

Andreas Fickers

## Towards a New Digital Historicism? Doing History in the Age of Abundance

2012-02-21

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/14043>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version  
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Fickers, Andreas: Towards a New Digital Historicism? Doing History in the Age of Abundance.  
In: *VIEW Journal of European Television History and Culture*, Jg. 1 (2012-02-21), Nr. 1, S. 19–26. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/14043>.

### Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here:

<https://doi.org/10.18146/2213-0969.2012.jethc004>

### Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer Creative Commons - Namensnennung - Weitergabe unter gleichen Bedingungen 4.0 Lizenz zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu dieser Lizenz finden Sie hier:

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>

### Terms of use:

This document is made available under a creative commons - Attribution - Share Alike 4.0 License. For more information see:

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>



# Towards A New Digital Historicism?

## Doing History In The Age Of Abundance

**Andreas Fickers**

Maastricht University | Grote Gracht 90-92  
Postbox 616 | 6200 MD Maastricht | The Netherlands  
[a.fickers@maastrichtuniversity.nl](mailto:a.fickers@maastrichtuniversity.nl)

**Abstract:** This article argues that the contemporary hype in digitization and dissemination of our cultural heritage – especially of audiovisual sources – is comparable to the boom of critical source editions in the late 19th century. But while the dramatic rise of accessibility to and availability of sources in the 19th century went hand in hand with the development of new scholarly skills of source interpretation and was paralleled by the institutionalization of history as an academic profession, a similar trend of an emerging digital historicism today seems absent. This essay aims at reflecting on the challenges and chances that the discipline of history – and the field of television history in particular – is actually facing. It offers some thoughts and ideas on how the digitization of sources and their online availability affects the established practices of source criticism.

**Keywords:** digital history, source critique, historical hermeneutics, digital humanities, contextualisation

### 1 Back to the Future: New Technologies – Old Problems

History as a historical narrative has for a long time been a tool of power, legitimizing political or religious systems and inventing traditions of noble parentage or divine ancestry. Since the invention of historiography in ancient Greece, the historian has played an active role in the re-construction of the past – a past which continues to be an object of theological, political and cultural debate today. From the very beginning, historical work was characterized by a double ambition: first to find and collect historical sources as traces of past times (= the historian as archivist and chronicler); second to produce a coherent narrative of that past by interpreting the sources based on contemporary questions and interests (= the historian as interpreter). Both activities were – and still are – influenced and shaped by the present: specific political and religious ideologies, economic and social realities, and cultural or mental traditions influence the selection and interpretation of sources.

It is not surprising then that the idea and definition of what historical sources are have changed quite a lot over time. With the emergence of historiography in Greek antiquity, historical storytelling became a matter of written language. The so-called ‘logographers’ – Greek intellectuals and storytellers who for the first time wrote down (‘graphein’ in ancient Greek) traditional stories passed on by word of mouth (‘logoi’) – mark the transition from myth to history.<sup>1</sup>

---

1 See Christian Simon, *Historiographie. Eine Einführung*, Stuttgart: Ulmer Verlag, 1997, p. 45-46.

For [Thucydides](#) (460 BC – c. 395 BC), often referred to as the father of historiography, oral testimonies were seen as primary evidence and had a higher reliability than hear-say and myths or legends. In medieval times, European historiography was affected by Christianity and chroniclers tried to interpret historical events with the help of ‘auctoritates’ – mainly fathers of the church such as [Augustine of Hippo](#) and ecclesiastic authorities such as [Thomas Aquinas](#) or [Albertus Magnus](#). During the Renaissance and Humanism, the rediscovery of ancient (Greek and Latin) texts deeply affected the style of historical writing (aestheticism) and inaugurated a tradition of literary text criticism now known as philology. But the period of ‘enlightenment’ also paved the way for a stronger politicisation of history, and ‘modern’ historiography started to play an active role in the construction of national histories. This co-construction of nation-states and professional historiography reached its climax in the 19th century, paralleled by an idealistic philosophy of history called historicism.

