

Digital Social Networks of the Past: Issues, Limits and Challenges

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This contribution, which lies at the intersection of two topics that will be addressed at the conference (Critical study and digital hermeneutical approaches in the humanities, and Humanities research enabled by digital approaches), aims to analyse how the study of digital social networks of the past may challenge historians of the Web and digital cultures (Brügger and Schroeder, 2017) and help shed light on current issues concerning the heritagisation of social networks.

Starting with the ARPANET, *The Network Revolution* by Jacques Vallee (1982) and the virtual communities described by Howard Rheingold in the mid-1990s, and considering the development of BBSes (such as CBBS), of FidoNet and Minitel, the first part of this contribution will show how, by studying these digital paths and their narratives and posterity, historians are able to question the continuities and changes within digital cultures (the “Web 2.0 turn” (O’Reilly, 2005), the “pre-history” of current social networks in terms of participation, user profiles, co-construction, platforms, audience, etc.). Based on my own work dedicated to communities that emerged in France during the 1980s (Minitel and the French BBS Calvacom, Schafer, 2012 and 2018) and also on a survey of other academic research on GeoCities (Milligan, 2017), Usenet (Paloque-Bergès, 2015), FidoNet (Driscoll, 2016), DDS (Nevejan and Badenoch, 2014) and HotWired (Stevenson, 2016), this first part will present a general historical framework that will highlight aspects of legacy within digital cultures.

The second part will focus on the sources, tools and methods that can be used for the reconstruction of these lost and/or “old” social networks. It will particularly focus on a typology of their born-digital heritage: some content completely disappeared with the end of the network that supported it (this is the case of Minitel), some content was saved (such as GeoCities by Archive Team), some was preserved but there is no way of entering its archival “black box” (as with newsgroups), and some is currently being rebuilt through media archaeology (such as DDS, see Alberts et al., 2017). This second section will reveal some of the limits and difficulties faced by historians when trying to reconstruct a complete picture of these social networks, and the strategies that may be employed or should be avoided.

These issues and challenges may pave the way for new practices and for “an integrative view of historical practice in the digital age that underscores hybridity as its main characteristic” (Zagsmaa, 2013), leading to the hybridisation of materials, research fields, methods, tools and partners. To conclude we will link these experiences and research with the current archiving practices of social networks (and their limits) in order to speculate on how future historians may be able to historically analyse Facebook or Twitter, for example, through Web archives.

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