

Invited Talk

Lovejoy's Dream – Or How to do History of Ideas Computationally in a Methodologically Sound Way

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Abstract :

History of ideas is a discipline largely founded by Arthur O. Lovejoy in the early twentieth century. Lovejoy characterized it as being concerned with *unit-ideas*, entities that retain their meaning through time and can therefore be traced in various contexts, that is, periods, intellectual settings, and disciplinary fields (Lovejoy 1936: 3-7, 15).

Now suppose a historian of ideas wants to trace an idea such as a *truth* through two-thousand years. According to WorldCat, 17,843,437 books have been published only between 1700 and 1900. How is a historian of ideas even supposed to think that such quantities of text can be studied with the historian's traditional method of investigation, namely close reading on one's own?

One might think that with today's digital means, such a study is finally possible. However, things are not that simple. First, we are far from the universal corpus we should be able to rely on for such an enterprise. Second, even with a universal corpus at our disposal, generic, simple and shallow bottom-up analyses of lots of diverse, 'long' and complex data is going to fail. For in a field such as this, feeding a computer masses of diverse and complex texts can only yield masses of unorganized details. Third, even if it were possible to make sense of such results computationally, there are fundamental problems with the very method of the history of ideas. The notion of *one idea* traceable through centuries of thought is illusory: for ideas cannot be studied in isolation from their context, and their meaning is in constant flux (Skinner 2002).

In this talk I elucidate a specific proposal for concept modelling to solve in particular the last two problems. I also show in what way my proposal is able to give a theoretical foundation to answering the need for dynamic ontologies, so that a computational turn can be effectively taken to history of ideas and related disciplines.

(based on joint work with Hein van den Berg)

