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On Archival Work in Digital Communication and Becoming Archival Ourselves

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I'd like to talk for a bit about what historical methods can mean to digital

rhetorics – particularly archival methods, particularly comparative studies. In doing so,

I find myself expanding on some of what Brandon Van Der Heide and Malcolm Parks

briefly mentioned yesterday in their talks. Can I just say how absolutely delighted I am

not to be the only one making these suggestions? Usually I am a voice crying in the

wilderness on this issue.

My suggestions are twofold: first, get thee to the archives. And second, become

archival yourselves. This isn't an argument that we should all necessarily become

historians; rather, it is an argument that we should know where and when our

technology and relevant issues spring forth from and that our data and arguments

should be grounded in the historical record. Going to the archive and doing historical

reading are what happen before you start working with data.

I'm definitely not the only scholar in this room who insists on exploring historical

dimensions of the digital, but to date there are really not many of us on either side of the

Rhetorical Studies fence who do this work. One of the pitfalls of working on digital

topics is a reliance on claiming the "new" in "new media": the shiny, the hot, the now.

And we absolutely should be examining what's going on in the world right now as we

speak, especially in terms of politics and publics. But the pitfall to avoid is doing so with

an insistence that new media really is new, that it absolutely changes our

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communicative lives in ways that have not yet been seen[1]. Digital environments can make things faster better more, but those things come from somewhere and some *time* before.

New textual forms and digital artifacts nearly always have precedents. One technology does not necessarily replace another; rather new technologies reinforce and reinterpret older technological forms and arguments. The telegraph, which enabled instantaneous, long-distance communication for the first time, was a nineteenth-century precedent to the speed and reach of the Internet. Camera obscuras and panoramas were used as early virtual reality devices in the eighteenth century[2]. Later, stereograph cards and viewing devices afforded a similar experience. Their widespread circulation served as an early, less democratic precedent to current image sharing applications such as Instagram. Part of our job as rhetoricians is to establish the continuity of "new" genres and activities with longstanding practices.

It's also our job to study the trajectory of arguments surrounding technologies. We and our immediate ancestors are hardly the only humans who ever encountered a new technology and had to figure out how to use it, how make an argument for either making it, deploying it, destroying it, or replicating it. As Michele Kennerly and Damien Pfister's forthcoming edited collection points out, humans have been doing this since ancient times[3]. And we've been doing it since medieval times and since the

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[1] For extensive treatments of these issues, see Chun & Keenan, Gitelman, Gitelman & Pingree, and Park, Jankowski & Jones.

[2] See also Blake, Erin C. "Zograscopes, Virtual Reality, and the Mapping of Polite Society in Eighteenth-Century England." In Gitelman & Pingree.

[3] Pre-order today! *Ancient Rhetorics + Digital Networks*. University of Alabama Press, forthcoming 2018.

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Enlightenment. And the people who came before us were not stupid about these things.

They developed interesting, innovative, cogent approaches to new technologies, whether

it was the technology of alphabetic writing, scientific objects such as clocks or

microscopes, information design, problems of coordinating crowdsourcing, or building

automated technologies. And those approaches tell us a lot about where we are right

now[4].

Toward that end: why design and conduct comparative case studies that rely on

archival work? Because we can and we should. Because it's strategic and vital to

genuine growth. Comparison of analog and networked texts lays bare the real impact of

technological developments. If you want to figure out what really has changed – or what

really hasn't – then start tracing the technologies you study or the discourse it facilitates

or the arguments surrounding it back and see what you find. And then when you find

that prior case study, set it up against your contemporary artifact and start mapping

parallel elements. The results will likely enrich your argument and may also surprise

you[5].

I can give you a couple examples of the way this has worked for me. My first book

was a study of textual curation practices and arguments for them that used Wikipedia

and the 1728 Chambers Cyclopaedia as case studies. I compared archived development

materials for both texts as well as archived discourse surrounding each of them.

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[4] So what does change in digital environments, then? The breakout group after this talk
focused on this question among others, and we posited that intensity (as opposed to speed,
which is itself a contextual construct) and complexity are central elements that change across
time. Many thanks to this group, especially Michele Kennerly, for this conversation.

[5] For astute discussion of theoretical aspects of doing this sort of work, see Hawhee & Olson.

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Wikipedia is of course its own vast digital archive since every edit, every comment, and every backchannel discussion is automatically archived for the public. Working on the Cyclopaedia required more traditional archival work, since at that time most of what I needed related to it was not yet digitized. It's not a commonly studied text, although it is central in the Western encyclopedic tradition. It's the first English-language encyclopedia that looks like what we think a modern encyclopedia should look like – it tries to be comprehensive, it's alphabetized, and it's cross-indexed. And it has quite a few parallels with Wikipedia in that Ephraim Chambers, who edited it, invited written contributions from the public in the second edition. His definition of "public" was not just educated aristocrats, but anyone who was a subject-matter expert: merchants, laborers, craftspeople, etc. If you were illiterate, he would come and he would write down your contribution for you.

