

Doing History in a Digital World

Annotated Bibliography

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Introduction

There are many fine historical works that either describe or make use of digital techniques. This bibliography focuses on material that is particularly relevant and accessible to an English-speaking audience. Disciplinary practice is influenced by national cultures and contexts; this bibliography is written for an international audience but of course represents the influences of its UK-based author. It includes material covering specific digital methods, pieces discussing digital history as a subdiscipline, and some historical reflections on the impact of digital tools and approaches. With two exceptions, I have focused on material published in the last decade. Although technology moves fast, historians have been thinking about how to engage with computers for as long as they have had access to them and much of this conceptual work remains valuable today. Ironically, much of this early writing remains undigitized but readers can explore some of it online, including back issues of the *Journal of History and Computing*.

Guidance on digital methods for research

Susan Grunewald and Andrew Janco, 'Finding Places in Text with the World Historical Gazetteer', *Programming Historian*, 11 February 2022, <https://programminghistorian.org/en/lessons/finding-places-world-historical-gazetteer>.

This lesson from *Programming Historian* is a good example of the kind of accessible hands-on self-paced skills training the free-to-access journal

offers. Published in English, Spanish, French and Portuguese, *Programming Historian* provides guides for scholars at all levels seeking to explore digital methods. Take a look at their lessons (<https://programminghistorian.org/en/lessons/>) for a sense of what is covered.

Reflections on digital history

Tim Hitchcock, 'Confronting the Digital: Or How Academic History Writing Lost the Plot', *Cultural and Social History*, 10:1 (2013), pp. 9–23.

This article is now over a decade old. As you read it, you might enjoy the polemic – Hitchcock cautions against blaming 'the actions of the mechanic and the road builders [scientists, software engineers, big tech] for the actions of the drunk at the wheel [historians]'. You might also consider whether some of his observations remain relevant – for example, that monographs and journal articles are not always clear about the ways in which digital tools have shaped their research.

Adam Crymble, *Technology and the Historian: Transformations in the Digital Age* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2021).

'[D]igital history does not need definitions,' writes Crymble, 'it needs histories'. This comprehensive and highly readable introduction to digital history as a field will help readers to understand both. It is particularly valuable in highlighting the culturally distinctive flavours of 'digital history' that developed in the UK and the USA.

Ian Milligan, *The Transformation of Historical Research in the Digital Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

Milligan's work covers some of the same historical ground as Crymble's but rather than focusing on understanding (or debunking) 'digital history', it focuses on the way in which digital technology has changed the work of all historians and describes the way in which 'we [historians] are all digital now'.

Historical perspectives

Vannevar Bush, 'As We May Think', *Atlantic Monthly*, September 1945.

This article by one of the USA's leading Second World War scientist-administrators is an early reflection on how technological innovation can shape the production of knowledge. His ideas about a knowledge machine he called a 'memex' were influential in shaping the work of early computer scientists and the creator of the World Wide Web and thus on the world of digital knowledge production we all inhabit.

Franco Moretti, 'Conjectures on World Literature', *New Left Review*, 1 (1 February 2000), pp. 54–68.

This is the article that coined the term 'distant reading'. It describes a scholarly approach that seeks to understand very large collections of texts (fiction published in different countries) by considering them as a whole, based 'distantly' on the work of other scholars, rather than by poring over individual publications. The author is not writing about digital methods and his subject matter might seem to Anglophone readers to belong to literary scholars rather than historians, but the discussion of the relationship between 'close' and 'distant' reading and the relative value and product of these endeavours is stimulating.

New directions

Ian Milligan, 'Finding Community in the Ruins of GeoCities: Distantly Reading a Web Archive' (Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers, 2015), <https://uwspace.uwaterloo.ca/handle/10012/11650>.

The research for this article sits at the intersection of digital techniques and digital archives. Using records from the Internet Archive and a range of digital techniques, Milligan explores an early, now abandoned proto-social network and the people who inhabited it. It is a revealing example of how to write the history of the Web and how to employ digital methods in historical research.

Conclusion

The advent of personal computing and widespread internet access has fundamentally changed the working practices of historians. Fragile physical records in remote archives have been photographed and made available internationally through online catalogues. Digital copies of books and articles are often available well in advance of print copies, and to a much wider audience. Already some primary sources from more recent periods will only ever exist in electronic form. Computers have also made new tools and techniques available to historians, helping them to organize, interrogate and understand the deluge of data, and changing the ways that they write, publish and communicate.

This computerization of everything has brought undeniable benefits, but it also presents real challenges. Digitization can decrease the accessibility of some sources even while it widens the availability of others. The search results we use every day are usually ranked based on criteria that are hidden from us as users. All of this poses important questions to the discipline. Most importantly: how best can we understand and utilize our research

tools, texts and practices? These questions are as old as the discipline itself and must be asked anew by every scholar on every project. The good news is that historians are well practised at asking and answering them. The sources in this bibliography are part of a rich literature that engages with that task.