

Artificial Intelligence as a Digital Historian: Capabilities and Limitations in Historical Interpretation

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Abstract: With this paper we are examining Artificial Intelligence (AI) as a “digital historian” and its potentials, limitations and challenges related to historical interpretation. Qualitative thematic analysis of 29 selected academic sources was used to explore the use of AI in historiography. Overall, the findings indicate that AI can be a valuable tool for historical research, as it can help analyze large amounts of text, detect patterns, and streamline the process of managing and processing historical data. These strengths enable historians to be able to work with large and complex quantities of data, which would not be possible using traditional approaches. The study does, however, reveal some important constraints, such as problems with the quality of the data, algorithmic bias, misinterpretations in context, and shallow interpretation. It also emphasizes methodological and epistemological issues about the trustworthiness of AI productions and the capacity of machine analysis to match the human historical thinking. The main thing that comes across is the tension between the objective of the computer and the subjective nature of historical interpretation. The study argues that AI should be seen as a complement, not a substitute, for human historians, and the employment of AI needs to be carefully considered in the field of digital humanities

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Digital History, Historiography, Historical Interpretation, AI Limitations

Introduction

The high pace of development of the Artificial Intelligence (AI) has greatly changed several areas of knowledge production, such as the humanities and historical research. AI started as a computational discipline which worked to create human-like intelligence but now it exists as a multi-dimensional field which affects scientific research and public administration and cultural scholarship (Groumpos, P. P., 2023; Ali, S. M. et al., 2023). The historical discipline now faces a complete transformation because researchers have moved from traditional methods to data-driven systems which operate through automated algorithms.

Historical research depends on scholars who apply critical thinking and contextual studies and personal interpretation to reconstruct historical events. The introduction of digital technology together with AI development has created new research methods which evaluate established research methods. Researchers now use computational methods to study history instead of following traditional narrative approaches because they analyze extensive data sets through automated systems (Tetteh, C. et al., 2022; Ajayi, K. and Oluwatosin, Y. I., 2024)..

The field has experienced two main transformations because of AI which now helps researchers analyze historical documents while it also supports archive management and detects recurring patterns. With the help of AI-powered tools, it is possible to analyze large corpora of historical documents and identify hidden patterns and generate insights that would be difficult to achieve by using exclusively the manual analysis (Jacob, H. et al., 2025; Yumasheva, J. Y., 2025). This has seen the introduction of what could be termed as the digital historian wherein AI systems are used to aid in the interpretation and reconstruction of historical events.

Although these innovations have taken place, the history of the use of AI in historical research is still a complex and controversial issue. Some researchers predict the system will enhance research operations while generating improved analytical results yet others point out major obstacles which scientists must overcome to handle its methodological restrictions and its challenges with data interpretation and its fundamental epistemological problems (Galve, K. V. & Kshirsagar, U., 2025; Aboyeji, O. S. & Aboyeji, A. J., n.d.). The main issue involves AI systems which should understand complete historical content while analyzing it through proper contextual interpretation.

The present study investigates how AI systems operate throughout various historical research domains which include digital archiving and automated classification and predictive modeling systems. The research reveals AI functions as an effective tool which produces a complete transformation of historical research methodology (AI-Daghstany, I. I. et al., 2025). The Digitalization-to-Computation transition generates major doubts about how historical information functions because it challenges our current understanding of author roles and interpreter activities and meaning development processes (Spina, S., 2026).

Although the literature on the use of AI in historical contexts is gradually expanding, a shortage of analytical frameworks that critically evaluate the use of AI in history remains. Available literature tend to be either technical, or more generally, opportune, without paying proper attention to the underlying epistemological and methodological consequences of AI-driven historical interpretation.

It is therefore in this light that this study seeks to fill this gap by considering the possibilities of Artificial Intelligence as a digital historian, its limitations, and challenges when it comes to the interpretation of historical events. The study aims at offering a critical and systematic review of the way AI is transforming historical inquiry, and also finding out the limits to which AI can be applied to the field of history.

The work can be used to advance the literature on AI by offering a systematic thematic framework which revitalizes AI as an interpretive agent in historiography.

