Compendium of Computational Theology – Introduction

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Abstract   This introductory essay provides an overview of the topics covered in the Compendium. Despite a long-standing tradition, research at the interface of theology and Digital Humanities has yet to gain traction. One reason for this research gap is the lack of infrastructure and foundational texts. Another reason is the various understandings of the task of Digital Theology. Thus, this article bases the field of Computational Theology firmly within the canon of the Digital Humanities. The second part of this essay provides insight into the genesis of this compendium and outlines the individual essay contributions in the first volume.*

Keywords   Computational Theology, Digital Humanities, Interdisciplinarity, Philosophy of Science

1.   Computational Theology?

The aim of this compendium is to provide an orientation to the fields of theology and Digital Humanities (DH).[1] The volume participates in two debates, the form and concept of which remain vast and unclear. With respect to theology, the compendium focuses on the small, tangible areas of academic theology in the diversity of the theological disciplines. Clarifying what is meant by the concept of DH is more difficult. This undertaking is anything but trivial, given several definitions have surfaced even within their limited history (on the origin of DH, see Piotrowski in this volume, pp. 33–35). Kirschenbaum (2010,1) writes: "'What is Digital Humanities?' essays like this one are already genre pieces."[2] As a working definition of DH, Sahle's (2017, 9) concept will suffice:

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*   This chapter, including quotations in foreign languages, was translated from German by Brandon Watson.

1   In order to facilitate the widest possible dissemination of this orientation, all chapters are presented in both German and English. In the translations, quotations have also been translated into the target language by the editorial team.

2   Cf. https://whatisdigitalhumanities.com (accessed on 18 May 2024), where Jason Heppler lists 817 attempts to define DH

> Essentially, however, DH is about the development, use, and critical reflection of digital processes in the humanities. DH take up the issues of the humanities and combine them with solutions from computer science and, in some cases, other disciplines – for example, advanced imaging methods from engineering, geoinformation systems from geography, empirical methods from the social sciences, or information theory approaches from *library and information science.*

According to Rapp (2021, 8), an increase in the activities of DH research can be observed, which have been politically driven by specific funding programs at prominent funding institutions. The social expectations associated with this increase are illustrated by Schmale's (2016, 299) research on musicology:

> Musicology is no different than other disciplines in the humanities and cultural sciences: any discipline without at least one digital branch is currently under pressure to justify itself. In the digital humanities, musicology is catching up with other disciplines: degree courses with a focus on digital musicology, PhD programs, professorships, digital projects, conferences – pulling out all stops.

Can the "development, use, and critical reflection of digital processes" also be seen as increasing in the research practices of academic theology and its disciplines? According to Hutchings & Clivaz (2021, 6), there is without a doubt a "digital branch" (if not even an entire forest landscape) in theology:

> Christian theology, religious studies and biblical studies have a long, rich and productive history of interaction with the academic digital humanities. There is no unique Christian way to do DH, but the numerous signs of academic institutionalization of DH, the rich libraries of academic DH publications and the extraordinary global Christian interest in digital theology and digital Bible study all demonstrate the value of an introductory book to Christianity and the digital humanities (Hutchings & Clivaz 2021, 6).

Other voices are a bit more restrained. Theologians Heyden & Schröder, for example, refer to "pioneering achievements" in theology in the DH and thus confirm a "long, rich and productive history of interaction with the academic digital humanities."[3]

