

UC San Diego

UC San Diego Previously Published Works

Title

Digital Media in History: Remediating Data and Narratives

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9cg307m5>

Journal

Perspectives on History, 47(5)

Author

Tanaka, Stefan

Publication Date

2009-05-01

Peer reviewed

Digital Media in History: Remediating Data and Narratives*

By Stefan Tanaka

Electronic media are now ubiquitous in our profession. Nevertheless, they have entered the profession differentially; their availability and use varies widely, and we are still trying to work out how they can help history in particular, rather than the workplace of academia generally. By and large, we are past the utopian fantasies and antiutopian rants of the digital revolution. It is a good moment to think about how digital media help us to teach, research, and write history. The computer and digital media are terrific tools and resources that have aided us in the profession. They have increased our access to data, catalogs, books, and so on, and they make it easier to construct texts. But we must also be careful; this explosion of data and materials also runs up against a conclusion of Thomas Hylland Eriksen in his book *Tyranny of the Moment*—that a surplus of information often leads to a fall in comprehension, not an increase.

It is important to remember that the modern discipline of history developed during a relatively information scarce age. In fact, mutually supportive institutions—archives, libraries, museums, and universities—also grew along with the discipline. Over the past two centuries we have developed a myriad of tools, practices, categories, and institutional and conceptual structures

to give meaning to the pasts of such societies in which information was scarce and print was the common means of dissemination. Today, we are in an information abundant—even excessive—age.

A recent antecedent in this interaction between technology and social practice can be found in office automation a mere 20 years ago. Rob Kling, a pioneer in the study of technology and social change, found that computerization enhanced current organization and methods and further argued that the best use of the new tools was through a reconceptualization and reorganization of relationships, structures, and management.¹ More data makes it possible to write ever more detailed and fine grained analysis. We must also ask whether an enhancement of current history—“more-better-faster” in many fields—is the best way to use digital media in history.² I cringe at the idea of longer monographs and essays over finer and finer points.

At this point we can turn to a number of areas. I am interested in an issue that is rather old; we have all struggled with issues of relevance, connection to the present, boredom, and so on. This is the separation between finished product—classroom, history textbook, or scholarly monograph—and its past as well as its audience. Two statements from vastly different domains of our profession strike me as apt in thinking

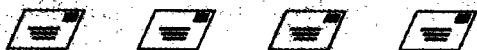
about the relation between digital technologies and history. Constantin Fasolt quotes a rather casual, but provocative statement by Thomas Kuhn: “in history, more than in any other discipline I know, the finished product of research disguises the nature of the work that produced it.” Sam Wineburg argues that historical thinking “goes against the grain of how we ordinarily think.”³ The similarity is in the way that history is separated from both the past (its object) and from its contemporary audience.

Digital media cannot help to bridge all these divides. But they offer different forms for manipulating information and communicating the past. They are “new,” less because they are fresh and innovative, but because they have a utility that is enhancing, complementing, and competing with the print world. For history this utility is in the ways that digital media facilitate the process which Kuhn finds disguised, the steps taken in the writing of history.⁴

Many good teachers are already restoring these steps as part of a shift from a teacher-centered, lecture/regurgitate approach to what education researchers call an open learning environment (OLE). The OLE creates an active learning environment that seeks to bring the steps of historical interpretation back to the classroom, and invites teachers and students to think of depth, the broader connections, alternatives, and contingencies that might not normally be evident in a linear account. In this age where some sectors are pushing history toward greater mechanization in a service environment, the new technologies become important tools that help teach the strengths of history. In short, discovery, textual analysis, interpretation, linkages, the parts of the research and writing that excites many of us can be more easily integrated into instruction. Digital media can help us both reconsider this process in our research and retrieve it as we write history.

LETTERS OF INTRODUCTION FROM THE AHA

AHA members in the process of making travel plans may obtain a letter of introduction from AHA headquarters in order to expedite admission to foreign and domestic archives. Letters of introduction for independent historians (scholars without formal affiliation with academic institutions) seeking access to college or university libraries in the United States for research purposes are also available on request. Please include a short statement on research plans and access needs and a current c.v. or resume. To request a letter of introduction, write AHA Headquarters, c/o Letter of Introduction, 400 A St., SE, Washington, DC 20003.



I must make clear that I do not believe in nor am I advocating the demise of print media. Print and digital are different media; they have different strengths and limitations. Here, we need to better understand the relation between our practice, how we became historical, and the print media—data, archives, libraries, and presses (journal and book)—that facilitate it.⁵ Print media are best for carefully constructed, complex, and rich arguments; digital media facilitate data storage and retrieval, exploration, and heterogeneity (distributed forms). Digital media operate in both realms, the existing and the new, but this complementarity is important; they are the two major components of history: data and narrative. To restate Kuhn and Wineburg, digital media can help us restore the disguised work which includes how people ordinarily think.

One way that I currently think of the merging of inherited and new technologies is through the metaphor of filters. Search engines are a technological filter of the internet; similarly, our current historical practices, categories, and structures embed numerous filters that have served us well. The recent debate about the use of Wikipedia in history courses is an example of these different filtering mechanisms.⁶ It shows that the current filters that “guarantee” veracity, reliability, expertise, etc. are not functioning in the digital world as they had in the print world. My point in raising this now dated issue is not to ask whether Wikipedia is good or bad; it is to point to a moment when different systems clash (and coexist).

The proliferation of information makes us again ask what data, or the verifiable fact, is. Of course, this is not new. But data is growing exponentially and the nature of that data is also changing. Additional and different filters (in which I include syncretic categories) can help us with this expanding and changing data field. We can find more facts, but we can also ask different questions. As an example, if we think of repetition as giving meaning to data (rather than assigning data to preexisting categories) we can see in 1884 Japan several pasts, the anachronistic inherited practices, the past present, and new traditions. These are not equally distributed, but they are overlapping and used differentially. Looking in this way at the multilayered pasts of Japan will help us understand not only how a particular society changed, but also more generally, how societies/communities change.

We increasingly have the ability and tools to look beyond the exceptional, the monumental, the moment of change, and so on. With better filters, we can better understand normative processes as well as the exceptional moments; we also have the possibility of linking these two, the mundane of everyday life with the exceptional moments of the state, international, or global. Or invoking Wineburg (and cognitive scientists), we might combine the way people think (in distributed, nonlinear, and multi-temporal forms) with the retrospective narratives of nation, state, and identity. These latter subjects came into being during the time-space compression of the 19th and 20th centuries, then new ways to encompass what had been local. Our more recent compressions can facilitate the development of “new” categories of study, such as non-place-based objects of study like childhood.

In conclusion, there is much possibility for enriching history by using digital media. They both facilitate our current practices and also inspire us to conceive of other ways of thinking and writing about our myriad pasts. My hope though, is that we not succumb to the “more-better-faster” seductions of technology; the history of technology is filled with examples of how (yet again) the next great technology did not live up to expectations; some withered away while others became widespread, often because of some unimagined utility. We can’t predict what those utilities will be, but we can engage, evaluate, and change technologies, both electronic and historical, in the service of better understanding the human; this is intellectual play, the exploration of new ways to think about and present pasts to make histories meaningful to the present.

Stefan Tanaka is professor of history at the University of California at San Diego.

Notes

- * I am using Bolter and Grusin’s notion of remediation where new media (over the past two centuries) refashion prior media forms. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (MIT Press, 2000).
1. Rob Kling, “Computerization at Work,” in Rob Kling, ed. *Computerization and Controversy: Value conflicts and Social Choices*, second ed. (Academic Press, 1996), 278–308.
 2. For a wonderful meditation on the acceleration of work in academia see David M. Levy, “No Time to Think: Reflections on Information Technology and Contemplative Scholarship.” *Ethics and Information Technology* (2007) 9, 237–49.
 3. Constantin Fasolt, *The Limits of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 39. Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 7.
 4. I use this phrase writing history as the historical enterprise, not the specific act of writing. I rely on Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, trans by Tom Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).
 5. Here, in referring to “becoming historical,” I am thinking of John Toews’ expression in his exploration of understanding toward a linear, historical form in early nineteenth century Germany. *Becoming Historical: Cultural Reformation and Public Memory in Early Nineteenth-Century Berlin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
 6. See Catherine Davidson’s plea for reasoned use of Wikipedia, as we have used other print forms, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 23, 2007.

