

How historians use historical newspapers

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Introduction

This research focuses on historians' needs for searching collections of newspapers and managing the information they find. There is a large body of work on use of literature by humanities scholars. Toms & O'Brien (2008) demonstrate a need for different information and communication technology tools for humanists than for other scholars, tools that support downloading, storing, organizing and markup of information. The extensive study by Tibbo (2002) showed that newspapers remain vital to historians, identified as both historians' "most important" and "most often used" type of material.

Goals of this Research

We have three major goals for this research. The first is to identify how historians use newspapers, regardless of the format. A second goal is to discover the problems researchers encounter in their research using newspapers. Finally, we seek to identify historians' needs for new interfaces for using digitized newspapers in research.

Procedure

We interviewed eight academic historians from two universities who regularly used newspapers in their research. The interviews lasted about 15-30 minutes each. The first three interviews relied on the interviewer's notes while the final five interviews were recorded and transcribed later.



Student at microfilm reader, c1970s. Library of the London School of Economics

Results

Highlights of some key findings from the interviews

Microfilm versus Digital Access

All the historians had experience with both microfilm and digital newspapers. Most reported satisfaction with both formats, but all had found obstacles to using them effectively. Several historians noted limited availability of digital resources. One noted a regional bias in what has been digitized, with a preponderance of materials from the northeastern coastal cities. Another mentioned a lack of digitized material from small towns. This echoes the conclusion of Dalton and Charnigo, who report that, unlike social scientists who suffered from information overload, historians want more information. They want access to more databases, to more texts in those databases, and to more years of those texts. This is a key theme of our respondents: there is a lack of digitized years and issues of the newspapers they want.

Searching

The humanist is typically a browser rather than searcher (Toms & O'Brien, 2008; Dalton & Charnigo, 2004). This tendency to browse came up often in our interviews: historians who read papers sequentially across months or years; the respondent who described his peers as browsing through an entire reel of microfilm rather than searching across years. This may be a question of the limitations of print and microfilm. Are historians browsers by nature or have they just acted that way because their sources have required it?

Browsing

Browsing is distinct from searching and is widely used to explore the context of events. One historian suggested that it would be great for broad topics, but not so much for narrow topics. In the same vein, another suggested: *Historians are always looking for both [context and facts]. You can't have the specific facts without the context and that's part of the reason why I at least skim the whole daily newspaper, just to see what kinds of things are there. Where it is in the paper, and what surrounds it, matter.*

Managing Search Results

Noting that searches lead to other searches, one historian wished to see how searches are nested within each other, in order to get back to earlier search results. Another wished for "a visual map telling you where you are in your search [and] a system that lets you easily use multiple windows."

Printing results was common. How do they manage these printouts? One admitted that the "worst case" is to photocopy articles and "mash them into a 'to sort' folder"; her "better" system is to read articles and take notes on a laptop, while the "best case would be to enter all the information into Endnote". Chronological arrangement also remains popular.

Another historian indicated that for research on multiple people she organized her search results (printouts) by person; in research that focused on one case, she sorted results by newspaper. Another looks at articles as threads in a tapestry and is not always sure where in the tapestry they will go when she finds them. The ability to tag articles with terms/keywords to help find them later would be great. That same historian said that she uses ancestry.com for census data. She doesn't print this data out, but keeps it in a "shoebox" in ancestry.com where it is easy to find later. This might be useful in a digital newspaper system.



For further information

Contact us at robs@drexel.edu and rba@drexel.edu. The conference paper from which this poster was adapted, and the interview questions asked, can be obtained at <http://idea.library.drexel.edu/handle/1860/3335>

Conclusions

These interviews reveal 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 other needs will require development of new services. Historians will clearly benefit from improved search tools and interfaces which would support richer ways of interacting with collections. Two specific additional search services would appear to be particularly useful. (1) to restrict searches by a variety of attributes. While existing services support restricting by newspaper title and by date, many other attributes could be applied. Yet there is little agreement about what the sections should be and the newspaper content is highly variable. (2) to address the challenge of searching on broad topics, visualization tools should be developed and implemented (Allen, 2005).

While we have mostly focused on digitized newspapers, we are entering an era of a wide range of historical resources. Successful interfaces could support access to archival records and manuscripts. Finally, while we have focused on academic historians there are other significant groups, including family historians, students and the group Herbert and Estlund (2008) call "citizen historians".

References

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Top photo courtesy of the Library of the London School of Economics' collection on the Flickr Commons: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/lselibrary/3990095436/>. Bottom photos from the Drexel University Archives collections. We thank the historians who agreed to be interviewed. We also thank Ashley Brandon, who transcribed the recordings.