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3   Like many others (e. g., Peters in this volume on p. 316), they refer to the preliminary work of *Index Thomisticus,* which began with conversations in the 1940s between the Jesuit priest Roberto Busa and the IBM founder Thomas Watson Sr. On the origins of the *Index Thomisticus* as the "founding myth of DH," see Thaller (2017, 3). For a monographic review of its origins, see Jones (2016). Despite the merits of Busa, however, it must be noted that the timing (cf. Blaney [2021, 7]) and
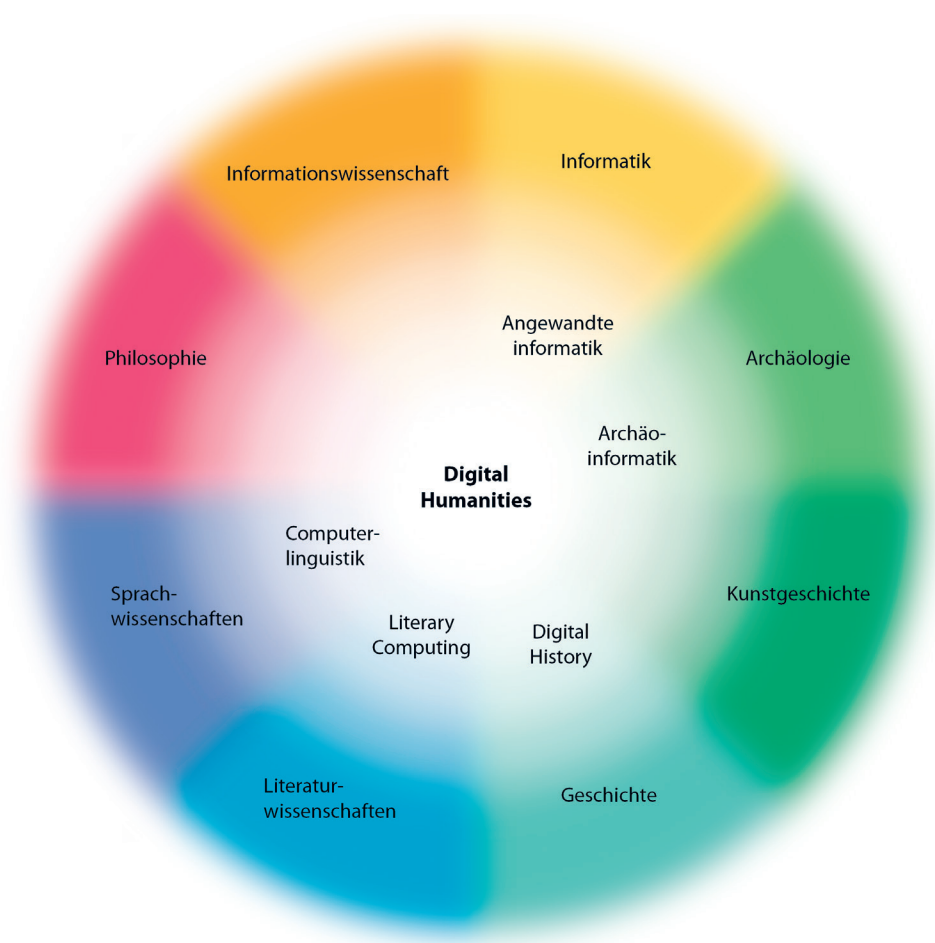
Fig. 1 Spheres of the Digital Humanities

At the same time, they observe that "aside from the pioneering achievements […], the breadth of theology […] has reacted hesitantly to the 'digital turn.'" This observation is reflected in studies observing the academic domains of DH. Theology was not included among the 15 "disciplines that are related to DH in some way," that Luhmann & Burghardt (2021, 150) consider in their scientometric study on DH and the academic

working practices (cf. Nyhan [2023, 23]) of the project are not uncontroversial. The disciplinary classification can also vary. Krämer (2019, 244), for example, explains Busa's original concern in his doctoral thesis as "a genuinely philosophical one" and concludes: "It was precisely a philosophical [!] research project that became the pioneer of the Digital Humanities at the beginning of the 1950s."

disciplines. Nor is theology mentioned in the oft cited spherical model (fig. 1) by Sahle (2013, 6).

