UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM

Faculty of Humanities

Proposal for a research group in the Faculty of Humanities

1. Name of the research group
Data Drive

2. Coordinator
Jan Hein Hoogstad, Robin Boast, Sander van Maas

3. Members of the research group
prof.dr. R. Boast
dr. J.H. Hoogstad
M.J. Kromhout MA
dr. S.A.F. van Maas
E. Mademli
dr. N. Martin

4. Description of the research programme of the research group (max. 400 words)
This text is work-in-progress and will periodically be updated as the project advances. The most up-to-date version can be found here: https://gist.github.com/datadrive/5049600. In 'The Age of the World Picture' (1938), Martin Heidegger argues that modern science and technology rest in their entirety on computation. Importantly, he warns that these ever-growing numbers and increasingly complex calculations come with a uncontrollable, and all-encompassing shadow. According to Heidegger, however, this shadow does not only designate a loss of control, it also announces the coming of a new era :"Everyday opinion sees in the shadow only the lack of light, if not light's complete denial. In truth, however, the shadow is a manifest, though impenetrable, testimony emitting of light. In keeping with this concept of shadow, we experience the incalculable as that which, withdrawn from representation, is nevertheless manifest in whatever is, pointing to Being, which remains concealed." ('World Picture,' 154)In 2009, Chris Anderson makes his own eschatological prediction in Wired Magazine, when he declares "The End of Science". Like Heidegger before him, Anderson's apocalypse rests on large numbers and complex computation, now called big data. As opposed to Heidegger, Anderson does not recognize a shadow in the 'age of the terabytes.' To him, data do not conceal the world but provide direct and unmediated knowledge of it. Science is again in the position to deal with reality - given with the data - rather than with theories and models about reality. In digital humanities, data often serve to ground the same disciplinary, conceptual and methodological frameworks that were in place before the advent of the digital. Rather than proclaiming the End of Science some active in this new field envisage a serial reaffirmation of its humanist heritage (Rens Bod, 'Het einde van de geesteswetenschappen 1.0,' 2012).

In addition, by conceiving of new technological research possibilities in terms of new tools replacing old ones and by focusing on pattern identities digital humanities seem to reaffirm a logic of the Same. They tend to neglect the creative, driving power that (big) data can have if seen from the vantage point of difference. This research group works from the premise that these returns to realism and humanism are far from being exhaustive. As an alternative, we aim to reintroduce Heidegger's notion of the gigantic ('that through which the quantitative becomes a special quality,' ibid. 135) into the debates around the future of science. Rather than as a threat we see data's shadow as an opportunity. Whereas Heidegger conceives a practice of contemplation as the only viable answer to uncontrollable computation, we recognize a chance for the humanities towards actionable knowledge. As Friedrich Kittler, argues in the 'On The Take-Off Of Operators' (1990), computer technology has rendered the opposition between thinking and action invalid. Contemplation cannot provide an answer to the problems that data pose to contemporary scientific research and education. Moving beyond predefined genres and media such as literature, music, or film, data are now driving knowledge production, representation, and manipulation. Inviting speakers from academic, artistic, and commercial contexts we as a research group aim to address the following questions concerning digital information and knowledge technologies and the ways in which these technologies inform our commerce with data: - Who are the agents of big data?- If the humanities are moving away from interpretation, where are they heading to? Which verbs express (or for that matter, transform) the current relation between science and data?- How can commercial uses of datasets (for example Nike+) inform academic research?- How can academic research be tested and validated in conjunction with commercial ventures?

5. Envisaged results (max. 100 words)

The outcome will consist of transdisciplinary meetings with international researchers and non-academic stakeholders (developers, artists), hacking events, conferences, lectures, coding and more traditional forms of written academic output (including PhD theses).

6. Work plan and time schedule (max. 100 words)

The group’s time line is extended and punctuated by its constituent (externally funded) projects, each having its own duration and deadlines. We expect to convene for at least three more years.

7. Societal relevance

Data driven digitality has a great impact on our cultural concepts and practices. This is evident for example in data visualisation in the press, data transforming audiences, or data challenging museum practices. Focusing on event-based forms of digitality this group aims to raise general awareness of the digital as a transformative cultural force rather than as an extension of traditional humanistic practices.

In addition, by inviting non-academic practitioners we aim to reshape the border between research and market to include new, “lean” forms of operationality in response to market-driven knowledge production.