

## **Clio's Matrix: Reflecting on Digital History at The University of the West Indies, St Augustine**

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The introduction of Digital History courses to the teaching lists of universities worldwide had been hailed by many historians as a positive step forward. This positive endorsement came as academia realised that these courses demonstrated the various universities' commitment towards expanding their historical offerings in step with the advancements taking place in technology. These courses demonstrated also the willingness and ability of the faculty members so involved to adopt and to teach new technologies and methodologies that today, inevitably, affect the discipline. However whilst the benefits of these courses may at first seem self-evident there are also many less visible, but nevertheless problematic, downsides to the adoption of digital technology into this traditional academic discipline. More specifically these downsides centre on the objectivity issues concerned with the presentation and the use of the sources within historical writing. The perceived downsides increase when one recognises that the field of Digital History itself is ultimately an attempt to redefine what traditional historical writing is and the basis of its legitimising authority.

**Key words:** digital, technology, history, objectivity

### **The case for Digital History**

The proposal for the first Digital History course at The University of the West Indies (UWI), St Augustine, Trinidad & Tobago submitted in the winter semester of 2011, was intended to attract a wide cross section of students from across the humanities and social sciences who were interested in understanding the use of technology within this traditional academic discipline. Indeed, technological growth within the Caribbean region and its application within many other disciplines today made the need for this offering of Digital History in the History department seem self-evident (Barry, 2002). Surprisingly, the discipline of history is today, in fact, now playing technological "catch up" with other disciplines that have utilised technology and its opportunities for non-linear methodology to view and solve problems. The position of coming from behind is surprising because the earliest idea for nonlinear expression of research was originally envisioned for the history discipline as early as 1945! (Ayers, 1999).

Digital History is a relatively new area of academic endeavour that first emerged in 1993 (Page, 2007). It involves on the one hand the digitisation of source

materials into online reference materials to form repositories for use by information seekers at all levels. On the other hand Digital History is a complex set of technical skills used to codify historical sources using contemporary technologies. These two aspects come together to present the historian's research often as a non-linear digitised representation of thoughts. This is usually presented through the use of web pages, digital archives or other software interfaces.

Many Caribbean educators argue that the proper use of digital technology within their courses could improve learning (Evans, 2007; Kuboni, 2009). They argue that with proper safeguards being given to teachers concerning the right type of technology to use; the warnings given in respect to differently abled, gendered and capable learners, and the respect given to the peer to peer experiences in learning and on-going teacher education, the use of technology and the emergence of the digital age can really only be a blessing for those in the teaching and learning community.

For Caribbean historians the Digital History option will be helpful, as it will give a much-needed boost in the arm for Caribbean Historical representation. In this context both primary and secondary sources will be made more easily accessible to a wider online audience. To this end there will be an increase in online publications of Caribbean topics and knowledge repositories about the Caribbean both regionally and internationally. There will also be the creation of new historical sources and the accompanying representations of them. Ultimately the historical material in many cases would 'come alive' through electronic presentations and the storage of historical data in audio-visual modes. All these improvements will positively impact upon the student and consuming public.

Positive also will be the new skills learnt by the budding historian. A glance at the course outline for the Digital History Course at UWI revealed that the new historian must appreciate the importance of issues like "digital technology on historical studies, blog entries, Digital preservation of sources", and skills like "web design and construction, historical communication via the Internet and assessing academic blogs" to name but a few of the course requirements. These skills were never imagined as part of the Caribbean historian's original arsenal of tools/skills even a decade ago. When learnt and practiced by the Digital History student today these new skills will undoubtedly benefit their learning not only in history but also across the disciplines.

Not only at the tertiary level will benefits accrue, but at the secondary level as well the digital influence provides benefits. Indeed the move by the UWI into Digital History had been foreshadowed by the regional examination board (Caribbean Examinations Council, CXC) that had already encouraged the use of History and Caribbean Studies web sites and related social media technologies for its students. They had done so with the expectation that not only would there be use made of the new digital technologies but also that the new format would make history more lively and enjoyable to a wider sector of the population especially those of school age. With the introduction of a Digital History course at the UWI this process was enhanced and validated by a key regionally based tertiary stakeholder.

