

# Teaching nineteenth-century periodicals using digital resources

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# Teaching Nineteenth-Century Periodicals Using Digital Resources: Myths and Methods

JIM MUSSELL

Back in 2006, *VPR* published a special issue edited by Teresa Mangum that discussed how periodicals might be studied in university classrooms.<sup>1</sup> The essays described innovative and exciting courses that engaged with different aspects of the nineteenth-century press. Each, in its own way, had to engage with a central methodological difficulty: how to provide access to newspapers and periodicals for students. Some managed with photocopies, others with trips to special collections in the library, and many made use of what digital resources were available. Now, with the publication of resources such as Gale Cengage's *19th Century UK Periodicals* (2007), Gale Cengage and the British Library's *British Newspapers 1800-1900* (2007) (also known as *19th Century British Library Newspapers*), ProQuest's *Historical Newspapers* (2001-) and *British Periodicals* (2007-), and Brightsolid's *British Newspaper Archive* (2011-), as well as the material republished in *Google Books* (2001-) and the *Internet Archive* (1996-), this key methodological difficulty has largely been overcome. And, as textual transcripts provide access to page images through a searchable index, it has been overcome in such a way that exerts significant bibliographical control over what has long been acknowledged as a recalcitrant and complex print archive.

This is not to argue that problems regarding access have been solved. The lack of political will for publicly-funded and accessible digitization programs (in England at least) has meant that the bulk of nineteenth-century newspapers and periodicals have been published by commercial publishers as packages to be sold to (predominantly North American) academic institutions. In some cases, the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC), under their JISC Collections scheme, has underwritten the cost of subscriptions for British universities, but access elsewhere depends on the wealth of the institution and the ability of academics to make the case

for the expense. Yet for scholars within subscribing institutions, there has been a fundamental transformation in the terms of access to nineteenth-century newspapers and periodicals. This transformation has the potential to return the press to its central place in studies of nineteenth-century culture, but only through the introduction of a new set of mediating forms. Working with periodicals always involves an engagement with mediation as lost print forms are reconstructed from traces in the surviving print archive. When we use digital resources, we introduce a further dimension to this familiar methodological consideration. The gains from using digital resources are so significant that nobody working within nineteenth-century studies can afford to ignore them. My argument here is that both students and scholars must be equipped to understand the constitution of this new digital representation of nineteenth-century print culture.

### Some Myths about Digital Scholarship

The web, at the time of writing, is twenty-one years old—older than most of the undergraduate students on campus. Computers, of course, are much older, and computation has been both a method and object of study for as long as the modern university has existed. The digital humanities traces its roots back to Father Busa's work in the 1940s, and computational methods have long been employed in a number of humanities disciplines.<sup>2</sup> Neither digital scholarship, then, nor digital culture, can really be approached as if they were still new. The rhetoric of novelty has political value, for both advocates and critics, but does not provide an intellectual framework through which to approach digital resources. A better approach is to substitute novelty for difference, taking the digital on its own terms while embracing the implicit question, "different from what?" It is this methodological embrace of difference that underpins each of my responses to the four myths below.

#### *1. The next generation knows what it is doing.*

Marc Prensky's influential paper, "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants," from 2001, argued that young people, because they have been exposed to digital culture for most of their lives, are intrinsically different learners than those who adapted to it later in life.<sup>3</sup> These "digital natives," according to Prensky, "think and process information fundamentally differently from their predecessors" and so require a learning environment and methodology specially attuned to their needs. Prensky's paper remains persuasive, I suspect, because it provides a scholarly justification for the widely-held but largely anecdotal notion that youth bestows technical

competence. Since then, a number of studies have exploded the myth of the digital native, focusing particularly on the difference between familiarity with various digital technologies—a kind of superficial competence—and a deeper, critical proficiency. What these studies reveal is that the technical competence of the young is routinely overstated, especially by the young people themselves.<sup>4</sup> They may have grown up with an always-on internet, available through a variety of devices (phones, music players, laptops, tablets) providing access to a range of interactive environments that connect people in various ways (the web, social networks), but this experience, important though it is, does not necessarily equip them to understand how it all works. Interactions online are structured by multiple black-boxes—shiny devices that give no clue as to their operation; interfaces that conceal their architecture and data structures—to create a user experience that is as unobtrusive and intuitive as possible. As Apple's recent marketing slogan—"it just works"—suggests, the investment in usability insulates users from the mechanism, the technology that enables work, as well as the labour that goes into producing the technology itself.<sup>5</sup>

