CENTRE FOR HISTORY AND ECONOMICS

The Digitization of History
Notes from the meeting at Trinity Hall, May 8 2007

There seemed to me to be at least two large issues to which we could return.

1. Inequality and digitization. The digitization of history is potentially a source of tremendous expansion and democratization in historical research, and at the same time a source of inequality. The inequality is most pronounced in respect of historians, libraries and archives in the "south," where so many of our group have worked, and where access to online resources is so limited at present. The question of inequality arises in particularly stark form when there are projects of digitization in respect of archives which are themselves in the south, and where historians in the countries concerned will have no access to the eventual digital archive, if only because of lack of computing capacity. The conversation PL reported, in the African archive where he was working, is striking. The archivist, when asked why he was doubtful about projects of digitization, said that if the archives were online, "people would not come here." There are important issues of unequal access to online resources even within the research universities of the "north." There has always been inequality in access to the materials of historical research; see Ranke's description of working in the Palazzo Barberini in 1829, quoted in Grafton's The Footnote ("my scribe arrives soon after I do...") But the older universities in Europe, where the experience of research has been least unlike Ranke's, have much less access to online resources than do rich US universities. There is a further important question of unequal access by language. Scholars working on French history, for example, or with French language sources, or in French universities, live in the digital world to a much lesser extent than do scholars working in English. (This is not only a matter of access to digital resources. DT pointed out that the equivalent of the Dictionary of National Biography for France has reached the letter "L", and the equivalent for Italy the letter "F.")

2. "Productivity" in historical research. The availability of digital and online resources can be seen in a fairly straightforward way as something that increases the productivity (and thereby the possibilities) of historians. One very good illustration has to do with transnational history. If historians can use archives more efficiently, then they have more time in which to learn languages, and to use archives in different countries. Certainly our group is in general "multi-archive" and multi-lingual. Another illustration has to do with the possibilities of using different kinds of evidence -- legal, economic, or administrative, for example -- which were earlier used only for fairly specific genres, ie legal sources for legal history, economic sources for economic history, and so forth. A third illustration has to do with the new possibilities of micro-history, and the resources of "family history," census records and digitized newspapers, as in JL's work on prostitutes and the police in late nineteenth-century London (or my own work

on an eighteenth-century Scottish-imperial family.) A fourth illustration has to do with the use of digital collections of texts (of which some of the most interesting are too expensive even for the University of Cambridge) in the history of ideas and concepts; a development which raises many interesting and difficult questions, some of which were discussed at Lynn Hunt's seminar at the Centre on May 30, but which is undoubtedly an extension of the possibilities of historical research.

But there are costs, too, or at least changes. Historians think differently; we are learning, as CA said, to "think like a search engine." (She also recommended Italo Calvino's If on a Winter's Night a Traveller.) We are forgetting other ways of finding one's way around archives, like having seventeen cups of tea with the archivist (JS, in Lucknow.) The metaphor of digitization as a technology which increases the productivity of historians suggests the possibility that the process of production of historical scholarship will become more collaborative (for example, with data embedded in papers, PRP), or more like the production of scholarship in the natural sciences, a prospect which was not met with uniform enthusiasm. The distance between historians, archivists, and the technologists of access to archives is much greater than it was, for example, in the early nineteenth century (as when B.G.Niebuhr, the former archivist of the Danish Permanent Commission for Barbary Affairs, discovered that an important manuscript of Ulpian in Verona Cathedral was in bad condition, and "was obliged hastily to prepare for myself an infusion of gall-nuts.") The archive is becoming a very different place, with different sounds and different sensations: not the click of Arlette Farge's high heels on the marble floor of the Archives Nationales, but the unending tip-tap of digital cameras and laptops. Do we read in the archives any more? or take pictures as fast as we can? What about the feel of the edges of the paper, and the verso? The archive is three-dimensional (WO'R's envelope with a sample of indigo). The easily available online resources have a complicated relationship to resources which are not online. There has been a great deal of digitization of nineteenth-century magazines, but not of women's magazines (JS); one of the national archives which has been most efficient in digitizing its records (DM) has done so highly selectively. There are very important questions (D'MC) about the conservation of digital materials, including pdf files, especially when archivists and newspaper librarians take the decision to "digitize and dispose." There are important questions, too, about the   maintenance of the resources which are freely available online, as individuals change jobs, or become even busier (D'MC); about the costs of "wiki" resources (BF); and about cataloging by volunteers.

Finally, do we have any proposals in relation to the future direction of digital history? There is one practical suggestion, which is that projects of digitization of, say, an African archive, should include resources for historians to visit the archives to be digitized. I am sure there are more.

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