

Promoting the digital literacy of undergraduate historians using digitised historic newspapers

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Introduction

This case study reports on the engagement of undergraduate historians with digitised newspapers at the University of Wolverhampton and explores the potential to promote digital literacy. It is a contribution to the debate on whether it is possible to teach digital natives digital literacy (Ng, 2012). The initial research for this article was funded by a Higher Education Academy teaching development grant (Hawkins & Gildart, 2010). This article updates the research by reporting on subsequent student engagement and experience using digitised historic newspapers at the University of Wolverhampton. As Cameron & Richardson (2005) have observed, before these newspapers were digitised historians “had to rely on outdated indexes and/or ploughing through reams of print on the screen of a microfilm reader.” They further observe (ibid) “The ability to search immense quantities of text quickly and efficiently opens up the newspapers as a resource for a wide range of historical studies.”

Digital historic newspaper resources: the context

In the pre-digital age using newspapers was extremely time-consuming because only a handful of newspapers had been indexed, *The Times* being a notable example. Access to historic newspapers in most university libraries was limited. Bound physical copies of newspapers took up a lot of space and so most universities, which held historic newspapers, especially new ones, only had microfilm copies. Microfilms were very time-consuming to use and, if mistreated, tended to decay very quickly.

During the last decade digital scanning and optical character recognition (OCR) technology has been used to digitise numerous runs of historic newspapers, both in Britain and elsewhere in the world. This allows historians to do a keyword search of the digitised newspapers. This has significantly reduced the time required to search newspapers for relevant content. The cost of this digitisation had been financed in different ways. Many British extant newspapers have formed partnerships with commercial digital media companies such as Gale Cengage Learning. Full runs of titles such as *The Times* and the *Financial Times* have been digitised. As a result university libraries are able to subscribe to these databases and make them available for learning and teaching. However, budgetary restraints mean that most university libraries are not able to subscribe to all of the digitised historic newspapers available from commercial digital media companies. Britain’s historic newspaper of record *The Times* is probably the digitised historic newspaper most commonly subscribed to by British university libraries. However, there are many historic newspaper titles held by Britain’s national

libraries, the British Library, the National Library of Scotland, and the National Library of Wales which are no longer in publication.

The National Library of Wales has digitised 120 Welsh newspapers up to 1910 partly funded by the Strategic Capital Investment Fund and the European Regional Development Fund through the Welsh Government. Welsh Newspapers Online can be accessed free of charge at <http://newspapers.library.wales/>. The British Library has also digitised a representative selection of the non-extant titles in its collections. It has used the public-private partnership model to fund this. The initial digitisation was done in partnership with JISC (Joint Information Systems Committee) and Gale Cengage Learning. This resulted in the digitisation of newspaper titles published from the beginning of the 17th century to the beginning of the 20th century. Subsequently, an additional public-private partnership was formed with the company known as Findmypast and JISC to digitise hundreds of additional titles from the 18th century to the mid-20th century. Findmypast has bundled all of the digitised British Library newspaper titles together as the *British Newspaper Archive* which is available to the public on a subscription basis. Moreover, universities libraries are able to provide access to most of the same digitised titles to their learners free of charge via the JISC database, *British Library Newspapers, 1600-1950*.

Promoting the digital literacy of undergraduate historians using digitised newspapers

To date there has been no research apart from that of the Hawkins & Gildart (2010) and Elliott, Feeney, Kollen and Reyes-Escudero (2015) on the use of digitised historic newspapers in undergraduate history teaching and assessment. Indeed, there is also very little literature on the use of digitised historic newspapers by academic historians with the exceptions of Vella (2009) and Allen & Sieczkiewicz (2010).

In common with many new universities the University of Wolverhampton has many mature undergraduate students as well as the more common 18-21 year old demographic. Marc Prensky (2001a and 2001b) has suggested that the 18-21 demographic are “digital natives” unlike the “digital immigrants”, those born before the emergence of the online world and in particular social media. However, Bennett, Maton and Kervin (2008) suggest that the “digital natives” debate resulting from Prensky’s thesis is not empirically and theoretically informed. The limited evidence that exists (ibid) suggests that there is “a significant proportion of young people who do not have the levels of access or technology skills predicted by proponents of the digital native idea.” (p.783). They further observe “It may be that there is as much variation within the digital native generation as between the generations.” (p.782). Ng (2012) also suggests “that the use of technology by young people is different in education in that most lack the skills and strategies to use them in learning.” (p.1065).

At the University of Wolverhampton, my personal experience suggests that in general the “digital natives” find it much more difficult to engage with online resources such as digitised newspapers than the mature students. The skills acquired through active engagement with social media do not transfer well to engagement with digitised historic

newspapers. First, very few of the 18-21 demographic read printed daily newspapers, not even the *Metro* which is available free to those who use public transport during the morning rush hour. It would appear that some do not access the news online through the newspaper websites without paywalls. Nor do they appear to make much use of the iPhone news app, Summly, developed by software prodigy, Nick d'Aloisio (Bradshaw, 2012), or one of the recently launched news apps: Apple News, Snapchat Discover, Instant Articles, or Twitter Moments. Thus are unfamiliar with the experience of engaging with both printed and online news. The University of Wolverhampton 18-21 demographic may not be atypical of Millennials. As a Millennial recently observed to Andrew Rivette-Carnae (2016), head of digital and social media at the public relations firm, Brunswick, "If a news story is big enough it will find me."