Even from these limited observations, one can confirm: theologians are largely absent from the DH-Community.[4] However, the current lack of involvement does not indicate that theology cannot use digitally supported research. When confronted with the question of digitization of research material, church historian Hubert Wolf elaborates "that with the currently available digital editions, students can use certain keyword searches in their studies to work on term papers that would otherwise require a large amount of time in the archive or on which a doctoral student would have worked for long time" (Burke & Hiepel 2021, 20). In fact, there are large databases and digital collections in theology (on this exemplary selection, see A. von Stockhausen in this volume, pp. 94–95). This collection of resources is summarized in a working paper from *Digital Research Infrastructure for the Arts and Humanities* (DARIAH): "Rapid progress is possible in theology because a large number of primary texts already exist in digital form" (Reiche et al. 2014, 21).

The digitization of resources is not the end of digital research, but the beginning, particularly within the context of DH: the potential of DH is not exhausted in the retroactive digitization of theological works (for a critique of this position, see Zahnd 2020, 117). Theological projects that go beyond this simple approach, pursuing questions unanswerable without the use of information technological resources, have become increasingly prevalent (see the chapter by Nunn in this volume); however, these projects are limited when compared to other humanities disciplines.

Through the events of the TheoLab, a research network founded in 2019 and led by the authors of this introduction,[5] which is dedicated to precisely such questions in colloquia for young researchers, workshop reports and conferences, it quickly became clear that there are either major reservations among theologians about getting involved in DH, or at least uncertainties regarding meaningful research questions and possibilities for technical implementation. This hesitation is partly due to the lack of specific infrastructures and foundational works, and partly to theoretical, methodological, and epistemological reservations (van Oorschot 2021).

There is a clear push towards institutionalization in other humanities disciplines, such as in the field of history, where, since 2009, several professorships, conference series, journals, and courses have been created using the term *Digital History* (for the first use by Peter Haber, see Döring et al. [2022, 5]). Salmu (2021, 7) describes this paradigm:

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4 Nunn (2024) presents a number of potential explanations for the apparent absence of theologians within the DH-Community.

5 It would be remiss not to mention Stefan Karcher, who founded the TheoLab in 2019 and played a leading role in its organisation until his departure from Heidelberg in 2021. Similarly, Selina Fucker has been involved in TheoLab for a number of years.

> Digital history acknowledges its origins in historians' serious efforts to engage with the Internet, digital tools and information technology. It is also a repository for the computational methods that were developed in the digital humanities and can be applied in and refined for solving historical problems. The definition of digital history can today be reformulated as follows: digital history is an approach to examining and representing the past; it uses new communication technologies and media applications and experiments with computational methods for the analysis, production and dissemination of historical knowledge.

There are similar definitions of Digital Classics (cf. Schubert 2015, 1), Digital Philology (cf. Adler et al. 2020, 1), Digital Philosophy (cf. Gramelsberger 2023, 111) or Digital Art History (cf. Schelbert 2018, 42).

Given the range of meanings of theology, simply adding Digital Theology to the list of disciplines would not suffice. According to van Oorschot (2023, 25), there are four areas that can be addressed under the label of Digital Theology:

1. Theology with digital resources, tools, or methods. This includes approaches to doing theology with digital methods, such as in the adaptation of the Digital Humanities.
2. Theology in digital spaces. This describes attempts to do theology using digital media, such as theological podcasts, blogs, or online journals.
3. Theological reflection on digitalization. Reflection on digital change and correlated topics can currently be found in the fields of practical theology (e.g. educational theory) or ethics (e.g. use of artificial intelligence, cyberwar).
4. The digital transformation of theology. Another approach is the question of how categories, thought models, and questions of theological reflection themselves are changed by the process of digitalization.