## 2 Historicism In Fast Forward: Ranke, Droysen And Dilthey

Based on the conviction that each historical event or period is ‘unique’, historicism called for a historical method that was able to grasp the specificity or ‘individuality’ of historical phenomena, thereby strongly emphasizing the importance of ‘great men’ as the real movers of history. When [Leopold von Ranke](#) (1795-1886)<sup>2</sup>, without doubt one of the exemplary figures of this new movement, made his famous yet mostly misinterpreted statement that history should simply ‘tell how it really was’, he by no means meant that history should be reduced to the neutral enumeration or description of ‘facts’. What he intended was that the historian should try to put himself into the position of his object/subject of study in order to be able to understand the intentions and motives of historical actors.<sup>3</sup> By a rigid study of historical sources, such was Ranke’s belief, the historian would be able to reveal the ‘inner connection between historical events’ (as they ‘really’ were) and thereby have a privileged access (compared to philosophers) to the inner essence of history.

Albeit driven by an individualistic and idealistic ideology, the philosophy of historicism went hand in hand with the development of a critical method of doing history, mainly derived from the tradition of classical philology that emerged during humanism. This method was characterized by a critical reading of historical sources aimed at identifying the authenticity of written traditions. This new skill of ‘source criticism’ was taught at universities and embedded into a new hermeneutic approach of the humanities. It was the German historian [Johann Gustav Droysen](#) (1808-1884) who, based on a critical reflection on Ranke’s ‘source fetishism’<sup>4</sup>, developed a hermeneutical theory of historiography systematically summarized in his book *Historik* in 1868.<sup>5</sup> Instead of searching for the ‘final truth’ of history in the documents /sources themselves, Droysen argued for a self-reflexive approach, introducing the historian as an active interpreter of past events. To understand the past and to make it meaningful to others, historical sources – divided into ‘Überreste’ (remains) and ‘Quellen’ (sources) – have to be interpreted. While remains are unintended witnesses of the past, sources have been produced with the intention of becoming tradition and need a ‘translation’ from past to present in which the historian plays an active role. Droysen declared quite categorically in his *Historik*:

*Those who consider it to be the highest task of the historian that he does not add anything of his own thinking, but simply lets the facts speak for themselves, do not see that the facts themselves do not speak except through the words of someone who has seized and understood them.*<sup>6</sup>

While Droysen – like Ranke – still worked with a ‘romantic’ model of science and knowledge production, the philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) finally introduced a concept of history (and historiography) as ‘science’: that is as a scientific discipline, characterized by an objective methodology and a logical theoretical framework. Dilthey’s historical hermeneutics were based on Droysen’s concept of ‘understanding’ (*Verstehen*), but he op-

2 For an online overview of short biographies of important historians see: <http://www.historicum.net/themen/klassiker-der-geschichtswissenschaft/>

3 Simon, p. 74-79.

4 In a letter to Wilhelm Arendt on 20 March 1857, Droysen confessed: ‘Unfortunately [...] because of Ranke and his school we have become lost in what is called source-criticism whose entire feat consists in asking whether a poor devil of an annalist has copied from another’. Quote from Philipp Müller, ‘Understanding history. Hermeneutics and source criticism in historical scholarship’, in Miriam Dobson and Benjamin Ziemann, eds, *Reading Primary Sources. The Interpretation of Texts from Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century History*, Routledge 2009, p. 21.

5 Johann Gustav Droysen, *Historik. Vorlesungen über Enzyklopädie und Methodologie der Geschichte*, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1974.

6 Quoted in Müller (op cit.) p. 26-27.

posed them to the concept of ‘explaining’ (Erklären) as practiced in the natural sciences.<sup>7</sup> ‘We can explain nature’, Dilthey claimed, ‘but we understand the life of the soul’. Historiography as a scientific profession became a ‘Geisteswissenschaft’ (literally ‘the sciences of mind’; ‘humanities’ in the English speaking world), aiming at understanding the past, but unable to ‘explain’ it in terms of scientific principles or natural laws. Dilthey’s ideas, to develop a scientific foundation for the humanities based on the concept of understanding, perfectly resonated with the bourgeois concept of *Bildung*, which aimed at developing the individual’s capacity for self-determined thinking and acting. The gaining of historical knowledge was thereby linked to the project of individual self-formation and life-long learning.

