

Kyna Herzinger
University of South Carolina
kherzinger01@gmail.com

Doing it the Old Fashioned Way:
Notes on the Challenges of Digital Surrogates in Historical Research

Today's students of history enter the profession with greater access to primary sources than previous generations of historians. With the proliferation of Encoded Archival Description and digital archives students may hone their research agendas, gather data, and analyze sources without the trappings (and inconveniences) of traditional archival research; researchers lose the experience of directly handling manuscripts and the assistance of trained staff, but need not worry about limited hours of operation, travel time, or potential expenses. Indeed, remote research is a growing trend, but one that caused an established historian to lament the extent to which today's students have lost the excitement of diving into manuscripts—of being the first to scour a collection for hidden gems.

Archivists, too, are giving digital activities higher priority amid their daily tasks citing preservation and improved access as the primary impetus. In some instances, such as the Grateful Dead archive at the University of California–Santa Cruz, the drive to digitize has been harnessed as a means to enhance and reinforce traditional professional imperatives like arrangement and description. Too often, however, archivists focus on what may be gained from digitizing with little recognition of what may be lost. Intellectual energies center instead on a short list of recurring topics: case studies offer do-it-yourself insights, the occasional user study directs the profession to improve their digital services, while even less attention is given to the technical nuts and bolts of digital preservation or long-term strategies required to maintain digital information.

Though this paper does not argue against the many benefits gained from digitization—preservation and access, as noted; institutional publicity secured through digital exhibition; or convenient search capabilities that can bring together disparate documents thereby enabling students and scholars to make intellectual connections across collections or even across a single collection—this paper highlights several concerns created by digitization; it will explore those aspects of traditional research that may be lost to the scholar when manuscripts are encountered in digital form. While there are situations in which use of digital surrogates is appropriate or even advantageous, this paper argues that it cannot serve as a complete substitute for traditional scholarly inquiry.

Much, for instance, may be learned from the artifactual value of a document. At times the artifactual value may even surpass a document's informational value to the extent that the data are less important than the document itself. (For an imperfect example, consider a diploma which is often kept only for its symbolic value. If an individual or institution seeks proof that a degree was conferred, the transcript is obtained, not the diploma.) Further, an item that has been re-presented in digital form has undergone a transformation that is mediated by a public interface, computer hardware, and is influenced by and filtered through descriptions created by

an often unidentified digital archivist. No longer is the scholar in conversation with the past, but more so with the digital realm. Stated another way, a fundamental, immediate connection to the past is lost in the digitization process. Finally, the fact remains that the digital world represents a mere fraction of the documentary record in much the same way that the documentary record represents only a small percentage of what constitutes human history. Focusing on materials digitally represented has the potential distort conclusions.

While this paper is foremost an apology for traditional research methods, it does not suggest that digital surrogates are not valuable in some contexts; rather, it proposes that there are situations in which digital surrogates simply cannot serve as a suitable substitute for scholarly research. Moreover, it offers several arguments that deserve greater attention and discussion within the profession.

SELECTED REFERENCES:

- Anderson, Ian G. "Are You Being Served? Historians and the Search for Primary Sources." *Archivaria* 58 (2004): 81-129.
- Briet, Suzanne. *What is Documentation?* Translated and edited by Ronald E. Day and Laurent Martinet with Hermina G. B. Angheliescu. Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2006.
- Buckland, Michael. "Information as Thing." *Journal of the American Society for Information Science*. 42 (1991): 351-60.
- . "What is a 'Document'?" In Trudi Bellardo Hahn & Michael Buckland, eds., *Historical Studies in Information Science*. Medford, NJ: Information Today, 1998.
- Cook, Terry. "Electronic Records, Paper Minds: The Revolution in Information Management and Archives in the Post-Custodial and Post-Modernist Era." *Archives and Manuscripts* 22 (1994): 300-328.
- Dodge, Bernadine. "Across the Great Divide: Archival Discourse and the (Re)Presentation of the Past in Late-Modern Society." *Archivaria* 53 (2002): 16-30.
- Dryden, Jean. "Copyright Issues in the Selection of Archival Material for Internet Access." *Archival Science* 8 (2008): 123-47.
- Gurian, Elain Heumann. "What is the Object of this Exercise? A Meandering of the Many Meanings of Objects in Museums." In *Civilizing the museum: The collected writings of Elain Heumann Gurian*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

- Henry, Linda J. "Schellenberg in Cyberspace." In *American Archival Studies: Readings in Theory and Practice*, edited by Randall C. Jimerson. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2000.
- Harris, Verne. *Archives and Justice: A South African Perspective*. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2007.
- Ketelaar, Eric. "Tacit Narratives: The Meanings of Archives." *Archival Science* 1 (2001): 131-141.
- Nesmith, Tom. "The Concept of Societal Provenance and Records of Nineteenth-Century Aboriginal-European Relations in Western Canada: Implications for Archival Theory and Practice." *Archival Science* 6 (2006): 351-360.
- Opp, J. "The Colonial Legacies of the Digital Archive: The Arnold Lupson Photographic Collection." *Archivaria* 65 (2008): 3-19.
- O'Toole, James M. "The Symbolic Significance of Archives." In *American Archival Studies: Readings in Theory and Practice*, edited by Randall C. Jimerson. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2000.