



Long-Term Policy on the Digital Humanities in Israel:

# Current Status and Vision for the Future

Outcomes of a symposium sponsored by The Israel Young Academy,  
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Computational methods have been increasingly employed in recent years throughout various disciplines in the humanities, including in history, linguistics, Judaic studies and archeology. The prospect of analyzing great troves of sources using technological means that not long ago were beyond our wildest dreams opens up new horizons for researchers, and will no doubt produce countless fresh insights and questions. Archeologists, for instance, can now use 3D scanners to perform comparative analyses on an astonishing amount of items. Students of the Genizah can likewise consider hundreds of thousands of items, currently scattered in seventy libraries around the world, and link together items whose association was unimaginable just a few years ago. Archives can use new technology to scan millions of items and upload them onto the Web, for both public and academic use, enabling wide-ranging research that was, until recently, impossible.

The increasing use of Digital Humanities tools by scholars in the humanities has generated wider recognition of the potential benefits of the new technology and methods. Funding bodies have consequently been more disposed to fund such initiatives. The call for proposals published in the summer of 2019 by the Israeli Ministry of Science to fund initiatives and postdoctoral grants in the field is further evidence of the growing importance of the Digital Humanities, and of the larger role it should play in future research. Furthermore, advances in the field of Digital Humanities have great potential for making research more publicly accessible, and for promoting public participation in scientific research. Archives, libraries, public bodies and private ventures have all been uploading to the World Wide Web treasures of human knowledge and tradition. A clever steering of the interface between such initiatives and scholars in the humanities, heeding both the needs of research and the interests of the public, would likely upgrade scientific analysis and integrate it more efficiently with publicly available insights and knowledge. Digital humanities can help researchers connect with historically and culturally significant enterprises, and prompt them to relate in new ways to aspects of Israeli society that are underrepresented in current scholarship. They can provide public access to knowledge about our shared heritage, and encourage non-academics to actively participate in scientific efforts – working with the education system, cultural institutions and private organizations.

Digital humanities tools in Israel are increasingly used nowadays in various fields of scholarship. We believe that this is a critical stage in the development of the field, whereupon researchers and policy makers can and should offer insights on its application and suggestions for its enhancement. This perspective invites us to look back at all that has already been achieved, and at the same time, to look into the future, reflect on the potential of the field and consider the policies that would allow us to realize its inherent possibilities. How, for instance, can we create cross-institutional and interdisciplinary partnerships that would prevent the wasting of resources and allow the leveraging of multiple branches of knowledge? How can we ensure that resources are directed towards productive paths, and prevent the creation of useless, unnecessary websites? How can we preserve completed initiatives for future use? And how can we make sure that learning is accumulated and shared efficiently, despite the entrenched propensity of scholars in the humanities to work alone? How can we relate to the public and its own needs, and how might the wisdom of crowds be used to further research in the humanities? What dangers are there in scanning and increased accessibility, and how can archives avoid them? What are the implications of copyright on accessibility efforts, and what novel ethical dilemmas does it involve, challenging archival and documentary work? These are just some of the issues that need to be addressed within this context.

In order to answer these and other questions, we convened some of the most experienced scholars in the field for a symposium jointly organized by the Israel Young Academy and the Ministry of Science and Technology. The Israel Young Academy is a division of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities. Comprising distinguished young Israeli scientists of various disciplines, the Young Academy is dedicated to the advancement of Israeli science and its wider accessibility through a cross-institutional and interdisciplinary collaboration. We asked the symposium's speakers to present what they see as the main challenges in the field in Israel, and propose some longer-term policies and revisions of existing policies. The presentations made it clear that we urgently need a strategic national vision; unified, cross-institutional infrastructure; an advancement of international academic relationships in the field; and a critical review of research and teaching practices, including a systematic introduction of the Digital Humanities into the education system.

## In praise of collaboration

In their seminal research on life in eastern European Jewish villages (Shtetls), *Life is with People*, Elizabeth Herzog and Mark Zborowski show how individuals and organizations often assume that it is "easier" and more "convenient" to face their challenges alone. Unfortunately, this predisposition passes up on the possibility of meeting others who might help, enrich and challenge; it thus discounts collective wisdom, collaboration and synergy, which often produce results more thrilling, rich and efficient than anything that can be achieved single-handedly. The advancement of Digital Humanities calls for interdisciplinarity and collaboration. Accordingly, our symposium was not meant to serve as a standalone event, but rather as the beginning of a systematic, collaborative and lasting process of integrative discussions and practices for the sake of promoting the Digital Humanities. The finalization of this policy paper – already planned and announced during the symposium – is yet another step in this process, which hopefully would culminate in implementing its recommendations.

In a related and noteworthy development, Israel has been negotiating its admission into the pan-European Digital Research Infrastructure for the Arts and Humanities (DARIAH). This process, which recently has been accelerated, was set in motion through a fruitful partnership between the Ministry of Science and Technology as the leading partner, the University of Haifa's Younes and Soraya Nazarian Library (creatively and firmly involved in the process since 2016), and the Israel Young Academy. We believe that such collaborations are indispensable: teamwork is a vital component in this endeavor and a precondition for further achievements.

