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AIME: opening the context of a Humanities inquiry

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Abstract. The AIME project is an empiric philosophical inquiry grounded on Bruno Latour’s work. To fulfill its philosophical scope, AIME strives to turn some readers into co-inquirers, thus assuming a collective and collaborative dimension. To achieve this goal a *context-aware argumentation platform* has been set up. The platform allows readers to frame the content of the inquiry into a broader contextual network and to contribute to it. We argue that digital technologies allow to foster the collective aspect of *humanities* by opening and presenting the context in which a specific argument is grounded in. More specifically they allow a richer collective appropriation and discussion about contents. We then discuss the challenges and limits lying down the open-context principle.

Keywords: digital humanities, scholarly publishing, argumentation platform, open context, collective inquiries.

1 Introduction

Despite the common idea of the solitary philosopher, humanities works have always been the result of intense collective and social interactions: conversations and debates, suggestions and informal contributions, collective reworking of ideas and tireless re-inspection of existing reasoning paths¹.

The materialization of such collective roots - the critical fortune - through footnotes or bibliographical references could be considered as technologies that are aimed at rendering the scholarly and personal experiences on which the author’s argumentative discourse is grounded.

Today, digital technologies and new research methods, under the name of Digital Humanities, permit to make the diverse outlying information supporting and inspiring one’s thesis available to the hands and to the eyes of readers without any limitation regarding quantity of information or type of content. Therefore, they allow to materialize even more the heterogeneous and lively groundings at work in the making of humanities, and thus to foster richer collective discussion and knowledge elaboration.

¹ As thoroughly shown by the historical visualization project “Mapping the Republic of Letters”. See : <http://republicofletters.stanford.edu/>

2 Humanities collective inquiries and digital technologies

2.1 Digital Humanities and openness

One of the goals of Digital Humanities is to take advantage of information technologies and the web to open knowledge and procedures of scholarly practices to a wider audience and in-between existing scholarly communities [1]. What is at stake here is, beside the dissemination of knowledge, the fostering of debate and discussion.

The open access movement is one of the main phenomena resulting from this will as it tries to spread the contents produced in scholarly contexts [2]. It has allowed the free access to print-based publishing materials through open access online journals² and humanities papers repositories³, but also spur the development of new born-digital forms of scholarly communication such as scholarly blogging platforms⁴ or multimedia scholarly journals⁵ [3].

The diverse open data initiatives at work in the humanities stem from the same concern of opening knowledge in scholarly communities [4]: they make available to anyone the very sources and reference materials either produced during one's research or potentially useful to it.

2.2 From opening contents to opening contexts

However, plain access to contents or data of humanities research may not be sufficient for allowing a genuine opening of one's work to collective discussion and appropriation.

Indeed, as Johanna Drucker has demonstrated in her analysis of visualization tools for the humanities [5], what we call "data" in the humanities is not only a raw material which needs simply to be made available to readers in order to become matters of debate and discussion: the source materials of the argumentative work of the humanities researcher is rather a constructed *capta* full of nuances and conceptual complexity and actively interpreted by its readers.

Thus, through a particular attention to the very interpretative process at work in one's thesis appropriation and discussion, and in order to open the very complexity of the "capta" that can be made available through the web, we argue that Digital Humanities could work on a new kind of opening perspective: the one of, beyond opening data and contents of an author's work, involving readers in the very process that has lead her from the network of references and experiences that she has gathered to her argumentative thesis.

In other words, in order to foster richer debate and discussion around an author's work, we argue that we should not just open its *contents* but also the *context* it has been made in.

² See for instance : <http://www.revues.org/>

³ See for instance the persée repository : <http://www.persee.fr/>

⁴ See for instance the hypothèse platform : <http://hypotheses.org/>

⁵ See for instance the Vectors multimedia journal : <http://vectors.usc.edu/>

3 AIME: opening the context of an inquiry

3.1 Intrinsic needs of context-opening in the AIME project

An Inquiry into Modes of Existence (AIME) is an empiric philosophy project initiated by the philosopher Bruno Latour. It deals with a systematic description of the different ontological systems that co-exist to describe our contemporary values and ways of being. The inquiry is made upon a strong corpus of references, multimedia documents and experience-related narratives, so as pointed by the concept of empiric philosophy.

Moreover, as the inquiry is ongoing and unfinished, and therefore requires further materials and arguments to be pursued, Bruno Latour wanted it to be collective and thus to welcome the contribution of several scholars, practitioners and specialists able to negotiate with him the definition of the “modes of existence” and their crossings.

