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.

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, matters.”

Managing Search Results
Noting that searching leads 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 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.”

Search for Primary Source Materials.

For further information
Contact us at rob@archives.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 add the address 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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