Call for Papers: Engaging with Big and Small Historical Data
An edited volume in Routledge’s Engaging with… series

The material that historical research – and humanities scholarship in general – is based on traditionally carries names like ‘archival’ or ‘primary sources’. The ongoing disciplinary movement towards digitization and datafication forces us to engage with our material in new ways: it becomes data. The aim of the volume Engaging with Big and Small Historical Data, under contract with Routledge as a part of their Engaging with… series, is to provide a guide for the scholarly community of historians to reflect on the consequences of these current developments. We invite historians and other scholars with an interest in this topic to contribute to the volume.

The structure of the volume is based on the following question regarding the datafication of historical scholarship. We are specifically looking for scholars interested in contributing to the named chapters within each of these parts of the volume, although we are open to any other suggestions that fit the aims of this volume:

0) Defining Data. The growing abundance of data has long been celebrated under the guise of ‘big data’. The contributions that this volume will start with will together address the most important debates that underlie this rhetoric. They elaborate on the epistemological consequences of thinking in terms of big data, on the rhetoric of ‘newness’ of big data, and on questions of bias, power, and inequality that come with big data.

Available chapters:
  a) Historicizing the data deluge
  b) Data (and) inequality: power and ethics

1) Where are data to be found? Data is not always stored in the archives and libraries that we know how to work with. Preconditions for access to data are changing. Historians have to cope with paywalls, versioning, permissions, and formats. They have to learn about OCR, image recognition, and other techniques. Most of all, they are usually not in control of what material is or can be turned into data. This raises crucial questions about what material can be worked with as data in the first place, and what material is being left out, excluded, overseen, or forgotten.

Available chapters:
  c) Digitization and the role of heritage institutions

2) How do we engage with data? Working with data impacts the epistemological preconditions of historical scholarship, if only because its methodologies usually originate from other fields of research. Does working with data necessitate a (new) quantitative turn in historical scholarship, or can it be integrated into hermeneutic traditions? How do current developments in artificial intelligence and machine learning, which have a huge potential for historical research, impact traditional views on methodological reflection and source criticism?

Available chapters:
  d) Becoming interdisciplinary
  e) Data and open science: presenting scholarship in the digital age

3) What can we find in data? Tools and techniques for computational analyses of data are advancing with great speed, and historians and other scholars have been using them in a large variety of ways to study history. These techniques allow for new research questions, as well as new perspectives on familiar questions.

Available chapters:
The title of this volume aims to capture the often intertwining trends that are hidden under these questions. It refers to the various dimensions of scholarship that come with digitization and born digital data. In addition, the juxtaposition of big and small also evokes two widely discussed approaches to using data in a humanities context – which are all but mutually exclusive. A more elaborate introduction to the volume’s aims and design can be found at http://tinyurl.com/BigandSmallData.

The volume primarily aims to target the field of history. However, even if based on historical examples, the contributions to this volume are to have relevance for other fields of humanities research. After all, the historical data that is being digitized is used in a wide range of fields, from cultural studies to philosophy and from media studies to linguistics. Therefore, scholars from adjacent fields working with historical data are also warmly invited to contribute.

Contributions are ca. 7000 words long (excl. bibliography) and, ideally, relate to a combination of concepts, key terms/methodologies and case studies. Due date for the first draft of contributors’ chapters is Jan 1, 2025. Revised chapters are due in the Spring of 2025. Expected publication of the volume is the Fall of 2025.

Interested scholars are asked to send proposals of max. 300 words no later than July 1, 2024 to volume editor Pim Huijnen at p.huijnen@uu.nl, who you may also contact with any questions.