„If content is king, context is its crown“

Epistemological and methodological challenges of digital media history

Andreas Fickers / Universität Luxemburg
Digital sources as “métasources”

• "a set of structured information, modelled, passed on to the computer and processed by it”

• “un ensemble structuré d’informations mises en formes, transmises à l'ordinateur et traitées par lui”

Digital sources as new epistemological object

• “The methodological consequences of using digitized and born-digital primary sources, particularly in comparison with ‘traditional’ printed sources is, of course, one of the most sensitive epistemological issue for today’s historian.”

The “life cycle” of historical information

Elizabeth Cowie: paradox of recorded reality

- “Photography and cinematography address two distinct and apparently contradictory desires. There is the desire for reality held and reviewable for analysis [...] and there is a desire for the real not as knowledge but as image – as spectacle” (p. 2)
The “life cycle” of historical information

Steve Anderson: database histories

- “histories comprised of not narratives that describe an experience of the past but rather collections of infinitely retrievable fragments, situated within categories and organized according to predetermined associations.” (p. 122)
Henry Jenkins: transmedia storytelling

• “A transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole. In the ideal form of transmedia storytelling, each medium does what it does best—so that a story might be introduced in a film, expanded through television, novels, and comics; its world might be explored through game play or experienced as an amusement park attraction”.

Discover Europe’s television heritage

EUscreen offers free online access to videos, stills, texts and audio from European broadcasters and audiovisual archives. Explore selected content from early 1900s until today.

search

Tip: use search operators for best results.

Explore EUscreen
FOOD AND DRINK

This exhibition explores the importance of food and drink within Europe, highlighting debates about food and health on television, the role of the chef in popular culture and how food is used to express cultural diversity.

Curated by Sian Barber Royal Holloway, University of London, Dana Mustata, University of Utrecht and Berber Hagedoorn, University of Utrecht.
HISTORY OF EUROPEAN TELEVISION

This exhibition demonstrates the potential for online audio-visual content to explore European television history in new and exciting ways. It is curated by Dr. Dana Mustata from University of Utrecht.
Cooking on television

In some countries such as Britain, the chef has become a central comedy or drama character.

In recent years TV chefs have become important programme hosts. The still image shown here is of Slovenian Ivan Ivacic whose television show was popular with audiences throughout the 1960s and who also published cookery books such as Kuharshka Knjiga.

Cookery shows have also evolved to include new formats and styles and to appeal to a range of viewers as well as reflecting new tastes and new approaches to cooking on screen.

Over time both the chef and the cooking process have constituted central subjects on television.
Cookings shows and famous faces

Cookery shows have also constituted a constant presence on television screens around Europe.

In Catalonia cookery programmes have often been hosted by chefs from famous restaurants who have been invited to present their cooking skills and recipes in front of the camera. The entertainment programme ‘Traditional Cuisine’ hosts weekly chefs from different regions of Catalonia to cook their best traditional recipes in the studio.

‘Michael’s Kitchen’ is another Spanish cookery show which is hosted by the famous Catalan actor Miquel Cors. Each weekly episode features a different famous chef from a different Catalan restaurant who is invited to prepare a dish on screen.
A MULTI-MEDIA E-JOURNAL ON THE PAST AND PRESENT OF EUROPEAN TELEVISION

Journal of European Television History and Culture is the first peer-reviewed, multi-media and open access e-journal in the field of European television history and culture. It offers an international platform for outstanding academic research and archival reflection on television as an important part of our European cultural heritage. With its interdisciplinary profile, the journal is open to many disciplinary perspectives on European television — including television history, media studies, media sociology, cultural studies and television studies.

Vol 1, No 2 (2012): Europe on and Behind the Screens

TABLE OF CONTENTS
A matter of epistemological urgency?!

• “History as a field of enquiry is standing on the edge of a conceptual precipice. Historians need to be thinking about the radical impact of the digital turn in historiography and historical methodology in a critical and engaged manner.”

• We need a broader reflection about the methodological and epistemological challenges of doing history in the digital age!
Theory versus Practice? State of the art

• “alarming silence of the historical community” (Kiral Patel: “Zeitgeschichte im digitalen Zeitalter” / VjHZG 3/2011)

• Few pioneers: Roy Rosenzweig, Peter Haber, Wolfgang Schmale, Serge Noiret, William Turkel, Tim Hitchcock, etc.

• Reluctant discussion at conferences / journals:
  – Special Issue “Digital History” of GMGN / Low Countries Historical Review 128 (2013) 4

• So far: project character
  – Digitization of specific source collections (newspaper, letters, manuscripts, photos, films...)
  – Experiments with enriched / enhanced publications
We need a critical digital history!