This research followed a qualitative thematic analysis research design, which relies on a structured and systematic selection of literature, which is relevant to the research. Data collection procedure was aimed at creating a narrow and methodologically-strong corpus of academic texts exploring the role of Artificial Intelligence in historiography. This will be done in a systematic manner in the period between January and March 2026. A sample of 64 records (100%), was discovered by using specific searches in several large academic databases. The distribution of sources was as follows: Scopus (34.4%, n = 22), Web of Science (21.9%, n = 14), Google Scholar (28.1%, n = 18), and publisher databases including Springer and IEEE Xplore (15.6%, n = 10). The search strategy implemented the combinations of the keywords as follows: Artificial Intelligence, Digital History, Historiography, Historical Interpretation and AI in Humanities, and connected them with the help of Boolean operators (AND/OR). Duplicate and overlapping records were eliminated (17.2% n = 11) giving a total of 53 distinct records (82.8%). These records were filtered at the title and abstract level as per set inclusion

and exclusion criterion.

The studies were included in those that discussed explicitly the intersection of Artificial Intelligence and historical research, but the studies that dealt with other domains of study that were not related, i.e., medicine, engineering and purely technical development of AI. Although the research has a systematic selection process, the research does not intend to carry out a formal systematic review but instead it would be used to support a qualitative interpretive analysis. After the screening process, 29 articles (54.7% of the screening records) were included in the final data set after passing the screening criteria. The last corpus is associated with the customized reference list that will be used in the study to ensure transparency and consistency between data collection and analysis as shown in figure 1.

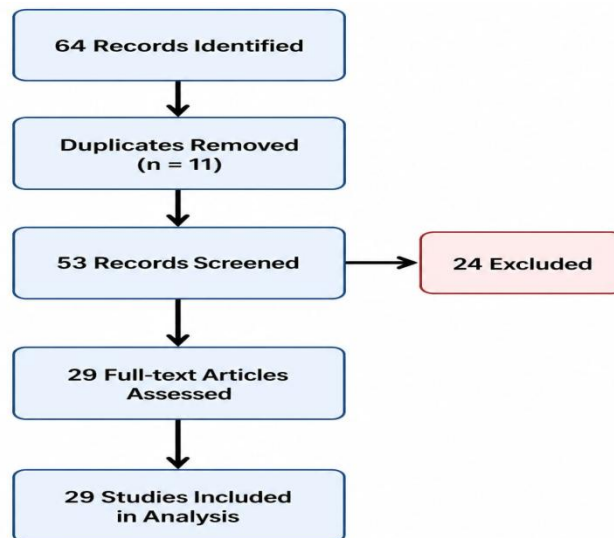


Figure 1.How the included literature was selected to be included in the study. The figure represents the systematic procedure of locating, screening and choice of pertinent research that are part of the qualitative thematic analysis. The initial number of identified records was 64, with 29 studies not having any issues with the eligibility criteria and succeeding in the final dataset.

Among the characteristics of the source, there are peer-reviewed journal articles (55.2, n=16), conference papers (13.8, n=4), and academic books or book chapters (31.0, n=9). The temporal distribution shows that most of the sources were published in the last 25 years (86.2, n = 25), which can be attributed to the topicality of the topic today.

After data collection, a formal data processing process was followed to maintain consistency, traceability and readiness to conduct analysis of the final corpus of 29 studies (100%).

In the first phase, a standardization of all the studies was done into a single format of analysis. Reference management tools were used to retrieve, organize and extract full texts, and extract key sections (abstract, methodology, results and discussion). This procedure led to full normalization of data (100% n=29), which means that all sources have the same terminology and structure.

On the second level, the hybrid coding framework was created, which entails a combination of deductive and inductive approaches to coding. The conceptual framework of the study informed the deductive phase, which produced 6 predetermined codes (100%), such as, potentials, limitations challenges, bias, reliability and the epistemological aspects. This was then followed by an inductive open-coding step that was used on all the texts that led to the discovery of 4 other emergent codes that further diversified the coding structure.

The 29 studies (100 percent) were systematically-coded. The coding process yielded a total of 312 coded segments, an average of 10.8 coded segments per study indicating consistency in extraction of relevant content to analysis across the dataset.

To increase methodological reliability, a consistency check with re-coding a subset of the data (20.7% n = 6 studies) was performed. The inter-rater agreement between the coding iterations was 91.3% and this implies that the level of inter-rater agreement is high.

All the coded data were then compiled into structure thematic matrices to allow systematic comparison and get the data ready to be analyzed.

