Literature Review: How Historians and Scholars Seek Information

Anastasia Finch

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Dr. Chris Hagar

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Introduction

Historians as an information community have somewhat unique information requirements. Not only do they require as many primary sources as they can get their hands on, but they also have need for secondary sources, particularly regarding critical examination of primary sources, and tertiary sources in order to gather as much information for their research as possible. This means that historians require wide access to multiple information sources, such as databases, archives, books, manuscripts, and even their own colleagues. Historians also search for information in unique ways, as librarians and information specialists have found out through various studies and surveys.

The following is a review of scholarly literature regarding historian information communities and their information-seeking behavior. As my information community is scholarly in nature, I found the most information from articles that were also scholarly. While the majority of the articles’ authors are not historians themselves, they are librarians or information specialists and have a personal interest in understanding and serving the historian community better. Most of the articles I found were surveys or studies, usually focused on one or several topics: what source materials historians use the most, how they search for information, and how they organize information once it’s been acquired.

Review of Literature

One of the first major studies of the historian information community was in Peter A. Uva’s “Information-Gathering Habits of Academic Historians” (1977). According to Uva (1977), it’s important for librarians to know the specific needs of any given information community in order to be able to adequately serve them (p. 3). Until Uva’s study, the historian community had been largely ignored in favor of focusing on other natural and physical science communities (Uva, 1977, p. 3). Furthermore, any previous studies of historians had been focused on citation usage rather than any other kind of information-gathering need (Uva, 1977, p. 4). It was with this lack in mind that Uva surveyed 52 academic historians from two universities in the hopes of discovering any specific stages of research, and whether there were different information needs associated with each stage.

According to Uva (1977), the study found that there are five stages of research: problem selection, detailed planning, data collection, analysis and interpretation, and writing-rewriting. Historians rarely focus on one or two sources during the course of their research, instead gathering information from as many different channels as possible. This includes both paper sources as well as personal ones, though paper sources were utilized more often than personal ones (Uva, 1977, p. 25). And finally, Uva (1977) found that historians’ worked multiple stages simultaneously, as opposed to one at a time in sequential order.

This theory of working in multiple stages simultaneously is supported in a later article, “The Collection and Use of Information by Some American Historians” by Donald Owen Case (1991). Case (1991) conducted a survey focused on how academic historians decide on a research topic and find/gather information for that topic, in the hopes that by studying the research habits of historians, librarians would be better able to serve their needs (p. 62). Case (1991) found that historians research, write, edit, and choose new topics concurrently (p. 78). This is probably because historians start their research with a wider topic and then narrow it inward as research progresses, sometimes adding in subtopics if they find them relevant (Case, 1991, p. 63). Historians gather information from a wide variety of sources, though libraries and archives were at the top of the list (Cast, 1991, p. 74).

Historians often focus on primary materials and sources for their research, though obtaining such things is sometimes difficult. In their article “Accidentally Found on Purpose: Information-Seeking Behavior of Historians in Archives,” Wendy M. Duff and Catherine A. Johnson (2002) conducted semi-structured interviews with historians to determine how they located primary materials and used archived material. Duff and Johnson (2002) found that historians conduct research activities concurrently and simultaneously to each other, and in no particular order (p. 480).

How a historian conducts their research depends on previous knowledge and experience using archives or records, what time period they’re researching, and what secondary sources are available (Duff and Johnson, 2002, p. 480). Duff and Johnson (2002) identified four types of information-seeking behavior: “1. orienting oneself to archives, finding aids, sources, or a collection; 2. seeking known material; 3. building contextual knowledge; and 4. identifying relevant material” (p. 492). Duff and Johnson (2002) found that historians conduct research activities concurrently and simultaneously to each other, and in no particular order (p. 492). Duff and Johnson (2002) also found that historians use names to start the majority of their research, as names are often the “easiest way into collections since archives are organized by the name of the creator of the record” (p. 493).

Keywords and search terms were the main topic of research in Marcia J. Bates, Deborah N. Wilde and Susan Siegfried’s 1993 article “An Analysis of Search Terminology Used by Humanities Scholars,” which for two years studied how humanities scholars used online databases for research. By studying 165 natural language statements and 1,068 search terms, Bates et. al. (1993) found that humanities scholars searched for more named individuals, geographical terms, chronological terms, and discipline terms than expected (p. 1).

According to Bates et. al. (1993), this is somewhat problematic for several reason. First, geographical jurisdictional and names change over time, and thus indexing and thesauri often lack those terms. Second, coding dates so they can be optimally retrieved takes multiple coding experimentation, which some databases may not be willing to do. And third, discipline terms creates a “paradox for the indexing and searching of online databases” (Bates et. al., 1993, p. 31). They are often broad terms and so are not usually considered good choices for indexes.

Though modern technology has introduced new ways for historians to search for information, it is still just one part of their typical search patterns. “Primarily History in America: How U.S. Historians Search for Primary Materials at the Dawn of the Digital Age” by Helen R. Tibbo (2003), an international, comparative study to determine how the internet and electronic finding aides have changed historians’ information-seeking behavior, found that historians tend to use a variety of sources, including traditional print and online databases. Historians not only looked for information in books and manuscripts, but also in footnotes and random internet searches (Tibbo, 2003, p. 28). And, interestingly enough, historians more often visit repository websites more than search engines, perhaps because they could not find enough detailed information using their preferred keywords. As previously stated, historians prefer to use names, places, and dates to search for sources, and many databases are not properly set up to handle that kind of searching (Bates et. al., 1993).