The first mentioned dimension, which aligns with the understanding of other humanities disciplines has rarely been the research focus. In theology, attention and the associated resources have been devoted to other areas. *The Global Network for Digital Theology* (GoNeDigiTal), which Hutchings & Clivaz primarily have in mind in the citation above, describes itself as "an international network that connects those involved in research and reflection on the interaction and expression of theologies within digital cultures, media, and technology."[6] The practices of the DH-Community are only marginally addressed; rather, the focus is on the media studies movement,

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6   Cf. https://www.gonedigital.media/what-we-do (accessed on 19 May 2024).

to which Florian Höhne belongs as having the first professorship for Digital Theology in the German-speaking realm.[7]

The TheoLab created the first ever infrastructure entirely dedicated to theology as DH discipline.[8] The *Compendium Computational Theology* provides the first comprehensive work published that is specifically tailored to the needs of theological researchers in the DH.[9] Computational Theology thus indicates "theological questions that are investigated with the help of computational approaches" (van Oorschot 2023, 29). The term is borrowed from the Computational Humanities, whose representatives set themselves apart from the *umbrella* of DH by returning to this older term to bring the technical aspects back to the fore (see the chapter by Piotrowski in this volume; for a description of the initial situation in DH, see also Berry & Fagerjord 2017, 36 f.). With this compendium, we hope to intensify the optimistic attitude that has recently been present at the interface of theology and the DH, to contribute to ensuring that theological research remains capable of discourse from a holistic scientific perspective by providing conceptual guidance, and to develop constructively in both fields in the networking of theology and the DH.

2.   The Conception of the Compendium

Theologians should not have a hard time engaging with the DH, particularly given both are very heterogenous disciplines.[10] Dalferth (2006, 5) claims, accordingly: "Protestant Theology is in no way a unified discipline; rather, theology is an ensemble of interrelated subjects and disciplines grouped around a shared task." Nüssel (2006, 92) explains this notion further:

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7   On the profile of Florian Höhne, see https://www.theologie.fau.de/person/prof-dr-florian-hoehne (accessed on 19 May 2024).

8   On the task and essentials of the Digital Humanities, see https://dig-hum.de/digitale-geisteswis senschaften (accessed on 24 May 2024): "The humanities encompass a large group of disciplines that research all aspects of human society, culture, language, and history as well as thought and communication. The Digital Humanities share these research areas and endeavor to develop the processes of acquiring and communicating knowledge under the conditions of a digital and media world. To this end, the DH research and teach in areas such as the digitalization of knowledge and cultural heritage, the application and further development of digital tools, the operationalization and answering of research questions, and reflection on the methodological and theoretical foundations of the humanities in a digital world."

9   At the same time, this volume also offers scholars in other humanities disciplines an application-oriented introduction to various methods and practices of the DH-Community.

10   The question of whether DH is a separate discipline, an auxiliary science, or a set of methods is deliberately excluded in this context. Hamidović (2016, 2–6) offers a helpful introduction to this complex of topics.

It was only in the 20th century that the theological disciplines developed into independent areas of research, which are only carried out by specially qualified experts and are therefore considered to be different areas of responsibility. Although the historical, systematic, and practical perspectives of theological understanding have largely diverged in research practice, and consequently also in teaching, they nevertheless belong together in substance.

Thaller (2017, 13) also emphasizes the "breadth of the research field," with regard to DH, even if there are "similarities between the different types." He continues (14): "Which information technology tools are particularly appropriate for which humanities subjects heavily depends on the self-understanding of the subject in question." The compendium hopes to provide this tool for understanding. It does not espouse either *the* theological nor *the* DH method. Depending on the theological discipline, certain approaches to DH are preferable to others. Choosing an approach that is incompatible with one's own research question costs valuable resources (cf. Krautter et al. 2023, 16). The compendium offers initial guidance in this regard.

The compendium will be divided into two volumes. The contributions in the first volume present the research practices of the DH from the perspective of the DH-community (see below). The theological authors of the second volume will be confronted with the task of exploring the potentials and limits of these practices for their respective disciplines. To this end, we organized a workshop in September 2023 in which the contributors to volume 2 were able to view and discuss an early version of the first volume.

