

How Historians use Historical Newspapers

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Abstract: Newspapers have long been rich resources for historians, yet historians use of newspapers as sources has not been deeply studied. Because many newspapers are now being digitized, understanding the way they will be used is important for designing search interfaces. To better understand those information needs we interviewed eight academic historians who use newspapers in their research, primarily research in North American history from the mid-19th to the mid-20th century. This poster highlights some of the findings of the research, which include the limitations of current search tools (for example, that newspaper databases are often allow users to search effectively for names, but that broader topics are hard to research); lack of support for managing search results (a historian wanted a log of all her searches; when editing a book manuscript, she found it “hugely taxing” to find items she hadn’t cited), and a need for greater complexity (one researcher wants a visual map to see how searches are nested within each other and to get back to earlier search results). Subjects’ feelings about newspapers ranged from passionate to ambivalent. The interviews revealed a wide range of needs for historians working with collections of digitized newspapers. Supporting many of these needs is a matter of broadly deploying known technologies but meeting some of these needs will require development of new services. The poster concludes with a brief consideration of other users of historical newspapers as well as the prospects for a historian’s workbench that supports all aspects of historical research.

About the authors:

Rob Sieczkiewicz is University Archivist and Head, Digital Collections, at Drexel University’s W.W. Hagerty Library, where he leads digital library initiatives. A member of the Academy of Certified Archivists, Rob served as an officer of the Delaware Valley Archivists Group (DVAG), 2005-2009. He currently serves on the National History Day Committee of the Reference, Access, and Outreach Section of the Society of American Archivists. Rob received his M.A. in History and Archival Methods from the University of Massachusetts Boston.

Robert (Bob) B. Allen is an Associate Professor at the iSchool at Drexel University. He has a broad teaching repertoire including Computer Supported Collaborative Work, Information Retrieval, Digital Preservation, and Language Processes. Dr. Allen has also released a comprehensive informatics textbook online which is titled “Information: A Fundamental Construct”. Dr. Allen was a pioneer in the development or recommender systems and made substantial contributions to hardware implementation of neural networks. In the past several years, his main research theme has been developing new approaches for access to massive collections of digitized historical newspapers. A related research topic is the specification and interaction with narrative chains such as those from stories, from scientific explanations, and from narrative history. Bob has been Program Chair or General Chair of several major conferences. He was Editor in Chief of the ACM Transactions on Information Systems for 10 years and Chair of the Publications Board of the ACM. Before moving to Drexel, he was a Professor of Practice at the College of Information Studies of the University of Maryland and before that he was Senior Scientist in the Information Science Research Group at Bellcore. He received his PhD in Social and Cognitive Experimental Psychology from UCSD and joined Bell Laboratories in 1978.