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SEARCHING FOR THE PAST:

Historians' Information-Seeking Behaviors and Needs

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Like all academic disciplines, the field of history and its research methods have been significantly impacted by the digital age. However, unlike what has happened in many other fields, the prevailing literature on the information needs and searching techniques of academic historians has not indicated a significant change in information behavior. This article will examine how and why academic historians (primarily professional historians holding doctorates, with a smaller review of history graduate students) search for information and what role those methods and reasons play in their library usage. Despite the presentation of academic historians as a singular group, there is the potential for considerable variation by historical discipline and field of study,

which can color the approach to information searching (Case 69). Also, several studies of historians' information needs are tied into wider surveys of humanities disciplines, making it important to assess the group as part of the larger framework of academia. Consistent with this sentiment is the need to examine their role as researchers and producers of historical scholarship in addition to their role as teaching faculty. However, this article will concentrate specifically on the role of historians as academic researchers and writers. With a significant amount of literature on academic historians and their information-seeking processes, we can adequately determine what they use, how they prefer to use it, and what constitutes their specific searching habits compared to their academic peers.

Since the digital revolution in the 1980s, several studies have been undertaken to determine what humanities professors generally, and history professors, specifically, find most useful in their pursuit of information. Assessing historians' information searching requires determining what types of information they are seeking. Generally, these searches are broken down into primary and secondary source searches, along with the digital databases and bibliographic information. Helen R. Tibbo's "Primarily History in America: How U.S. Historians Search for Primary Materials at the Dawn of the Digital Age" from 2003 serves nicely as a historiography of information searching for historians, as well as representing many of the surveys that concentrate on how historians react to changing technologies. Before the birth of OPACs and their growth in access and sophistication during the 1980s, historians typically found secondary sources through the bibliographies of the works they read, book reviews in journals, specialized indexes, and other similar tools (13). The development of more sophisticated online databases allowed for a proliferation of electronic resources, which significantly improved access to secondary works and their physical acquisition. However, this development highlights the duality of what historians find most useful in their searching. Common across all surveys are the differences between finding secondary works for bibliographic and research help, versus primary historical documents meant to facilitate publishing and individual research, and the importance historians place on this dichotomy (Chassanoff 460).

SINCE THE DIGITAL REVOLUTION IN THE 1980S, SEVERAL STUDIES HAVE BEEN UNDERTAKEN TO DETERMINE WHAT HUMANITIES PROFESSORS GENERALLY, AND HISTORY PROFESSORS, SPECIFICALLY, FIND MOST USEFUL IN THEIR PURSUIT OF INFORMATION.

This key difference represents one of the most important aspects of assessing the information needs of historians. By separating secondary sources from primary source materials (often represented in archives or as physical historical materials for research), several studies have drawn interesting conclusions. Most notably, historians responding to surveys of their information preferences strongly prefer more library finding aids and more detail on aids that already exist, but have less interest in the digitization of primary sources (Anderson 100). This assertion is supported elsewhere by a self-critical examination of historians' supposed stubbornness to learning new techniques and technologies, which, among other things, has produced a disinclination to adopt digital archival sources in preference of "old-school" item handling (Brown 334). Perhaps then, it is not surprising that historians often believe that library archives need to prioritize extending their building hours more than they need to work towards digitization (Anderson 100). Despite that attitude revealed in 2004, newer surveys of historians' interactions with digital archives have demonstrated an increasing awareness of their utility and the librarian's place within that system. A survey conducted nearly a decade after Anderson's paper indicated that 93% of respondents now use digital materials in their research (Chassanoff 470). Still, even with this sure sign of historians' increasing confidence in digitization and online archives, the study found that their level of interest was tied primarily to two things: the availability of the physical item for examination after online perusal, and trust in the institution that held the item itself (Chassanoff 470-71). In that case, the clearest preference of historians remains the ability to interact physically with primary documents, despite their growing utilization of digital resources.

Returning to the concept of trust is also important for understanding the information behaviors of historians. That level of trust has been examined several times in the literature, most notably by looking at how historians orient their research in archival spaces, with some studies even including psychological factors. Common findings point to the need of historical researchers to familiarize themselves and interact with archivists and librarians regularly to achieve that trust in the sources they manage, a process that necessitates physical presence (Duff 480-81).