Without some understanding of hardware and software, it is difficult for users to get the most out of the tools they use. This is particularly important for those using digital technology to carry out advanced work such as scholarship, which depends on complex informational retrieval and analysis. A 2008 report commissioned by the JISC and the British Library carried out at University College London looked at the behaviour of the "Google Generation" (anyone born after 1985) in higher education.<sup>6</sup> What they found was that students in academic environments demonstrated fairly basic information literacy. Eighty-three percent began information-seeking tasks with a simple web search, and ninety-three percent reported satisfaction with what they found, despite the difficulty of managing long lists of results or evaluating what was returned.<sup>7</sup> The "Google Generation," it appears, is happy to "get by with Google"; however, what the report also found was that this behaviour is not just limited to this demographic but is exhibited by most researchers in digital environments. The Google Generation might be in need of remedial attention, but, the report suggests, we are all the Google Generation now.<sup>8</sup>

*2. The value of digital resources is in how well they imitate nondigital material.*

When using digital resources to access nineteenth-century periodicals, it is easy to be struck by how the digital representations differ from the objects in the archive. The principal gains from using the current range of digital resources are searchability and access: in other words, digitization is used to produce an easily-retrievable version of the source object that can

function as a surrogate for whatever is in the archive. Given this logic, it is easy to argue that the better the representation, the better the resource, yet treating digital representations as surrogates limits the possibilities of interpretation. The computer, because it has been designed that way, is adept at simulation, but, as N. Katherine Hayles has noted, it achieves this “because it is completely unlike print in its architecture or functioning.”<sup>9</sup> This difference means that any digital representation must be deficient in some way. Smell, weight, texture, and size, for instance, are all important aspects of the materiality of print and are all difficult to translate into digital media. Encoding is always interpretive, and any digital representation selects certain features to reproduce at the cost of others. For some types of analysis—those focusing on textual content, for instance, or reproducible aspects of page images such as layout or typography—this might not matter, but for others it can always be argued that the digital representation is inferior. Such an attitude means that the best that can be accomplished with digital resources is similar work to that carried out using print; at worst, it means that the sort of scholarship carried out using digital resources will never be as good as that carried out using the print archive.

Yet this is a false choice based on a false premise. Digital resources should not replace the material in the archive but instead complement it, providing another way to approach whatever is being studied. Just as bound volumes of periodicals only partially represent the issues as they were published, so the print archive is itself a partial representation of nineteenth-century print culture. Research using periodicals is always partly an attempt to reconstruct a lost context, whether this is alternative forms in which a text was published or the broader historical culture in which such forms were meaningful. Digital resources provide a different way to approach this absent context. Once we recognize that the objects in the archive are simply the “originals” because they happen to survive, then we can start to use digital resources to reimagine the relationship between the archive and the past. Indeed, nostalgia for the aura of print objects often derives from a failure to recognize the material specificity of the digital objects. Focusing on what is missing from digital representations means that what they add can be neglected. The ability to search, for instance, is so familiar that it is often taken for granted, yet it depends upon the addition of a layer of processable textual information that can yield all sorts of information about content, style, and genre. And it is not just the textual transcript: digitization renders all selected aspects of the periodical as data, providing material that can be interrogated or employed in various ways.<sup>10</sup> All of these activities depend on the way in which digital resources differ from the print objects on which they are based. Only comparison can establish the difference between digital resources and print, but it is a mistake to equate this difference with deficit.

3. *Digital resources and objects, whatever they might be, are unworthy of study in their own right.*

The way most digital resources of nineteenth-century periodicals and newspapers are presented to users deliberately effaces their mediating role, suggesting instead that they are simply gateways to content. This has the effect of affirming the digital representations as surrogates, standing in for hard copy tucked away in archives that are difficult to access. However, as digitization projects effectively republish the material that they contain, these resources actually constitute a type of edition. They may not label themselves as such, and certainly would not qualify as scholarly editions, but they represent, nonetheless, the first attempt to republish large amounts of nineteenth-century serials (with, perhaps, the exception of microfilm) since the nineteenth century.<sup>11</sup> Just as those in literary studies would not teach a literary text without due regard to its transmission and form, so scholars working with digital resources of nineteenth-century newspapers and periodicals must attend to the way in which digital resources redefine their content through the way it is presented.

Users must be able to analyse how a resource has been put together if they are to understand how the digital representation differs from whatever it republishes. As argued above, this might serve to alert users to how a resource misrepresents the source objects; however, it can also serve the more valuable purpose of allowing the user to understand how a specific instantiation of the source material affects what it means. All editorial projects make arguments about whatever they republish, and digital resources are no exception. Just like editions in print, a digital resource affects the meaning of republished material through its selection, presentation, contextual or supplementary matter, and interface. The latter is particularly important, as the user of a digital resource has much more agency than the reader of a print edition. In fact, interfaces are explicitly designed to regulate the behaviour of users so that they carry out certain predetermined and predictable tasks. An understanding of how a resource has been put together allows users to recognize how what they do within a resource affects what it is possible to learn. It will allow them to take full advantage of what the resource offers, but it might also allow them to work against the grain, allowing the content to be leveraged in ways unimagined by its designers.

