Report on the DFG/NEH Bilateral Digital Humanities Program

2008 – 2018

1.   Background on the funding format

In 2008 the US National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) in Germany initiated a program to jointly fund information infrastructures. The rationale behind the joint program was to leverage the anticipated added value for the German and American scholarly communities. Funding was intended primarily to enable materials to be suitably prepared and made available for digital use in humanities research. This was due to the fact that no other form of transatlantic funding for information infrastructure projects was possible, and a need was recognised, especially in the disciplines that increasingly rely on materials transformed from analogue to digital form, at a time when the digital humanities were becoming established.

Funding was awarded on the basis of program calls in 2008, 2009 and 2010. Following a report and modification of the program focus in 2011, two further calls were issued in 2012 and 2014, which brought the total number of funding rounds in this program to five. Currently, projects funded in the last round have come to an end.

In the first three funding rounds, two different types of projects were offered. Applicants could either propose transatlantic symposia and workshops or projects primarily aimed at digitising collections or enhancing the use of digitised resources (Enriching Digital Collections). The requirements for funding were: joint application by German and US cooperation partners, quality of the project design, qualification of the applicants, high value of the project to humanities research, demonstrable added value of the transatlantic collaboration, and the free availability of the project results. Proposals were evaluated on the basis of written assessments (subject-specific and information-related) at review meetings held jointly by the DFG and the NEH. For approved projects, the portions requested from the DFG and the NEH were each funded separately. The maximum sum per proposal was set at €280,000 and later reduced to €250,000. It was also specified that the total funds requested from each national funder could not deviate by more than 20 percent.

In the last two funding rounds in 2012 and 2014, only information infrastructure projects were considered; following an evaluation of the funding program, funding for workshops and symposia was no longer offered. Starting in 2012, the focus of the program calls was also modified to explicitly encourage the development of tools and methods for accessing and processing digital resources in order to optimise and stimulate their use for research purposes. Emphasis was also placed on the importance of best practices and standards to create the best possible structures for international information infrastructures.

2.   Overview of the five funding rounds

The table below shows an overview of proposal trends in the five funding rounds:

	Number of proposals	Number of awards	Funding requested in EUR	Funding awarded (with PP*) in EUR	Success rate
2008	13	4	1,972,889	635,249	31%
2009	15	5	1,935,489	701,256	33%
2010	18	5	1,209,372	392,867	28%
2012	20	4	2,649,112	550,794	20%
2014	39	6	5,945,283	870,899	15%
TOTAL	105	24	13,712,145	3,151,065	23%

*Programme allowance for indirect project costs (in German *Programmpauschale*)

Distribution of awards by subject area:

Egyptol-ogy	Archae-ology	History	History of Philosophy	Indology	Islamic Studies	Jewish Studies	Classics Philology
2	2	3	1	2	1	2	2

Coptology	Fine Arts	Medical History	Musicology	Linguistics	Humanities, General
1	2	1	2	2	1

3.   Report on the last two funding rounds

Following a report on the first three rounds of program calls in 2011, the last two funding rounds took place in 2012 and 2014. The last round of funding in 2014 showed a particularly high response, as evidenced by the number of submissions. Based on the report, and judging by the number of proposals alone, it may therefore be assumed that there will be continued high demand for this type of funding. The last projects in this round concluded in May 2018.

With regard to the **objectives** of the 59 projects submitted in 2012 and 2014, by far the most common was software development, followed by the consolidation of content or portals. A very small number of projects (6 projects) focused on the development and dissemination of standards or best practices.

In terms of **content**, the majority of projects were concerned with the development of virtual work environments, particularly on the basis of text corpora (19 projects), followed by work with visual sources (paintings, coins, maps; 12 projects) and the development of tools for editions (5 projects) or language corpora (4 projects). There were also projects to develop or expand databases (5 projects), develop or analyse algorithms (8 projects) and develop plugins

(1 project). Only one project was concerned with born-digital objects, while only four projects were concerned purely with digitisation work. This strongly indicates that applicants responded to the modified program focus, even though the aim of contributing to better practices and standards in international information infrastructure was not achieved.

The most common **reasons for rejection** were by far shortcomings in the project concept, followed by weaknesses in technical implementation and the work program as a whole. A lack of recognisability and doubts about the scholarly use of the project were also frequently cited. Relatively frequently, individual criteria specified in the program call were not met (e.g. field analysis, open-source provision). This was especially true in the last round of program calls in 2014. On the other hand, legal ambiguities, duplication of content and lack of details on sustainability were rarely cited as reasons for rejection. In summary, in 2012 the reviewers identified the greatest flaws in proposals in the implementation of the field analysis, lack of information about the impacts of projects on research, and technical implementation.

In the 10 **grants awarded**, the most frequently cited feature was the use of the project for research, followed by the innovativeness of the chosen approach and the model nature of the project. Some projects used the funding to develop models for their disciplines, e.g. in 2012: Digital Corpus of Literary Papyri and in 2014: KELLIA as well as SARIT: Enriching Digital Text Collections in Indology.

4.   Impact of the Program

The funding provided enormous added value for transatlantic cooperation in the digital humanities, and international cooperation will only become an even more important component of both research and information infrastructure development in the future. In this respect, the Bilateral Digital Humanities Program had an exploratory, innovative and ultimately model character.

The program was also very timely, as it began in 2009 at a time when digital humanities was starting to become an important new area of research in both the US and Germany. The program enabled many important research partnerships and helped spur the growth of digital humanities work in a global context.

The 24 awards made by the program not only represented a wide variety of scientific disciplines, but also a range of cooperating institutions. On the US side, this included major private research universities like Columbia University, Princeton University, and the University of Pennsylvania; public research universities like the University of Virginia, the University of California, Los Angeles, and the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign; and non-university research organizations like the Center for Jewish History, Rhizome Communications, and the Gerry Research Institute. On the German side, awardees included Universities of Excellence like the University of Tübingen, Humboldt University of Berlin, the University of Heidelberg, and the University of Cologne; as well as non-university research organizations like the Art Library, Berlin State Museums, the German Archaeological Institute, and the Herzog August Bibliothek. This range of institutions demonstrates the wide interest in bi-lateral digital humanities scholarship between researchers from both Germany and the US.

It is worth noting that coordinating a bilateral call between two funders is a complex task, requiring both parties to negotiate common protocols for proposal submissions, peer review,

and award. This program would not have been a success without the committed work of staff from both DFG and NEH. In particular, Max Vögler and Christoph Kümmel of DFG and Jason Rhody and Brett Bobley of NEH were essential to this bilateral cooperation.

This report was produced by Angela Holzer (DFG) and Brett Bobley (NEH).

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