

**Daniel Scott Snelson, *The Little Database – A Poetics of Media Formats*.
Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 2025, 224 pp.**
(Reviewed by Camilla Holm Soelseth, OsloMet – Oslo Metropolitan University)

The Little Database – A Poetics of Media Formats is a new addition to the established series *Electronic Mediations*, which over the years has produced many noteworthy and well-cited contributions to the often now overlapping fields of the (critical) digital humanities, media-influenced literary and cultural studies, archival studies, and library and information science. *The Little Database* is thus in the company of great works like *What is Information?* (Janich 2018), *How to Talk About Video Games* (Bogost 2015), *A Geology of Media* (Parikka 2015), *Reading Writing Interfaces* (Emerson 2014), *Comparative Textual Media* (Hayles – Pressman 2013), *Digital Memory and the Archives* (Ernst 2012), and *Bodies in Technology* (Ihde 2001).

This book is another important work in this series, an interrogation into a critical aspect of our contemporary datafied society (Schäfer – van Es 2017): the little database. The work succeeds in providing an entry point into the sociopoetics of online archives and collections, which is also transferable to the investigation of larger database conglomerates in the form of platforms today. It is also a strongly humanistic endeavour in its multiscalar methodological way of approaching databases, close reading at different scales. With this, an important contribution Snelson makes to the study of digital culture and datafied society today is through the book's successful demonstration of how central the humanities have become to understanding both the historical phenomenon and the concept of digitization in the fields of GLAM (Galleries, Libraries, Archives, and Museums), as well as GLAM-related research in other academic disciplines. Snelson's work is evident even in the introduction to the index, where it endeavours to account for the many ways the book can be read and the many ways this index can function for us, in different material contexts.

The Little Database is, in addition, an important contribution to how we as researchers need to approach our datafied society, not in just following the loud promises of what “big data” can give us, but rather in understanding and

approaching our smaller collections of data, of little databases everywhere, and how they affect what they organize. For this reason, Snelson calls the little database an “integral model” for understanding our contemporary society and culture (2025: 2), and the study of these models is also integral to making visible the effects of digitization, through the vectors of computation, preservation, transmission, and contingent reading. Here, accounting for the relations between file formats, circuits of transmission and distribution, database contexts, and sites of use. Artifacts appear as digital objects, within a set of “historically contingent and contextually networked databases” (2025: 15).

As is also typical of many strains of contemporary humanistic research, a new materialist-inspired approach is brought together with the infrastructural turn in the humanities: the shift to studying the inner workings of digital infrastructure and formats (Chun 2008). Our contemporary databases exist in a space between preservation and distribution i.e., between storage and transmission. As many practitioners and scholars in GLAM and GLAM-adjacent fields are aware of, they configure the contemporary experience of historical artefacts, as well as the interpretive methods available for the study of the artefacts in these databases (2025: 7), an important part of the collections-as-data movement found in the GLAM-sector today, and which much digital humanities research is built on.

The concept of the database is fittingly taken from the much-cited cultural theorist Lev Manovich and defined as “any organized collection of data” (2025: 9), and any analysis employing the concept must include how the database organizes, stores, indexes, displays, and manipulates (2025: 9). Furthermore, Snelson relies on a theoretical framework encompassing many of the most central names in both the humanities in general, and the humanistic strains of the interdisciplinary GLAM research fields in particular. This includes established concepts, conceptual developments, and ideas from thinkers such as Hayles (objects are not static, but dynamic assemblages), Liu (critique of information management practices), McGann (on textuality and material hermeneutics), and Dworkin (radical formalism).

Snelson also introduces a very fruitful concept for the study of post-digital and contemporary networked culture: Saper’s “sociopoetics” (2001). Applying this concept, the focus is shifted from the objects in the database to the database itself and its processes of distribution and compilation. This focus becomes a way for texts (or artifacts) to find and gain meaning through their distribution. The centrality of this term is so important that Snelson defines it twice, once in chapter 1 (2025: 27) and again in chapter 2 (2025: 75).

The methodological framework also fittingly borrows from a wide array of thinkers in new materialism, digital humanities, cultural theory, and critical data and code studies. All sharing a focus on forces making, rather than things made. An example of this is Snelson following Matthew Kirschenbaum's argument for the importance of archival approaches to the traces left by digital systems of circulation (2008), where networks reinscribe the works they circulate. In this way, the book is situated in the same theoretical and methodological framework of *Life After New Media – Mediation as a Vital Process* (Kember – Zylinska 2012), and their case for making cuts at different scales, focusing on the processes of mediation rather than on stabilized objects. It seemed a missed opportunity not to be in conversation with this work, when they complement each other so well.

The book is divided into four chapters, in addition to an introduction and an epilogue. The introduction serves as an entry way to thinking of all the ways our lives contain little databases as organized data and files for our own personal use. Snelson makes a compelling argument for how the datafied society today – or information environment, as he calls it – is not just big data, but also little databases. From this follows that understanding the logics of the little database is just as important as working with big data, when researching our contemporary society.

The epilogue drives down an additional point, and this is that no matter how much we think of the digital as standardised and protocolled (or platformed, as it is so often expressed with synonymous intent today), so many little databases are idiosyncratic in their making. This points to how little databases are inherently man-made artifacts, even when existing as services for a multitude of users. Likewise, new infrastructural changes, such as going from transmission through downloading to transmission through streaming, affect the practice of personal archiving, shifting power relations, and introducing new contingencies into reading files and databases. The creation of a playlist on Spotify can serve as such a contemporary example. With the guidance of the analysis in the previous chapters in the book, we can help make sense of it as an organizer of culture as data, a rendition of a little database, now encased in larger *platform* databases.