Indeed the move by the UWI into this area may mark perhaps its ascent into a position of regulation for the downstream sites of knowledge that have sprung up and which cater to the needs of the various students.

The attractiveness of Digital History had been encouraged also by the rise of social media. Webfoot Research (a leading provider of Internet security services for consumers and businesses worldwide) estimated that about 75% of Millennials (people between the ages of 18 and 34) felt addicted to social networking especially on their mobiles. In this context the custodians of traditional teaching had taken note of (and consciously joined) this new popular medium in their quest for reaching learners where they are most comfortable and indeed, most present (Campbell, 2011). Digital History by making use of much of the social computing networks and tools has widened the teaching forum, methodologies and appeal beyond the classroom.

Additionally the leaps and bounds made by hardware manufacturers today have provided tools like printers, computers and storage media which, when properly connected, give almost unlimited access to and means of dissemination for a wide range of knowledge. These hardware improvements and social inter-connectivity options have given rise within the education community to sleek software interfaces and their related Learning Content Management Systems (LCMS). These items, not surprisingly, have developed a justifiably solid foundation within academia that has guaranteed their further growth. Indeed the day of the virtual classroom and its related learning methodologies is definitely here with us.

In general therefore Digital History allows ease of use, and enhanced storage and presentation options. All these add up to make the historical experience a more enjoyable one through the use of academic software and social media. Digital History through feedback and interactive portals also allows forums for historians to collaborate and share information amongst themselves and with the wider public.

However, a word of caution! As the old adage goes 'All that glitters is not gold' so we must now re-assess our glittering digitally enhanced educational edifices and discern what may lie below the gleam. While accepting that with due diligence many of the downsides to the use of technology may be avoided, this paper, ironically, focuses on the problems that may be caused when better practice is pursued. In this example the creation of Digital History, while providing an egalitarian base that allows almost limitless access and presentations opportunities of historical sources, also creates some new and recurring issues about the pivotal point of how history is done (epistemology) and the very nature of historical objectivity itself (ontology).

### **The 'Matrix'/problem defined**

The new issues that arise with the use of technology within Digital History, in the first instance, revolve around the Internet as both an information source and a publication outlet. With the use of the Internet as the primary medium for

dissemination of historical information within Digital History, there is now an increase in the number and calibre of people who get published. This poses a big problem within a discipline that sets much store by its established canons and by the “professional” historians who, over time, have established these canons and, through their iconic printed publications, had controlled the nature of the voice of legitimacy.

The Internet, by offering an egalitarian approach to ‘who gets published’, makes everyone a publishing historian. Many established historians caution against this digital aid that allows numerous varying (and sometimes misleading) accounts, to have as much significance as those accounts of the historical ‘heavyweights’. However, others have argued that there is a definite and positive role for alternate accounts and interpretations on any historical matter (White, 1983). As such, in a dialectical context, it is necessary for all accounts to see the light of day. As all accounts, even by their errors, offer opportunities for growth. In this sense, as the Formalist school might argue, the alternate interpretations all allow a clearer assessment of the ultimate truth.

This very reasoning had, in the past, served the Caribbean well in its own struggle to gain historical ascendancy. In this context one notes the dominance of Imperial History and its metropolitan scholars who controlled Caribbean expression right through to the 20th century. It was only through small, independent studies done by locals like J.J. Thomas (Thomas, 1969) who questioned the dominance of the imperial voice and its right to pronounce on Caribbean peoples, that a small niche was carved out and won for ‘post-colonial’ and ‘subaltern’ studies. Thanks to the ideas and new methodologies of these single independent thinkers, today the Caribbean has its own historiography and legitimacy.

The point here then is that it would not be in the best interest of the historical discipline to shut down these new ‘digital historians’ who may be unknown or not affiliated with known publication houses or universities. In fact the Internet now offers a unique chance for perhaps an increase in the speed of the historical dialectic as new ‘historians’ emerge. Perhaps the strongest critique of Digital History comes in the area of its methodological implications. More specifically the critiques that focus on the fundamental building block of history - the text.

