BRIDGE: TOOLS FOR MEDIA STUDIES RESEARCHERS

MERDES: PARDON MY FRENCH!

If you abbreviate ‘Media research data exploration suite’ then MeRDES is a logical name. However, as the team from the research project found out during a conference in Brussels, the French-speaking world has somewhat different connotations. Nevertheless, even the French media researchers were interested in what this tool could do for them, despite its name...

WHAT WAS THE PROBLEM?

Developing a research question can be a particularly challenging and time consuming stage, especially when there is a large volume of information that offers possibilities. In this case, a TV archive inspires many scholars to pursue fresh lines of enquiry, but how best to support them?

According to the NWO-CATCH project Building Rich Links to Enable Television History Research, or BRIDGE, media researchers working in archives usually go through an exploration phase, generating and fine-tuning research questions by looking what kind of information is available in the media archive. The project team sought to support researchers through this initial stage of their work.

HOW WAS THE PROBLEM SOLVED?

The idea behind MeRDES is that you play around, you compare and you get ideas for research questions, while at the same time understanding what kind of content the media archive offers you.

The MeRDES interface gives you the opportunity to search on two topics at the same time. After searching, the interface comes back with two word clouds and a visualisation that compares the two topics in various graphs such as a time line.

So for example, if you are studying immigration from Eastern Europe to the Netherlands, you might consider how Romanian and Polish immigrants are portrayed on Dutch television. By using MeRDES, you can see how ‘Polish’ and ‘Romanian’ are mentioned in the descriptions of the television programmes, as to detect an evolution throughout the time and a trend in the usage of specific words such as refugee, labour migrant or asylum seeker.

Maurits van der Graaf (author of this article) was given a demonstration and when asked to come up with a topic picked one from a former job and immediately possible research questions were discussed!
BRIDGE is a collaborative project of the Information and Language Processing Systems group (University of Amsterdam), the Centre for Television in Transition (Utrecht University), and the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision (Beeld en Geluid).

WHAT ARE THE MAIN OUTCOMES?

After developing the research tool, the team investigated its use for the researchers to find out: was the research question better or different when people used the MeRDES tool?

They presented two versions of MeRDES to two sets of researchers. One version was a straightforward search tool, the other version allowed for a comparison. The BRIDGE team then logged the search behaviour of these two groups of academics, who have been asked to formulate a research question at the very end of their search tasks.

The outcome? Researchers using the comparative version, MeRDES, had explored the archive more broadly and had consulted more documents, this might suggest that the comparison tool enabled them to develop different research questions as they were able to probe the archives more fully.

MORE TOOLS: COMERDA

The BRIDGE team did more than just developing and looking at the use of the MeRDES tool on media research projects. Their investigations into the workings of the media research cycle identified the different needs of academics and thus possibilities for tools. The team subsequently created another tool, this time for contextualisation:

CoMeRDa aims to support scholars to contextualise their findings. It enables the user to search in multiple data collections within the television archive, newspapers and so on. CoMeRDa provides several interfaces: a basic interface to search a collection, and a combined search interface to examine multiple collections simultaneously. An issue with comparing documents held in different places is that when collections are sparsely annotated, it is difficult to link them to documents in other collections. CoMeRDa enables viewing of documents in the context of items in other collections. It allows researchers to create connections across archives.
KEY LESSONS LEARNED

The BRIDGE team learnt that it is important to involve users in the development of interfaces in an early stage. Also, the combination of a computer science researcher with a humanities researcher as key project members yielded new insights for both disciplines. They encourage more and intensive collaboration between teams of computer scientists and humanists.

FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

The BRIDGE project has ended, so what is going to happen now with MeRDES and CoMeRDa? In the words of the project team: “We are a research project, not an infrastructural project. Our project is finished, we all went to work on different projects, and therefore we cannot take care of the sustainability and maintenance of the tools”.

However, there are follow-up research and development activities and plans for a more structural solution:

- **The Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision** – the archive for the public television and radio broadcasts in the Netherlands - has redeveloped the MeRDES interface but was sensible enough to give it another name: **AVResearcher, which will be launched mid-2014**

- **The code for AVResearcher has been released as open source**, which allows others to create their own version of search tools such as MeRDES in other domains

- **QuaMeRDES**: this is an extended version of MeRDES, funded by CLARIN-NL. It goes one step further in analysing the metadata, but also has a typical feature of CoMeRDa: it simultaneously searches across television, newspapers and subtitles

- **TROVe**: this ‘transmedia observatory’, funded by CLARIAH (join-up of CLARIN and DARIAH projects), helps people analyse how news spreads across various types of media, such as tweets, blogs and television, comparing coverage of events across multiple archives.

However, there is still need for a more structural solution. The future is yet unclear, but the hope is that the tools will become part of a portal for humanities scholars. The proposal for such a portal, called CLARIAH (clariah.nl), is currently under review and the results will be announced mid-2014. It is clear that the BRIDGE-tools support
media researchers in exploring, searching and analysing various relevant archives. There will no doubt be an eager audience for the tools; the community of media researchers and students in the Netherlands is growing all the time.

Maurits van der Graaf says, “You cannot deny the BRIDGE team’s creativity and productivity; although you might have critical thoughts about the names they give their research tools.” But what is the outlook for the tools they developed?

The team’s experiences with the MeRDES and CoMeRDa, both research projects to determine what kind of tools would be most useful for researchers, suggest at least two topics for further study.

Firstly, because the research cycle of media scholars shares similarities with those of researchers in other humanities disciplines, it seems worthwhile to explore the potential of tools like CoMeRDa for a wider range of academics.

Secondly, the project team identified that further investigation is needed to find out how their next generation of search interfaces can better support researchers’ individual preferences for search strategies and how the material is presented.

FIND OUT MORE

Find out more about BRIDGE
Explore the MeRDES tool
Explore the CoMeRDa tool
Read more about the methods developed within the BRIDGE project here

References

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Based on an interview with Marc Bron and Jasmijn Van Gorp on 20 January 2014 by Maurits van der Graaf

March 2014

With thanks to Marc Bron and Jasmijn Van Gorp for sharing their views, and to Maurits van der Graaf and Nicola Yeeles for writing the text.

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