### 3 Between Facts And Fiction, Education And Nation Building

With the emergence of history as an academic discipline in many universities all over the world, the 19th century saw the initiation of huge editorial projects producing specific source collections. Very often, these projects were linked to the larger political agenda of nation building, aiming at offering a scientifically accurate yet ideologically biased canon of sources that reassembled a set of historically important or relevant texts. In Germany, Baron Karl vom Stein founded the Association for Ancient German History, which edited the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*<sup>8</sup> from 1819; in France, the renewed interest in the middle ages during the first wave of Romanticism led to the foundation of the *École des chartes* which aimed at educating professional archivists and palaeontologists in order to organise the national heritage and offer edited source collections for the writing of French national history. As a national institute, the *École des chartes* is still the first place for the professional training of archivists in France and offers many online resources for the reading and analysis of medieval and modern sources.<sup>9</sup>

The ‘archival desire’ of 19th century historicism was characterized by the ambivalent mission of creating scientifically edited source collections as visible evidence of their professional approach to historical sources that could or should be used for the writing of national histories and thereby functioned as raw material for the ‘invention of tradition’ in the sense of Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger<sup>10</sup>. The many ‘blue’ or ‘white books’<sup>11</sup> published since the late 19th century – mainly reuniting parliamentary, governmental or diplomatic documents and records on specific historical periods or events – provide witness of these politics of history that aimed at (mis)using archival evidence for political or propagandistic purposes.<sup>12</sup> These published collections were highly selective and always very complimentary of their sponsoring governments and thereby reveal more about what they wished to stress than what they wanted to conceal.<sup>13</sup>

But it would be unfair and historically incorrect to state that all large editing projects were somehow corrupted by political or ideological interests. Many projects were driven by the ambition to produce – for the first time – complete collections of specific types of sources in order to introduce new archival material to the growing scientific community and educated lay audience. As access to archives remained difficult both for researchers and students (travelling to archives was costly and copying by hand a time consuming activity), published collections

---

7 Wilhelm Dilthey, *Texte zur Kritik der historischen Vernunft*, edited and introduced by Hans-Ulrich Lessing, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983.

8 For the history of the MGH see Harry Bresslau, ‘Geschichte der Monumenta Germaniae historica’, *Neues Archiv der Gesellschaft für ältere deutsche Geschichtskunde* 42, 1921, p. 1-769.

9 See: <http://theleme.enc.sorbonne.fr/>.

10 Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger. *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, 1996.

11 The term dates back to the 15th century, when large blue velvet-covered books were used for record-keeping by the Parliament of the United Kingdom. In Germany and France they are called ‘White Books’.

12 A real ‘battle’ of White Books emerged after the First World War when many governments delivered ‘official’ documentation in order to ‘prove’ the question of war guilt which caused heated debates during and after the negotiations of the Treaty of Versailles in 1919.

13 On the history of archival policies in the 20th century see Cook, Terry, ‘What is Past is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas since 1898, and the Future Paradigm Shift’, *Archivaria* 43, 1997, p. 17-63.

such as the [Patrologia Latina](#) by the French priest Jacques-Paul Migne<sup>14</sup> or the [Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents](#)<sup>15</sup> translated (from French, Latin, Italian into English) and edited by the Secretary of the Wisconsin Historical Society, Reuben Thwaites, in 73 volumes from 1896 to 1901. Archives themselves started massive copying projects to make access to their collections easier, but all these initiatives faced a crucial problem: the problem of selectivity and de-contextualization.

## 4 Selectivity, Provenance And The Problem Of Contextualization

In an article entitled '[The Importance of Context for Digitized Archival Collections](#)' in the Journal of the Association for History and Computing in April 2008, Mark Vajcner highlighted a crucial problem that critical source editions have faced since their first appearance in the 19th century: the fact that all editions, no matter how ambitious or exhaustive in scope, are necessarily the result of a selection process and rarely offer any contextual information. By contextual information we don't mean the historical context to which the sources relate, but information concerning the provenance of the sources themselves and their tradition. Two key principles in the organization of archives tackle the problem of provenance:

- the 'respect des fonds' (this principle dictates that archival materials, when transferred to archival custody, remain as distinct collections catalogued and filed according to their creator or office of origin)
- the 'respect de l'ordre' (this principle demands that records in these distinct collections are maintained in their original order).

