

Can we grasp and preserve the fleetingness of 19th-century fairs through digital humanities?

Eva Andersen, University of Antwerp

In this paper I will discuss the digital component of the ERC-funded project “Science at the fair. Performing Knowledge and Technology in Western Europe, 1850-1914” (SciFair).¹ I want to provide insight into why and how we set up our database, which problems we encountered, what we hope to achieve, and which preliminary results we generated.

During the 19th and early 20th century, funfairs were not only places of entertainment but also of education and science. Itinerant showpeople travelling across Europe played a crucial role in the circulation of information/knowledge among eager visitors, between showpeople and even between scientific establishments. Tracing these interactions is important to understand how fairs contributed to the dissemination of knowledge, media and visual culture in Northwestern Europe.² Currently fairground culture is under review to become UNESCO-approved intangible European cultural heritage.

Transient, scattered and scarce

Fairs have a very fleeting nature. As showpeople are innately always on the move, the historical artifacts – booths, letters, photos, documents – they leave behind are limited. The only dedicated institution (and digital platform) that currently exists to explore and safeguard funfair history is the National Fairground and Circus Archive in the United Kingdom.³ Outside of this institution, historical artifacts, if at all preserved, are scattered across Europe in obscure local archives, private collections, national libraries and cultural heritage institutions. While the latter two have their own (sometimes paywalled) platforms where various sources are accessible,⁴ these are not necessarily the key information providers related to funfairs. And if they are, it is only after combining various piecemeal traces that these actors and their histories are made visible in physical or digital archives.

Can digital tools help mediate these obstacles of transience, dispersion and scarcity? How do we preserve these sources and make them accessible? How can we capture and map these

¹ The PI of this project is Nele Wynants. <https://Scifair.eu>. ERC-grant number: 948678

² “Low” culture, and fairs in particular, have only very recently become a research area, and find themselves at the intersection of cultural history, media history, history of science and history of knowledge. See for example: Vanessa Toulmin, *Telling the Tale: The Story of the Fairground Bioscope Shows and the Showmen Who Operated Them* (U.K.: John Libbey, 1994); Sofie Lachapelle, *Conjuring Science: A History of Scientific Entertainment and Stage Magic in Modern France*, 2015; Kurt Vanhoutte and Nele Wynants, ‘Magie En Wetenschap in de -spektakelcultuur van de Negentiende Eeuw: Henri Robin in de Lage Landen’, *Tijdschrift Voor Mediageschiedenis* 20, no. 2 (2017); Dulce da Rocha Gonçalves, ‘Science between the Fairground and the Academy: The Case of Dutch Science Popularizer L. K. Maju (1823–1886)’, *Public Understanding of Science* 29, no. 8 (2020): 881–91.

³ ‘National Fairground and Circus Archive - University of Sheffield Library Digital Collections’, accessed 11 April 2023, <https://cdm15847.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15847coll3>.

⁴ Horst Kremers, *Digital Cultural Heritage*, 2020, 35–36, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=2172939>.

events, attractions and showpeople? How do we grasp the processes of knowledge circulation? How can we allow for a synchronic and diachronic analysis over several decades and generations?

New versus established DH tools

We chose to setup a relational database to answer the above questions. Very early on, it became clear that we would opt for existing technology. This facilitated the practical use of digital tools. Furthermore, there was no need to reinvent the wheel. We discussed several possibilities such as *Heurist*⁵ and *MADOC*⁶ but ultimately chose for the web-based application *Nodegoat*.⁷ For many in the DH community, Nodegoat has become a well-known tool since its inception ten years ago.⁸ While not brand-new, it is still one of the better solutions available today.⁹ Regular updates and maintenance, which is something many other DH tools cannot guarantee, made it the perfect environment to research a niche subject that is difficult to grasp.

Creating and enriching our dataset

We created our database to serve two main goals. Firstly, we want to research and analyse the history of fairs and the complex but vital relation between local and international levels, as this project is the first comprehensive transnational study of the fairground. Secondly, it is crucial to safeguard fairground history, and preserve and disseminate the sources, data and stories we accumulate by making them available online.

