Rethinking Tradition: the Impact of Technology & the Loss of Serendipity on the Historical Research Process

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ABSTRACT

The move towards the digital humanities will see a growing interest in tools such as Ebooks. This study examines how historians perceive Ebooks and other technologies as impacting their research process. Findings indicate that historians are concerned that the digital environment reduces the possibility of chance encounters with a text. They continue to recreate the environment that encourages serendipity to occur within their field, and would readily welcome tools that facilitate this.

BACKGROUND

The importance of serendipity to the research process has been studied by numerous computer scientists and information professionals. The role that the chance encounter plays in historical research has been documented by several authors (Hoflich, 2007; McKeever, 2005). Libraries and archives are the setting for many of these chance encounters, or “A-HA!” moments which can take a scholar of work into an entirely new area, provide the missing piece to a puzzle or, for historians, fill in a missing gap in their understanding of the past. The “planned chaos” of the library shelves seems to provide a perfect setting for serendipity (Hoflich, 2007).

Recent research has shown that it is not simply the setting, or even the “A-HA!” moment itself that is remembered when a serendipitous encounter is recalled. A prepared mind, the act of noticing and chance all play a role in the development of a fortuitous outcome, and each of these aspects must be explored in order to understand how serendipity is experienced (Battin, Burkell & Quan-Haase, 2011). In a series of interviews on the use of digital tools by historians (Martin & Quan-Haase, 2011) a link was found between hesitation to use new tools and the fear over a loss of serendipity during their information-seeking process. In the current study we examine ways in which historians believe new digital tools for research might affect the possibility of a chance encounter with information.

OBJECTIVES:

- To examine the ways in which serendipity occurs during the research process of historians.
- To investigate the impact of digital tools on the serendipitous find.
- To analyse whether the belief that these new tools will have a negative impact on their research process will affect the adoption of these tools by historians.

METHODS:

The present study employed interviews as its data collection method. Ten interviews lasting about 30 to 60 minutes were conducted with history professionals from institutions of higher education in South Western Ontario from October 2010 to December 2011. The interview questions were intentionally left open-ended so that participants could describe their knowledge of Ebooks in their own terms. The interviews were semi-structured following an interview guide so that the interviewer was able to probe further into answers that opened new avenues for discussion (Berg, 2005). Interviews were structured as a conversation and the interview guide was only followed loosely to guarantee that all topics of relevance were covered. As the interviews progressed, some questions were added to the interview guide so as to direct the interviewers on certain subjects which the interviewer had not anticipated could be asked systematically across all respondents.

We utilized grounded theory for the analysis of the data because it allows for the development of new insights based on the data itself. Taking into consideration that our data analysis was being informed by the model of Serendipity Facets in Everyday Chance Encounters by Rubin, Burkell and Quan-Haase (2011), we chose the procedures outlined in Corbin and Strauss (2008, 1997).

FINDINGS

The following statements reflect the results of our study.

1. Historians are concerned that new means of accessing digital information do not allow for serendipity.
2. Tradition, for historians, is not just the desire for the printed book, but also involves the physical research process, and the sensuous experience (going to the stacks, browsing material, etc.).
3. Despite some anxieties and concerns, historians were curious about the ways that digital tools could facilitate their research.
4. Historians are beginning to introduce new ‘heuristic’ forms of serendipity.
5. Most faculty are still teaching their students to go to the stacks for their resources. The chance encounter with text is still seen as a rite of passage for historians.

6. Historians think that serendipity might be built back into the digital realm. Some faculty are teaching their students to use the digital shelves of their institutions much like they would the physical.

“Still tell my students that, with all the online searches, there’s still no substitute for going to the stacks and looking through and seeing what’s there”

“I don’t know how to describe this, but it… removed the serendipity factor. You can browse online, but that’s always much more targeted, sometimes, most of us are very happy to have that, sort of, inadvertent discovery”

“Googlebooks, however, has sort of just come into my life, because a Googlesearch is, you know you’re looking for a subject and then books come up and you can stumble across them that way, I should add that I use Googlebooks much more than the official bought library Ebooks”

“And then one wonders, well, what are the other ways we can leverage the digital realm to provide different kinds of serendipity that you wouldn’t have thought of”

DISCUSSION

As the move towards the digital humanities continues, it is likely that historians involved in this shift will work to recreate serendipity. As some historians are already looking for ways to encourage chance encounters online, and larger companies such as Google work to recreate serendipity in the larger digital world, it is likely that this key element will re-emerge as a needed part of historical scholarship. When this finally occurs, it could result in entirely new study habits, teaching methods and research practices by historians.

Many different digital tools are already being developed to increase the possibility of a chance encounter with information. One such tool, the Digital Public Library of America was created at Harvard to replicate books on a library box. The site is searchable by author, title or subject, but most importantly it is browseable much like the library shelves of the past.

Wordclouds are another tool which can be used by library sites (or any site at all, for that matter) to enable their users to see the content that is available on their site as a smaller subset of the whole. These clouds provide a new way of looking at information, and often rank the size of the word in the cloud to the amount of times it is used in a given site. This tool might allow users to piece together words or bits of information that they had not thought of previously, and by clicking on a word within the cloud, could users be taken to another cloud with an entirely different set of words, creating chance after chance for a serendipitous encounter to occur.

Some university libraries are already replacing their virtual reference shelves more apt for the serendipitous find by allowing stacks to browse and replace the ‘shelves’ on either side of the book they have selected.

CONCLUSIONS:

This research makes it clear that serendipity plays an important role in the traditional research practices of historians. The interviews showed that going to the stacks and browsing were ways that the chance encounter with information were a formative part of the selection of evidence; and are perceived by historians as a rite of passage.

Tradition, or the desire for the printed book, is a central aspect in the concern toward the sole reliance on Ebooks (Brousson, 2008; Walton, 2008). For historians, it is not just the physical book that is traditionally associated with their research, but also the act of going to the library, selecting material and possibly having a serendipitous encounter. For historians, tradition is more than just accessing information in old fashioned ways, but rather it encompasses the information practices that allow for new insights to form in the context of historical scholarship.

Adoption of digital tools by historians is occurring, though at a slow rate. Secondary source material is already being read and issued in digital form. The reintroduction of serendipity into the online research process would likely see their adoption of these tools increase.

REFERENCES:


