**Why Using Technology is Imperative When Researching History**

Out of every academic field of interest, the historical field may be the most skeptical towards technology. The institution prides itself in understanding and preserving an exact replica the past. It follows that a profession with a great interest in history may be inherently more reserved by modern technology. However, the notion is not as prevalent is it once was. As of 2010, less than 3% of all historians claimed to be “avoiders” of modern technology (Townshend, 31). Although very few historians are considered to be active users, the numbers are definitive. They suggest that the historical field has begun to adapt to the increase of sophisticated technology. Consequently, we are left to wonder why this timeless profession is only now beginning to shift methods. The change can be attributed to several possible factors, but the focus should lie on technology itself. In spite of all the possible downsides, technology is capable of greatly assisting in historical research.

One of the earliest and most profound pieces of technology is the photograph. Since its invention around the turn of the 20th century, the ability to capture still images of real world events has gained enormous popularity. Regardless, the value of a photograph to the historian is difficult to assess. Author Andru Chiorean stated that the “historic force” of photographs “consists in its capacity to mediate the knowledge of a past world” (243). However, the knowledge a photograph contains isn’t quite as penetrable as opposing sources. The flaw of the photograph is that it is limited to the event originally captured. Photographs are unable to provide a context or a rich understanding of the event they reproduce. Furthermore, photographs can also be very deceptive to the historian. For the information an image depicts might not necessarily correlate with the legitimacy of the events occurring at that point. Nevertheless, all of these issues are resolved when a photograph is used properly. The functional peak of a photograph is obtained when they are used adjacent to other appropriate sources.

In his article “Images and the History Lecture,” author and professor Joseph Coohill details a case study he enacted while teaching history at Penn State University. The premise behind his study was to understand the effects historical images had on his students. Coohill designed his study by separating his two history classes into both image and lecture or strictly lectured-based classes. Although Coohill noted that the results of his study were not conclusive, they did ultimately favor the use of images. In the two years the study had occurred, roughly 87% of the students in the image-based lecture stated that the use of images helped in their understanding of the material. In the final semester of the case study, an overwhelming 98% of the students believed that they benefited from the use of images. Overall, the use of images increased the student’s understanding and retention of the historical material (457-459).

 The best explanation available for Coohill’s experiment points towards the practicality of photographs. The strength of images lies in their ability to directly appeal to the basic human senses. Most written, secondary sources will attempt to encourage the reader to visualize the context of the scene they describe, but they aren’t always successful. To the contrary, photographs are immersive by their nature. As Peter Burke, an esteemed cultural historian once said, “images allow us to ‘imagine’ the past more vividly” (13). For example, one student in Joseph Coohill’s class stated that looking at a map of Europe alongside the lecture greatly improved his understanding (Coohill, 460). The first-hand visualization the photograph offered provided an insightful recognition in the way history transpired. In that sense, images should be considered as the perfect complimentary source. The photograph’s limitations should not reign over the shimmering benefits they offer to the historian.

 Despite being labeled under the blanket term of technology, photographs conflict with some of the more modern technologies. Very rarely will a historian repudiate the use of technology in their research. This is likely due to the fact that perceivable effects of photographic research are nearly entirely beneficial. Moreover, the uncertain possibilities are far too ambiguous to rightfully hinder a historian from using images. Greatly sophisticated technologies are far more susceptible to criticism from the historian. One of the most highly debated aspects of technology is film. Although films are frequently grouped alongside photographs, the historical field treats them both differently. Nevertheless, the value of a historical film to the historian is unparalleled.

As Dr. Durahn Taylor affirmed, a history professor at Pace University, films are “immensely significant.” “For in many ways,” he goes on to say, “they have become a primary document” (Taylor). By reconstructing the past, films can assist research in a couple of ways. In a more direct sense, they allow the audience to witness a particular event in history unfold exactly as it once had. To the dismay of historians, other sources may recount an incident out of order or with improper information. On the other hand, films require a minimal amount of imagination from the part of the researcher. Because the events of a previous era are captured and recreated with such stunning detail, it would be nearly impossible for the historian to incorrectly decipher the film.

Furthermore, films can also provide historians with information beyond what the events in the video depict. They serve as a reflection of the past and are capable of portraying every existing socio-political aspect of a previous culture. To the historian, even the most arbitrary and trivial piece of film can greatly assist in their particular research. For example, the value of Humphrey Bogart’s crime films in the 1940’s is inherently evident. Historians with a general focus on the sociological perspective of crime are more directly assisted in their research. Moreover, the encompassing urbanized culture as depicted by the architecture and fashion of the setting may also prove to be useful for cultural historians (McCreary, 52-52).

It’s apparent that both films and photographs can be greatly beneficial in aiding historical research. When the technologies are implemented appropriately, they can be equally as valuable as a physical, primary source. Then again, technologies like films and photographs are unable to supersede the historical significance of tangible resources. They may compliment relevant sources efficiently, but on their own they suffer from a prevalent ambiguity in the past’s events. Author Eugene McCreary adds, “The investigator must have more than a passing acquaintance with the major historical events” (56). For that reason, historians will often turn to reliable, primary sources in order to become more informed over the historical setting. Therefore, the emphasis on using primary resources is where the more advanced technologies aim to expand upon. The most sophisticated technology leading this effort is the World Wide Web.

Despite being one of the most advanced technologies to date, the easily obtainable nature of the World Wide Web remains in tact. Any individual within reach of both a computer and Internet connection can peruse the expansive depths of the information highway. Given the extent in which technology has spread throughout the modern world, substantial portions of Earth’s population are all able to connect to the World Wide Web. As a result, the globalized network enables individuals to share knowledge and information at an unprecedented level. William J. Turkel described this spread of information as “transduction,” or “the act of converting energy from its original form to another” (287). From the assistance of the World Wide Web, transduction may ultimately prove to be a colossal step forward for the field of history.

For historians, transduction implies that the conversion of energy occurs from a physical, primary source into digital media. Through this conversion, the inherent limitations of physical matter are removed. That is to say, valuable primary resources would no longer be restrained to one particular area of the globe. To the contrary, an exact reproduction onto the World Wide Web widens the appeal to the historical field. Any historian with an Internet connection will have the opportunity to examine the historical nature of a primary source. Given the emphasis on obtaining primary sources for research, it follows that the historical community can greatly benefit from the World Wide Web.

For all the advantages technology may bring into historical research, it’s important to recognize that the issue isn’t entirely one-sided. Many professionals do agree that there are a considerable amount of drawbacks to consider when technology is used for research. For example, the notion that digital media may deter the use of the original source material isn’t terribly far-fetched. If the aim of technology is to simplify the activities of the user, it’s possible that the earlier methods will become obsolete. In fact, a comparison between current and previous cultures may support the claim. Nevertheless, the benefits that technology has to offer historical research is far too tantalizing to dismiss. All things considered, it would be absurd for any historian to refuse incorporating technology into their research.

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