

November 30, 2019

The School of Information Sciences  
University of Illinois  
Champaign, IL, 61820

Dear Members of the Search Committee:

Please accept my application for the position of Assistant Professor in Digital Humanities. I am currently a Postdoctoral Associate and Weld Fellow at the Princeton Center for Digital Humanities and defended the first digital history dissertation at Vanderbilt University in August 2019.

As a digital humanist, my research bridges history, media studies, computer science, and data visualization to make new knowledge claims about the past *and* build new digital methods for producing humanistic knowledge. My book project, *Circulating Anti-Colonial Cairo: The Struggle to Decolonize The International Information Order and Construct the Third World in Egypt*, tells the story of how Egypt became one of the foremost international news media producers and a leader in the global anti-colonial movement of the 1950s and 60s. Moving between the local national and international scales, I trace how Egypt's efforts to build a post-colonial information regime were instrumental in transforming Cairo into a hub for leftist revolutionaries and nationalist movements from around the globe. This perspective elucidates how anti-colonial politics rationalized a massive expansion of the Egyptian state, and how in turn these new state-funded media platforms allowed Cairo to circulate their revolutionary message to the Third World. To uncover how Egypt's involvement differed from other anti-colonial states, I integrated digital methods into my historical narrative. Given the dearth of non-Western digitized collections, I developed a custom web application to digitize Egyptian and Third World newspapers and periodicals, turning these archival sources into machine-readable datasets. I then used a combination of natural language processing, computer vision, network analysis, and machine learning to trace how anti-colonial discourses transformed over the 1960s. Ultimately, I argue that combining digital analysis of these ideas along with the history of new media infrastructures and state institutions is crucial for understanding how Egypt challenged the existing international information order and promoted a vision for the Third World.

At Princeton I am expanding my project into the 1970s to include the New World Information and Communication Order movement and publications from additional anti-colonial capitals like Havana and Dar es Salaam. In addition, I am leveraging neural networks to improve the OCR accuracy of my multi-lingual sources and to capture images in these periodicals, which will enable comparisons between the textual discourses and visual symbolism of anti-colonialism. I plan to publish an interactive website alongside my monograph so readers can explore how *place* shaped *perspective* in the making of the Third World. In addition to my book, I am completing two forthcoming articles. The first details Egypt's role in the Congo crisis, weaving together political, intellectual, and digital history to detail the previously underappreciated extent of Cairo's involvement in this Cold War conflict. The second article describes the infrastructure that I have built to digitize these sources and their relation to broader transformations in historical research practices. I argue that as scholars increasingly move from archives to datasets the divide between infrastructure and interpretation has shifted, and that small-scale digitization of sources now requires a rethinking of the relationship between data curation and argument in the humanities. These themes of information history and information technology are at the heart of my next project, which uses television archives and digital methods to explore how the Third World became known as

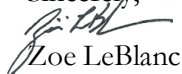
the Global South. In particular, I aim to uncover how the rise of new television and satellite infrastructure in post-colonial states intersected with emerging ideas about multiculturalism and globalization in the 1980s and early 90s.

My passion for digital humanities defines my teaching methodology. This Spring I am teaching an introductory course in digital humanities (DH) that surveys both the intellectual debates to define the field and exposes students to the praxis of DH through a semester-long humanities data analysis project. I am also consulting for an undergraduate seminar in the Computer Science Department led by Professor Brian Kernighan on building DH tools. My approach to teaching DH draws from my experiences as a Digital Humanities Developer at the Scholars' Lab at UVA, and from DH graduate fellowships I held at Vanderbilt University. While my primary focus at UVA was rebuilding Neatline and Bookworm (mapping and text mining tools respectively, that are widely used in the classroom), I had the opportunity to teach a course for graduate fellows on humanities programming. This class introduced students to thinking both computationally and statistically with humanities data and research questions. I paired coding assignments with readings on the history of computing and the social construction of data to encourage my students to see digital technologies not simply as tools, but instead as socially and politically constructed ways of knowing. Thus, learning how to capture data from a web page was also an opportunity to discuss the construction of datasets, the history of the internet, and current debates over data ownership and privacy. I strongly believe that for students to engage meaningfully with digital humanities, they must be exposed to a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds, including theoretical approaches to data, histories of information and knowledge, and computational methods. Yet digital humanities itself is a recent construct, and one that is still coalescing, especially relative to other areas of the humanities, which is why I am also committed to advancing the field. To this end, I joined the Association for the Computers and the Humanities' Executive Committee and the editorial board of the *Programming Historian* to advocate for humanists interested in learning digital methods and building digital projects. I have also shared my experiences in digital humanities through panels at national conferences, as well as a proposed a submission to the *Debates in Digital Humanities* series on the future of digital research in dissertations.

I believe that my commitment to digital humanities research and pedagogy is well suited to the mission of the School of Information Sciences. As a member of this community, I hope to contribute to existing course offerings, and help further digital humanities on campus by providing opportunities for students to confidently and critically experiment with humanities research and computational methods. Given the interdisciplinary nature of the iSchool, I also hope to collaborate with fellow faculty and students to develop curriculum that pushes disciplinary boundaries and digital projects that reimagine humanities scholarship. My research at the intersections of international histories of information, along with my expertise in digital and computational methods, complements and advances the existing strengths of the iSchool. As a scholar studying the history of information, building new digital infrastructure, and envisioning the impact of digital research on both the humanities and in society writ large, I believe that the School of Information Sciences represents an ideal scholarly community, and I would be honored to contribute to the future of digital humanities on this campus.

I have included my curriculum vitae, research and teaching statement, and contact information for my references, and am happy to share additional materials upon request. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

  
Zoe LeBlanc