Utilizing New Media in Graduate academic Research

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Utilizing New Media in Graduate Academic Research

Recent funding from governmental and foundational sources has allowed for an explosion of major archival information to be digitized and organized for researchers and students. With this new information available online, archival materials once only accessible in dusty libraries to European travelers with large research budgets is now available to a range of scholars globally. Digitized archival materials allow advanced undergraduates and graduate students to complete primary source based research from their home institutions allowing for more complex and more varied academic projects to be done for both coursework and for thesis-level research.

It is easy to access the internet for transcribed copies of various resources from Hammurabi’s Code to Patrick Henry’s speeches to recent press releases from President Obama. These resources are of critical importance to researchers and educators at all levels in providing glimpses into different worlds and historical events but these transcribed resources limit scholars and students to the text (often edited or translated by unknown individuals) and prevent a more comprehensive evaluation of a document. We are unable to analyze the style of writing, the distinctive marks on the paper, and the subtle or sometimes substantial wear on the document itself. Digital archives are not just websites with information. Digital archives:

- Provide information at any time and in any place;
- Provide access to collections of multimedia information that integrate text, image, graphics, audio, video, and other continuous media;
- Make it possible for users to personalize or customize how they access and represent information for example, by “harvesting” only relevant information and avoiding information overload; and
- Radically enhance collaborative intellectual activities, including research, learning, and design, by reducing barriers of geography, organizational distance, and time.

Digital archives and archival databases are far more advanced applications of technology to the systematic preservation of historic materials in their original form and provide for digital remote access to those original documents for scholars around the globe.

British archives, universities and libraries have recently invested heavily in the development of digital archives and databases that are open to virtually all researchers regardless of affiliation or academic rank. Some collections, such as the Treasures of the British Library, have digitized medieval and early modern texts like the William Claxton’s editions of
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the *Canterbury Tales* or several copies of *Magna Carta*. The ability to view these sources in high-resolution format with magnifying capabilities, textual comparisons, and academic commentary allow millions of individuals to access these fragile documents that were rarely available to all but a select few of elite scholars. While these are of value in numerous settings as true treasures of western civilization, they are not the only applications of such technology. Far more innovated databases have been developed by consortiums of academics that compile information from a range of collections, archives and individuals. The Church of England Clergy Database and the Anglo-Saxon Prosopography projects assemble resources from various archives and libraries across the United Kingdom that would not otherwise be able to digitize any part of their collections. Collections virtually unsearchable by non-UK based academics are now given an online presence that allows greater engagement with the cyber-researcher.

Digitized materials and databases are no substitute for the archival experience of a dusty room, white gloves and the inevitable case of archivist’s nose but for the seasoned academic or apprentice scholar, online collections can provide a wealth of information that enhance one’s work and excite one’s imagination. As these collections become more sophisticated and materials become more plentiful, primary source material on any subject can be part of one’s academic life at any stage of an academic career.

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