And he and his publishers also crowdsourced the funding for this project through an advance subscription system. Crowdsourcing is almost always described as a purely digital phenomenon – GoFundMe, KickStarter, etc -- so I was surprised when I came across these subscription lists and figured out how they were handling the funding. I wanted to figure out how they were arguing for this, so I went and poked around in the British Library and the Bodleian until I found some of the original pamphlets they put out to publicize it.

And I looked for any existing documents on Chambers, which is difficult because he was a childless bachelor so nobody kept his papers and then many of his publishers' archives were destroyed by Nazi bombing in the Blitz[6]. So how could I possibly figure

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[6] For archival work on Chambers prior to my own that I found very helpful indeed, see Yeo.

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out anything about analogue 18th century crowdsourcing, aside from a pamphlet that was pure argument and these long-dead names on the subscription list that gave absolutely no clues about networks or ethos or pretty much anything that would rhetorically connect these people?

Well, one of the few known things about Chambers is that after the first edition was well received, he became a Fellow of the Royal Society, and the Society keeps a database of biographical information. They listed him as a Freemason, which I found surprising, not knowing anything about Masonry or the strong connections between the Royal Society and the early English Freemasons. So one morning while I was researching in London, I went to the United Grand Lodge of London archives expecting to find absolutely nothing and cross them off my list. Instead, the archivist handed me their handwritten membership logs from the 1720s and suggested that I do a little cross-indexing with the subscription list. Which I did, and lo and behold, there were a ton of Freemasons who were funding this very expensive encyclopedia.

All of a sudden, a network emerged from these old pages, and from there I learned that the Enlightenment-era Masons were devoted to two things: to evangelizing Newtonianism, which was then very controversial, and to developing open-access policy on emerging scientific information in a way that was very similar to contemporary arguments for Creative Commons licenses and the public domain, especially those made by Wikipedians. So the Masons were all about giving money to this brand-new encyclopedia that compiled articles that detailed an entirely Newtonian approach to natural philosophy, which later became what we call science. So suddenly I had three parallel topics and their arguments reaching across 300 years: crowdfunding, open-

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access intellectual property policy, and moral commitments to open circulation of new knowledge about science and technology.

And during this project, I discovered another useful thing about doing comparative historical studies: it strategically extends the expiration date on your work, which as many of you know grinds slowly through the academic publication process. Probably nobody wanted to publish yet another study on Wikipedia by early 2014 when I signed the contract for this book. But when you add in the 18th century case study on the Cyclopaedia, which has a ton of comparative elements, that study on Wikipedia that I'd been working on since my second semester of PhD work had a lot better legs. The pitfall of comparative studies is, of course, in maintaining validity, quality, and relevance. Plenty of false equivalencies abound these days – facile comparisons of public figures to Hitler, and the like. We're obviously required to ask our usual questions about fallacious arguments and about the validity of sites of study when we take up this kind of method.

My second suggestion, way back there at the beginning of all this was: become archival. You are building archives, large or small, as you collect artifacts, assemble databases, do whatever it is you need to do to gather and process your data. If all of that didn't come from existing archives, then the question is: what is our obligation for preservation? This is both a general question about research ethics and a question about this political moment. We need to be having interdisciplinary conversations about what place preservation has in our methods and how we can assist with capturing and preserving the digital history that is happening under our feet and that we are studying.

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Even though this sort of data is subject to surveillance, misappropriation, and false equivalence, we're in a moment that requires us to examine this obligation[7].

Hardcore information structuring, management, and preservation is best left to library science professionals, but I'm wondering about our obligations to keep our data when we're done and make it either publically available or make it available to relevant archives that may well have an interest in preserving data on, say, political discourse during incredibly contentious elections, on how we were enacting and considering health discourse in the first quarter of the 21st century, or on quick, tiny interpersonal interactions that happened over text on what will become those old smartphones. It's worth making connections with Special Collections folks who have already been developing holdings in these areas and seeing if there is a need, if there is room, if there are ideas. It's worth making good use of our institutional repositories. We are not ourselves archivists, but we are already archival, both in our practices and in our own interactions. We're in a space to do some thinking and make some contributions in this area.

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[7] Thanks to Malcolm Parks for pointing out that this is a commonplace requirement for STEM scholars and for researchers on public grants. What does that mean, then, for unfunded or privately funded humanists?

Further Reading

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