The principles of provenance prohibit the re-arrangement of materials within collections as this would break the intertextual relationships of documents and thereby ensure that the researcher using the archive sees the records as the creating agency (for example a ministry) saw them. Thanks to this principle, the historian can try to determine what the office/historical actors knew at a specific moment in time and how that knowledge affected its actions.<sup>16</sup>

Every historian interested in a specific historical event knows about the importance of the principle of provenance when confronted with the need to meticulously reconstruct the prehistory, its course or the legacy of such an event with the help of archival evidence. Without the principle of the 'respect de l'ordre' the historian would be unable to produce historical meaning out of the huge collections of letters, reports, notes, telegraphs, telephone recordings, internal memos, handwritten comments and official press releases of the diplomatic, ministerial and governmental records held by national archives all over the world. In other words, it is the providence that delimits the chronology of a specific event from an archival point of view, but a particular collection or tradition in one archive by no means offers 'the truth' or any kind of authoritative reading. In order to avoid a one-dimensional perspective, the historian has always to look for so-called 'parallel traditions' offering alternative readings of the same event. Archives are, as Carolyn Steedman has reminded us in her wonderful book *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001), reservoirs of stories that historians use to re-construct a meaningful past. If the heated debates on the 'linguistic turn' in historiography and the post-modern condition of history have revealed one thing, factual evidence and historical storytelling are just

---

14 The *Patrologia Latina* is a collection of 221 volumes of texts and indices of the Church Fathers from Tertullian to Pope Innocent 3rd (230 – 1216 a.d.), edited and published by the French priest Jacques-Paul Migne between 1844-1845. It was completed by a collection of texts from Greek texts (the *Patrologia Graeca*, published 1856-57 in 85 volumes). Although criticized by scholars for their faultiness, Migne was very successful in selling his collections through his own publishing house, the *Imprimerie Catholique*. It was founded in 1836 and became one of the biggest private publishing houses in France until the archbishop of Paris banned his activities in 1868. For an entertaining story of Migne's life and work see Howard Bloch, *God's Plagiarist: Being an Account of the Fabulous Industry and Irregular Commerce of Abbé Migne*, Chicago University Press, 1994.

15 The *Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents* are a collection of primary sources about the travels and explorations of the Jesuit missionaries in New France (now Canada) between 1610 and 1791. Each year the head of the Jesuit order in New France sent back to Paris an annual report. These extremely detailed eyewitness accounts of the activities of priests living in the wilderness among many different Indian nations are the earliest and most compelling written records of North America at the time of white contact.

16 See Vajcner, Mark, 'The Importance of Context for Digitized Archival Sources', *Journal of the Association for History and Computing*, 11, 2008, 1, p. 1.

two sides of the same coin.<sup>17</sup> It is the meaningful combination of original sources with a convincing narrative that makes a good piece of historiography.

## 5 The Digital Revolution In Archives And The Silence Of The Historians

Since the emergence of the Internet as a leading new medium, cultural heritage institutions such as archives and museums have started massive digitization projects in order to make their collections searchable and sometimes even accessible. Digitally available collections tend to replace or at least seriously endanger the old source editions, but quite paradoxically, as Mark Vajcner stresses, ‘they have not replicated the scholarly rigor that was associated with published series’.<sup>18</sup> There seems to be a ‘digital divide’ between the potentially unlimited ‘born digital’ users of online resources on the one side and the small scholarly community of historians on the other. The German historian Kiran Patel recently wondered about the ‘collective silence’ of the historical community when it comes to the dramatic impact of the Internet and digital technologies on the historian’s profession and explained it by the ‘mercy of analogue birth’.<sup>19</sup> Most of the current generation of historians working as professors at universities and colleges were ‘born analogue’ and show a strange resistance, or at least striking reluctance, when confronted with this paradigm shift in the archival world. While archivists have been debating the substantial impact of the digital revolution in their field for a while now, historians as their professional users have remained surprisingly silent on this question.

According to Roy Rosenzweig, one of the few historians who has discussed and promoted the phenomenon of ‘digital history’ since the 1990s, most of his fellow colleagues tend to brush off the discussions on digitization as ‘technical’ issues and assume a professional division of responsibility: while archivists have to deal with the problem of digitization of sources as it touches the questions of conservation and preservation, historians neglect these problems and focus on the problem of authenticity and reliability.<sup>20</sup> But, as Rosenzweig rightly states:

*historians need to be thinking simultaneously about how to research, write, and teach in a world of unheard-of historical abundance and how to avoid a future of record scarcity. [...] The ‘system’ for preserving the past that has evolved over centuries is in crisis, and historians need to take a hand in building a new system for the coming century.<sup>21</sup>*

But what should such a new system look like, and what crisis are we facing?