Our database is structured around five objects: events (e.g. fairs), attractions (e.g. anatomical museums), people (mainly showpeople), organizations (e.g. unions for itinerant showpeople or natural history museums), and sources (for purposes of referencing and preservation). The majority of data comes from newspapers and union journals, and is supplemented by other source materials such as photos, postcards and posters. The amount of information that can be gleaned from these sources is often rather sparse, and their digital carriers also vary (images vs pdf, one page vs multiple pages), creating problems with how and where to best link and preserve this material and disambiguate information/data.

A main concern within the project is the ambiguity of data, as information is often in short supply and spelling was not yet standardized. This leads to problems in disambiguation, especially with attractions (e.g. *Musée d'Anatomie Lozeroff* versus *Musée franco-russe Lozeroff*), as well as people (e.g. *Watrin* versus *Watrin L.* versus *Watrin Jean-Louis*). This is complicated further as many of these people are not found in biographical dictionaries or

⁵ heuristnetwork.org, accessed 18/01/2023.

⁶ www.ghentcdh.ugent.be/projects/madoc-iiif-transcription-annotation-and-crowdsourcing-platform, accessed 18/01/2023.

⁷ nodegoat.net, accessed 18/01/2023.

⁸ lab1100.com/onedecade, accessed 23/01/2023.

⁹ Maurizio Toscano, Manuel J. Cobo, and Enrique Herrera-Viedma, 'Software Solutions for Web Information Systems in Digital Humanities: Review, Analysis and Comparative Study', *Profesional de La Información* 31, no. 2 (26 March 2022), <https://doi.org/10.3145/epi.2022.mar.11>.

databases such as Wikidata or VIAF which mandates us to build up our own independent person data repository. To maintain an overview of all the ambiguous or uncertain data we review problematic data with the whole team.

The data is further enriched by, for example, distinguishing between types of events (fairs, permanent venues, lectures, ...) and types of attractions (museums, theatres, menageries, ...). These additions are already facilitating our researchers' projects and will be helpful to other scholars' once we disclose the database. Currently, only a minority of larger Nodegoat projects have created public interfaces over the past few years.¹⁰ Documenting transformation and decision processes within projects making use of Nodegoat, how their data interacts with other databases or uses storytelling to present data are rare.¹¹ Yet such documentation would benefit future projects and with the SciFair database we want to fully utilize these options. While some researchers are rather critical of the use of database websites, they can contribute to help make information on a niche topic more findable and useable.¹²

By focusing on events, attractions, organisations and people, and constantly enriching these entries with (meta)data from different sources, we are able to gain insight into a variety of socio-cultural aspects over the *longue durée*, such as family dynamics, social and professional relations, travel patterns, network creation in- and outside the fairground, solidarity dynamics, and influential knowledge brokers. I will illustrate this through a case study about the *Ménagerie des frères Pianet*. In conclusion, we will contribute at the same time to the preservation of source material, and highlight research findings by making our database accessible online to both researchers and the general public.

¹⁰ Of the more than 50 Nodegoat projects only 12 created a public interface. See: lab1100.com/onedecade, accessed 11/04/2023. While some have created interesting and visually appealing interfaces; the audience, purpose and functionalities of other interfaces are not always clear.

¹¹ The TIC and WeChangED projects in particular function as an inspirational source. See: Christophe Verbruggen et al., 'Social Reform International Congresses and Organizations (1846–1914): From Sources to Data', *Journal of Open Humanities Data* 8, no. 0 (12 May 2022): 13, <https://doi.org/10.5334/johd.69>; Katherine Thornton et al., 'Linking Women Editors of Periodicals to the Wikidata Knowledge Graph', *SEMANTIC WEB* 14, no. 2 (2023): 443–55, <https://doi.org/10.3233/SW-222845>. See also their project websites: TIC project, <https://www.tic.ugent.be/> en <https://www.tic.ugent.be/data>, accessed 11/04/2023; WeChangEd project, <https://www.wechanged.ugent.be/#stories>, accessed 11/04/2023. Only a few of the larger projects have deposited their data in a repository.

¹² Adam Crymble, 'Does Your Historical Collection Need a Database-Driven Website?', *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 009, no. 1 (26 May 2015), <http://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/9/1/000206/000206.html>.