

## **The Internet as the Basis for Collaborative Research: How Will It Shift the Research Behavior of Historians?**

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For historians, the development of the Internet and the World Wide Web created a complex intersection of their information needs, research habits, communication preferences, and professional collaboration on a scale that they had never experienced before. Broad-based search engines, digitized archives, e-mail, numerous websites, and broader access to computers provide more opportunities and more challenges. More information may be available on one's desktop but sifting through it to find relevant pieces may take more time.

In order to discuss how use of the Internet and the World Wide Web may have impacted the research and communication behaviors of historians, we must first review what was already known about these habits. Over the past three decades, several studies on the research behavior of historians have been conducted and published, generally in the context of librarians providing services to history faculty or doctoral candidates on a university campus.

The first widely published study of the information needs and attendant research behavior of social scientists, including historians, was conducted in the U.K. in 1967 and the results were published in 1971. Over 2,600 social scientists were sent questionnaires on their information needs and 42 per cent responded. It is interesting to note the findings and place them against what we have experienced with the Internet. A key finding from the survey showed that this group preferred informal channels of seeking reference information to formal channels. Informal channels frequently require some kind of collaborative communication. The study also created a methodology followed in future studies including Margaret Steig's study on the information needs and research habits of U.S. historians published in 1981. In her study, Steig noted several characteristics of historians based on the responses of 767 historians. I've detailed some of these earlier findings simply to provide a context to further discussions and to set the stage as to what was known about history research patterns twenty years ago.

1. Historians preferred physical formats of resources (in order) were books, periodicals, and manuscripts. Computer print-outs ranked 11<sup>th</sup> out of 13 identified formats and no one suggested reading from a computer screen.
2. Historians felt they had as much right to work at home or in their offices as they did in the library.
3. Many historians were uncomfortable working with computers and preferred to ignore them.
4. Historians were frequently dependent on printed sources of information rather than on oral sources.

5. Historians referred an unsystematic approach to conducting research, which reinforced an earlier identified preference for informality. Many respondents to the survey indicated that they never used indexes or abstracts and, in fact, considered them irrelevant. Browsing and serendipity were part of this unsystematic approach.
6. Historians preferred methods of discovering relevant published information were 1) bibliographies or references in books or journals, 2) consulting a known expert, 3) abstracts or indexes, 4) consulting with colleagues. There was a high reliance on the accidental discovery of material related to their current research by scanning current periodicals.

Steig's conclusion was that "When all the evidence is added up, it is clear that too often historians fail to use existing sources of information. Their reasons for this are various: the historian may know that something exists but be unwilling to make the effort to use it; he may know it exists, but be unable to obtain it, or he may be unaware that it exists." (p. 559) While some of these findings may seem dated now, particularly those related to computer use and the use of electronic data, some of the others are still valid. I doubt that most historians today have anywhere near the aversion to computer-based research as they did in 1981. Even many senior professors who may have been apprehensive in 1981 have probably changed their minds. Much has changed in the past twenty years in the types of sources historians rely on in their studies, the ways they go about finding them, and the improvements to technology. What hasn't changed is the historian's preference for using informal methods of research and using communications with colleagues as a method to enhance or refine that research.

Helen Tibbo's study published in 1993 echoed many of these same findings on historians' information needs and research habits. Recently, a Canadian researcher in communication studies, Charles Cole, has been conducting studies on the research behaviors of historians, most frequently on history graduate students, in order to understand historians' research patterns and thus to design information retrieval systems appropriate for historians, humanists, and other social scientists. His most recent article, published in 2000, builds upon the earlier findings and shows that those earlier identified patterns of historian research behavior going as far back as the INFROSS and Steig studies are still present today and are present not only in historians but also in graduate history students. This research pattern is definitely related to the nature of history research and not to a particular age or experience group of historians. Cole's study focused on a graduate student's history research based on the recognition of subtle patterns around proper names in an archive and on a recognition of a shift in the pattern as the basis for additional research. The student was preparing a dissertation on privateering in the English Channel during the early Eighteenth Century. Cole's research methods in his study included both observation of behavior patterns and in-depth interviews.

Cole takes this evidence and posits that there is a dichotomy between the research habits of historians and the current state of web search engines. Using current web technology that is generally developed with the research patterns of scientists in mind, a single query can retrieve a large quantity of information of varied quality. The results

retrieved by such a search are in contrast to humanist/history research behavior that includes 1) a greater use of libraries and archives than any other group, 2) a preference for informal methods of seeking information such as browsing, and 3) a preference for accessing formal information search tools such as indexes and abstracts via proper names rather than by common subject terms. Cole concludes that in order for an information retrieval system to work for historians the following element must be taken into consideration “the technique [use of proper names as a retrieval mechanism] serves as an entry key into the Ph.D. student’s mind, allowing the IR [information retrieval] designer to integrate the student’s information search with the history student’s task – finding patterns in the material leading to original thesis formation.” [p. 106]

However, despite evidence that current web technology has not been created with the research patterns of historians in mind, historians are moving to the Internet in large numbers. Many of the identified problems will be solved in the next few years. Search engines will be developed that can more easily accommodate the browsing and pattern-seeking behavior of humanists. The article to reference to article linking for humanities that it is provided for the sciences will be available to the humanities, either through CrossRef or through some other means so that historians may continue their use of cited references as an information-seeking tool. More secondary information such as articles and monographs as well as primary materials will be available electronically.

Why are historians adapting their research behavior patterns to the Internet rather than waiting for the Internet to adapt? There are several possible explanations. The first is that there is a tremendous amount of digitized quality materials available, especially for historians who teach. Professor Roy Rosenzweig recently published an article in which he discusses the quantity and quality of information available on the web for historians. These materials are available from the public sector, including grass-roots enthusiasts, grant-funded university-based projects, or government agencies such as the Library of Congress as well as private corporations. Rosenzweig suggests that graduate students should emulate some of the grass-roots sites now available and make visible the most private part of the scholar’s work – assembling a body of primary documents – and make it visible by putting the information on a website. This visibility can attract the attention, comments and suggestions from other scholars. [at 556]

The second is that e-mail is readily available on most campus desktops so historians can easily and quickly communicate with others beyond their immediate campuses and even beyond their country. Communication is no longer limited to other historians on campus or even those met at conferences.

Third is that communities, such as those on H-Net, are have sprung into existence. These communities encourage communication among interested historians within the academy all over the world as well as participants outside the academy. Historians can use these communities to find out about current research and discoveries as well as the more mundane concerns such as conferences, jobs, grants, and teaching resources.

The future is always difficult to predict but I think that historians may develop two research mindsets, one for traditional print materials and archives, and the other for

electronic information. They will use whichever research mindset is appropriate to the source at hand and will use whatever sources they can find available. Historians will become accustomed to moving between them as needed and in fact, may not even realize that the shifts are happening as they concentrate on digging for information, recognizing the subtle shifts in patterns that are the keys to historical research, and sharing their observations and insights with other historians.

In essence, the Internet only serves to enhance the collaborative mindset and informal research and communication style that has been present among historians for many years.

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