The presentation of resources as portals to content makes it easy to dismiss them as providers of a service rather than cultural artefacts in their own right. These resources are expensive to produce (and so expensive to buy), innovative, and have a major impact upon scholarship. At present, publishers do not see the value in documenting their methodology (or at

least making it available), nor do they provide accessible histories of the content they republish beyond introductory essays about the source material. There is little or no information about where this material is from (which archives?), what has been omitted (multiple editions? supplements?), any intermediary forms (microfilm?), let alone the various transformations that underpin the production of the image and metadata delivered over the web. Given the stake scholars have in this digital material and the fact that it will be used, in one form or another, as it is republished in new resources into the foreseeable future, it is vital that we can account for its history. Treating resources as if they were publications rather than libraries would be a good start, incorporating them within networks of citations that begin to document the various forms in which they appear. Scholars, as the key market for such resources, might also begin to lobby publishers to provide methodological accounts and editorial apparatus as standard. Lastly, scholars must begin to take seriously the problem of curation, preserving resources so that it remains possible to account for the history of the discipline into the future.

#### *4. Teaching these skills is someone else's job.*

There are a number of places where the skills required to become a critical user of digital resources might be developed on campus. Librarians have enormous expertise in information literacy and have been at the forefront of skills training for some time. Some campuses may also have dedicated e-learning units that can work with both staff and students to identify gaps in provision and develop appropriate resources. Given the recent rise in profile of the digital humanities, it is tempting to see this discipline as a locus for these sorts of activities. Yet there is substantial evidence that these skills can be provided far more effectively in context. Given their importance, both within the academy and beyond, simply relying on staff and students to locate and develop the appropriate skills without embedding them within formal programs is not really adequate for a higher education system in the twenty-first century.<sup>12</sup> Instead of a haphazard approach to digital literacy, then, it is important that these skills become an integral part of the humanities as taught within the disciplines.

The importance of digital resources to the study of nineteenth-century newspapers and periodicals means that those teaching this material cannot afford to neglect digital skills. If lecturers simply point students towards digital resources or offer digital facsimiles as replacements for hard copy, then they affirm the rhetoric of surrogacy that diminishes both digital resources and the significance of the archive. Students need the skills to interrogate digital resources, but they also need the skills to critique them

just as they would any other edition. Given limited resources and expertise, lecturers cannot be expected to do everything, so it is important to identify and draw upon what is already available on campus; however, the next stage is to work out how these skills might be developed through working with digitized newspapers and periodicals. This means treating the resources as mediating objects, building the use of resources into class activities and discussion, encouraging students to consider how these resources work and, perhaps most importantly, to consider how they relate to a past that is usually approached through a few surviving objects in the archives. All these activities are scalable and can be adapted or pursued in as much detail as individual lecturers feel is appropriate or comfortable. It might be that lecturers just take the time to explore the digital resource, pointing out how it structures particular patterns of behaviour and maintains a particular representation of its contents. Some might encourage students to work with digital media, producing their own projects based on periodicals and perhaps publishing them online.<sup>13</sup> Given the ease of online publishing, the amount of technical support available (especially from the digital humanities community), and the size of the print archive, such projects can become valuable research resources in their own right.

### Conclusion: Teaching Digital Literacy

No scholar working with nineteenth-century periodicals or newspapers can ignore the digital resources that have been published over the past five years or so. Simply by exerting a measure of bibliographic control over the archive, these resources have the potential to return the press—and print culture more generally—to the centre of nineteenth-century studies. Yet if scholars neglect to develop and pass on the skills required to become critical users, then these resources, despite all their potential, will function as article-retrieving tools that privilege text over image while positioning their users as passive consumers of content. The publication of these resources represents an opportunity to demonstrate the importance of the printed material that we study, but we have to know how to get the resources to work for us. This can be done by getting to know them, of course, but it may be that we have to become more active in specifying what we want from publishers or even build our own.

Digital resources allow us to share the nineteenth-century press with our students, but they also allow us to recognize and validate skills that can be applied much more widely than historical research. Although I am wary about endorsing a utilitarian agenda with regards to the academy, especially as this discourse is used (particularly in the UK) to drive up fees to an unprecedented level, it is important to recognize the place of the uni-



versity in the wider information economy. If our students are to become good, engaged citizens, then they need the skills to participate within digital culture.

