

Towards Co-Designing a Global Biographical Research Infrastructure Introduction by the Local Organisers of BD2017 @ Ars Electronica

Eveline Wandl-Vogt

Austrian Academy of Sciences, Austrian Centre for Digital Humanities (ACDH-ÖAW)

1010 Wien, Sonnenfelsgasse 19

E-mail: eveline.wandl-vogt@oeaw.ac.at

Diversity:

The art of thinking independently together.

[Malcolm Forbes]

Abstract

Following the inaugural conference held in Amsterdam in 2015 (BD2015), the Biographical Data in a Digital World Conference (BD2017) aimed to continue the discussion on the multidisciplinary investigation of biographical data. Over two days, this conference brought together international researchers and actors of diverse backgrounds and experiences to facilitate knowledge exchange and innovation. Hosted by the Austrian Academy of Sciences, Austrian Centre for Digital Humanities (ACDH-ÖAW), this event was organized in cooperation with Ars Electronica and the DARIAH-EU Working Group “Analyzing and linking biographical data” in conjunction with Edith Cowan University (AU), Huygens ING (NL), University of Amsterdam (NL) and VU Amsterdam (NL). BD2017 took place in the framework of the project APIS (Austrian Prosopographical Information System) with the financial support of Landesregierung Oberösterreich and Linz Tourismus, kindly patronized by the Alliance of Digital Humanities Organizations (ADHO). The main aim of the conference was facilitating a co-designing process towards a Global Biographical Research Infrastructure in various dimensions.

1. Overall Framework:

Biographical Research and experimentation spaces: exploration space & Ars Electronica

The second edition of „Biographical Data in a Digital World (BD2017)“ Conference was held under the patronage of the Austrian Academy of Sciences (AAS), Austrian Centre for Digital Humanities (ACDH-ÖAW), in collaboration with Ars Electronica Center (AEC), 6-7 November 2017, in Linz (Austria).

In addition to its international organisational conference board (Edith Cowan University, Australia; Huygens Institute for the History of the Netherlands, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and University of Amsterdam, all three: The Netherlands) it was granted support by the Alliance of Digital Humanities Organizations (ADHO) as well as DARIAH-EU by means of the Working Group “Analysing and Linking Biographical Data”.

The main aims of the local organisers were to facilitate and enable a co-designing process towards the development of a Global Biographical Research Infrastructure¹:

More precisely, the core goals of this conference were

1. to open up the scope of the conference towards

new (relevant) actors and experts beyond scientific realms;

2. to trigger new directions of discovering dimensions of biographical / prosopographical data research in cross-organisational settings; and
3. to further participatory processes and co-design towards community building as well as integration into existing social infrastructures and (global) initiatives.

Against the background of the ACDH-ÖAW working group “methods and innovation”- “exploration space”², the conference was designed as an experience of diverse actors to come together and to stimulate knowledge exchange and innovation. Exploration space aims to stimulate, design, enable and scientifically analyze new forms of knowledge production at the intersection of science, technology and society by applying Open Innovation methods and practices. BD2017 was the first conference organized against this mission.

The conference was embedded into the stimulating environment of Ars Electronica Center in Linz (AT)³: “a place of inquiry and discovery, experimentation and exploration, a place that has taken the world of tomorrow as its stage, and that assembles and presents influences from many different ways of thinking and of seeing

¹ c.f. various presentations of the author in the framework of the Open Innovation Research Infrastructure, such as : goo.gl/1U7sjQ.

² <https://www.oeaw.ac.at/acdh/about/news-archive/news-detail/article/methods-and-innovation/>

³ <https://www.aec.at/news/>

things”.

BD2017 aimed to be a low-threshold conference. The open space of Ars Electronica (a museum rather than a scientific institution) was a key indicator of this goal; as was the commitment of our financial and in-kind supporters to run this event without any registration fees.

Our website runs on Google-Sites:

<https://sites.google.com/view/bd2017/home>.

Conference abstracts have been made available in advance via zenodo [DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.1041978]:

<https://zenodo.org/record/1041978#.WybYCIp9jX4>.

The conference is documented on Wikimedia.Commons /BD2017/. For those, who did not up to now: We are delighted if you add pictures and presentations.

2. Cross-Organisational Collaborations: People and Institutions

BD2017 focused on bringing together diverse actors to facilitate cross-organisational discussions in various guided and open formats.

Representing the various approaches toward biographical data in a digital world, BD2017 opened with two keynote inputs not primarily connected with biographical data:

On the one hand, Gerfried Stocker, Artistic and Managing Director of AEC, challenged current research based on biographical data against the background of Artificial Intelligence and Internet 4.0.

On the other, Tobias Schönberg, of Wikimedia Austria, introduced the collaborative approach and resource of Wikidata to the audience, challenging scientific biographical research practices (collaboration versus participatory approaches and democratization) and displayed some of its potentials for biographical research.