The compendium can be used in different ways:

Scenario 1: A theology student about to graduate is considering writing a church history dissertation on early Christian martyr acts with the help of a historical network analysis. But is this approach effective? After reading the relevant chapter in volume 1, the student will be able to answer this question, as she is now aware of the potentials, pitfalls and best practices of this method.

Scenario 2: The same student asks whether the dissertation could be reasonably located in the field of Digital Humanities. After reading the chapter on ancient church history in volume 2, the student has an idea of whether it would fit and, if so, which DH practices could take her further in concrete terms. She can then take a closer look at these in the first volume.

Given the breadth of the research field in the DH and the numerous (sub)disciplines of theology, two volumes, despite their already considerable scope, will inevitably only contain a certain selection of the possible approaches at the interface of DH and theology. Naming a few examples here will suffice. E.g., the examination of three-

dimensional artefacts, which represents a pivotal area of interest within the field of Christian archaeology and constitutes a core subject of inquiry within the domain of DH, is conspicuous by its absence. The use of AI could be given even greater focus in the analyses. Discourse analysis could be fleshed out with further individual methods, such as chapters on *Web Scraping*[11] or *Argument Mining.*[12] In the section on dissemination, digital forms of publication could be given their own chapter.

These two volumes should therefore only be seen as a prelude. As a *living handbook,* they will be continued online in the future, so that additions and updates to the material will still be possible after publication. In this manner, we present a comprehensive and reliable foundation that will retain its value and applicability in the years to come.

3.   Overview of the Volume

3.1   Introduction

Before the practices of Computational Theology can be outlined, the specifics of the discipline must first be detailed. There are three contributions in the volume to fulfil this task. **Michael Piotrowski** introduces the relationship between Computational and Digital Humanities, showing the two disciplines are not too far apart, but are rather manifestations of two different cultural traditions. That these traditions can also be mapped onto the landscape of theological research is illustrated by **Erin Raffety,** who establishes guidelines for a Computational Theology from the perspective of a predominantly Anglo-Saxon *Digital Religion* paradigm using the example of the theological use of video games. Finally, **Christopher A. Nunn** ties the various threads together and presents interdisciplinary projects that correspond to a Computational Theology.

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11 This method is used, for example, to investigate mourning practices on the Internet at the URPP Digital Religion(s) at the University of Zurich. Cf. the project website: https://www.digitalreligions. uzh.ch/de/research/internaldynamics/p1_public_valediction.html (accessed on 20 May 2024).

12 This method is currently being tested for mapping theological discourse formations using the example of "suicide" in the Department of Catholic Theology at the University of Passau. Cf. the project website: https://www.ktf.uni-passau.de/digital-methods (accessed on 20 May 2024).

3.2   Media

Christianity is a textually centered religion, which makes theological research largely centered around intensive textual work.[13] DH have also placed a significant emphasis on textual analysis. However, Kohle (2018, 16) has highlighted a potential limitation of this approach, suggesting that:

> [The Digital Humanities are] largely focused on linguistic artifacts. Generally, this focus likely has to do with the dominance of language in logocentric European culture, but more specifically with the fact that philologies are institutionally dominant in the European academic system. Images and sounds are relegated to a edges; as art media, they are dealt with in art history and musicology. Even if art history, for example, formulates a certain claim to universality with its extension from art to images, it remains institutionally marginal, or even non-existent. At this point, the situation in the digital humanities only reflects the general situation (cf. also Manovich 2020, 7).

Recently, however, the DH-community has become increasingly aware of other media. This shift can be seen, for example, by the motto of the 6th annual conference of the *Association for Digital Humanities in the German Speaking Areas* (DHd), which met in 2019 in Mainz and Frankfurt: "Digital Humanities: multimedial and multimodal."[14]

Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra discusses transcription techniques, layout analysis, and computer paleography in an essay on text digitization, thus presenting state-of-the-art of automatic analysis of manuscripts and ambiguous texts. **Hubertus Kohle's** essay then changes gears and introduces the properties of the digital image, image databases, and AI-controlled image generators on image digitization. **Christof Weiß** enters the field of computational audio and music analysis. In his essay, Weiß illustrates the potential of audio recordings for the study of church music. **Manuel Burghardt, John Bateman, Eric Müller-Budack** and **Ralph Ewerth** present an overview of computational tools and methods for film and video analysis and use the TV series "Game of Thrones" as an example to show how narrative patterns can be researched with the aid of computers.

