

In praise of frequency. Generating and visualising the collective mentalities of the past

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Serial publications offer insight into the collective mentalities of the past. Because a collective mentality emerges through the iterative nature of information exchange (religious upbringing, school education and public media are significant examples of such exchanges), frequency counts gleaned from media involving a high degree of periodicity, such as newspapers and magazines, are a logical means of outlining the contours of such a mentality. In addition, for domain experts, simple counts produce intuitively more convincing results than the complicated 'shock and awe' algorithms often vaunted in digital humanities' projects. My research generally focuses on twentieth-century Dutch newspapers, employing such rubrics as advertisements, news articles on political and economic events, sports news, weather reports, recipes and crossword puzzles to trace popular conceptions as part of a collective mentality. For this paper, however, I have focused instead on a new and heretofore little-used serial medium: the radio news items of the Dutch national news agency ANP (Algemeen Nederlands Persbureau), broadcast daily between 1937 and 1984. The material was analysed using a series of simple techniques, while the results were visualised through tailor-made graphic displays. In this paper two examples will be surveyed, one using simple frequency counts and the other using ngrams. More complex text mining techniques based for example on topic modelling are obviously possible too but fall beyond the scope of this paper: the question here is the extent to which simple frequencies generated on the basis of a corpus of serial documents directly support historical analysis, and how visualizations can be put to good use in the process.