To study the conceptualization of Artificial Intelligence in the selected works, the data analysis was performed in terms of a thematic analysis approach, which combines qualitative interpretation with the use of the structured categorization approach.

The analysis was done based on all the 312 coded segments (100%) on the basis of the 29 studies (100%). In the first step, all the coded data were systematized based on the developed coding scheme. These codes were then summed up into six higher-order themes of analysis that allowed a more coherent and interpretable structure to the analysis.

The comparative analytical method was utilized in all the studies to establish patterns, similarities and differences in the ways Artificial Intelligence is discussed in regards to historical interpretation. This involved exploring the thematic areas of overlap, differences in conceptual framing and differences in methodological orientation. The studies were categorized by their research orientation (conceptual, applied, or review-based) that would help to interpret the data more carefully. Such classifications helped to cross-compares and enhance the depth of analysis of the study.

Lastly, the analysis was based on synthesizing patterns of recurrent patterns and conceptual relationships throughout the dataset to provide an organized basis of interpreting the role of Artificial Intelligence as a digital historian.

This section shows the empirical results of the thematic analysis of the 29 selected articles (100%), out of the 312 coded segments (100%). They are arranged in three key parts (1) the thematic categories distribution, (2) the cross-study thematic engagement and (3) the methodological orientation of the included studies.

The thematic analysis indicated a systematic sorting of the themes expressing the conceptualization of Artificial Intelligence in historical intervention. As demonstrated in Table 1, the most prevalent theme was the one that was coded as 32.1% (n = 100) of all the segments that were coded. This was done followed by limitations and technical constraints at 24.6% (n = 76) and methodological and epistemological challenges at 18.6% (n = 58). Themes connected with such spheres like bias and ethical concerns included 12.5% (n = 39) and 7.7% (n = 24), respectively.

The least represented theme was the epistemological transformation in historiography which consisted of 4.7 percent (n=15). The overall concentration of scholarly interest in both the opportunities and limitations of AI in historical settings were highly concentrated, with the three dominant themes (potentials, limitations, and challenges) constituting 75.1% of all the coded data. Table 1 shows the distribution of thematic categories that were identified in the dataset. The findings show a clear predomination of the themes of the potentials, limitations, and challenges of Artificial Intelligence when it comes to interpreting history, which is the main focus of the present discourse on both the capabilities and limitations of AI. The results are further graphically represented in Figure 2 in order to visually enhance the distribution of thematic categories.

Artificial Intelligence as a Digital Historian: Capabilities and Limitations in Historical Interpretation

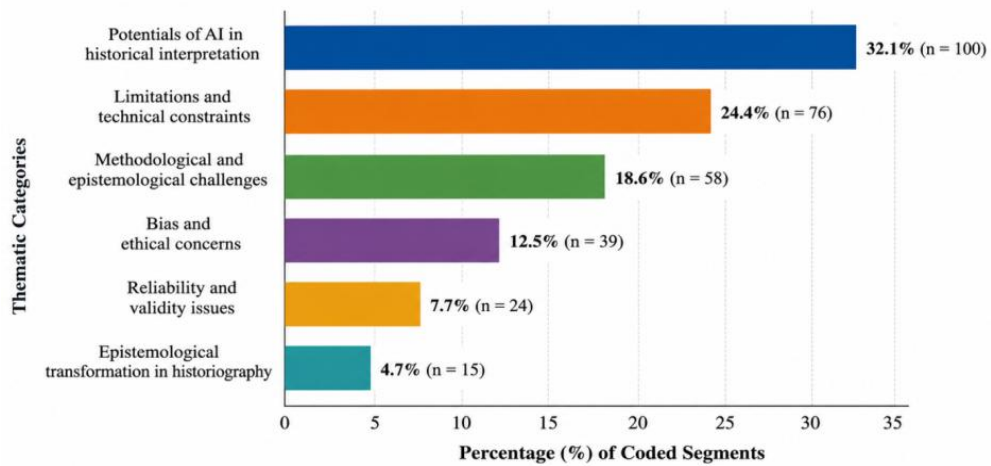


Figure 2. Their dispersion in thematic groups that present the idea of Artificial Intelligence usage in historical interpretation

The distribution, as presented in Figure 2, confirms a strong emphasis on the opportunities of the Artificial Intelligence, then the limitations of this approach and the methodological issues, with epistemological concerns being relatively under researched.

