The Web Gives and It Takes Away

By John Lutz

The Internet has been with us for over a decade so we are starting to have the critical distance to see what elements of historical work it has enabled and what parts it has begun to undermine. The reflection is useful, I think, to give two types of direction. The question: "what are the affinities between what we want to do as historians and the new technology?"suggests how we may take advantage of it. We also need to understand how the technology is taking advantage of us.

Historians know better than anyone that new technologies are seldom universally beneficial: they advance the interests of some usually at the expense of others; they often have unintended consequences, and sometimes produce a negative net result for society as a whole. So, what elements of the historical profession are negatively affected by the Internet and are there any that we as a profession and society wish to intervene to preserve?

Answering these questions could take us in many directions: to teaching, communication, collaboration, authority, or research among others. In this short space I want to explore impacts on writing and presentation.

The Internet is a series (a network) of linked texts, images and sound files presented in a simple format that is readable to anyone with a free browser software and access to a computer. On any given day, around the world there are over a billion users of the Internet accessing billions of website pages.[1]

The strengths of the Internet for historical writing and presentation derive from its fundamental nature. As a series of networked information it lends itself to small discrete text, sound or image bites/bytes linked by various criteria. We have always preferred certain kinds of information in this format: reference material like encyclopedias, gazetteers, directories ... so it is no wonder they have found a compatible home in cyberspace.

It also turns out that archival material is ideally presented in this way which is why the digitizing of archival material is so popular and successful. Several historians have opted to present histories as archives rather than as a narrative, allowing the user to create their own story. Normally aimed at students, some of the best of these virtual archives include the *Valley of the Shadow* (http://valley.vcdh. virginia.edu) about the American Civil War and *A Midwife's Tale* (http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/midwife/) which

develops the work of Laurel Thatcher Ulrich on women's lives in revolutionary America. A Canadian example is the collaborative teaching project *Great Unsolved Mysteries in Canadian History* that takes advantage of the ability to put facsimiles of historical documents online in archives dedicated to specific mysteries for students to solve. (canadianmysteries.ca).

The Internet is more compatible with the presentation of visual evidence than any media that historians have worked with to date. A brilliant and disturbing example is *Without Sanctuary: Photographs and Postcards of Lynching in America* (http://www.withoutsanctuary.org/). Jack Censer and Lynn Hunt's *Imaging the French Revolution* is an example of an archive (of revolutionary images) accompanied by a series of interpretations (http://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/imaging/essays.html)

Certain genres of historical writing also map well onto this media. The media lends itself to non-linear networked re-visions of the past which have become part of the corpus of scholars who have taken the post-modern turn. An early example would be Kay Anderson's "Disappearing a Lake" (http://mqup.mcgill.ca/files/cameron_laura) and more recently Phillip Etherington, *Los Angeles and the Problem of Urban Historical Knowledge* (cwis.usc.edu/LAS/history/historylab/LAPUHK/index.html).

Microhistory, a genre that, while rejecting the coherence of modernist writing has continued its emphasis on realism, often aims to show how a person or event is part of a network of relationships. The technique maps easily onto the Internet, as student work demonstrates at Victoria's Victoria (victoriasvictoria.ca).

Increasingly we find ourselves publishing in journals that either are on-line or have an on-line version but so far our message has not adapted to the media. We are familiar with the notion that we must write differently for a screenplay, newspaper, or a popular magazine, than for a scholarly journal. Yet despite the fact that there is abundant evidence that people read differently on the web, we write the same article for the web as we do for print.[2]

One example of how we might take advantage of the capacity of the new media to write for an on-line journal is provided by William G. Thomas III and Edward L. Ayers, *"An Overview:The Difference Slavery Made: A Close Analysis of the Two American Communities"* (December 2003) *American Historical Review*, (www.indiana.edu/%7Eahr/

elec-projects.html). Thomas and Ayers offer the best example of Multi-Level Creation technique (www.e-gineer.com/v1/articles/web-writing-for-many-interests-levels.html) that allows the reader to choose the level of detail he/she is interested in from abstract, to argument, to examples, to the data used to build the article.

If these are some of the historical modes of presentation that lend themselves to the new media, what are those that do not? In our discipline we have privileged the scholarly monograph as the highest form of our art, but neither the computer nor the computer user sees it in the same light. While the technology of the computer is a huge advance on the book in many ways, it is not in others. For reading long texts most of us prefer the book. True, there are now tens of thousands of full-text books scanned and available on line, my suspicion is that most of us do not read these books but search them for particular bits of information. On-line books cease to be things we read and become texts we scan.

Our mode of historical thinking and the techniques of writing and publishing grew up together (a point nicely made by Anthony Grafton's history of the footnote) so our structure, logic and argument have been refined for a print media. Books, which developed alongside modernist historical think-ing, are normally organized with a linear and logical flow, so plots can be developed which lead the reader inexorably to the author's conclusion. Owing to their length, books lend themselves to extended and complex reflection and argu-ment.

The Internet is in danger of putting the monograph even further out on the margins of modern life than it is already, and for most of us this is an undesirable consequence. Increasingly students and teachers are taking the view that if it is not on line, it is not available and with this attitude, the wealth of monographic scholarship becomes invisible. Canadian statistics show that Internet use is grew by 75% between 2000-2006 some of that certainly came at the expense of reading print.[3] The create-and-destroy dynamics of the new technologies and the experience of the last decade suggest that as a profession we get creative and adapt our monographs so they are compatible with, and presentable on, the new media or we accept the fact that in the future our books are not going to thoughtfully read but merely searched.

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[1] Internet World Stats (www.internetworldstats.com)

[2] Andrew Dillon, *Designing Usable Electronic Text*, (CRC: 2004) See also how people scan Web pages: http://www.useit.com/aalertbox/reading_pattern.html

[3] Fifteen percent of Canadian respondents indicated that their Internet use took time from reading while 25% took time from TV and 11% from sleeping. Ben Veenhof, "The Internet Experience of Younger and Older Canadians, "*Innovation Analysis Bulletin*". Vol. 8, no. 1 (February 2006) 8-10. Also Internet World Stats (www.internetworldstats.com/am/ca.html)