## 6 Crisis, What Crisis?

Historians cannot be accused of being radical innovators when it comes to theoretical or methodological innovations in the field of humanities. Quite the opposite – history as an academic profession could rather be qualified as ‘conservative’, defending its quest for ‘scientific objectivity’ based on the rigid methods of source criticism as developed by Ranke and his fellow companions in the 19th century. So far it has ‘resisted’ the many turns and theoretical fashions that have characterized the humanities in the last 30 years more ‘successfully’ than many other disciplines.<sup>22</sup> But the recent trends towards digitization and online dissemination of sources both within classical cultural heritage institutions and beyond (think of the millions of private copies of sources –

---

17 See Elizabeth A. Clark, *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn*, Harvard University Press, 2004 and for a general introduction into the changing ‘turns’ in modern historiography see Iggers, Georg, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century. From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge*, Wesleyan University Press, 1997.

18 Vajcner, 2008, p. 3.

19 Kiran K. Patel, Kiran, ‘Zeitgeschichte im digitalen Zeitalter. Neue und alte Herausforderungen’, *Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 3 (2011), p. 331-251, here p. 350. Patel’s term of the ‘mercy of the analogue birth’ is a playful allusion to a famous speech of the German chancellor Helmut Kohl in 1984 in which Kohl claimed to be happy to belong to the generation of those sharing the ‘mercy of a late birth’, meaning that they were too young to have been implicated in the Nazi regime, either as an actor or a follower.

20 Rosenzweig, Roy, ‘Scarcity or Abundance? Preserving the Past’, in Roy Rosenzweig, *Clio Wired. The Future of the Past in the Digital Age*, Columbia University Press, 2011, p. 3-27.

21 Ibid, p. 6.

22 For an exemplary case study of this debate see the vivid discussions that followed the publication of Richard Evans’ book *In Defence of History*, Granta, 1997. See the online publication of many reviews and lengthy replies by Evans on <http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/Whatishistory/evans.html>

may it be letters, postcards, photographs, videos or objects – put online by collectors, amateurs or private institutions) force the community of professional historians to rethink their audience, both in terms of reach and scope. Television bypassed the book as the main mediator of historical knowledge some thirty years ago<sup>23</sup>, and the Internet is accelerating this trend even more. Academic historiography has definitely lost its hegemonic power in the public sphere – if it ever had such a privileged position in the past. But is this the crisis Rosenzweig is talking about? I don't think so.

The crisis Rosenzweig is referring to is a *crisis of historical practice*. While generations of historians have been trained in learning how to deal with a relative scarcity of sources (either published or archival ones) and faced serious problems when trying to access specific collections or documents (because of legal barriers, limited budgets for travelling and doing research at diverse archives, and a multitude of restrictions and additional requirements regulating the consultation of documents depending on the nature of the archive), we actually witness a phase of abundance and overflow of sources on the web. 'Historians, in fact', Rosenzweig writes, 'may be facing a fundamental paradigm shift from a culture of scarcity to a culture of abundance'.<sup>24</sup> But why worry? Isn't this a situation generations of historians have dreamed of?

## 7 From Scarcity To Abundance? Doing History In The Age Of Plenty

Indeed, being able to consult sources online sounds like heaven for those who have experienced the fate of getting caught in the wheels of 'real' archives. While written archives have been loosening their strict regulations in terms of consultation and copying (in most archives one is allowed to take digital photographs of the sources while getting a photocopy was often prohibited or extremely costly), most of the audiovisual archives remain restrictive in terms of access and offer few facilities to do professional research on the spot. The internet with its many video portals seems like a perfect solution to this problem: once the sources have been digitised, their online consultation is a cost-effective operation both for archives and users. Alas, the brave new world of online access is threatened by both legal restrictions and economic factors. At least in the field of audiovisual sources, copyright problems seriously hamper the enthusiasm of those trying to make their collections available. Despite some promising developments on a European level ([Europeana](#)), national legislation still prevents the global dissemination of audiovisual content. In terms of critical source editions for audiovisual content, the internet remains a poor source!

