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Editorial: hidden gems and pointing fingers

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One of my favourite professors implored her students to always be kind to archivists: ‘They know the archive and if they like you, they will help you find the hidden gems of the collection’. In a way, the subject of this special issue, Delpher, can be seen as the modern, digital equivalent of an archivist: the platform provides researchers with access to the extensive digital collections of the KB and several other Dutch institutions, helping them find the gems in the collection. There are certainly aspects to Delpher that leave room for improvement – as several of the contributors to this special issue will point out. However, I think it is fair to begin this theme issue by considering the upsides and benefits of the platform.

The “digital humanities” is arguably the most vibrant, as well as one of the best funded, research fields within the humanities. As this burgeoning field is spurred on in part by what is often called ‘big data’, digital access to large collections of “texts” – mostly in the form of digitized newspapers, periodicals, and books – has become increasingly important. Delpher has provided Dutch-speaking digital humanities scholars (and other researchers, amateur or professional) with an almost unfair advantage over many of their international colleagues. Aside from Trove, the Delpher of Australia, no other national platform exists that provides comprehensive access to such a wide range of digitized historical sources and does so without pay-walls or expensive institutional subscriptions. In short: Dutch scholars, and scholars of Dutch history especially, have a lot to be grateful for.

Still, despite all the enthusiasm, the digital humanities in general – and research that uses platforms like Delpher in particular – remain far from established “fields”, both as such and in the Bourdieuan sense of the word. Because the new field threatens long-established non-digital research practices, proponents as much as opponents of the digital humanities scrutinize platforms like Delpher for either doing too little or doing too much. In addition, the critique of contributors to this issue can be further subdivided into two categories. Firstly, one encounters fundamental critique of the digital humanities as such, often coupled with a fear for the disappearance of more traditional research methods and skill sets. For instance, Van Groesen notes in his article on early modern

Dutch newspapers that the paper archive will always ‘trump’ the digital archive, if only because of its ability to bring the researcher closer to the seventeenth-century reader, who may also have held, smelt, and read the same paper. Der Weduwen, writing on early modern newspapers as well, argues for a method that combines research in paper and digital archives, positing them as reinforcing each other.

Other contributors to this issue, focusing on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, do not share this more fundamental critique. This might be because Delpher does not provide the same level of access to different historical periods, making trips to the paper archive more likely. Take for example, the enormous difference in the available number of pages for the seventeenth and the nineteenth century. However, just like Van Groessen and Der Weduwen, the other authors do point to problems surrounding the (in)completeness of Delpher as a whole, and that of smaller specific corpora, hand-selected by researchers. In her article on ‘quantitative discourse analysis’, for example, Van Krieken considers if studies using Delpher can ever meet core standards of quantitative research like generalizability and replicability, noting the inherently unstable and ever-changing nature of the digital archive. Walma, who argues for a further specification of the categorisations of newspaper articles, and Verhoef, who introduces two computational approaches that can result in a more fine-grained indexation of newspaper advertisements, are similarly, be it on a more practical level, concerned with finding ways to build stable, representative corpora of sources with Delpher.

One wonders, however: can digital archives ever truly be complete? Will platforms like Delpher ever be able to answer to the needs of the majority of researchers, let alone ever be perfect? Such issues cannot be resolved by practical or technical additions and/or adjustments to digital archives or platforms (although the contributors to this special issue make some excellent suggestions on this front). We will never be able to add *enough* digitized pages. The functionalities of search engines, the indexation of pages (OLR) and the OCR quality will never be good *enough*.

In my opinion, these kinds of issues revolve in the end around agency – the perceived or presumed agency of Delpher as a digital archivist, and that of the scholars who make use of it. Researchers often point out the flaws of digital platforms such as Delpher, seemingly forgetting the inherent constructed nature of *every* archive. Instead of solely improving the archive, I find that we, as scholars, should also think about adjusting our methodology: the way we “handle” the archive, reasserting our agency over digitized sources. Verhoef’s notion of semi-distant reading, a method situated between quantitative and qualitative approaches, is a welcome addition in this respect. Similarly, Van den Bos and Giffard’s article, in which an indexation of newspaper relevance is suggested, is an example worthy of imitation.

After reading Van den Bos and Giffard’s contribution, I realized that there is an important difference between a human archivist and a digital one. A human archivist may be kind and helpful to you, going the extra mile to help you find the gems of the collection, or they might be grumpy. A digital archivist like Delpher is exactly as “friendly” and “helpful” as it can be made to be: in this digital age we not only construct

the archive, but also the archivist. This should lead us to be careful in pointing out the flaws of Delpher, because we are – in most cases – pointing at ourselves.

There are many more points to be made about the insightful contributions to this special issue, but this falls beyond the scope of this introduction. Besides the contributors, I would like to thank all the editors of *TS*, and Tessel Bauduin – my co-editor of this issue – especially. Furthermore, I would like to thank Maaïke Napolitano of the KB for her help, suggestions, and of course her contribution. This issue would not have been possible without our wonderful guest-editors Meike Kersten and Bjorn Schrijen. Finally, I would like to thank my predecessor Maaïke Koffeman, whose commitment to *TS* only became truly clear after she was no longer in charge: Maaïke, on behalf of the entire *TS* team, this issue is dedicated to you.

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