In a multidisciplinary setting, a panel discussion was set up to look beyond current biographical data research and trigger the question of what “Biographical data in a digital world” might include in 2017 and beyond and how researchers might be challenged by new approaches.

The panel, co-moderated by Harold Short (UK) and Eveline Wandl-Vogt (AT), introduced the various views of the panelists by means of “cultural probes”. Panelists were asked to give a brief statement considering the most challenging issues, and further research steps.

The panelists were chosen to offer a broad view on biographical data, on the one hand current biographical research, and on the other looking into various new fields of methods and applications / technologies as well as open up for new approaches for collaboration, and sharing views on research, cultural institutions, firms and citizens.

The invited panelists included:

Paul Arthur - Chair in Digital Humanities and Social Sciences, Director of Global Issues Centre at Edith Cowan University (AU), Georg Gartner - TU Wien, Department of Geodesy and Geoinformation, Head of Research Group Cartography (AT), Rennie Mapp - Project Manager for strategic DH initiatives at University of Virginia (US), Tobias Schönberg - Wikimedia Austria (AT), Gerfried Stocker - Artistic and Managing Director of Ars Electronica (AT), and Jo Payne - Head of Biographical and General Reference at Oxford University Press (UK).

Finally, at the end of day one the Second Meeting towards a Global Research Infrastructure for Biographical Research, chaired by Paul Arthur (AU) and Eveline Wandl-Vogt (AT) was held. A broad discussion allowed for wrapping up of ideas and challenges of day one on the one hand and mapping these onto visions and needs for a Global Research Infrastructure for Biographical Research; and on the other hand input for the interactive session for day two was collected.

3. Format: Interactions, Inspirations and Presentations

Next to 16 oral presentations and a poster session with 10 posters, about 60 participants were invited to engage with further sessions that aimed to touch core issues of working with biographical data and issues of high relevance in co-designing an innovation network for biographical research. All sessions were co-chaired with the aim of making use of the wealth of diversity.

The interactive sessions took place in AEC-labs. The labs allowed participants to open up new communication channels and new forms of interactions.

Session 1 was about Linking and Enrichment of Biographical Data, co-chaired by Matthias Schlögl (AT), Katalin Lejtovicz (AT), Antske Fokkens (NL), and Eero Hyvönen (FI).

Session 2 was digging into Visualisation and Visual Analysis, co-chaired by Florian Windhager (AT), Eva Mayr (AT) and Alessio Bertone (AT).

Session 3 discussed issues of Publication and Openness of Biographical data, co-chaired by Peter Kraker (AT), Bernhard Krabina (AT) and Sarah Herbe (AT).

Finally, session 4 aimed to meet issues of Collaboration and Co-Creation, co-chaired by Eveline Wandl-Vogt (AT), Abbas Salamat (AT) and Jo Payne (UK), representing scientific research (organisations), Wikimedia and a company.

I warmly want to thank all co-chairs of the sessions for their engagement and willingness to facilitate and grow the impact of this conference, as well as for their openness

and trust to experiment with the new format.

The less interactive paper presentation sessions were interrupted by inspirational walk arounds at AEC:
Highlights of Ars Electronica Center
Deep Space⁴ - Highlights
Deep Space - Specials.

I warmly thank AEC for this unforgettable experience.

4. Follow up and Thank you

The overwhelming impressions taken of AEC and its options to work and interact with (biographical) data, stimulated rich visionary discussions amongst the participants.

BD2017 led to several follow ups, amongst them:

- Application for a UNESCO Chair of Human Journeys in the Global Era program
- Application for an ADHO Special Interest Group on Biographical Data Research
- Examples for cross-organisational communications and first results of collaborations, e.g. Wikidata and research institutions, Wikimedians in residence in (biographical) research institutions.
- Activities to develop a Template for easing communication and collaboration with business companies on the example of OED
- Increasing activities in the setting of the DARIAH-EU working group on “Analysing and Linking Biographical Data”
- Proposal for a DH-conference workshop and a European Alliance of Digital Humanities Organisations (EADH): pre-conference workshop
- Proceedings of BD2017.

We are delighted about this variety and richness and we thoroughly wish the reader a positive experience in further collaborations in this area.

We gratefully thank our sponsors for their financial and in-kind support for making this event happen:

Ars Electronica Center
Austrian Centre for Digital Humanities - ÖAW
Landesregierung Oberösterreich
Linz Tourism
APIS (Austrian Prosopographical Information System).

Finally, I would like to thank all the contributors and enthusiastic participants.

Don't stop dreaming big and follow your visions! I deeply appreciated the time in Linz we were exploring together and look forward to shared next steps.

⁴ <https://www.aec.at/center/en/ausstellungen/deep-space/>