5 domains, which digital history needs to critically engage with:

• Digitization and archiving
• Digital heuristic of search
• Digital source criticism
• Digital research tools and techniques
• Digital storytelling
1) Digitization and archiving

• So far: digitization of historical sources pushed by cultural heritage institutions (museums, archives, libraries)

• Change of role / function of “archive” in digital age: from conservation to accessibility

• From “age of scarcity” to “age of abundance” (Roy Rosenzweig)
  – But: despite enthusiasm – only 2 % of archival material is digitized; only a small part of this is available online.
  – Problem: research questions and outcomes become biased (you work with what is available, not what is existing)
1) Digitization and archiving

- Epistemological questions:
  - How does digitization (retro-digitization as well as digital born) affect the ontological status of documents as sources?
    - Does the concept of “original” still make sense?
    - How to test / qualify the authenticity of digital sources?
    - How to deal with the logics / practices of archiving (“respect des fonds” / “respect de l’ordre”) in full text searchable databases?
1) Digitization and archiving

• Conclusion:

  – Change from “document” to “data” makes concept of “original” obsolete: we need an updated methodology of digital source critique in order to be able to make statements about the “authenticity” of digital sources
  – Changing nature of “archives” asks for search strategies (“heuristics of search”) and a critical reflection on the availability / quality of “metadata” (contextualization)
2) Heuristics of search

- “Google-Syndrom” (Peter Haber): has “auf den Kopf gestellt” the classical, deductive mode of information retrieval in history
  - Instead of going from the general to the specific (handbooks, monographs, articles, sources), we go from the specific to the “similar”
  - From specific search (opacs, Bool operators) to *browsing*
  - Statistic production of relevance (based on algorithms and semantic genealogy) instead of thematic / problem based relevance
2) Heuristics of search

- “The digital turn in humanities goes hand in hand with a reprogramming of its key functions. Where basic skills and practices – especially in the domain of search / information retrieval – are taken over by the universal machine (google), competences, once acquired over years, become simulations of competences.”

2) Heuristics of search

• Challenges / problems:
  – you only search for / find what is made visible! Large parts of the web are “unvisible” (non indexed or hidden sites)
  – High failure rate of automatic search software (OCR / especially with retor-digitized sources)

• Interesting developments in visualization of search results:
  – Example: MeRDES (Media Researchers' Data Exploration Suite)
    • aim: visualition by time line, genres, tagged keywords;
    • Online tutorial: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MdHUsDklm8U](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MdHUsDklm8U)
  – Example: Network Analysis
    • aim: thinking in relational structures
    • Can bring hidden relations to the forefront
2) Heuristics of search

• Points of reflection:

  – Temptation of “quick and easy”: democratisation or deprofessionalization?
  – Often uncritical use of statistical mechanisms for quantitative analyses ("big data" = "trust in numbers" ? (Ted Turner)
  – “statistical relevance” or “visual evidence” is not “scientific” / “historical” relevance
3) Digital Source Critique

- Methodology of source criticism = at the very heart of history as scientific discipline
- Early days of internet: question focused on “originality” (digital water proof)
- But: digital source critique has to deal with the whole life cycle of digital sources
  - Especially complicated in the domain of audiovisual sources
Life cycle of digital sources
3) Digital Source Critique

• Big problem (especially with “digital born” sources): missing metadata

  – Basic information needed for historical contextualisation (who, when, where) is often missing (audiovisual sources: YouTube)
  – Metadata are indispensable for setting up larger databases / linking of catalogues (“semantic interoperability”); standards are needed (for example “Dublin core”)
  – Pelle Snickars: “If content is king, context is its crown”
Towards A New Digital Historicism?
Doing History In The Age Of Abundance

Andreas Fickers
Maastricht University | Grote Spruit 59-62
Postbox 611 | 6200 MD Maastricht | The Netherlands
a.fickers@maastrichtuniversity.nl

Abstract: This article argues that the contemporary type of digitization and dissemination of our cultural heritage — especially of audiovisual sources — is comparable to the boom of critical source editions in the late 19th century. But while the dramatic rise of accessibility to and availability of sources in the 19th century went hand in hand with the development of new scholarly skills of source interpretation, and was paralleled by the institutionalization of history as an academic profession, a similar trend of an emerging digital historicism today seems absent. This essay aims at reflecting on the challenges and chances that the discipline of history — and the field of television history in particular — is actually facing. It offers some thoughts and ideas on how the digitization of sources and their online availability affects the established practices of source criticism.

Keywords: digital history, source criticism, historical hermeneutics, digital humanities, contextualization

1 Back to the Future: New Technologies – Old Problems

History as a historical narrative has for a long time been a tool of power, legitimizing political or religious systems and inventing traditions of noble parentage or divine ancestry. Since the invention of historiography in ancient Greece, the historian has played an active role in the re-construction of the past — a past which continues to be an object of ideological, political and cultural debate today. From the very beginning, ‘historical work’ was characterized by a double ambition: first to find and collect historical sources as traces of past times (i.e. the historian as archivist and chronicler), second to produce a coherent narrative of that past by interpreting these sources based on contemporary questions and interests (i.e. the historian as interpreter). Both activities were — and still are — influenced and shaped by the present: specific political and religious ideologies, economic and social realities, and cultural or mental traditions influence the selection and interpretation of sources.

