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Towards Web History: Sources, Methods, and Challenges in the Digital Age. An Introduction

Christoph Classen, Susanne Kinnebrock & Maria Löblich [*]

Abstract: *»Auf dem Weg zur Web History. Quellen, Methoden und Herausforderungen im digitalen Zeitalter«.* The process of digitization represents a twofold challenge both for historiography in general and, in particular, for historical communication research. Digitization has deeply changed research practice as well as the inter-disciplinary communication and is likely to do so in future. The introduction to the HSR Focus presents the collected contributions, which address a twofold conceptual challenge. In a first part, problems and chances of a contemporary history of digital media are discussed. In the second part the authors leave the level of conceptual considerations and turn towards the already established practice of digitization and the supply of sources in the net.

Keywords: web, web history, web historiography, digitization.

The process of digitization represents a twofold challenge both for historiography in general and, in particular, for historical communication research. Digitization has deeply changed research practice as well as the inter-disciplinary communication and is likely to do so in future. While, for example, the internet was used by historians solely as an additional source of information, the mid 90s saw the foundation of the H-Net and other scientific information services resulting in an immense expansion of inter-disciplinary communication. Since the year 2000, indexes of sources and other resources as well as research papers have been increasingly published online. The question at present is: To what extent will the interactive elements of Web 2.0 change scientific communication?[1] This process requires constant critical accompaniment and methodological self-reflection. From the point of view of historical communication research it has become obvious that digital media and commu-

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[1] See Peter Haber, "Zeitgeschichte und Digital Humanities," in: *Zeitgeschichte – Konzepte und Methoden*, ed. Frank Bösch and Jürgen Danyel (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012), 47-66.

nication have a history of their own going back far into the 20th century. Conceptualizing and writing down this history is a task to be taken on by contemporary history and communication history. In the interest of a future historiography of the digital age it seems to be particularly urgent to realize that the character of digital sources and forms of communication have undergone change and that suitable methods of securing and interpreting them should be developed.

The focus on "web history" addresses a twofold conceptual challenge. In a first part, problems and chances of a contemporary history of digital media are discussed. Problems arise in connection with the exponential growth of the amount of stored data in various forms and often having a hybrid character leading to questions of selection, archiving and preservation. The discussion will therefore center on paradigm change from scarcity of sources to their abundance which will thoroughly change the future reconstruction processes of the past.[2] Is, as a result, a new kind of historism looming?[3] However, the alternative of abundance versus scarcity seems to be misleading as is suggested by Niels Brügger in his article on the challenges of a future history of the World Wide Web (WWW). Indeed evidence suggests that large parts of the content are already lost.[4] The difficulty of storage and archiving are presently pointing to the fact that we will have to deal with the paradox of the simultaneity of huge data volumes and the loss and/or incompleteness of large parts of content – a finding which due to the rapid change of technical platforms may be transferred to other types of digital data. In the case of the WWW other problems with respect to the sources arise, in particular the fluid character of web contents which appear in constantly updated, extended, linked versions and which are reproduced elsewhere. Thus, as is demonstrated by Brügger, the question for the "original" in the net becomes obsolete. Classical questions about source criticism, author, time and context of content creation can only be answered with difficulty or not at all.

Is "web history" in the sense of classical methodological standards of historiography possible at all? What significance has machine readability for the sources of the research process? Above all, the pressing question arises what measures are presently required to make available a comprehensive source

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[2] See Roy Rosenzweig, "Scarcity or Abundance? Preserving the Past", in: *Clio Wired. The Future of Past in the Digital Age*, Roy Rosenzweig, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 3-27.

[3] Andreas Fickers, "Towards a New Digital Historicism? Doing History In The Age OF Abundance," *Journal of European Television History and Culture* 1, no. 1 (2012), <http://journal.euscreen.eu/index.php/jethc/article/view/878/1555>.

