The Historian - A Special User of Computational and Digital Tools?

Disintermediation and the Discipline-Based Technological Expertise

Pompilia Burcica, PhD
Graduate School of Library and Information Science, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Aim
To examine a path for historians to approach and embrace computational tools.
To harmonize digital tools with the historians' craft.
To disintermediate the understanding and use of digital tools
To remove gatekeepers and promote a direct engagement with the computational methods rather than through proxy

Method
Comparing the literature in information science and computer science to identify new perspectives of integrating technology within the historians' craft

Background
When seeking information, historians:
• identify and locate their own sources
• bypass reference services (Susan Guest, Deidre Corcoran Stam, Margaret Stieg);
• make minimal use of formal bibliographies
• prefer primary sources more than other sources
• are not dependent on the latest findings or publications, use more retrospective works than recent materials
• lack training in computer science

Trigger
While historians are using only partially and selectively the online sources of information retrieval and digital humanities, they appear increasingly interested in statistical analysis.

Context

- Librarians and information scientists say: historians should use digital humanities tools (spatial analysis, text mining, text encoding, and data visualization).
- Computer scientists say: historians should build a standard quantitative research base, should hire a technology teaching faculty member who should teach to faculty the daily Hour a’ Coding training sessions.
- Historians say: we are…

Formulating Questions
Reading
Recording
Analyzing

Historians formulates questions, creates queries, and generates plans based on level of complexity.

Historians read about institutions, people, trends, motivations, and interpretations.

Historians still use old-fashioned methods of recording information and references.

Historians never delegate analysis of evidence to computers and librarians.

Digital tools cannot help in this stage:

Computational tools can help only with institutional and individual names through e-encoding.

Computational tools group words that occur together in a text for researchers to further analyze them.

TIMELINE: THE HISTORIAN-LIBRARIAN RELATIONSHIP

1960s
Reference services in University Libraries appear to be working only for history students and faculty (Rundell, 1968)

1980s
History faculty and students rely on personal collections and tracked citations as the major resource for information. Librarians ranking last in the order of methods for obtaining information (Guest, 1987)

2000s
Historians can access databases, identify sources, locate the most diverse sources and obtain materials through interlibrary loan offices without direct librarian help. Most historians are sophisticated users of various electronic resources (e.g. King, 2009, 99)

2010s
High interest but low investment in computational tools learning

The Historian’s Toolbox

They need to learn how:
• formulate an hypothesis, upload census data, select variables, interpret output, verify questions, report findings.

1. To create databases – define the purpose, design the records, the structure
2. To understand how a computer "thinks"
3. To learn what an algorithm is
4. To do data manipulation
5. To run simple programs
6. To create and use spreadsheets
7. To collect data and entry data.
8. To retrieve data and analyze it.

Conclusions

Historians pursue research differently than other scholars in the humanities and social sciences

Historians need technology for understanding economic, demographic, age, income, education, and gender factors.

Training needs to occur within the department, taught by historians skilled in computational tools, with historical specialization

Bibliography

2. Susan S. Guest. “The Use of Bibliographic Tools by Humanities Faculty at the State University of New York at Albany,” The Reference Librarian, no. 18, (Summer 1987), 163.

Further research: Study the temporal spread of an old topic between historians.