. The Survey was filled by 297 respondents, mostly shows undergraduate male students of the University of Lagos, Nigeria. The outcome shows that:
- The students from the faculty of Arts (Humanities) show less interest while most of the respondents were from Sciences, Education, Social Sciences, Managements, and Engineering.

- Most of them were interested in learning how to code, develop databases, and create Apps.

- Over 50% of the respondents are already grounded in basic computing, data processing, graphics design, and have knowledge of basic scripting languages.
Meanwhile, 31.8% of the respondents see themselves as Computer literate while 35.5% think that they are semi-literate. Obviously, more than half of the respondents have their own personal laptops and are quite familiar with available software for research in their respective disciplines.

SURVEY B:

Link: [https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1_WQRpKd8v7wuOEbH2qTP-S9SuAUxCPAW-lsUsegncUQ/edit#responses](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1_WQRpKd8v7wuOEbH2qTP-S9SuAUxCPAW-lsUsegncUQ/edit#responses)

At the end of the 2nd Summer School of Digital Humanities organised for DH Scholars in Nigeria and some other West African countries, I conducted a survey to determine the attitude of scholars and researchers in the humanities to the use of Digital Humanities (DH) technologies for research and learning within the academic community. The survey shows that DH Technological tools have gained wide acceptance among some African scholars in the humanities (see Chart III).
Some respondents said DH Tools (such as Zotero) have helped them in keeping the list of the books they authored, while they have also used DH Tools such as Mendeley to locate secondary references when in doubt or when source is incomplete. Some scholars opined that it has made their research work neat and understandable.
-some correspondence complained that they were unable to know all the operations of these DH software. One of those respondents said and I quote: 'I am new to them or they are new to my usual method of gathering data and analysis', and another wrote thus: 'I had to first learn the basics of using the tools’.

-most advanced users of these tools lamented that some of the tools are not just accessible nor able to analyse some data and images captured with the use of African languages. They complained that most DH Tools lack the capability to capture contextual meaning. A respondent said that in his attempt to use these tools in investigating academic writing practices of tertiary students and expert writers (and sometimes those of native English writers on the basis of corpora), those tool have often been difficult to customize. This challenge could have informed another respondent suggestion that the current challenge with DH technologies is that most of them are not be optimized for use in the developing world.

**RESOLUTIONS AND PROSPECTS**

DH Technologies have enhanced research and learning in the humanities by providing alternatives to manual way of analysing texts, doing annotation, gathering, and sorting data. Although they have facilitated research and save time by providing faster techniques to word counting and imputation of bibliographic information, they could only replace manual approaches to research when there is more synergy between the designers and the users. In recent times, DH Research centres in Africa have embarked on extensive research towards the optimization of African languages with those DH Technologies. For instance, South African Centre for Digital Language Resources(SADiLaR) focuses on all official languages of South Africa, while The Centre for Digital Humanities of the University of Lagos (CEDHUL) in
Nigeria is currently developing indigenous repositories and corpus – for example, the Corpus of Nigeria New Media Discourse in English (CONNMDE) and the Corpus of Nigeria Public Health Communication in English (CONPHCE). The challenges posed by high cost of internet subscription and epileptic supply of electricity in most Africa nations have been resolved through the implementation of Alex Gil’s idea of 'Minimal Computing'.

To conclude this discourse on the enhancement of DH Tools for use in the analysis of data, texts, and images extracted in Africa, I would enjoin African scholars to come up with epistemological and ontological frameworks that would aid software developers in creating tools which capture the unique aspects of African history, techné, culture, philosophy and tradition. Furthermore, we implore DH Scholars across the globe to collaborate with us in our effort to develop multimedia documentaries, archives of cultural movies, digital translators for African languages, virtual galleries that would display African sculptures, arts, artifacts, and antiques. In a bid to promote diversity and global framework for Digital Humanities scholarship, Africa's rich multilingual and multicultural knowledge system has so much to contribute and this unique perspective towards the development of Textual, Visual and Audio DH Tool should not be ignored.