

Morals of Digital Humanities: Data and the Slave Trade

Digital humanities is an expanding field which is, by its nature, continually active, developing, and growing. The live nature of data available online through the internet and digitised texts means that information available on Google Books, for example, is being continually updated to include new publications. That being said, there are certain cautions that should be taken with exploring data in this way, and examining data models in a critical way is an essential skill in the study of digital humanities. There are also ethical and moral considerations to take into account in digital humanities and the [Debates in Digital Humanities](#) publications show the development of these moral considerations from 2012 to 2019. In the 2012 Introduction, Matthew Gold asks 'Does (digital humanities) have a politics?' and notes that the volume he introduces takes a critical look at digital humanities and is not afraid to highlight its shortcomings at the time, including its lack of attention to issues such as race, gender, class, and sexuality. The tone of the introduction for the 2019 edition is notably expanded in its view, and speaks of a field that is proactively trying to ally with and aid activists and those seeking to empower others. One example of this is the establishment of the group Data for Black Lives Matter in 2017, which is employing the field of data science for matters of racial justice.

Another example of this in action is the [Slave Voyages](#) project which collates records relating to the Trans-Atlantic and Intra-American slave trades from 1501-1875, including the names of ships, number of slaves transported, sizes of crews, places disembarked, and names of captains. The public nature of the database is emphasised and the ability for

contributions to be proposed and included (pending peer-review) affirms this. The public spirit of digital humanities seems strong here and the ability for anyone to access and explore this data in relation to research, either for personal or scholarly reasons, is a hugely positive aspect. In addition to this, the website includes lesson plans aimed at children aged 11-17 which feature activities that utilise the database and encourage students to conduct their own research. There are a variety of data mapping methods used in the database which present the data in engaging and easily readable ways, such as a time-lapse which represents the movement of slaves across the Atlantic through coloured dots. However, this contrasts somewhat to the sensitive subject matter the data represents, but nonetheless makes it more accessible to view. This is where the historical contextualisation included by the site is such a valuable addition: it provides social-historical context for the lives of the slaves who are essentially condensed into data points in the graphs and tables the website allows the user to view. Perhaps then, in the case of a data set relating to such a sensitive topic, an arms-length approach is best? Providing the essential historical contextualisation alongside the data allows the user to gain the information from the site that best suits their needs and draw their own interpretations from what they find. Regardless, making the data around the slave trade available and public and continually updating this information with new data (the site's last update was August 2021) is a way of making the lives of those enslaved visible and available for anybody to research.