**Researching History and the Impact of the World Wide Web**

The spread of information and sharing of knowledge is a practice that has existed for thousands of years. Throughout the decades, groups and individuals have found their own particular way to enable this spread that fulfill their own personal preferences. Historians, like many other professions, would ordinarily complete their research through first hand experiential circumstances. Perhaps they would travel to locations of historical significance, or at the very least libraries stocked with an abundance of documents and sources. Over the last thirty years, the ways in which historians have gathered their research is gradually shifting methods. As of November 2010, research has shown that roughly 74 percent of all historians integrate some sort of digital tool in their research (Townsend, 32). With so many more people relying on the World Wide Web and research libraries to conduct their research, it’s important to recognize the implications that technology like that can bring.

When we try to understand what the Internet has done for the spread of information, we tend to focus on two important points. The globalized network has allowed for more information to be spread at much more frequent intervals. Because the historian relies on the intake of facts and statistics, it would not at all be outrageous to claim that the Internet has had a great benefit in assisting the historian conduct their research. However, many skeptics believe that information may be too widely available to obtain. In his article “IT and the Study of History,” Chalong Soontravanich addresses an area of concern for historians that he refers to as the “information revolution.” Because the World Wide Web has allowed for so many different sources of information to surface, verifying and comparing every existing source could turn the process into an arduous and tedious task. Referring to the abundance of political statistics on the Internet, Soontravanich states, “it will truly be a nightmare for any political historian in the future to conduct comprehensive research” (Soontravanich, 12).

The aforementioned complaint legitimately argues that the research process can be greatly slowed down when more evidence is prevalent. However, those in favor of digitalized libraries would likely reinforce the notion that the historian’s job is to compile as much information as possible for analysis. Charles M. Dollar’s article “Innovation in Historical Research: A Computer Approach” acknowledges this basic principle as a strong rationale for advocating the use of technology in research. Dollar believes that computers and the Internet “provides historians in virtually any area of research with a sound foundation on which historical explanation is based” (Dollar, 142). Whether or not too much information diminishes the rate in which the historian can work, a vast library of research cannot be detrimental to a profession that necessitates as much diverse information that knowingly exists.

One of the other less focused on issues that have occurred with the reliance of technology is the importance of currently existing, physical libraries. Before the years of the World Wide Web and computers, libraries containing a cornucopia of informative documents were the standard location in gathering historical research. But as the technologies became more and more sophisticated, the general consensus began to shift. The idea became that research can be obtained through home computers in lieu of historic libraries. Dr. Marilyn Weigold, a professor and advisor of the history department at Pace University, offered her own personal experiences that can attest for this fundamental shift. During an interview with Dr. Weigold, she stated that she believes the Internet has enabled her to “become a better researcher.” Before the use of technology became a legitimate form of research, Dr. Weigold believed that the earlier procedures of research were a lot of “physical work.” No longer restrained by her physical or geographical limitations, she is able to “access a wealth of information” from “some of the finest libraries” (Weigold).

Professor Weigold offers an insight to a trend that many of her fellow historians are following. The ease in accessing information from one’s home office is a luxury so convenient that many fear first-hand research may become absolute. Accessing catalogues of information through the World Wide Web may trump physical documents in terms of speed and convenience, but the essence of historical research is still functional in the former procedures. Author of “Archives, Documents, and Hidden History,” Sandra Roff explains that using tangible archives for source information can be far more intellectually rewarding than digital libraries. With a copious amount of material available in physical locations, online archives are often susceptible to omitting essential, sometimes forgotten artifacts. With so much forgotten material available in physical locations, Roff states, “the possibility of discovery awaits every student given the opportunity to use an archival collection” (Roff, 553). Ultimately, historians that neglect the use of archival libraries end up depriving themselves of the complete understanding they seek.

All in all, the ways in which historians apply the World Wide Web to their research isn’t definitively beneficial or detrimental. Stating the positive and negative implications of using technology isn’t a way of indicating which side of the issue is correct, but rather to inform some of the drawbacks to a method that some investigators may not be aware of. As it stands, further research is needed to fully understand the complex repercussions technology like the World Wide Web may bring.

Soontravanich, Chalong. “IT and the Study of History.” *History Agenda 12* (Dec.

2000): *Kyotoreview.* Web. 7 Feb. 2012.

http://kyotoreview.cseas.kyoto-u.ac.jp/issue/issue2/article\_229.html.

Weigold, Marilyn. Personal interview. 30 Jan. 2012.

Dollar, Charles M. "Innovation in Historical Research: A Computer Approach."

*Computers and the Humanities* 3.3 (1969): 139-151. Print.

Roff, Sandra. “Archives, Documents, and Hidden History: A Course to Teach Undergraduates the Thrill of Historical Discovery Real and Virtual.” *The History Teacher* 4.40 (2007): 551-558. Print

Townsend, Robert B. "How is New Media Reshaping the Work of Historians."   
     *Perspective on History* 8.48 (2010): 31-36. Print.