History and Reproducibility (Geneva, 6-8 Sep 27)

Geneva, University of Geneva, Sep 6–08, 2027
Deadline: Dec 1, 2026

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History and Reproducibility: Digital History Switzerland Conference.

For its second edition, the Digital History Switzerland Conference (6-8 September, 2027) will address a notion that has generated considerable debate since the widespread adoption of digital methods and tools: reproducibility. This notion will be explored from two principal perspectives: the reproducibility of scholarly methods, and the reproducibility of the objects and content upon which historical research increasingly relies. This conference is intended for a broad scholarly audience, including historians, digital humanities researchers, and specialists in epistemology, as well as scholars in related fields such as philosophy, sociology of science, information science, archival studies, and data science.

Reproducibility of methods: smoke and mirrors?

For over a century, history has sought to emulate the so-called ‘hard’ sciences and the ideal of objectivity they are often thought to embody [Denisio, 2017; Reiss & Sprenger, 2020; Shapin, 2020; Peels, 2019]. The rise of computational approaches has revived this desire for scientific alignment. Yet among the four principles of ‘FAIR’ (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, Reproducible), the latter appears to be the most challenging to fulfil. Numerous obstacles hinder the reproducibility of historical research practices [Holbrook, Penders & de Rijcke, 2019], including in their computational dimensions [Joyeux-Prunel, 2024]. The increasing use of generative AI—whether to classify documents, transcribe them, or generate code for their analysis—further complicates the issue of reproducibility, as outputs produced by AI are not strictly reproducible.

This raises a fundamental question: what is the purpose of reproducibility of historical research? If reproducibility is intended to guarantee the reliability of results, historians cannot be satisfied with data alone. Other sources and other scales of analysis are required. Furthermore, sources and their interrelations never impose a single, fixed meaning: interpretations remain inherently situated.

Does the reproducibility promoted within digital humanities therefore represent a different epistemological model? Does making a documentary corpus and code available online carry the same epistemological status as citing archival references in a footnote? Or should we reconsider - and perhaps abandon - the ideal of scientific reproducibility in history and, more broadly, in the humanities in general?

Beyond the hermeneutic specificity of humanistic inquiry, reproducibility has become a challenge

across all scientific fields. The history of experimental practices—notably in light of the recent 'replication crisis' [Baker, 2016; Ritchie, 2020]—demonstrates that many experiments cannot, in fact, be replicated. Should this be seen as a threat to the credibility of science itself?

The reproducibility of sources, no less problematic

Throwing reproducibility overboard is undoubtedly not the most productive way to encourage the wider availability of digital sources for historical work. Yet this tension inevitably leads back to an older question, already articulated by Walter Benjamin in The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction: namely, the ever-unstable relationship between reproduction and authenticity, between technology and knowledge. To reproduce, to digitise, to copy. These are all acts that claim to preserve, but they inevitably also transform. They entail loss of information, of materiality, and of historical depth, in addition to the loss of aura that Benjamin famously highlighted. The dissolution of the almost metaphysical distance afforded by the "real presence" of the historical source quickly gives rise to other, no less problematic, illusions: that of exhaustiveness, that of the possibility of seeing in detail – whereas every digitisation decision, from metadata standards to file formats, continues a silent act of selection and interpretation. Beyond the considerable cost (economic, human, ecological) of large-scale digitisation campaigns, we must ask whether such efforts are always really justified.

CALL FOR PROPOSALS

Based on these considerations, the organising team invites researchers to examine their own practices and results in light of this dual issue:

Is their work reproducible, and if so, how and under what conditions? What would reproducibility mean in the field of history? Can it enhance the quality of research, including its interpretative singularity?

What does reproducibility do to our objects and methods? Does it risk concealing a new form of reduction or standardisation of historical knowledge? How can we conceptualise the reproducibility of sources without succumbing to the illusion of their transparency? What practices—of selection, cleaning, modelling, or transformation—render the conditions under which a digital corpus is produced visible, or conversely obscure them?

Finally, what alternative forms of rigour, fidelity or traceability could we imagine, beyond the mere paradigm of repetition? Perhaps the challenge is not to reproduce identically, but to make methods shareable, comparable and interpretable – in other words, to think of reproducibility not as an end in itself, but as a critical practice at the heart of the historian's work.

Potential thematic areas

The conference welcomes proposals from all disciplines concerned with the use of digital technology in history—whether theoretical, methodological, or empirical. Contributions may, for example, focus on:

- practical case studies of research projects, digitisation initiatives or historical databases, examining the concrete conditions of reproducibility—from corpus creation to the publication of result-

s—as well as its limits, ambiguities, and unintended effects;

- critical reflections on the reproducibility of sources, digital materiality, loss and transformation linked to the decontextualisation/standardisation of data;

- epistemological and historical analyses of the place of reproducibility in the humanities, its relationship to evidence, trust and the transmission of knowledge;

- comparative and transdisciplinary approaches (history, art, sociology of science, computer science, philosophy, etc.), questioning the tension between scientific reproducibility and the hermeneutic singularity of historical knowledge.

Keynote

The conference will feature keynote lectures by Prof. Dr. Monika Domman, Full Professor in History at the University of Zurich.

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES, and TIMELINE

Proposals for the conference should be submitted as a PDF document by December 1, 2026 and should include a title, an abstract of up to 250-400 words and a 200-word biography, all in English, in the same document. Submissions should be sent to: digital-history-2027@unige.ch, within one single document titled as follows:

FAMILYNAME_Firstname_ShortTitle.pdf.

Applicants will be notified by Mid-February 2027.

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

The conference is organized jointly by the Laboratory for the history of science and technology (EPFL) and the Digital Humanities Chair (University of Geneva). The event will be hosted by the University of Geneva from September 6-8, 2027.

Scientific Committee
Jérôme Baudry (EPFL), Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel (UNIGE), Radu Suciu (UNIGE), Grégoire Mallard (Geneva Graduate Institute), Eliane Kurmann and Enrico Natale (Infoclio), Moritz Maehr (UNIBE), Isabella Di Lenardo (EPFL), Christiane Sibille (EPFZ), Lucas Burkart (UNIBAS), Tobias Hodel (UNIBE).

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Jérôme Baudry (EPFL), Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel (UNIGE), Radu Suciu (UNIGE).

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