Table 1: Distribution of Thematic Categories (n = 312 coded segments)

Theme	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Potentials of AI in historical interpretation	100	32.1%
Limitations and technical constraints	76	24.4%
Methodological and epistemological challenges	58	18.6%
Bias and ethical concerns	39	12.5%
Reliability and validity issues	24	7.7%
Epistemological transformation in historiography	15	4.7%
Total	312	100%

As shown in Table 1, the results indicate that the focus of research is relatively focused on the functional and methodological aspects of AI, with high share of relatively underrepresented deeper epistemological considerations.

Each of the studies was evaluated in terms of the depth and breadth of thematic coverage, by counting the number of themes covered by each study. Most of the studies as shown in Table 2 exhibited multidimensional engagement. The overall prevalence of at least 2 themes is 82.8 percent (n = 24) with the prevalence of 3 or more themes being 41.4 percent (n = 12). Contrary to that, only 17.2 percent (n = 5) of the studies paid attention to one dominant theme. This dispersion points to the fact that most of the researches do not analyze Artificial Intelligence in a vacuum but tend to examine it through the prism of interrelated analytical levels. The level of thematic interest of the chosen studies is summed up in Table 2, which shows the degree to which the studies consider multiple analytical dimensions.

Table2. Thematic engagement across studies (n = 29 studies)

Number of Themes per Study	Number of Studies (n)	Percentage (%)
One theme	5	17.2%
Two themes	12	41.4%
Three or more themes	12	41.4%
Total	29	100%

The data show that the majority of the studies are taken in a multidimensional format, which means that Artificial Intelligence is seldom examined as a phenomenon with one variable but as a complicated and interrelated phenomenon.

The studies included were further studied depending on its methodological orientation. According to Table 3, the qualitative and conceptual studies were the most common in the dataset, which comprised 65.5% (n = 19) of all the sources. These works were mainly directed on the theoretical discourses, the historiographical discourses and theoretical frameworks. Applied or case-based studies made up 24.1% (n = 7), and presented practical insights into the implementation of AI tools in historical research. In the meantime, review-based studies made 10.4% (n = 3) and synthesized the existing literature on AI applications. It is also interesting to note that applied studies provided more coverage to the discussions on the potentials of AI, being 46.0% of the segments in this theme, whereas conceptual studies were more prominent in the discussion related to bias and epistemological issues, and conceptual studies contributed 68.4% of segments within these categories. The methodological orientation of included studies is presented in Table 3, which indicates the prevailing research methods in the dataset.

Table3. Methodological Orientation of Inclusion Studies (n = 29 studies)

Study Type	Number of Studies (n)	Percentage (%)
Qualitative / Conceptual	19	65.5%
Applied / Case-based	7	24.1%
Review-based	3	10.4%
Total	29	100%

The findings indicate a definite prevalence of conceptual and qualitative research methods, which shows the exploratory and theoretical nature of the current studies on AI in historical contexts.

The results synthesis shows that there are three prevailing patterns throughout the data. To start with, there is a high focus on the abilities of AI, which is accompanied by similar issues of concern on its limitations. Second, the results indicate that there has been a continuing struggle between automation and human interpretive powers in the historical analysis. Third, although there are epistemological discussions, they are not fully developed as compared to technical and methodological considerations. In order to generalize these trends into one analytical view, a conceptual framework is suggested (see Figure 3).

Artificial Intelligence as a Digital Historian: Capabilities and Limitations in Historical Interpretation

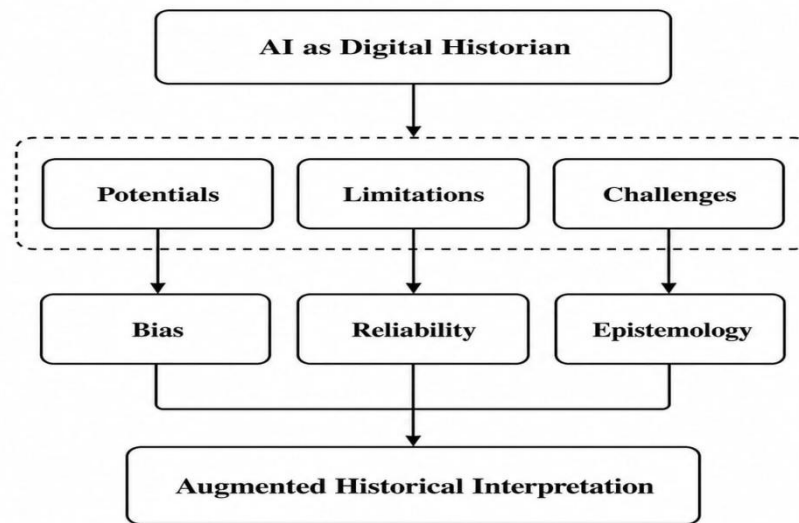


Figure 3. Theoretical model depicting the interaction between the potentials, limitations and challenges of Artificial Intelligence as a digital historian resulting in augmented historical interpretation.