[4] A recent case study suggests that after only two and a half years already nearly 30% of the current political content is no longer available; cf. Hany M. SalahEldeen and Michael Nelson, "Losing my Revolution. How Many Ressources Shared on Social Media Have Been Lost?," <http//arxiv.org/pdf/12093026v1.pdf>.

material to a future history of digitization and the worldwide web. But the very thought of permanent storage as a snapshot is in conflict with its dynamic and fluid character. Christian Schwarzenegger in his article refers to the problem of the reception history of the WWW: It is beyond doubt that the eminently important perspective of appropriation of media contents even in the case of the "classical" mass media from books to TV can only be reconstructed with difficulty. The fact that the WWW contains data which are mostly stored in a decentralized manner and web content does not have a linear structure does not make the whole issue any easier. This calls for a discussion about methods and theories being suitable for archiving digital data and writing the histories of the digital age. Also the necessary competences of researchers have to be under consideration. At present, however, this discussion among historians has hardly been commenced yet.

The fundamental changes challenging historians with regard to digitization should however not create the impression that some problems are by no means as new and unique as it may seem at present. As early as in the second half of the 19th century debates on the handling of changing sources and the related possibilities of historical knowledge had been initiated which finally led to the overcoming of the historism in the tradition of Ranke. According to Schwarzenegger it is worthwhile studying the historical medial change as it sharpens the view for the fact that the availability of new media and technologies has always been connected with far reaching challenges. They should by no means give rise to dystopia because, as experience has shown, not *everything* is changing at once. According to him historians should take a relaxed attitude. The relationship between old and new media is also subject of an article by Christian Oggolder about the discourse on digitization in German and Austrian print media. His paper not only highlights the rapid change of the social framing of this process, but also demonstrates that the digital media should not be considered isolated, but should be analyzed as part of a complex media ensemble. To resist the temptation to judge the change by digitalization incorrectly, the "old" media must always remain with the view.

In the second part the authors leave the level of conceptual considerations and turn towards the already established practice of digitization and the supply of sources in the net. In the meantime, a number of projects aiming at the digitization and provision of historical media sources in the WWW were initiated or have already been completed. Special focus is placed on the question of how the latter are to be treated in order to generate a great amount of additional value for researchers and other circles of users. Against the backdrop of concrete experience not only technical-methodological problems and solutions but also fundamental conceptual questions of communication historiography are under discussion.

Right from the beginning criticism of such projects was aimed at the selection criteria and relevance of the digital representations made available online.

In contrast to "classical" archives WWW archives are still suspected to remove sources from their original context because the availability of sources might prevail over the systematic documentation of contexts and metadata. The two projects presented here demonstrate that the alleged contrast between the classical archive and the internet is not plausible. Both projects are based on cooperation between an established state archive and/or library and a team of researchers. The additional value generated by such projects for classical historical research is demonstrated by the projects on digitization of the Prussian official press (Albrecht Hoppe and Rudolf Stöber) and further on the digitization of illustrated magazines (Patrick Rössler, Achim Bonte and Katja Leiskau). The first project realized in cooperation with the State Library of Berlin primarily aims at indexing a type of newspaper which is difficult to approach and only little known. Its significance as a central source of Prussian state propaganda, however, is diametrically opposed to its inconspicuousness and small degree of publicity. Indexing of the corpus comprising approximately 13.000 pages is carried out by a systematic index as well as a full text search. Thus context information is included which refers to persons, places and factual contexts. The second project, however, had to face even greater methodological and technical difficulties because an even larger volume of data is to be handled in order to digitize the most important popular magazines of the Weimar Republic. In addition, not only text but also a large number of pictures have to be recorded and systematically indexed. The benefit for research not only lies in the preservation and central availability of magazines which have been stored in a decentralized manner. On the contrary, this project forms a basis for manifold research activities of communication history and contemporary history on a broad empirical basis. The systematic indexing of an expected 50.000 photographs in the course of visual turn can hardly be overestimated.

To make a long story short, the process of digitalization has already reached historiography. Although it creates many new problems to historical research there is also a lot opportunities to make use of. A prerequisite for this is that the challenges associated with the digitalization are recognized and reflected on a theoretical and methodological level. Unfortunately until know this seems to happen very rarely indeed.

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