

Power Asymmetries of eHumanities Infrastructures

Infrastructures enable & confine scholarly practices

POWER ASYMMETRY

“When there is something available, then I can do something with it and we can take the next step as far as I am concerned, while for [the computational linguist] it often seems more a discussion on a philosophical level. **Sometimes that surpasses me.** The back-end remains something I feel I cannot do much with then” (history PhD)

“**You are very dependent** on what the computer scientists as experts, which they are, say and argue should be in the project proposal [...] in hindsight I think they should have said more about matters such as the really practical things, such as computation capacity, server space, the stability of software, how that is managed. You need money for that too. We did not have budget for that in the project, as **idiotic** as that seems now” (history professor)

“We thought [the software developers] had the experience and knew what we meant. **We did not consider that it could be interpreted otherwise**” (history coordinator)

“There is absolutely disconnect between how we want to use the tools and actually the development time. And **we do not have a good handle** on how long any given request would take to translate into code” (history postdoc)

“Even just a very sleek, a very finished looking thing, **makes you think as a user** it is finished. But we know it is being constantly tinkered with under the hood. Even the collections, the number of [sources] that we are dealing with for example, are changing constantly” (history postdoc)

KNOWLEDGE ASYMMETRY

COLLABORATION

KNOW-HOW

Digital research infrastructures simultaneously enable and confine research practices of scholars, constituting a **power relation**. This power relation can be characterised as a **power asymmetry**, with scholars dependent on the developers of infrastructures.

In order to reduce this power asymmetry, infrastructures are developed in **collaboration** between scholars and computational researchers. Through an analysis of 28 interviews I have investigated whether digital history collaborations succeed in reducing power asymmetry.

A significant issue is **knowledge asymmetry**, the ignorance of how a collaborator performs their tasks. Scholars consequently lack power to effectively influence infrastructure development, reinforcing power asymmetry. Besides the development of infrastructures, scholars therefore emphasize the development of **know-how** as a key outcome of collaborative eHumanities development.

“Another thing is really the learning **how do you conduct digital humanities**. How do you bring these parties together, what do you run into. So everything that on a methodological organizational side succeeds or fails, that has to be put on paper” (history professor)

“Ultimately a production-version does not have to come out of [the project], that is not the thing. This is more a technology project in which **the know-how that is developed**, also by the companies that work here, to a productive whole. That they can use parts in a new product” (history professor)



MAX KEMMAN
@MaxKemman
max.kemman@uni.lu
www.maxkemman.nl