Apart from a vision for future development, we would like to promote a productive model for a robust and enduring professional relationship between academia and government. Our hope is that it can serve as a standard for other disciplines and fields of interest, notwithstanding the obvious challenges involved in this sort of cooperation.

# Integrative Policy Proposals

Following are nine integrative policy proposals:

## 1. Encouragement of new research in the Digital Humanities.

We recommend creating a long-term scheme for funding research that develops and utilizes Digital Humanities tools. This initiative would be jointly supported by the Ministry for Science and Technology, the Israel Science Foundation and the Israel Innovation Authority. On the one hand, the joint scheme would ensure an inclusive, integrative perspective, which would highlight the place of the Digital Humanities as a distinct discipline deserving of appropriate treatment; on the other hand, it would allow a crucial differentiation between basic research and the development of applications or products. The joint scheme would be open to contributions from philanthropic funds and additional governmental agencies.

## 2. Support existing research.

The formation and maintenance of digital databases require a long-term commitment. In order to preserve such databases as active and useful tools for scholars, and considering the importance of an integrative point of view and of a broad national and international perspective, we propose that about 25% of all financing allocated to the Digital Humanities (see policy proposal #1) should go towards elaborate tools for ongoing support of existing projects. Such support should be based on comprehensive evaluation, whether by using "transition periods" to find alternative funding sources, or by preserving ongoing support of the best and most important projects. Such projects would eventually find a natural home in university libraries and in the National Library of Israel. These institutions should allocate some of their own resources to keep these projects alive.

## 3. Acknowledging the Digital Humanities as a distinct field of inquiry.

We propose creating a dedicated team that would draft recommendations concerning the efficient advancement of the Digital Humanities in academia. The team would engage in an in-depth discussion of measures, such as allocating special budgets to faculties in the humanities in various universities, for the purpose of retaining computer and tech support staff that would help formulate and operate projects with Digital Humanities tools;

supplying faculty members with advanced equipment and software, fit for cutting-edge research; and organizing training days and special symposia for developing the Digital Humanities in the faculties. Recommendations should also be made for supporting recruitment of new staff that is already skilled in using the tools and methods of the Digital Humanities.

#### **4. Interface with data sciences and other related fields.**

The Digital Humanities have not developed in the void. Thus, structures should be built for cooperation and mutual fertilization with various other scientific arenas and fields. The discipline of data sciences would be one such natural partner for cooperation. This kind of discourse has already been initiated in most universities by the Planning and Budgeting Committee (of the Council for Higher Education in Israel), and the Israel Young Academy. We propose this discourse be expanded, institutionalized for the long-run, and used as a model for developing the relationship between the Digital Humanities and related fields.

#### **5. Plan for the future of "traditional" humanities.**

For all the importance and great potential of the Digital Humanities, it is imperative that we also preserve and promote "traditional" interests and research methods in the humanities as well. Digitalization, however broadly or narrowly it is conceived, must never serve as an exclusive entry point to the humanities. Digital dimensions should be welcome when appropriate, when they can bear fruit and enrich our research; but they should not be regarded as the sole objective and the only viable methodology in the Humanities. This relates as well to broader concerns regarding current perceptions about the "identity" and prospects of the humanities. The various fields of the humanities took centuries to develop, and their path forward should therefore be probed with great care and sensibility. In this context, a working group made up of scholars from multiple disciplines, doctoral students as well as junior and senior faculty, might produce a much-needed framework for thinking through these issues. Following our symposium, the Young Academy established a new forum for the Digital Humanities, which seeks to address this need and contemplate both tensions and links between "traditional" and digital facets of research in the humanities.

## **6. Define the role of archives in the age of Digital Humanities.**

The variety of archives in Israel differ in accessibility to digital sources, levels of digitization, methods of content organization, etc. The aforementioned tensions between "old" and "new" are even more pronounced in Israeli archives. We propose that the Association of Israeli Archivists collaborate with the Young Academy, the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities and other bodies, in creating a special taskforce to determine the roles and potential future directions for archives in the 21st century.

## **7. Train the next (and the current) generation of scholars in the Digital Humanities.**

We propose building a structured but modular sequence of training, starting with high school education and culminating with senior scholars. Special courses in the Digital Humanities should be set up in high schools, and also be introduced as part of undergraduate and graduate university programs. Special modular workshops should also be provided to current faculty in research institutions and other relevant organizations.

## **8. Establish a vital connection with the international community.**

We propose creating a strategic program for linking Israel with key global initiatives in the Digital Humanities. A first important step would be for Israel to join the aforementioned pan-European DARIAH as a full member.

## **9. Towards the community: The Digital Humanities as an essential bridge connecting breakthrough science with the public.**

What can be more stimulating than to approach thousands of years of Jewish life, culture and thought with novel analytical tools? We propose that the Young Academy, the Ministry of Science and Technology and other interested parties organize a broad symposium on how best to promote awareness to the Digital Humanities, and on creating practical avenues for expanding the accessibility of the innovative research using its novel tools.