This might sound demanding or like something someone else should be doing, but I think that those who work with historical newspapers and periodicals are particularly well-placed to develop these skills. Working with newspapers and periodicals entails recognizing the historical specificity of technology, media, and practice—all things that apply to the use of digital resources. Given that nearly all scholars who work with the nineteenth-century press are already working with digital media, the application of these skills can become part of everyday research and teaching. It is a central tenet of the study of newspapers and periodicals that medium matters: our interrogative and critical skills simply need to be applied to the media that represent the print archive, while ensuring that we remember that the print archive represents something too.

Lastly, I think that we have no choice about all this. The objects that we study have already been digitized in vast numbers and so we must be prepared to become adept users of digital resources and share what we learn. The process of digitization is by no means complete, and the threat of Patrick Leary's "offline penumbra" remains very real as new canons of titles emerge according to their accessibility.<sup>14</sup> Yet there are sufficient numbers of publications in digital form that even when working with those not yet digitized, it is likely that scholars will have recourse to digital resources in order to make comparisons and establish the place of a publication in the market. Using these resources makes the print archive much more accessible, allowing it to play a part in all the disciplines with an interest in the period. The resources allow periodicals and newspapers to easily become part of presentations, to enter the classroom, and to be used and manipulated by students. The study of newspapers and periodicals has always turned on the question of mediation: how publications present texts; how different forms of publications represent other, absent forms; and how the fragmented print archive represents an absent, thriving print culture. The future of nineteenth-century newspapers and periodicals depends upon how they are interpreted by a new media, but it is a media that we are well-placed to use, critique, and appropriate.

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## NOTES

1. See *Victorian Periodicals Review* 39, no. 4 (2006): 307–444.
2. See Susan Hockey, "A History of Humanities Computing," and William G. Thomas III, "Computing and the Historical Imagination," in *A Compan-*

- ion to *Digital Humanities*, ed. Susan Schreibman, Ray Siemens, and John Unsworth (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 3–19; 56–68, <http://www.digitalhumanities.org/companion/>.
3. Marc Prensky, “Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants Part 1,” and “Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants Part 2: Do They Really Think Differently?,” *On the Horizon* 9, no. 5 and 6 (2001): 1–6.
  4. See, for instance, Helen Beetham, Lou McGill, and Allison Littlejohn, *Thriving in the 21st Century: Learning Literacies for the Digital Age (LLiDA Project)* (London: JISC, 2009), 15, <http://www.academy.gcal.ac.uk/llida/>, and Ron Tanner, “The Myth of the Tech-Savvy Student,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 6, 2011, <http://chronicle.com/article/The-Myth-of-the-Tech-Savvy/129607/>.
  5. See M. G. Siegler, “It Just Works,” *Techcrunch*, June 8, 2011, <http://techcrunch.com/2011/06/08/apple-icloud-google-cloud/>. For the importance of the mechanism, see Matthew G. Kirschenbaum, *Mechanisms: New Media and the Forensic Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2008).
  6. Centre for Information Behaviour and the Evaluation of Research (CIBER), *Information Behaviour of the Researcher of the Future* (London: JISC and British Library, 2008), <http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/resource-discovery/googlegen.aspx>.
  7. *Ibid.*, 7.
  8. *Ibid.*, 21.
  9. N. Katherine Hayles, “Translating Media: Why We Should Rethink Textuality,” *Yale Journal of Criticism* 16, no. 2 (2003): 264.
  10. For examples of the sorts of things that can be learned, see the essays by Dallas Liddle and Robert Nicholson in the digital forum dedicated to newspapers in the *Journal of Victorian Culture* 17, no. 2 (2012), forthcoming.
  11. For a discussion of these terms with regards to scholarly resources, see Kenneth M. Price, “Edition, Project, Database, Archive, Thematic Research Collection: What’s in a Name?” *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 3, no. 3 (2009): 1–40, <http://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/3/3/000053/000053.html>. For these terms when applied to digital resources of newspapers and periodicals, see James Mussell and Suzanne Paylor, “Editions and Archives,” in *The Nineteenth-Century Press in the Digital Age*, ed. James Mussell (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2012), 114–48.
  12. See, for instance, Beetham, McGill, and Littlejohn, *Thriving in the 21st Century*, 7.
  13. See essays by Paul Fyfe, Katherine D. Harris, Andrea Kaston Tange, and Leslee Thorne Murphy in the *Journal of Victorian Culture* 16, no. 1 (2011): 84–88, 89–94, 95–100, 101–111. For a longer discussion of using periodicals to teach digital literacy, see Mussell, *The Nineteenth-Century Press in the Digital Age*, 164–91.
  14. Patrick Leary, “Googling the Victorians,” *Journal of Victorian Culture* 10, no. 1 (2005): 83–84.