The Journal for Digital Legal History

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The past year has been a remarkable journey for Digital Legal History in general, marked by innovative explorations at the intersection of digital methods and legal historical research. The recent Rechtshistorikertag in Frankfurt (16-20 September 2024) epitomized this intellectual transformation with its provocative theme "The Language of Sources" – a concept that would have seemed almost inconceivable just a few years ago.

The conference's broad scope perfectly captured the evolving landscape of legal historical research. The event underscored a fundamental shift in how we approach legal historical scholarship by bringing together digital humanities, global legal history, and diverse historical domains—from maritime and ecclesiastical to criminal history. No longer confined to traditional disciplinary boundaries, researchers are now exploring interconnected narratives that span geographical, temporal, and methodological frontiers.

Our special issue on "Gute Policey" represented a significant milestone in this journey. Breaking from traditional urban-centric narratives, this publication offered a nuanced digital perspective on police ordinances, illuminating the complex legal landscapes of rural jurisdictions. By focusing on less-explored territories, we demonstrated the transformative potential of digital methodological approaches to reframe and enrich our understanding of historical legal systems.

Of particular intrigue is the emerging discourse around generative artificial intelligence. These technologies have rapidly transitioned from speculative potential to practical tools, offering unprecedented capabilities – from sophisticated spell-checking to generating complex analytical responses. Yet, their emergence demands rigorous scholarly scrutiny and a nuanced approach.

The potential of AI is matched only by the need for careful, methodical engagement, especially when navigating the intricate terrains of historical sources. Historical documents are not merely linear records but complex narratives representing multiple potential trajectories. They capture what occurred and the broader spectrum of possibilities, including paths not taken. Generative AI models, trained on existing patterns, risk reducing these rich, nuanced historical realities to seemingly 'logical' but potentially reductive narratives.

This methodological challenge is precisely why scholarly intervention is crucial. While powerful, AI technologies are fundamentally based on pattern recognition and statistical probability. They build generic ideas and potential combinations based on prior contexts. However, historical sources – particularly those from periods distant from our own – often defy such easy categorization. They represent moments of contingency, alternative imaginations, and paths not chosen.

Consider, for instance, legal documents from periods of significant social or political transformation. An AI model might need help to capture the nuanced legal reasoning, the contextual subtleties, and the complex human negotiations that underpin these sources. The risk lies in overlooking the complexity that makes historical research so intellectually compelling. We thus extend an open invitation to our scholarly community: we eagerly anticipate contributions that critically examine the intersections of AI technologies and legal historical research. What are the epistemological challenges and opportunities? How can we harness these tools while maintaining scholarly rigour and interpretative depth? These are not just technological questions, but fundamental inquiries into the nature of historical understanding.

Our commitment remains unwavering: quality over quantity. Rather than adhering to arbitrary publication quotas, we prioritize thorough peer review and scholarly excellence. While our current volume might seem modest, we are preparing for what promises to be a substantive – or as we might playfully say, a true "digital doorstopper" – collection of scholarly insights in the coming months.

The articles currently in review and revision phases represent the cutting edge of digital legal historical research. They embody our commitment to pushing methodological boundaries, exploring innovative approaches, and bringing fresh perspectives to historical legal studies.

To our readers, contributors, and the broader digital legal history community, we invite you to join us in this exciting intellectual expedition. Challenge our assumptions, explore new methodological terrains, and help us chart the evolving landscape of legal historical research.

The future of legal history is not just digital – it is collaborative, interdisciplinary, and boundless.

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