It is not surprising then that the idea and definition of what historical sources are have changed quite a lot over time. With the emergence of historiography in Greek antiquity, historical storytelling became a matter of written language. The so-called ‘logographers’ — Greek intellectuals and storytellers who for the first time wrote down (‘graphnai’ in ancient Greek) traditional stories passed on by word of mouth (“logoi”) — mark the transition from myth to history.1

4) Digital research tools & techniques

• Does the future of history lie in the computer-based analysis of “big data”?  

• Great hopes: “text mining”
  – Ngram viewer for google books
  – Qualitative data analysis: NVivo; QDAminar (index based)

• Visualisation of semantic relations
  – Text clouds (tagging)
  – Geografical visualisation (geo-referencing)
  – Chronological presentation (time lines)

• From “analysing data” to “doing things with data”
  – Jim Mussel: Move from digital history 1.0 to 2.0
“Doing things with data”

• “In manipulating data from multiple resources, modelling their relationships and so exposing factes hitherto unrealized, the historian moves from simulation to simulacra, to validating representations against reified originals to producing analyses of phenomena, objects and relationships that belong to the past.”

• Doing things with data forces us to recognize / problematize the constructed nature of evidence (statistical, visual, semantic)!

Challenge: “Doing things with data”

• **Digital historian 1.0**
  – Must be able to understand why data performs as it does (digital source criticism; problematizing authenticity)

• **Digital historian 2.0**
  – Requires a more advanced understanding of the affordances of the digital (manipulating data from multiple resources, modelling their relationships)
British History Sources, 1500-1900

Connected Histories brings together a range of digital resources related to early modern and nineteenth century Britain with a single federated search that allows sophisticated searching of names, places and dates, as well as the ability to save, connect and share resources within a personal workspace. We have produced this short video guide to introduce you to the key features.

Connected Histories is a not-for-profit project. We welcome proposals for new content.

Quick search

Query types: Place Person Keyword

Date range: From 1500 To 1900

More search options

Seven new resources have been added


Latest Connections

sir th william bulkley GGG Grandfather Robert Pebbels, Bess - Isabella Jane railway station model railway station Samuel Woodham transported convict John Martin, transported convict max...

Research guides

Our nine research guides will help you to get the most out of Connected Histories, whatever your interests.
Welcome to Locating London's Past

This website allows you to search a wide body of digital resources relating to early modern and eighteenth-century London, and to map the results onto a fully GIS compliant version of John Rocque's 1746 map.

Add some data
Video walkthrough

Historical background

Records of crime, poor relief, taxation, elections, local administration, plague deaths and archaeological finds can all be searched and mapped on this site.

Historical background and datasets

The Map

Building on a fully GIS compliant version of John Rocque’s 1746 map of London, this site allows you to relate an eighteenth-century representation of the metropolis to the first accurate GIS map of London (1869-80), and to a modern Google Maps environment.

Mapping methodology
4) Digital research tools & techniques

• Conclusion: interesting phase of experimentation, but:
  – Problem of sustainability
    • Short life time of projects; focus on development of new tools, but not on their use (didactical / pedagogical training)
    • Dominance of “technological solutionism” (Evgeny Morozov)
  – Important:
    • Joint ventures between developers (technician) and users (historian)
    • Promote sustainability (embedding into existing infrastructures like DARIAH) and avoid reinvention of the wheel
    • Critical reflection on the manipulation of data when working with digital research tools / techniques
5) Digital storytelling

• So far:
  – Text (book, article) = remains standard medium for historical narration (with footnote as symbol of scientific authority)
  – Project character of digital history online
    • More time and energy in building new platforms / sites than in thinking about how to use them
    • Challenge of sustainability: continuous updates & editing
    • So far: mostly “database histories”
5) Digital storytelling

• New possibilities:

  – “enhanced publications” / digital editions / e-books
  – Online journals / blogs / twitter
  – Contemporary history: videoessays / podcasts / virtual exhibitions
Theory versus Practice?

• Or why are historians so reluctant in making use of the rich audiovisual heritage online?

  – Not trained in classical audio-visual source critique
  – No tradition of scholarly publications / formats making use of audio-visual material (no symbolic capital for new forms of online storytelling)
  – Digital divide (generational gap) in history as an academic discipline
Conclusion: “Hybridity is the new normal”

• “The current challenge facing the discipline of history is not in creating ever bigger sets of data and developing new tools, important as these are. The real challenge is to be consciously hybrid and to integrate ‘traditional’ approaches in a new practice of doing history”.