

# Conference “Digital Methods and Resources in Legal History”

19-20 March 2020

Max Planck Institute for European Legal History, Frankfurt/Main, Germany

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## Introduction

The digital turn that changes society as we are watching has reached far into academia and even into the humanities as well. Digital methods are in use in academic fields like archaeology, music, art history, and digital resources are being established in literature studies, history, media studies and many more. (And that is not even mentioning fields arguably closer to quantitative methods such as social and political sciences, psychology or linguistics.) Computers are now involved in the gathering and preparation of research objects (e.g. digital audio records of interviews, digital images of manuscript pages, harvesting of social media on internet platforms, “cleaning” the resulting raw audio/video or text data, photogrammetrical extrapolation of archaeological 3D models etc), in their collection and curation (e.g. classifying objects in catalogues, linking cross-references over the internet, or providing smart access points to a digital collection), in their perusal, exploration and analysis (via search interfaces that include features like suggestion mechanisms and fuzzy matches, via various forms of complexity reduction, information extraction and exploratory visualization) and in the enhanced publication of research results (e.g. instantiating cross-references as hyperlinks, combining different media and dynamic forms of visualization, or offering interactive elements). Even in the field of applicable law, databases provide access to legislation and case law, sometimes going back to the 17th century, and they offer “intelligent” methods like semantic querying or citation extraction. In fact, while expectations of research policy makers and a general interest even of many non-technical legal historians have become tangible, the array of potentially useful resources and methods has already become quite confusing.

Another feature of digital approaches in the humanities that stands out is their inter- or transdisciplinary nature. In making use of digital methods and resources, scholars almost inevitably come into contact with persons, experiences and approaches from other disciplines: not only do they have to negotiate the applicability in their domain or the possible extensibility of existing tools and resources with the providers of the latter, but they also learn about the use of the same tools and resources in other disciplines, with slightly different, or maybe even

quite similar questions and perspectives. On the other hand, as those who are already using digital tools in the various disciplines can confirm, they can hardly ever be applied to a new field without difficulties, and frequently, what at first might seem to be a small but necessary modification is in fact a substantial challenge on the conceptual level, so that the seemingly effortless transdisciplinary use of those methods and tools is actually backed by continuing processes of critique, revision and redesign. The experience in other disciplines suggests that a more intense discussion of digital methods and resources in legal history is likely to reveal new challenges for toolmakers, too, and that it can be expected to promote the development of new tools that answer specific needs of legal history more directly.

While by now, more than just a few projects making use of such techniques have made their contributions to legal history, the uptake of those techniques in legal history as a field is still rather hesitant. To some extent this is probably due to the limited visibility of these methods (which is often related to disciplinary boundaries) and to the limited knowledge of how they may respond to genuinely legal-historical questions. In 2016, a [forum of the journal \*Rechtsgeschichte\*](#) has discussed the character of such projects' results (in some cases by tentatively translating results from other disciplines to legal history), and a [special issue of the \*Law and History Review\*](#) has presented a number of pioneering projects (with a – maybe unintended – exclusively Anglo-american focus), but by now a more encompassing, more concrete, and more differentiated picture can be drawn. Thus, we think it is a good moment to assemble legal historians and discuss what role digital methods play in their respective projects and what some of the aspects of a digital legal history, taken more generally, could be.

To that end, the Max Planck Institute for European Legal History holds a conference on “Digital Methods and Resources in Legal History” in March 2020, bringing together scholars with experiences and interest in digital methods who contribute to the composition of such a picture. Besides the presentation and critical discussion of methods, resources and project results, the conference also seeks to provide an opportunity for legal history scholars who are interested in digital approaches to get to know each other and begin building a community of sorts. In this vein, we will devote some sections of the conference to the discussion of common needs, of communication and collaboration strategies, and of perspectives relating the digital turn to the development of the discipline.

## Call for Papers/Posters

With this conference, we want to provide an opportunity to present collections, databases, gazetteers and similar resources of relevance to legal history, but also to have demonstrations of how these or other resources, and how digital methods in general have been put to use in concrete project contexts. Note that we explicitly invite reports about research questions, projects or approaches that have failed to find or create digital means to work with in a satisfactory manner, too. Some of the questions that could be discussed are the following:

- what insights in legal history have been made possible by the use of digital methods and resources?
- how do you integrate digital methods with hermeneutical and narrative aspects of your work?
- how are popular digital methods of analysis applied in legal history?
- what aspects of texts and objects are particularly relevant for legal history and how can they be modelled and processed in digital approaches?
- how do data-driven methods differ from other approaches in legal history?
- which limitations did you encounter when trying to use digital tools or methods?
- which digital resources are presently available, waiting to be exploited by legal history?
- which resources are lacking?

The conference combines invited talks with an open Call for Papers/Posters, so when submitting, please indicate whether you intend your submission as a talk or a poster proposal.

Paper submissions should have a length of up to 1.200 words, excluding references. Please also add a short abstract (150-300 words) for publication with the preliminary program.

Poster submissions should have a length of up to 500 words, excluding references. There will be an opportunity invite the audience to your poster during a poster slam. Please also add a short abstract for publication with the preliminary program.

Please note that submissions will not be anonymized in the review process.

The primary language of the conference will be English, but if you want to hold your presentation in another language, please get in touch with us so we can discuss the options.

### Important dates

- Please submit your proposal by: 2019-09-15
- Notifications of acceptance will be sent by: 2019-10-30
- Conference dates: 19-20 March 2020

### Contact, fees and administrative issues

Submissions should be sent by e-mail to [dlh@rg.mpg.de](mailto:dlh@rg.mpg.de).

There is no conference fee. For paper presenters, we will provide accommodation and reimburse travel costs according to the institute's general guidelines. (If you are presenting and want to organize your accommodation yourself, please get in touch so we can clarify conditions of reimbursement.) For poster presenters, we can

provide reimbursement of up to 400 € for travel and accommodation costs, according to the institute's guidelines.

The conference venue is the Max Planck Institute for European Legal History, Hansaallee 41, 60323 Frankfurt am Main, Germany. Directions for getting to the venue can be found [on the Institute's website](#).

For all questions and comments, you are very welcome to contact us by sending e-mail to: [dlh@rg.mpg.de](mailto:dlh@rg.mpg.de)