So where does the talk about 'abundance' take its evidence from? Mainly from the fact that portals like [YouTube](#) and social media like [My Space](#), [Facebook](#) or [Twitter](#) have developed into platforms for the sharing of millions of 'private sources', largely ignoring questions of copyright and intellectual property right. These portals offer an overwhelming number of clips of old television series, news programmes, documentaries and advertisements. Enthusiasts of 'disintermediation' interpret these portals as the realization of a democratic, direct, and unmediated access to the past and sociologist Mike Featherstone speculates about the emergence of a 'new culture of memory' in which the hierarchical control over access to cultural heritage would disappear. This unmediated access would lead to a decline of the intellectual and academic power of historians, who no longer stand between people and their past.<sup>25</sup> Without denying the fact that the internet offers the fantastic possibility of sharing hitherto inaccessible or private sources with a potentially unlimited number of 'users', the question is what kind of history this unlimited access would produce? Or, in the words of Roy Rosenzweig: 'Will abundance bring better or more thoughtful history?'<sup>26</sup>

## 8 The Hermeneutic Prerequisite Of Online Source Criticism

At conferences or in the classroom, references to videos on YouTube or other online video channels, or their integration into a Power Point or Prezzi presentation, have become standard practice among students and – increasingly – among senior academics and researchers too. While the visual attraction of video material can be a useful pedagogical tool to illustrate a specific historical argument, the historical evidence of the sources shown often remains obscure. It seems as though ritualized practices of critical source analysis are neglected when

23 See Erin Bell and Ann Gray, eds, *Television History. Mediating the Past in Postwar Europe*, Palgrave, 2010.

24 Rosenzweig, 2011, p. 7.

25 Mike Featherstone, 'Archiving Cultures', *British Journal of Sociology* 51 (2000) 1, p. 161-184.

26 Rosenzweig, 2011, p. 7.

dealing with audiovisual sources from the web. From the millions of sources available on the net, only a few are accompanied by the contextual information necessary to give a satisfactory answer to the five basic W's of historical source criticism:

- **Who** created/produced the source (author)?
- **What** kind of document is it (genre and specific use of language)?
- **Where** was it made and distributed (dissemination and audience)?
- **When** was it made (date and period)?
- **Why** was it made (intention)?

When looking at the mass of audiovisual content dealing with the history of television on YouTube (including complete episodes of television series, shorter fragments of all kind of genres, screenshots and montages), very few will be offering so-called meta-data that are essential for a critical reading and interpretation of the source. While watching a rediscovered programme on YouTube might produce a feeling of nostalgia and bring back some cheerful memories and therefore constitute an interesting form of autobiographical remembrance, the source remains with no history beyond that personal experience. The pure availability of the source tells nothing about its historical meaning or importance. Without the contextual information of the meta-data, any source is of limited historical value to the historian. The 'internal' source criticism can offer interesting and valuable information about the technical, aesthetic and narrative nature of the source under examination, but in order to offer a historical interpretation of the function, role or importance of a specific source based on a specific historical question, 'internal' and 'external' source criticism need to go hand in hand. If history aims at 'understanding' the past, in the way Droysen formulated it in his *Historik*, the combination of 'textual' and 'contextual' analysis is a hermeneutic prerequisite.

## 9 The Future Historian: A Computer Scientist?

'More thoughtful' history, in the terms of Roy Rosenzweig, would therefore require a new historical practice that can deal with both the problem of abundance and the lack of contextual information. What would such a critical practice look like? How to make use of the millions of interesting sources on the web without drowning in a flood of entertaining yet historically irrelevant information? Or, in the words of the German historian [Gabriele Lingenbach](#), how to deal with the paradox of a simultaneous loss of contextual information while widening our horizon of perception and cognition?<sup>27</sup> Again, a look back into the history of historical education might be helpful in finding some analogies between the challenges of dealing with archival information in the 19th century and today. Now and then historians have been confronted with the question of how to make sense of the traditions, and the basic problems have – at least in my view – remained the same! The first question to tackle is that of authenticity. As mentioned at the beginning of this article, the quest of authenticity was at the very heart of the movement of historicism, and training the philological and epigraphic skills seemed to be the key competence for historians of that time. But what about today? If we assume that the internet will be the main archive of the future, what kind of critical competences must historians acquire or possess to be able to ascertain the authenticity of an online source? If future generations of historians want to keep this key competence within the realm of their discipline and habitus, they will need to develop skills in computer science, digital image analysis and network technology.