Studies of what kind of materials historians use are also prominent. This may be because access to source materials is rather hit-or-miss, depending on the historian’s research topic. Medieval manuscripts are more difficult to access than other types of materials, for example. In Margaret F. Stieg’s “The Information of Needs of Historians” (1981), a questionnaire was sent to medieval historians to ask them about their information sources, where they locate relevant references, and how they use materials in foreign languages. Stieg (1981) found that historians tend to use periodicals and books most often, with microfilm, manuscripts, and dissertations following next (p. 551). The problem for historians regarding these sources is twofold: availability and ease of use. Books and periodicals are most often available, either through the historian’s library (whether using inter-library loan or otherwise) or personal purchases. They are also the most useful, as they are where historical research ends up (Stieg, 1981, p. 551).

Dissertations, microfilm, and manuscripts are more difficult to obtain and use. Dissertations and manuscripts are often not published widely, and obtaining a copy may mean many months of waiting only to be disappointed by its lack of useful information (Stieg, 1981, p. 553). Microfilm saves on space, but is tethered to the library’s microfilm reader and must thus be read in the library during open hours. Many historians prefer working from their home or office, microfilm readers are prone to breaking, and reading text on film strains the eyes (Stieg, 1981, p. 552).

A 2004 study by Margaret Stieg Dalton and Laurie Charnigo continues the study began in Stieg’s “The Information Needs of Historians,” now updated for inclusion of electronic resources. In “Historians and Their Information Sources,” Dalton and Charnigo (2004) found that print is still the principal resource for historians, though the availability of electronic resources means an increased use of catalogs and indexes (p. 400). Surprisingly, electronic journals are not used as much as might be expected. This could be because historians simply don’t know about their value or reliability as sources (Dalton and Charnigo, 2004, p. 414). Historians also complained that the variety of sources available online is too sparse, specifically in how few older sources were available online (Dalton and Charnigo, 2004, p. 415).

Another problem regarding electronic sources is that the vast majority of historians prefer to handle original sources, as found in a 2004 study by Wendy Duff, Barbara Craig and Joan Cherry. In “Historians’ Use of Archival Sources: Promises and Pitfalls of the Digital Age,” Duff, Craig and Cherry (2004) wanted to know if historians found archives and archivists useful. The answer is yes, but only in so far as archives hold information historians want, and archivists are the ones who know how to get the information so the historian can use it. Historians, as mentioned earlier, particularly want access to original sources, even if the historian and the source are located many miles apart. However, many times they will have to settle for an electronic reproduction, which as of 2004 was still an untapped market. Archivists would be the ones who digitize any original sources, and so a good relationship between archivists and historians is ultimately desired. Thus Duff, Craig and Cherry (2004) recommend that archives provide access to full and complete finding aides and prepare digital reproductions (p. 22). Historians, meanwhile, will use electronic resources as a supplement to their research.

The idea of a historian’s electronic sources collection is further explored in Smiljana Antonijevi and Ellysa Stern Cahoy’s “Personal Library Curation: An Ethnographic Study of Scholars’ Information Practices” (2014). A survey of how historians use digital tools for keeping track of sources and information, the results are somewhat surprising. The integration of digital tools into a historian’s search activities actually caused a “complete breakdown of their systems for organizing information” (Antonijevi and Cahoy, 2014, p. 302). This was because many organizational systems were built around paper, which as mentioned before is still the primary resource for the majority of historians. Antonijevi and Cahoy (2014) also noted that many historians in the study had a difficult time “adjusting their research practice to the requirements and possibilities of digital scholarship, such as developing organizational and citation management methods suited to electronic materials, migrating their research materials from obsolete to contemporary formats, and digitizing research materials” (p. 302).

Though younger generation historians might have an easier time assimilating their research into modern, digital scholarship, they don’t use the same research methods as older generation historians do. According to Ian Rowlands, David Nicholas, Peter Williams, Paul Huntington and Maggie Fieldhouse’s “The Google Generation” (2008), younger people rely heavily on search engines for research, skim rather than read, and lack the necessary critical and analytical skills needed to understand the information they find online (p. 290). Furthermore, when searching for information, look for an “answer” rather than a particular source or format (Rowlands et. al., 2008, p. 293). This is in contrast to older historians who specifically look for sources that might contain needed information and go from there. Rowlands et. al. (2008) conclude that there has been a fundamental shift in how people search and find information from previous generations, the impact of which has yet to be fully explored or understood (p. 308).

Conclusion

In reviewing the literature available on how historians find and gather materials and information, I couldn’t help but notice that there was a lack of recent studies on amateur historians. Most of the studies focused on professional historians, either employed by a school or a historical society, or some similar entity. Amateur historians, meanwhile, have the same sort of need for information and primary resources, but there are very little studies available on how they actually achieve access to those resources. This might be an interesting topic for a future author to write about, especially since the advent of the internet has made professional and amateur access to information easier than it’s ever been before.

While most of the studies had information about research cycles, only a few of them also studied what historians do with the information once they get it. How a historian organizes their sources is just as important as how they get information in the first place, and studying what happens next might bring some new insight into the historian community. This would be particularly useful for young historians, who search for information in different ways from older historians, as seen in “The Google Generation” (2008). Perhaps they organize their information sources differently, as well.

An interesting pattern I found is that the article topics tended to go in cycles, coinciding with major technological changes. The study of historians’ info-gathering techniques started in the 1970s, and then moved to a study of the materials they used in the 1980s, which then prompted responses to both in the early 1990s. This was before computers and the internet played a large part in information-gathering; after the mid-1990s, when computers became more popular, the same survey-response cycle started again, ending in the early 2000s. That means it is about time for some research on how modern historians conduct and keep track of their research, especially since computers and use of the internet has become even more popular since almost all the articles explored here were written. And not just research on what historians do online, but also how libraries and archives are handling the ever increasingly digital world of scholarship.

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