The text forms the basis of the historical evidence and issues of interpretation surrounding its exposition have always existed. These issues revolved traditionally around the meaning of the text. The main challenges to the text faced by the historians being lumped under the title, the “New Historicism” (Brannigan, 1998, p. 6; Hamilton, 1996, p. 107). The New Historicism focuses, at root, on meaning creation. This had already been a contentious area even before the advent of the Digital aspect. The problem arose when historians focused on how issues of the text, textuality and context, combined to create meaning. Following the linguistic turn, and using the insights of cultural historians like Jonathan Culler, the very text that the historian used (which initially seemed so definite) were pronounced to be nothing more than “...linguistic codes that constitute social and discursive

formations” and which allow the real to be “as imagined as the imaginary” (Jenkins, 1995, p. 3).

The point here is that textual representation itself had already been made (before the advent of Digital History) into a contested area of interpretation in which historians argued over the primacy of any one ‘correct’ interpretation (Spiegel, 1997). The New Historicism which developed in the late 20th century threatened the very core of the discipline as it attempted to treat much of history’s text like literature to be discreetly critiqued and its meanings to be derived thereafter (Hamilton, 1996). Not surprisingly therefore many traditional historians hated it (Lothe, 2000).

Traditionally historians loved to create a straight narrative with the text which, though it may contain a few twists and turns, said something definite at the end. Indeed in an often-quoted line the famed Victorian historian James Anthony Froude described the selectivity and bias inherent in the historian’s desire for a ‘straight’ story in the following way:

It often seems to me as if history is like a child’s box of letters, with which we can spell any word we please. We have only to pick out such letters as we want, arrange them as we like, and say nothing about those which do not suit our purpose.

(Froude in Lothe, 2000, p.vii)

It seems then that much traditional history writing, like science, craved finite conclusions. It relied on text that usually gave the historical story a definite and finite end and slant. Digital History shattered this idea. Its use of multi-layered expository narratives that presented many layered options and no one fixed meaning through a hypertexted methodology, offered for the first time, the ability to cleanly create non-finite history writing.

By so doing the typical history essay was changed. Hypertextivity challenged the linear format and ‘text’ of a good essay (Ayers, 1999; Thomas, 2007). Issues like coherence and interpretation were now definitely reinterpreted as the good Digital History essay had new criteria for relevance. Essays now included hyperlinks, graphical representations and other layout schemes that constituted ‘good’ Digital History text. Challenged also was the basic historical ‘essay’ which no longer conforms to the conventions of the print media but rather relies on digital textual definitions for relevance. Indeed there now has to be new ways to ‘read’ the text of Digital History.

The Digital History article for example, not only consist of traditional text but, as a matter of course, also contains digitised objects such as paintings, photographs, audio (speeches, songs, narration), flash animations and Quick Time© movies - which will now also constitute ‘text’. With these inclusions the historian is further challenged to rethink the idea of ‘text’ in Digital History. The inclusion of Digital History to the Course Offerings at UWI, St Augustine will raise

again in a local context the intricate problem of historical interpretation/expression and the basis of 'text'.

Another critique of Digital History which emerges as one reflects on its implementation at UWI concerns the authenticity of the sources themselves. Perhaps an example using photos may best illustrate this issue. Getting tones right and proper colour management in published photographs is as much a part of good Digital History presentation as is getting your subject/verb agreement right is in traditional text. Indeed oftentimes the original picture source may be difficult for the researcher to access or it may be damaged and the use of a scanner would allow a copy to be made. This copy subsequently has to be edited and the skill of the practitioner determines how good the picture will ultimately look. Whether for aesthetic value or for practical viewing reasons some slight adjustments may be necessary or even preferred. The easy and seamless ways in which software programs can achieve fantastic results, allow a much better digital presentation but, inadvertently, allow a tampered primary source.