Each chapter in *The Little Database* focuses on a digitized version of a specific media type format, from text (chapter 1), image (of text) (chapter 2), sound (chapter 3), and video (chapter 4). Chapter one focuses on the computation of digital text and the text file, while Chapter 2 focuses on modes of preservation and new ways of circulation when changing the modes of reading historical cultural artifacts as they are presented as new digitized editions. Chapter 3 deals

with transmission, with a close reading of the circulations of artifacts as digitized objects across multiple databases. Chapter 4 has a different focus, scaling down to reading the database through the objects in it. Three specific movies found in this database are analysed through a sociopoetic method of close reading, with a focus on the aspect of dispersion.

For each of the four chapters, an interlude is included. The interludes are textual descriptions of different cases of artistic research, examples of how to perform the same argument as the preceding chapter, but through producing a media-reflexive work. These interludes serve as examples of what many media-influenced humanities scholars before him have argued; it is in the media-reflexive works of art and literature that a particular media or technology is made visible and explored for all its contingencies, in this case revealing the effects of digitization.

Each of the four main chapters also touches upon a larger debate related to our datafied culture. Chapter 1 includes a discussion of what these little databases should be defined as in terms related to how they fulfil roles of preserving, organizing, and distributing digital objects. This opens up for a good discussion and review of the differences between a collection, a (digital) library, an (online) archive (or rogue archive!), an anthology, and an arsenal. This reveals how the historical contingencies of these terms are all challenged by a datafied society and a networked culture.

Chapter 2 expands upon the access to different file formats, their specificity, and the ephemerality of the digital condition in general, tied in with the tension between preservation and distribution. Digital archives act as active forces in redistribution to put into new circulations in the sociopoetic networks of the present, yet cannot escape the aspects of the digital condition. This is even more striking, given that the database case study in question is partly only available through the Internet Archive today.

Chapter 3 is concerned with the different ways that works circulate, the effects their temporary storage in different databases gives, and how this affects our interface with them even when the file format remains consistent. One question looms in the background of this chapter: How does the organization affect both circulation and experience? Harking back to the previous chapter, this also means we have to contemplate that a remediation changes something from being discrete in one format to becoming non-discrete in a new digital format.

Last, chapter 4 shows how media-reflexive works can amplify the effects of digitization, particularly the networked effects of digitization. The relevance of intertextuality is reasserted, but intertextuality is also reconfigured through how

the organization of data in databases creates intertextual relations. As such, it connects to the age-old question of how we critique cultural artifacts.

The Little Database does require a certain prerequisite knowledge of file types and data types to be fully appreciated. Undoubtedly, scholars in the same field in which this book situates itself will have an easier time understanding the descriptions of file types, data, protocols, scripts, and the acts of encoding and decoding. All technical terms we are used to dealing with in the digital humanities but might appear less straightforward if the reader is situated in, e.g., the sociology of literature. But overall, the book still serves as a good example for academics and students in general for how to methodologically and archivally approach personal collections and smaller culture organization projects.

The book is mainly concerned with dealing with the creations coming out of Web 1.0, or what is left of Web 1.0, in Web 2.0. This makes sense, as the latter part of Web 2.0 is recognized as a post-digital epoch in internet history (Cramer: 2015), where data infrastructures are mundane and hidden, buried deep in layers upon layers of platformed content management systems. So, while it offers “a range of tactics to read cultural history through playful engagements with the contingent networks of the present” (2025: 21), it shies away from grappling with a lot of our own reconfigured little databases of Web 2.0. From the partly user-generated new media archives on Instagram and Tumblr to the playlist on Spotify.

There exists a missed opportunity in how to create links between the sociopoetical mode of reading in periodicals, to the *Eclipse* digital collection, to the new media archives of social media (a concept defined by Beer (2013)), which creates new databases for contemporary pop poetry, such as instapoetry. For instance, one of the main ways of distribution and storage of single poems is currently championed by participatory culture on Instagram in conjunction with the search and sorting algorithms there. Here, the intrusiveness of saves and list-functions on contemporary platforms, combined with the influence of participatory culture, facilitates the repurposing of larger standardized systems to create our own little databases within databases. Similarly, the DIY archives made by fans on Tumblr, repurposing functions of the platform, is yet another such example. These relations between smaller and larger databases are, in many ways, essential today in understanding how artifacts circulate as digital objects. On the other hand, this yearning for a chapter on this topic also speaks to the book's importance in creating space for these further arguments. Sometimes, judging a book by what it lacks is more effective if we treat it as an invitation to consider what it opens up for thought and how it might be used.

As its predecessors in *Electronic Mediations*, it has the makings of a central book in the fields of archives, libraries, and museums, and the (critical) digital humanities in general. Not least, it also contributes significantly to the field of artistic practice and research. It is an essential book in covering what to make of formats, databases, as well as digital (and digitized) objects in new environments. It showcases the craft of how to analyse the organizational parts that make up our world, a necessary method to be able to wield for anyone who wishes to excel in the study of contemporary culture and/or GLAM-related research, such as digital cultural heritage.

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