Complementary to online access to sources are the use of physical library materials and the usage patterns they necessitate. It has been a truism in the field of history that despite changing tools for research and information searching, the process of writing history has changed little over the decades (Gilmore 668). Given this relative truth, historians continue to access information with the same goals that have traditionally characterized the field. A long-term goal for researchers of historians' information-seeking patterns has been adequately defining and ranking the relative importance of the sources historians pursue. The standard set by Sue Stone in 1982 to define researchers in the humanities has largely stood the test of time (and includes historians in its definition). Stone determined that they characteristically work alone, need to browse materials, are comfortable and willing to research across disci-

plines to find sources, and despite using a wide range of sources, prefer books and journal articles (Stone 295-6). Newer studies confirm that despite the intervening decades since her article, little has changed for humanities researchers, particularly in their attachment to books and journal articles. In one survey, 99% and 98% of historian respondents respectively considered books and journal articles important to their research (Dalton 405). Of all materials surveyed, these two item types were the most favored, while things like genealogical sources, museum pieces, and audio-visual materials emerged as the least important. It is not surprising then that historians generally feel their research is more likely to be productive when they are able to obtain print materials. One survey discovered that 70% of respondents believed their research queries were more likely to be satisfied by print resources than electronic resources (Ge 443).

Further research into the information-seeking practices of historians reveals other important clues, especially with regard to libraries and their catalogs. In a series of interviews, one researcher found that both faculty and graduate students do not rely heavily on librarians as a primary method of research, despite their consistent utilization of librarians when looking for hard-to-find materials (Barrett 329). However, a discrepancy emerged between graduate students, younger faculty, and "older faculty" in several areas of these interviews that may belie a generation gap in information researching among historians. In particular, graduate students and younger faculty were more likely to conduct initial research online. This sentiment is echoed in Dalton's survey of historians and their ways of discovering information, which found that only 3% viewed libraries or reference librarians as their primary method of discovery. However, library catalogs constituted the third highest of these primary search tools at 20%, and given that archival sources constituted the next highest primary means of discovery at 19%, it should be noted that greater coordination between archives and library cataloging systems is a logical step for organizational adjustment (Dalton 407). Indeed, when combining the pieces of the survey that independently summarized librarianship or library-work (non-archival), that number ballooned to 57%, demonstrating the role libraries and librarians play in the combined approaches historians take.

Historians approach information searching through a variety of methods, largely defined by their pursuit of primary or secondary sources for their research. The guiding principles that foster their research and writing significantly iinfluence their information needs by determining the paths they will take to foster good information behaviors. As an academic group, they are well versed in discovery tools, both online and through interactions with archival and library personnel. That historians continue to regard books and scholarly journals as the primary methods of information gathering is hardly surprising for such a traditional discipline, but it should be noted that many historians recognize the growing importance of digital sources and online access. As the ways of information seeking have changed, so too have historians in an effort to continue their research and scholarship.

Using these truisms, libraries and librarians can approach their services to this group more effectively. Where possible, subject librarians or department liaisons specific to history can fill the gap of information assets in an effort to connect library functions to this group. Though the research suggests librarians are no longer the *primary* means of contact, they still play a role in anticipating the research needs of academic historians. Current research on library liaisons suggests that even as in-person faculty liaison work continues to be unevenly distributed, academic faculty still associate strong librarian-academic faculty relationships with consistent contact and assistance (Arendt & Lotts 175). Assisting collection development departments is another seemingly simple way to serve the role of anticipator, whether that is by pushing to procure history-focused databases, recommending the acquisition of relevant monographs in the field, or other collection-focused work. In effect, anticipating the needs of academic historians differs little from other disciplines or even from long-standardized librarian practices. As historians have joined general academics in shifting their initial discovery and research to online platforms, libraries can adapt to this pattern by meeting them at a variety of compass points, including through the web. Subject guides and other content management platforms that facilitate online discovery patterns service this need nicely. Still, given the proclivity of academic historians to work on their own or through their own sources, liaison work may not be the best or most productive way to facilitate their research. Instead, concentration on services like interlibrary loan, collection development, and other means of delivering items into the hands of academic historians may be choices that are more prudent. The inherent contradictions in the needs of academic historians – their preferentially lonely search for information coupled with their need for the people who can help provide that information – leave libraries and librarians with both challenges and opportunities in working with this faculty group.

THOUGH THE RESEARCH SUGGESTS LIBRARIANS ARE NO LONGER THE PRIMARY MEANS OF CONTACT, THEY STILL PLAY A ROLE IN ANTICIPATING THE RESEARCH NEEDS OF ACADEMIC HISTORIANS.

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