For example issues of racial preferences can affect the final allocated skin tone of a digital picture. Facial enhancements can add or remove blemishes from a face. 'Too much' or 'too little' of a subject's nose or lips for example, can easily be fixed to create better aesthetics for the reproducer. Some questions emerge here. At what point does the subjectivity of the Digital Historian affect their role as a neutral conduit through which the source is brought to the present and to the viewer? Does the Digital Historian, by refining the subjects of history, actually create history? As film critics have often argued, when considering pictorial representation, that the production "...like verbal prose, has a sender...[and] no matter how different they are, it is useful to differentiate the concept of sender (implied) author and narrator" (Lothe, 2000, p. 29). What this means is that a dilemma occurs for the Digital Historian between what counts as objective representation of the subject and what counts as 'aesthetic' falsification of same.

Similarly, pictures of geographical sites and locations can also be 'enhanced' depending on the purpose of the digital author. While the deliberate manipulation and falsification of historical data may be easily identified, the unintended/subtle yet telling changes made due to well-meaning enhancements now also need to be taken into account: since they now form a part of the historical account. In this sense the issue is to what extent can a source be enhanced or digitised and still remain 'authentic'? At what point does an 'enhanced' picture become a false source? The problem increases as, over time, the original authors of these sources may become absent and can no longer point out their edited inputs.

A third and perhaps final reflective critique of Digital History is its acceptance or not into mainstream academia. There was some scepticism by conservative historians about the new learning technologies and their being detrimental to higher learning (Noble, 1997). This scepticism was fuelled by a belief that the electronic revolution would destroy the legitimate canons of traditional learning. It would do this by replacing the tried and trusted 'pen and paper' techniques of historical investigation and allow instead a watered down electronic methodology

in which the Internet would give primacy of importance to all created documents and sources. As the Marxist historian of technology David Noble ruefully stated over this projected watering down of the standards of traditional scholarship "... In future years we will look upon the wired remains of our once great democratic higher education system and wonder how we let it happen" (Noble, 1997: online).

In spite of these gloomy predictions the technological revolution continues and today our electronic libraries and computerised courses stand not weakened but in fact strengthened by the surplus of resources that they now access and give access to as a result of the digital revolution. The reason for their continuation is simple. Whilst a positivist approach has long since been abandoned by most historians, the still oftentimes heavy reliance on primary sources, interviews and 'immersing oneself in the period under study' gives the student a positivist leaning within a discipline that has largely undergone a postmodernist turn. As such the need for streams of data remains. The digital format provides a voluminous context for the production and retrieval of loads of information.

Digital History production is an activity that encompasses more than just the provision of a think piece or entertaining multimedia show created for consumers. It is instead legitimate scholarship that will influence opinion. So why then is it trivialised even within History Departments that allow such courses to be created? The answer lies perhaps in the fact that what has changed is that the digital age has threatened to alter the face of power relations within the historical profession itself. This is a frightening threat for many already established historians.

With open access to publication and the ear of the masses the power once wielded by a select few scholars has now become available to the many. Indeed the need to learn new and sometimes complex skills within the digital arsenal acts as a new barrier to exclude, ironically, the traditional holders of power. As such there is often a reactionary cry against the use of Digital History. To this end the often-voiced critique about the lack of authenticity of its sources is expressed. However one notes that Digital History, like traditional 'pen and ink' history, has created safeguards to protect its methodologies.

These methodologies revolve around electronic means of verifying the authenticity of original sources. To this end, for example, the critique of false electronic sources has been stymied somewhat by the use of electronic tagging of source material through the use of Digital Object Identifiers (DOI) that form unique labels for a computer readable objects found on the World Wide Web. The DOI stays with the object, even when the digital object is transferred to another owner and/or another website which avoids copies or counterfeit sources being created or used. Even further, governments, industries and individuals worldwide have instituted laws, penalties and low cost detection methods that allow easy recognition of digitally produced fakes.

Measures already suggested/instituted by companies like Hewlett-Packard for example include "...a detection scheme that uses an algorithm to separate suspicious documents from those free of suspicion by changing the position of objects an infinitesimal amount, too little to be seen by most people, but enough

so that a machine can detect it... .. using differences in color,... utilizing the Graphical Barcode which injects a 'digital life' into printed documents. So when the document is to be copied, instead of producing its photographic image, the original document is retrieved from the digital source and printed" and by utilizing "measures to detect properties of a counterfeit to identify what kind of printer and ink may have been used to produce it" (Beckett, online). The point here, ultimately, is that Digital History is a serious area of study employing an ever-expanding and legitimate set of methodology and safeguards.

