Historians’ Use of Digital Archival Collection: the Web, Historical Scholarship and Archival Research

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Study Overview

• A follow-up study of citation analysis
  o *American Historical Review* articles from 2000-2012
  o Citing digital archival collections
• Deeper layer of historians’ use of digital archival collection
• Open-ended questionnaire asking for specific experience with digital collections
Methods

• Questionnaire
  o methods of identification; values to include them in publications; the relationship between research patterns and digital archival research, etc.

• 21 Historians participated (20.6 % response rate)
  o Sample representation similar to the whole population
  o Email contact with each author’s article title and referenced digital collections
  o 12 year period; lack of citation format for digital resources in AHR

• Data collection in November and December 2012
Paths to digital archival collections

• Not very different from typical information behaviors
  o colleagues, librarians/archivists, conference, news and magazines, citations
• Except the major method: Web searches & previous knowledge
  o “I usually just Google a subject I want to know about and go from there.”
  o “I was looking for nineteenth-century maps of the Indian Ocean region which I could use in publication (i.e. copyright free), I found the University of Texas Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection excellent and easy to use. I was not previously aware of the collection, so found it with a simple web search.”
Experiences with digital archival collections

• Learning Curve
  o “The Transatlantic Slave Trade Database is not an "intuitive" research tool. One has to have some previous historical knowledge to really make it do useful/interesting work. Moreover, one has to familiarize oneself with the various search fields, which can take some time.”

• Previous knowledge useful in searching
  o “had a great deal of previous knowledge concerning archival and museum holdings, which greatly facilitated the process.”

• Those most complained also most popular ones: good content outweigh difficulties
• Difficulties and Benefits coming from Technology

• Negative
  – deficiencies in systems’ general usability; poor quality of digital images; insufficiency and lack of diversity; help unavailable; text in image not searchable; too sophisticated (less useful for novice users)
  – “page by page downloads of digital documents is annoying, and generates fragmentary files. No standard naming conventions.”

• Positive
  – Save time and effort; advanced feature for discovery
  – “I sometimes find material, especially illustrations that I might not have found otherwise. It is a fast and easy way to browse lots of images.”
Values to their AHR articles

• “No, digital copies are NEVER the same, but they are very, very useful.”

• Values for citation
  • Direct relevancy in content; Enrichment tool for argument; Uniqueness in content; Uniqueness as image and artistic value
  • “the images I used in my article were illustrative. They allowed readers to visualize events I was describing, adding texture and nuance to my argument.”
  • But NOT authoritative form (still original form preferred)

• Checking authentication of their studies
  • “allow for readers to confirm your sources and hence your arguments”
Research patterns

• Information seeking occur across research projects
  o “The AHR essay used parts of two book projects for which I have made very extensive use of digital collections. I didn't need more archives for this essay”

• 5 stages for historical research by Uva’s stages (1977)
  o “Historical research is not quite this linear--it loops back and forth from primary sources (I don't think of these materials as "data") to interpretive strategies.”
  o Archival research occur throughout the research process

• Meaning of “use of digital archival collections”
  o Seeking, finding, understanding, interpreting, presenting, etc.

• New patterns
  o “I use digital sources at the same time that I use more traditional hard copy sources, so they are completely integrated into my research.”
Factors affecting the use of digital sources

• **Academic Norm**
  - Conventional training for historians
    - “As a historian, I am trained always to prefer the source closest to the original.”

• **Creator of digital collections: through reliable methods by authoritative institutions**
  - Truly excellent digital copies made by authoritative procedures seem to me as good as, and sometimes better than, originals.”

• **Format** (image files rather than text html)

• **Venue to publish** (conservative journals or monographs)

• **Reproduction rights, subscription status, etc.**
Findings: others

• Interaction with other researchers and information professionals
  o E-community?
  o “No chance to interact with others at the archive; no e-community in the digital archive.”

• Universal accessibility
  o “I am disabled (mobility problems) so it's great to be able to access the material from my study.”

• Social media
  o “I am a member of academia.edu, where many digital resources are announced.”
Discussions

• Nothing New?
• Empirical Data with users’ actual research
• Specific cases tells about diverse patterns and perceptions
• Historical scholarship in the digital environment: changes in methods? Or in culture?
• Web searches: how to index individual digital items
• Different notions of “use”
• Need further studies who says/does what
  o New generation of historians (digital natives); New historical scholarship (digital humanities); Non-users: who and why
Thank you.

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