Second, some of the 18-21 demographic have great difficulty using online search engines. Indeed, in a recent article on student engagement with e-books Kate B. Moore (2015) identifies searching functionality as a significant barrier for many students. Many undergraduate historians at the University of Wolverhampton find the *British Library Newspapers, 1900-1950* search engine extremely difficult to use. They have great difficulty refining their search if they initially receive too many results as evidenced by feedback in mid-module and end of module questionnaires. Furthermore, using the search engine is a very different experience to using the Google search engine which has a helpful search algorithm. Gildart & Hawkins (2010) introduced an extensive briefing workshop so that the students on our second year Social History of Victorian Britain c1850-c1901 module would be better prepared to find newspaper articles using what has subsequently been rebadged *British Library Newspapers, 1600-1950* for one of the modules' two written assessments. Gooding, Terras & Warwick (2013) suggest that some authors make "grandiose claims" for the impact of mass digitisation, such as that of historic newspapers without supporting evidence and suggest Hawkins and Gildart's (2010) report provides a more "realistic assessment... of the benefits of large-scale digitization on scholarly activity." (p. 635).

Gooding, Terras & Warwick's (2013) cautionary perspective on the benefits of large-scale digitisation is certainly supported by the experience of many of the University of Wolverhampton's undergraduate historians with online digitised historic newspapers since the publication of Hawkins & Gildart's (2010) report. Additional Higher Education Academy funding supported the publication of a printed and electronic guide for historians on how to use digitised newspapers (Hawkins, 2011) including, for example: how to reference them. This has been made available to the students on the second year Victorian Britain module via the University of Wolverhampton's Virtual Learning Environment, WOLF. However, notwithstanding this additional support for student learning, many of the students on the module in the years since 2010 have continued to find engagement with *British Library Newspapers, 1600-1950* extremely challenging. This is evidenced by both their feedback in mid-module and end of module evaluation questionnaires, as well as in the unwillingness of a significant minority of students to engage with the database, even though it was originally mandatory. The questionnaire responses identify the functionality of the search engine as the main issue. The responses have also identified the "excessive" length of time required by some of the

respondents to refine their searches in order to identify newspaper articles which are relevant to their assignment. Overall undergraduate historians, who do not include the Victorian Britain module in their programme, appear to engage very little with online digitised newspapers. This is despite the fact the University of Wolverhampton's Learning Centre has additionally subscribed to the digitised *The Times* database since 2013, and provided a link to *Welsh Newspapers Online* since its launch in 2013.

There is one exception to the general experience of University of Wolverhampton undergraduate historians' engagement with digitised historic newspapers. Informed by the HEA funded project we developed a new final year module, *America: The Rise of a Superpower, 1890-1950*, which was launched in 2010. The first of the two assessments for this module requires the students to use a mandatory minimum of ten newspapers articles drawn from the Library of Congress's *Chronicling America* digitised historic newspapers database: a minimum of two each from New York City; Washington D.C.; Texas; Minnesota; and San Francisco. They have a choice of two questions: the first is on the outbreak of the Spanish-American War and American imperialism; and the second is on Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* and the enactment of the Meat Inspection Act and the Pure Food and Drug Act. Unlike in the case of the second year Victorian Britain module, students on this final year module have, for the most part, engaged enthusiastically with the American database which is reflected in above average attainment. Student feedback from the module has been very positive. One student observed that he "thoroughly enjoy[ed] the assignment". I wish there were more modules with components like this at first and second year." Another reflected that she "particularly enjoyed my third year module - America: The Rise of a Superpower 1890-1945 which I found enlightening; one of my most enjoyable essays to write was based upon Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*." The external examiner for the module has also commended it, observing; "The use of online research materials embedded into specific History modules also represents exemplary practice and is a major step forward in encouraging digital literacy amongst students."

The disparity in the student engagement and performance can be explained by a number of factors. First, and in particular, unlike *British Library Newspapers, 1900-1950*, the *Chronicling America* database has not been designed primarily for academic researchers. The Library Congress has designed the *Chronicling America* database primarily for a mass user community and this is reflected in the search engine which our students find much easier to use than that of the *British Library Newspapers, 1900-1950* database. This is evidenced by their very positive feedback on their engagement with the database in the mid-module and end of module evaluation questionnaires. Second, this final year module is a research based module. My recent subject discipline research has drawn heavily on the *Chronicling America* database and thus I can draw upon my own experience when instructing students on how to optimise their engagement with it. My enthusiasm for this database also makes students feel more confident in their initial engagement with it. Third, early twentieth century American English presents fewer challenges to students on this module than the Victorian English does to the students on the second year module. Fourth, students are able to contextualise the newspaper articles by drawing upon digitised books and other printed media available online at

American open access databases such as the HathiTrust Digital Library, Cornell University Library Making of America Collection, and University of Michigan Library Making of America Collection.

Conclusion

The student engagement with and experience of *America: The Rise of a Superpower, 1890-1950* demonstrates that the digitised historic newspapers can be used in undergraduate history teaching very successfully. Elliott, Feeney, Kollen & Reyes-Escudero (2015) emphasise in their research at the University of Arizona the importance of “searching functionality” to student engagement with digitised historic newspapers. The student engagement and experience at the University of Wolverhampton suggests that digitised historic newspaper databases with search engines designed primarily for academic researchers result in less positive outcomes (Hawkins & Gildart 2010). However, *America: The Rise of a Superpower, 1890-1950*, shows that the use of mass digitisation in teaching can produce much more positive outcomes for student engagement and experience, when in particular mass digitisation databases are designed to be friendly to all user communities, rather than just academic researchers. Search engine functionality is clearly a necessary condition for positive outcomes. Other factors such as guidance by the lecturer are not sufficient without this condition.

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