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13 A prominent example of this view of theology can be found in the DH: Moretti (2000, 57) defines his idea of *close reading* as a "theological exercise – very solemn treatment of very few texts taken very seriously." Dalferth (2018, 435), can also be mentioned here as a theological reference, according to which theology is a "text-related discipline of reflection."

14 Cf. the conference website: https://dhd2019.dig-hum.de (accessed on 21 May 2024).

3.3   Forms of Digital Text Analysis

Despite the prevalence of multimedia, the text is still the central object of theological research. We thus decided to limit the detailed analysis section to this medium. The largest possible (albeit not exhaustive!) selection of digital text analyses should help to find answers to a variety of theological research questions.

In the essay *"Python* or *R*? Getting started with programming for humanists," **William Mattingly** addresses the question of why acquiring programming skills and delving deeper into digital analysis methods is a worthy pursuit. What at first glance seems time-consuming (such as learning a programming language) can actually save research time in the end, depending on the research question. Acquiring the specific knowledge should be done in a targeted manner. Depending on the subject matter and research interest, different levels of knowledge may be required, including program packages that require no programming knowledge at all.[15]

In an essay on stylistic analysis, **Fotis Jannidis** offers the first specific approach to digital text analysis. The focus is on stylometric methods, i.e., a corpus-based analysis of style using quantitative methods that aim to assign a text to a group of other texts based on stylistic characteristics. This type of approach is often (but not exclusively) chosen to investigate questions about the authorship of a text *(authorship attribution).* Unsurprisingly, this approach also has a long tradition in theology, as Jannidis illustrates with the question of the authenticity of the Apostle Paul's letters.

Network analysis is the most well-known DH method, which creates visualizations of various relational networks (not only between specific actors or institutions, but also at the lexical level). This method has already been successfully applied in several theological disciplines. **Caitlin Burge** describes useful applications of this method based on exemplary research studies, while also mentioning potential pitfalls, such as the consequences of reductionist network visualizations, which are a result of a lack of prior consideration when conceptualizing the network.

Another important methodological approach, e.g. in practical theology, is digital discourse analysis, which is addressed by **Alexander Lasch,** who provides readers of the compendium with the necessary theoretical foundation and focuses primarily on the approaches of German discourse linguistics. Discourse analysis is about iden-

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15   Cf. Dombrowski (2023, 143): "There are some kinds of DH work where coding matters. Pre-built tools will always have limitations; in their creation, developers must take decisions that constrain the kinds of questions the tool can be used to answer […]. Coding is a skill that takes time, practice, and ongoing effort to learn, but investing the energy to improve one's coding skills will not, by itself, prepare a scholar to do skillful work that is a meaningful contribution to scholarship. For that, it is more important to develop skills around the selection and preparation of data, around matching humanities questions with appropriate quantitative methods (if any exist), around carefully reading others' documentation and either producing one's own code or successfully communicating to a programmer what needs to be created – both for oneself and for future scholars to use."

tifying certain semantic relationships between different texts. Various methods can be used for this purpose. Some of these are discussed in the following chapters. The Named Entity Recognition method, which automatically recognizes entities in texts and essential for discourse analysis, is discussed in a chapter by **Evelyn Gius.** In this process, certain entities such as persons, places, data, or concepts are determined in machine processes using textual features. Since the frequency and distribution of these entities can also be read out, this method, which has not yet been used in theology, is suitable for tracing certain developments. However, discourses can also be traced using so-called topic modeling, which is addressed in the volume by **Melanie Althage.** Using various algorithms, large text corpora can be searched for specific groups of words that occur together in the individual documents with a striking statistical frequency. In this way, an overview of the content structure can be gained, which is particularly useful for making an initial hypothesis. However, it is important to be able to understand how the word groups come about and to configure the settings sensibly so as not to rely blindly on a *black box.*[16] Althage's essay can serve as an important guide for these initial findings.