The interplay of potentials, limitations and challenges as shown in Figure 3 results in critical epistemic issues, especially in the areas of bias and reliability culminating in the creation of an augmented version of historical interpretation.

Discussion

The results of the present study give a subtle insight into Artificial Intelligence as a digital historian that shows a complicated interaction between the potential of technologies and the methodological limitations and epistemological transformation. These findings are in line with larger arguments in the field of digital historiography: the growing view of AI as not a tool, but an agent of the creation and interpretation of historical knowledge.

The fact that the theme of the dominance of the potentials theme in the results prevails, is indicative of the increased awareness of the transformative capabilities of AI in historical research. Large scale text analysis, pattern recognition and reconstruction of archives can be done with AI technologies and the amount of information analyzed through AI technologies is significantly higher. This is in line with the findings of Colavizza, G. et al. (2021), who pointed out to the growing role of AI in archival systems and digital heritage. (2024), who emphasized the potential of AI to rethink and re-create archival images.

Further, the processing capacity of AI systems with large volumes of data is comparable to the developments in other sectors like healthcare and engineering where AI has proven to be extremely efficient in detecting patterns and making predictions (Siontis, K. C. et al., 2021; Li, H. et al., 2021). This interdisciplinary uniformity confirms the thesis that AI has great potential in the historical disciplines.

But, as Wooldridge, M. has pointed out, this is not true. These developments need to be seen in the wider history of the evolution of AI itself, which has always been characterized by periods of invention, constraint and reinvention.

Irrespective of the potential, the results prove that AI is still limited by the considerable technical and structural constraints. Such problems as data quality, algorithmic opaqueness and misinterpretation in the context of historical analysis limit its usefulness. Such constraints can be aligned with the framework suggested by Parycek, P. et al. (2024), who consider AI systems to be

operating within institutional and technical constraints that limit the ability of AI systems to interpret information.

Moreover, there is evidence of the applied domain application of AI systems, including medicine and clinical diagnostics, where high accuracy of the AI systems is observed (Kulkarni, P. A. & Singh, H., 2023; Cui, M. & Zhang, D. Y., 2021). This restriction is even more evident when applied to historical data, in that case, no longer a mere pattern recognition is necessary to interpret historical data, but contextual reasoning and critical judgment are required, as well. The fast progress of generative AI tools according to Wu T. et al. (2023) shows that language proficiency stands apart from actual knowledge content when these tools create output.

Among the most acute lessons that the outcomes bring to light is that there is a degree of bias and ethical issues in historical interpretation with the help of AI. Algorithms bias, data selection bias and representational distortion are among the major issues that affect the credibility of AI as a historical agent.

Floridi, L. has a very strong case concerning these issues. The latter point is stressed by the author of the article (2023), who points out that, AI systems are by definition a reflection of the values and biases of the data used to train the AI system. Similarly, M. H. Arnold. The ethical aspect of AI decision-making (especially in the situations when interpretation and judgment are needed) is criticized by (2021).

Historiographical, Kansteiner, W. The fundamental issue raised by (2022) is whether it is feasible to meaningfully outsource the interpretation of historical knowledge to machines, without calling into question the subjective and interpretive nature of historical knowledge. This is an additional issue that Pasquinelli, M. supports. Who frames AI in the broader systems of power, (2023) argues that technology systems tend to recreate the epistemic hierarchies which had previously existed.

The fact that the issue of reliability was relatively less represented in the results and is therefore not well researched and still remains unanswered, only confirms its importance. Pieces of evidence in other fields imply that although AI can attain high rates of precision, its results will have to be carefully analyzed.

