Rethinking Tradition: The loss of serendipity and the impact of technology on the historical research process

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ABSTRACT
The move towards the digital humanities will see a growing interest in tools such as Ebooks. This study examines how historians feel Ebooks and other technologies are impacting their research process. Findings indicate that historians feel the digital environment makes chances of a serendipitous encounter with a text unlikely. They continue to try to recreate an atmosphere that encourages serendipity within their field, and would readily welcome a method to make this possible.

Keywords
Historians, serendipity, Ebooks, digital humanities

INTRODUCTION
Humanities scholarship has been changing as digital tools become integrated into scholarship and teaching. While this move toward the use of computers in the humanities is not new (Busa, 1980), certainly the ubiquity and widespread acceptance is unprecedented. This has led toward the formation of the digital humanities as a field of inquiry. A number of innovative studies have surfaced investigating the types of electronic tools that humanists use in their research and teaching (Toms & O'Brien, 2008), their perceptions toward the use of these tools (Barrett, 2005), and their willingness to adopt new electronic tools in their scholarship and teaching (Tahir, Mahmood, & Shafique, 2010).

Despite this increased interest, few studies have examined the extent to which the reliance on digital tools affects scholar’s ability to gain new insights. One aspect of particular relevance is the interrelation between electronic tools and serendipity. Serendipity is generally understood as the chance encountering of information (Erdelez, 2004), which leads toward a fortuitous outcome or new insight (Rubin, Burkell, & Quan-Haase, 2011). Serendipity has consistently been shown to play an important role in scientific discoveries, and has also been shown to be essential in the scholarship of humanists (Duff and Johnson, 2002).

METHODS
We conducted 10 semi-structured interviews with graduate students and professors working in the field of history, who were based in London, Ontario. The interviews were transcribed and coded using QSR NVIVO software to analyze the data using a grounded theory approach. (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

FINDINGS
Historians in the present study have started to use Ebooks because of their benefits to scholarship and teaching, such as keyword searching, portability, ease of access, fact-checking and convenience. However, none of the participants indicated that they would use Ebooks for researching a topic at length and in-depth, and four of them indicated that they prefer to go to the library (and to teach their students to do so) until the recreation of serendipity is made possible.

Loss of serendipity: The interviews indicated a definite anxiety over the possible loss of the chance encounter if historians made the move to Ebooks. The primary concern of participants is that search engines and digital documents allow for quick retrieval of information, scholars who make use of them are less likely to browse information, and therefore are less likely to come across anything by chance. Faculty were also unlikely to encourage their students to use Ebooks because they felt that their students would not experience the serendipity in the research process in the same way that they themselves did in their early careers.

Possible re-emergence of Serendipity: Despite these anxieties, many of the participants were curious about Ebooks and how the technology could aid their teaching and research. They were willing to experiment with Ebooks.

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and seemed to hold out hope that serendipity might be built back into these digital systems:

**Introducing new “heuristic” forms of serendipity:** Some faculty members were already attempting to recreate serendipity online. One participant encouraged her students to use the library website much like they would a physical library; by looking up a book relevant to their studies and then “browsing the catalog” by looking through the books in the order they would be on the shelves, a feature which this institution’s library makes possible. This shows that despite her anxiety over the loss of serendipity, the participant was still willing to try and recreate the atmosphere for a chance encounter to occur.

**DISCUSSION**

There is a great concern amongst historians that new means of accessing digital information does not allow for serendipity. Currently history faculty are unlikely to encourage the use of Ebooks and search engines amongst their students because it detracts from the historical research process.

This research makes it clear that serendipity plays an important role in the traditional research practices of historians. The interviews showed that going to the stacks to browse and the possibility of a chance encounter with information were a formative part of the selection of evidence, and are perhaps perceived by history scholars as a rite of passage.

Tradition, or the desire for the printed book, is a central aspect in the concern toward the sole reliance on Ebooks (Brunson 2008, Walton 2008). For historians, it is not just the physical book that is traditionally associated with their research, but also the act of going to the library, selecting material and (possibly) having a serendipitous encounter. For historians, tradition is more than just accessing information in old fashioned ways, but rather it encompasses the information practices that allow for new insights to form in the context of historical scholarship.

As the move towards the digital humanities continues, it is likely that historians involved in this shift will work to recreate serendipity. As some historians are already looking for ways to encourage chance encounters online, and larger companies such as Google work to recreate serendipity in the larger digital world, it is likely that this key element will re-emerge as a needed part of historical scholarship. When this finally occurs, it could result in entirely new study habits, teaching methods and research practices by historians.

**REFERENCES**