However, discourses can also be visualized using more specific methods. One method is sentiment analysis, which **Rachele Sprugnoli** describes in detail. The Natural Language processing (NLP) method aims to identify and categorize opinions, emotions, and personal assessments that have been written about various entities, events, and topics. The method can, for example, help to identify the attitude of individuals to certain discourses. The main difficulties with this approach lie in recognizing irony or implicit expressions of opinion that presuppose a certain knowledge of the world. If one considers Dalferth's interpretation of theology as a text-related science of reflection, it makes sense to dedicate a chapter to digital intertextuality research. **Julia Nantke** traces the history of this strand of research and describes the methods used to evaluate intertextual relationships digitally (manually or automatically). The development of discourses, for example, could be traced on this basis. Another way of approaching texts using computer-aided methods concerns the spatial dimension. In a chapter on spatial analysis or more precisely on new literary geography, **Matthew Wilkens** describes how quantitative analyses can support qualitative studies (and thus follows a *mixed-methods* approach). He cites several impressive projects in which certain metadata from literary texts is collected and mapped in order to reveal developments in an author, an epoch, a region, or a discourse.

What happens once the respective analysis has been completed? Regarding information visualization, **Janelle Peters** guides the reader through various forms

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16   Cf. van Zundert et al. (2020, 124): "The lack of knowledge about what is actually taking place in these software 'black boxes' and about how they are made introduces serious problems for evaluation and trust in humanities research. If we cannot read code or see the workings of the software as it functions, we can experience it only in terms of its interface and its output, neither of which seem subject to our control."

of visualization and discusses those well suited for specific questions and presents considerable dangers to avoided when visualizing. Peters presents a history of information visualization within theological projects. Ultimately, a digital edition can also be the result. But what does this result actually mean? What should a digital edition contain and how does it differ from a digitized edition? **Annette von Stockhausen** clarifies these questions in the final essay in the section.

3.4   Dissemination

As part of the Digital Humanities, Computational Theology not only has to use specific media and forms of analysis but must also engage with new practices of scientific transfer. These forms are presented in a dedicated section. **Ulrike Wuttke** initiates this with a comprehensive introduction to science communication and its significance for DH. Wuttke then examines community building, which also plays an important role in the DH, as its members are forced to build and maintain new networks beyond subject and institute boundaries due to the high degree of interdisciplinarity. The collaborative work that particularly characterizes the DH-Community takes place in proximity to virtual research environments. **Caroline T. Schroeder** describes the advantages and challenges of this relationship. The fact that not only texts are created, but also a wealth of other data can be generated, which should be findable, accessible to everyone, interoperable and reusable, requires well-considered research data management. **Jochen Apel** deals with this crucial aspect. Dissemination practices also include the communication of DH approaches. The use of artificial intelligence in teaching is an obvious example here. **Johanna Gröpler, Margret Mundorf,** and **Nicolaus Wilder** discuss the topic of AI-supported text production in higher education. At this point, it becomes clear that computationally generated products pose new challenges for the entire reviewing process. How can digital editions, text collections, and tools be reasonably evaluated? **Ulrike Henny-Krahmer** discusses this evaluation process in a chapter on reviewing digital resources. All contributions bear witness to a change in conventional research environments and forms of publication. Finally, **Clifford Anderson** reflects on the extent of the changes to the entire academic enterprise brought about by the advent of DH.

4.   Acknowledgements

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Figure Credit

Fig. 1: Spheres of the Digital Humanities – created by Patrick Sahle, CC BY 4.0.