### **The Matrix resolved**

To a large extent much of Caribbean History has revolved around the region's plantation sugar industry past. The historical recovery of this important period often relies on the sources created by the activities of the sugar plantations. These sources, usually in official form as plantation and colonial records, have been available as paper based sources. Researchers generally referenced these sources which are freely available at repositories in the Caribbean, Africa, the Public Record Office in England and public and private holdings wherever records have been kept. These sources, traditionally, were accessed usually only by the specialist who had the time (and finances) to travel to the repositories and could provide the necessary credentials for access. With the digitisation of these sources researchers no longer need to have the resources to leave the Caribbean or risk going to hot spots (like those in parts of Africa) to access them. Compilations of Caribbean and African sources for example, are now easily accessible through the Internet.

Additionally, complex historical records cataloguing transatlantic journeys and recording the ships used; captains and tonnage of cargoes, and enslaved people carried, are now easily available to interested students on CD Rom. However, easy access comes at a price. The new problem is that the selection of material is now done digitally and what is not digitised becomes less relevant. As Carr (1990) argued the age old problem of historians and their subjective selection of sources will always remain a problem. One can easily see then how this traditional problem of selecting sources is transferred into the field of Digital History.

For example the digitised sources of slave trips recorded by historians like David Eltis on CD Rom (Eltis, 2000) have become the standard reference source for many Caribbean historians. While helpful it does limit the expansion of the debate by pre-empting further searches. It also assumes that the methodology, figures and estimates of the original researchers were faultless: a point that offers some cause for concern especially in light of other statistical debates taking place in the discipline of history. Nevertheless, easy and cheap electronic access to sources still remains a positive development for the discipline.

Perhaps the final comment on Digital History should aptly be based upon the words of a historical Caribbean source. In early Jamaican plantation history Mrs Arcedeckne, a resident white female sugar planter in 1781, had commented wryly on the dictates she received from her absentee son and his comrades in

England. Although her son was an absentee owner who owned the plantation, she was resident in Jamaica on the plantation and observed most carefully its day-to-day operation. As such she and her local resident planters felt they knew more about the needs of the estate than the absentees. What is interesting is the reference she and the local planters used for the absentees. They had dismissingly referred to the absentees' management dictates as coming from theoretical "pen and ink" planters who were out of touch with modern sugar management "on the ground" (Vanneck Papers, 1765-1810). She held them in contempt because, unlike them, she operated in the current world of sugar management and was able to better manoeuvre amidst the pitfalls and opportunities existing there.

Perhaps now it is the turn of the traditional "pen and ink" historians to feel scared and to be threatened and marginalised as the new digitised historians "on the ground" take hold. In a way then we are in an era in which, ironically, a new historical class is set to emerge from within the mass of traditional historians. These historians have now become interested in digital technology and, armed with new tools utilising the art of digital manipulation and layout, they now threaten to shake up the historical establishment.

Regarding bringing the course offerings of the History Department into the technological age, the student of history in the Caribbean is faced with a seemingly straight win/win situation. To this end one cannot ignore the fact that today the computer and the Internet have become indispensable tools to the modern day historian. Today the keen historian who is armed with a powerful word processor, bibliographical software and who has access to the worldwide web and its related databases can create often-adequate historical narratives. While not saying these are all the tools that are necessary for the historical record, the point is that today technology has changed the way the historian does their craft and, by extension, demands a change in the way that the craft is taught.

Digital History is a methodology for doing history easier and representing it differently. It is not necessarily a more accurate way or a way that eliminates many of the traditional issues associated with historical writing. The fundamental issue of deriving truth from the sources remains and, in some cases, is actually expanded. Perhaps the biggest advantage of Digital History is that it allows the historian the freedom to realise truly multidimensional historical presentations. A yearning first raised in 1945 by Vannevar Bush and the amazing multi-level thinking and exposition historical machine he had created in his mind for historians. He had labelled it a "memex" (Ayers, 1999).

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