Healthcare diagnostic operations have reached their highest AI development stage yet human staff members must keep an eye on these systems because they need protection against false information and unverified system results (Hirani, R. et al., 2024; Xu, L. et al., 2021). The same patterns emerge in dental care and petroleum engineering because AI technology improves operational results but it needs human specialists to make final decisions (Agrawal, P. et al., 2022; Kuang, L. et al., 2021).

Such cross-domain consistency enhances the claim that AI in historical studies must be considered as an augmentative tool as opposed to an independent interpreter.

Even though not as widely reflected in the data, epistemological problems have important theoretical attributes. History students must learn to identify the truth when they use AI for their historical research assignments. Historical research has faced two fundamental obstacles because AI technology arrived to disrupt standard methods which allowed authentic authors to create original work while enabling scientists to access historical data.

The research of Colavizza and his team from 2021, shows that AI systems generate unique knowledge which makes it difficult to identify when data analysis ends and human understanding begins. Kansteiner, W. (2022) identifies a problem which arises from the difference between how computers process information and how humans interpret historical information.

Artificial Intelligence as a Digital Historian: Capabilities and Limitations in Historical Interpretation

The broader historical perspective provided by Wooldridge, M. (2021) and Grzybowski, A. et al. (2024) suggests that AI represents not a rupture but a continuation in the evolution of knowledge systems. But it is the critical point of view by Pasquinelli, M. The article (2023) makes us remember that this change is not just a matter of fact, but rather an issue that is deeply rooted in the social, political, and economic contexts.

In general, the discussion shows that Artificial Intelligence is not yet able to be a fully autonomous, in other words a fully autonomous digital historian. Rather, it is used as a supplement to human capacities in the form of an augmented historiographical tool, but still relies on human capacities, human interpretation and human contextualization and ethical judgment. The results indicate that there are three general conclusions that are made:

First, AI greatly widens the range of methodological tools of historians, but it does not exclude interpretive reasoning.

Second, there are still significant limitations pertaining to bias, reliability and understanding of the context around the incident.

Third, the introduction of AI into historiography requires the reconsideration of the frameworks of epistemology instead of its alternative.

These results support the thesis that AI is transforming, although not eliminating, the epistemic basis of the historical inquiry.

Conclusion

This paper has critically discussed Artificial Intelligence (AI) as a digital historian, with specific reference to its opportunities, limits and challenges in the interpretation of historical events. Through synthesis of evidence based on a structured corpus of scholarly sources, the research gives a comprehensive evaluation of how AI is transforming the methodological and epistemological underpinnings of historical inquiry.

The results show that AI can provide significant benefits to historical research, especially with regard to processing large amounts of data and recognizing patterns and analyzing large volumes of textual and archival data. Such capabilities help to broaden the scope and effectiveness of historical inquiry, and allow historians to interact with sources in ways previously unavailable to them. In this regard, AI is a major methodological change in the overall context of digital humanities. The paper also points out that these benefits are also coupled with serious constraints. The problems of data quality, algorithmic bias, misinterpretation of context, and lack of depth to interpretation are all significant challenges to full integration of AI into historical practice. AI systems do not, unlike human historians, have the ability to think in a nuanced contextual manner, to be reflexive, and capable of critical judgment, which are key elements of historical interpretation.

More so, the study highlights that there is still a methodological and epistemological problem. Utilization of AI leads to the basic questions of authorship, objectivity, and character of historical knowledge. Although the outputs may seem analytically sound, the outputs are necessarily conditioned by the data and algorithms that generate them, which underline the importance of human controls and critical analysis.

Resting on these observations, this paper finds that AI cannot be deemed an independent historian. Rather, it can be viewed as an augmentative tool that facilitates, but does not substitute, the human interpretation processes. Such a hybrid approach is thus likely to dominate the future of historical research, whereby AI-driven analysis and human expertise are in a complementary

relationship.

It is based on these findings that the study recommends that future research should focus on the development of more transparent, explainable, and ethically grounded AI systems with reference to the needs of historical inquiry. Also, more emphasis should be put on interdisciplinary cooperation between historians, data scientists, and ethicists to guarantee the responsible and successful introduction of AI into the world of historiography.

In general, although AI represents a revolutionizing concept in historical research, it is, still, a fundamentally supportive concept, which has to be continuously engaged with critically, in order to make sure that the integrity and complexity of historical knowledge are not compromised.

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Artificial Intelligence as a Digital Historian: Capabilities and Limitations in Historical Interpretation

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