



## History in the digital age: New Approaches to History

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### Abstract:

In order to understand the new approaches and major debates in history of recent decades we must first pay attention to some deeper tendencies prevalent in the modern world to changes in the culture's fundamental principles, technological opportunities, and in our attitudes to the environment. It is any longer necessary to adopt any ideological position in order to regard 'globalization' as the focal byword of our times – a concept so polyvalent as to be well fit for the role of a common denominator for various processes often only weakly linked to each other. Those days are gone forever. For disciplines that rely primarily on journal articles to communicate ideas—which now includes nearly all academic fields other than our own—the digitization of publishing has to a considerable degree eliminated the need for making physical trips to physical libraries at all. Library *services* remain just as essential as they ever were, but for journal-based disciplines these are increasingly delivered via computer screens rather than paper.

**Key words:** history, digital age, technological, cultural

### Introduction

Sources are the raw material of history. History is the intellectual form in which a culture gives account of its past' was the memorable way for defining history proposed in 1929 by the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga. History is 'the record of what one age finds worthy of note in another'. We need not conclude from these definitions that the study of the past could be reduced to the requirements of the present, or to a social demand – certainly the internal explorations of the academic world must be taken into account; yet it seems clear that developments in history writing cannot be discussed in isolation from major social, technological, cultural, and other changes. Thus, in order to understand the new approaches and major debates in history of recent

decades – that being the main aim of the present volume – we must first pay attention to some deeper tendencies prevalent in the modern (Western) world: to changes in the culture's fundamental principles, technological opportunities, and in our attitudes to the environment.

It is fair to say that globalization has forced or inspired historians to search for spatial alternatives in making sense of the past, to pay more attention to supranational connections and networks. These searches have given rise to a number of approaches that, under various names such as transnational history, connected history, entangled history, or global history, share the same desire to move beyond conventional geopolitical articulations and discrete civilizations, to turn the concept of space again into



a significant theoretical category. Unlike traditional universal or world history, the new trends (which we could, for convenience' sake, group under the name of global history) do not tell a story about everything that has come to pass in the world – 'global' does not refer so much to the object of study but to a perspective that focuses on connections, entanglements, and integration.

Global history sets store by what Jacques Revel (1996) has called 'scale shifts – a study of past phenomena on different scales so as to bring to light unexpected associations, link seemingly isolated phenomena, map overlapping spaces. It becomes ever more important in the study of history not to set out from a given spatial framework but to follow the ideas, people, and things selected for study, no matter where they may lead. Thus, history becomes a multilayered and intertwined process wherein the different layers are characterized by a different logic, a different tempo, and a different geographical extension. In the eyes of a global historian, the world is indeed an integrated phenomenon, yet it is also internally heterogeneous. Therefore, the triumph of the global perspective of history does not imply the loss of the local dimension; instead, it becomes important to discuss local and global, micro- and macro-history conjointly, even to the extent of developing a 'global microhistory' – an effort for which there have, in recent times, already been calls.

### **History in the digital age**

While in ecological terms, we live in the age of Man, in technological terms we are inhabitants of the digital age. The changed attitudes to time and space reviewed above, as well as the rapid growth of man's ecological footprint, are indeed all, in one way or another, linked to the rapid development of digital technology. Globalization would never have acquired its present importance, had it not been supported by technological advances, primarily the rapid dissemination of digital means of communication. Manuel Castells has plausibly written that 'the forces driving globalization could only be effectuated because they have at their disposal the global networking capacity provided by digital communication technologies and information systems, including computerized, long-haul, fast, transportation networks'.

In more than one sense, the World Wide Web is a symbol of our age, and without much exaggeration it can be said that 'mass adoption of the Internet is driving one of the most exciting social, cultural, and political transformations in history, and unlike earlier periods of change, this time the effects are fully global. The rise of the internet and digital communication has also marked an important change in our knowledge system, the third major revolution since the invention of writing and printing. This has brought along new debates about the birth of a 'knowledge society' or information age', which, in turn, have encouraged an historical approach to the topic –



the emergence of the history of knowledge. The development of technology and media has always influenced cultural attitudes and shaped our relations with the past. Having spread extensively all over the world in but a few decades, digital technology has forcefully reshaped our relationship with the past, as well as the ways and means of studying the past; and it is quite safe to say that these developments will only intensify in the future.

### Digital history-consequences

Digital history might be understood broadly as an approach to examining and representing the past that works with the new communication technologies of the computer, the internet network, and software systems. On one level, digital history is an open arena of scholarly production and communication, encompassing the development of new course materials and scholarly data collection efforts. On another level, digital history is a methodological approach framed by the hyper textual power of these technologies to make, define, query, and annotate associations in the human record of the past.

Thus, digital history is to be conceived not as history's new ancillary, but as a new way of studying and writing history. From the viewpoint of research work, historians must get used to a new situation described by Roy Rosenzweig as 'a fundamental paradigm shift from a culture of scarcity to a culture of abundance'. The massive digitization of sources and the

ever new opportunities offered by quantitative analysis confront historians with the question of how the new situation will modify the current understanding of a 'historical source'.

The 'digital turn' challenges not only the study of the past, but also the ways of representing it. Digital environment liberates historians from the obligation of using a linear narrative, online historical writing enables them to create intermodal hypertexts and virtual historical realities, with every user choosing the path suited for him/her. Chiel Van den Akker (2013: 111) recently proposed a convenient typology to distinguish between the historians' narratives in the analogue versus the digital age:

Old narrative	New (online) narrative
Book, article, review	Enriched publication, wiki, blog, exhibition
Monographic	Collaborative, participatory, interactive
Linear	Non-linear, hypertextual
Panoramic	Collage
Writing and reading	Direct communication

Online history writing supports the users' active participation in the creation of knowledge, it enables historians to develop collaborative and participatory projects of historical research on the internet, which in the future will certainly have an impact on how history writing will be conceived. This participatory online culture, as Ann Rigney (2010: 111) has justly



underscored, 'is not only creating new conditions for the production of narratives about the past but also new challenges for conceptualization'.

### Challenge for historians

The challenge for historians is to come to grips with these biological discoveries while recognizing that historians have an ever more important role to play in an era when biology holds sway: as critics of the tendency of science to universalize and decontextualize human behavior; as discoverers of patterns in human behaviour and changes in human bodies that can reshape scientific thought and redirect scientific research; and as champions of history as a humanistic mode of inquiry (AHR Roundtable).

### Conclusion

While in the evolution of the history of the body, the contribution of women and gender history played a key role, the novel interest in the 'real' bodies and things has made it possible to expand the 'questionnaire' of gender history, but also challenged its main distinctions (including sex and gender) (Downs 2010). In the long history of humankind, gender identities have been expressed not just through speech acts and conceptual categories, but through textiles, timber, metal, images, rituals, dance, music, and so on. Leora Auslander (2005: 1019) has written, rising to a suggestive level of generalization: 'Human beings need things to individuate, differentiate, and identify; human beings need things to express and communicate the unsaid

and the unsayable; human beings need things to situate themselves in space and time, as extensions of the body (and to compensate for the body's limits), as well as for sensory pleasure; human beings need objects to effectively remember and forget; and we need objects to cope with absence, with loss, and with death'.

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