While the digitization of sources and their public dissemination is being praised as a democratization of access and historical knowledge production, the products of this process – digital documents or files – disrupt long-evolved systems of trust and authenticity, ownership and preservation.<sup>28</sup> As Roy Rosenzweig has rightly stated, re-adopting those systems to the digital environment, or inventing new ones, is more difficult than coming up with a long-lived storage mechanism.<sup>29</sup> Some twenty years ago, the problem of fakery seemed a marginal phenomenon and 'tamed' because of a well established system of source criticism and control of the channels of dissemination of historical knowledge (in peer reviewed journals, professional publishing houses or academic institutions). Since the massive dissemination of personal computers as 'historical workstations' and the emergence of the internet, the 'copy & paste' function has developed into a standard feature in the research and

<sup>27</sup> Gabriele Lingenbach, 'Ein Motor der Geschichtswissenschaft? Zusammenhänge zwischen technologischer Entwicklung, Veränderungen des Arbeitsalltags von Historikern und fachlichem Wandel', *Zeitenblicke* 10 (2011) 3.

<sup>28</sup> For a detailed discussion of the question of authenticity of digital objects see the interesting collection of articles in the volume *Authenticity in a Digital Environment*, edited by the Council on Library and Information Resources Washington, Washington D.C., 2000: <http://www.clir.org/pubs/reports/pub92/pub92.pdf>

<sup>29</sup> Rosenzweig, 2011, p. 9.



writing process and has deeply affected erudite traditions of making transcriptions by hand. As Wolfgang Schmale<sup>30</sup> has shown, the computerization of our world has deeply affected all components of history as a profession:

- it changed the storage and management of collected information (electronic data bases and new modes of presentation)
- it affected the process of writing (word processing, copy & paste)
- it modified the research process (online catalogues; new forms of distant collaborations)
- it impacted on the learning and teaching of history (e-learning)
- it opened new possibilities of storytelling (non-linear narratives; audiovisual tools).

## 10 Gap Between Old And New 'user Generations'

Of course, new technologies have always impacted on the practice of the historian – be it in teaching (use of matrixes, microphones, photocopies, overhead/beamer, etc.), research (slip boxes, microfiche collections, opacs) or collaboration (conferences, telegraphy and telephony, e-mail, mailing lists and Skype). And the introduction of and socialisation with these facilities has in return always resulted in a tension between old and new 'user generations' of specific technologies.<sup>31</sup> That the 'analogue born' generation of historians might experience the current transitions in historical practice as more 'radical' or 'revolutionary' than the 'digital born' is a classic phenomenon of generational shift. Three interrelated phenomena, according to [Armin Heinen](#), result from this shift :

- the delocalization of archives and sources,
- the silent devaluation of the written word,
- the tendency towards non-linear narratives of history.<sup>32</sup>

If we are to move in that direction, future historians cannot escape the productive confrontation with the new technical, economic and social realities of the digital culture. Instead of digital escapism and methodological conventionalism the discipline of history is rather in need of a new digital historicism. This digital historicism should be characterized by collaboration between archivists, computer scientists, historians and the public, with the aim of developing tools for a new digital source criticism. Projects like [EUscreen](#) have a pioneering function in this respect. In bringing together the technical expertise for the development of semantic interoperability of the different meta-data systems of archival collections, the juridical knowledge in order to find creative yet legal procedures for the building of a transnational infrastructure of online video material, the most important stakeholders in the field of audiovisual archives as content providers, and finally an academic network of European television historians as professional users of the newly built infrastructure, the EUscreen project offers the opportunity to study this new digital historicism in the making. It is this type of international and interdisciplinary cooperation that can pave the way to a new practice of doing history in the digital age.

## Biography

Andreas Fickers is Associate Professor of Comparative Media History at the Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences of Maastricht University, The Netherlands. Together with Sonja de Leeuw he coordinates the [European Television History Network](#) and is a member of the Management Board of the [Tensions of Europe network](#). His research focuses on the transnational history of media technologies and infrastructures and on the cultural history of media in a European perspective. Recent publications include: *A European Television History* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2008; co-edited with Jonathan Bignell) and *Materializing Europe. Transnational Infrastructures and the Project of Europe* (Palgrave-Macmillan, 2010; co-edited with Alexander Badenoch).

---

30 Wolfgang Schmale, *Digitale Geschichtswissenschaft*, Böhlau Verlag, 2010.

31 For a systematic reflection on the relationship between new technologies and the changing practices of the historian see Lingenbach, 2010.

32 Heinen, Armin, 'Mediaspektion der Historiographie. Zur Geschichte der Geschichtswissenschaft aus medien- und technikgeschichtlicher Perspektive', *Zeitenblicke* 10 (2011), 3.