Therefore, AIME's intellectual project and collective methodology required to open its context for two reasons. The first, as a reading issue, was to allow the readers to absorb, moreover the arguments proposed in the inquiry, also the vast and heterogeneous contexts in which the author had formulated them, and stored as a collection of notes, vocabulary definitions, diverse references and multimedia documents. The second, as a writing issue, was to enable committed participants to contribute to the inquiry in the same context-based mindset.

These different specifications have led to the elaboration of a human and technical infrastructure supporting the inquiry: a hard-copy book [6], a set of physical meetings, and a context-aware argumentation platform⁶. We are now going to focus on the latter artifact, as it seems to be the most likely transferable experiment for the broader digital humanities community.

3.2 Opening content through context-aware reading interfaces.

Beyond AIME's hard copy book's contents, which cover a very few part of all the inquiry's initial network of elements, context is presented via a digital platform that proposes what we could define as a "context-aware argumentative reading space". It allows to navigate in the network constituted by the initial textual elements and their various heterogeneous contextual references.

The platform's main interface⁷ presents a four-column system which organizes the contents according to their proximity with the author, from left to right: initial text, vocabulary entries, reference documents, and eventually contributions from other co-inquirers. The reader is left free to follow the linear thread of the initial book's text or to stroll through the links made between the elements of the inquiry.

Moreover, the platform allows for a second mode of navigation in the inquiry's context through a “cross-mode entry”⁸ which permits to represent the network of elements as grouped according to the several "modes of existence" and their crossings.

⁶ See: <http://www.modesofexistence.org/>

⁷ See : <http://www.modesofexistence.org/inquiry/>

⁸ See : <http://www.modesofexistence.org/crossings/>

Gathering all the elements of the inquiry in one visual navigable space allows to foster richer interpretations. We argue that such a compositional presentation of the network allows to produce a richer context-aware reading experience.

3.3 Opening debates : spurring genuine contributions through open context

As AIME is a collective inquiry, the digital platform allows for an enrichment of the initial argumentative network of the main author through the possibility of contributing to it. The goal of AIME is to spur a genuine collaboration among co-inquirers, but not to be a digital space in which would be submitted appreciative comments and opinions (as, for instance, in online newspapers' commenting threads) that wouldn't be useful to the inquiry.

To address this nuance between commenting and contributing, context-based argumentation has also been used: co-inquirers are invited to contribute to the inquiry on the double plan of context and content by producing scholarly-like reference-based arguments. The interface leads them to publish their contribution along with documented references: the enlarging of the context is thus made necessary by the platform machinery in order to keep some continuity between the way the first solitary inquiry was made and new contributions.

4 Opening contexts in the digital humanities: perspectives and discussion

4.1 Opening contexts as opening arguments to readers

Through the opening of context, readers are able to perform verifications of the argumentative discourse produced by the writer. We assume here that the opening of context gives readers an improved way to "open arguments", as it allows to trace back the relation between an argument and its demonstration, and to evaluate and critique how the author justified the making of her thesis and the journey from one argument to another.

This context-based form of publishing requires both a particular conceptual and technical infrastructure (a network-based organization of contents and contextual elements) and a specific interface design that allows to produce context-aware argumentation spaces and to help the reader to contribute properly.

4.1 Limits of context-opening

Basing on our experiment of an open-context platform, we would like to nuance the openness ideal at work in the humanities.

First, AIME's inquiry "context" is not the raw data of Bruno Latour's research but rather a *mise en scène* aiming at producing insights on inquiry's arguments through re-worked and carefully chosen significant contextual elements. AIME's context is a rhetorical network aimed at producing an open argumentative discourse through its navigation.

Secondly, as in movements such as open source programming [7], making the elements of an open collective project available for anyone doesn't mean that anyone can participate to its making: opening cannot avoid the question of expertise. Open context argumentation demands a certain level of expertise about the arguments handled: we have managed this requirement both by a careful moderating work made by a part of the team, and by a pedagogical contribution writing interface, which demands a step-by-step document-based argumentation and guides the co-inquirer in the making of a structured and documented contribution.

5 Conclusion and further research

Grounding on the insights given by the ongoing AIME experiment, we argue that spurring genuine open collective knowledge elaboration and discussions through the web is not only a matter of opening data or contents, but also of opening the very context of one's argumentative discourse.

This is done by setting up a network-based landscape of selected resources and texts and aimed at demonstrating and discussing arguments through a context-based contribution process.

As a future research perspective, we intend to transfer such an experience to other humanities inquiries and context-aware collective writing and reading processes, as some particular form of scholarly publishing especially suited for humanities and social sciences contents and their context-based forms of argumentation.

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