Community connections – the renaissance of local history
Dr Lisa Murray, City of Sydney historian, Australian Historical Association paper, 2012.

As a public historian, I have always been interested in local history and its connections with the wider historical narrative of social and urban history. In this paper I will explore the impact of the digital humanities on the practice and production of local and community history. Shunned and ignored by academics for decades, local history is becoming sexy once more as the digital humanities provide new opportunities for presenting local history. Mapping and geo-referencing privileges local and place based information. More excitingly, the complicated relationships that make up a community's history can be visualised and connected using the digital humanities. Drawing on a range of examples - from Historypin and walking tour apps to the Dictionary of Sydney and Te Ara - I will argue that this transformation of local history production by the digital humanities is contributing to a renaissance in local history. Participation in the production of historical knowledge is growing, and new historical methodologies are emerging. Local history is finally finding its legitimate place within historiography and will ultimately revolutionise the research, writing, publication and teaching of history in the 21st century.

Word count 3,155 all inclusive.

As a public historian, I have always been interested in local and community history and its connections with the wider historical narrative. With the flourishing of the internet, we can access historical records and share our histories with greater ease and flair. But how are the digital humanities revolutionising history? What are the opportunities for local and community history? Today I want to survey this area of historical production in terms of participation, historical research, practice and methodology.

A purely digital history redefines the possibilities for local, urban and public history. Participation in the production of historical knowledge is growing, and new methodologies are emerging. Local history is finally finding its legitimate place within historiography and will ultimately revolutionise the research, writing, publication and teaching of history in the 21st century. How will academic scholarship respond to the broadening participation in community and local history? I will argue we need rethink how history is being taught, published and awarded in academic circles.

Surveying

As we are all well aware, history is powerfully (re)presented on the internet and digital tools overcome a number of traditional publishing restrictions. We are all happy to be liberated from the printed page. Niche audiences can be found, multimedia allows for a much wider and richer presentation of images alongside other primary source material, and digital technologies allow for time-spatial mapping.

Digitisation projects provide the ground work for easier access and analysis of sources. From the Guttenberg project to TROVE, historical questions can be answered much more quickly. The digitisation of records is a particular boon for genealogists and family historians, opening up new archives and sources and allowing datasets to be mined for kinship connections. Graeme Davison called this transformation of research practices in genealogy 'speed-relating'.[1] But of course, family historians are not the only beneficiaries – all historians are, and many of us are addicted.
[For example, just last week I had to undertake a heritage analysis of the place names of Dawes Point, Millers Point and Walsh Bay, to respond to a community proposal that Walsh Bay be re-assigned as a suburb. I was able to search transcribed versions of first fleet journals and the Sydney Gazette to establish when particular place names were first in common usage. This was all done in a matter of moments and provided strong evidence for continuity and longevity of place names.]

These digitisation projects also open up historical resources to a much wider audience. They provide greater accessibility and encourages more people to go the next step and use the sources to participate in historical production.

The development of digital tools assists community groups and local councils to bring their materials onto the web. Local history collections, especially photographs and oral histories, are migrating to online access. Technological advances in file sizes and storage means that oral history collections are finding a new lease of life and a wider audience on the web.[2]

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[1] Professor Graeme Davison, "Speed-relating: family history in the digital age", 11th Don Grant Lecture, 2007. http://www.slv.vic.gov.au/node/1100
[2] Eg. camdenVOICESonline http://www.library.camden.nsw.gov.au/camdenvoices/

Flickr is being used by many cultural institutions, including State Records NSW and the Powerhouse Museum, to share their photographic collections, encouraging people to comment on the photos, identify places or dates, and help with cataloguing conundrums. Detailed discussions of image locations, connecting disparate photographs in collections, are taking place through Flickr.
[I was recently astounded and excited to discover photographs that I'd found on microfilm at State Records were also available through Flickr; and that there were others on the same subject not currently identifiable in the catalogue or on microfilm that had been linked and connected in Flickr.]

The City of Sydney Archives is having some success reaching new audiences by sharing historic images on the City's facebook page. Each week an Archive pic is shared with nearly 17,000 friends. Discussion and communities are created by people guessing where shots were taken. Images get shared and people learn about the breadth and depth of the Archives' collection.

HistoryPin builds upon the growing digitisation of photographs in both institutions and personal collections to connect an image to place. It is a simple idea, to use google maps as a pinboard to stick on your historical photographs. This concept can be used on a very basic level to add photos with short commentaries; but other tools allow then and now comparisons, and the construction of historical tours.

Similar things are being done by museums for exhibitions or to highlight the breadth and depth of their collections. There are "then and now apps" such as the Historic Houses Trust "Painting the Rocks" and the London Museum's
"Streetmuseum". Walking tours abound[3], and segue into interactive games with applications such as Digimacq, ChinaHeart, or Razorhurst.

The Museum of Victoria takes participation in local and community history much further with their Making History website, developed with the Public History Institute at Monash University.[4] Through Making

[3] Powerhouse Museum and Sydney Observatory MyTours walks (Ultimo, pubs, the Rocks). Glebe walks http://www.glebewalks.com.au/
[4] Making History http://museumvictoria.com.au/discoverycentre/websites/making-history/

History school groups or individuals can research, create and share family and community stories. Students are encouraged to create digital stories around four themes: Living with Natural Disasters, World Events / Local Impacts, Cultural Identity / Migration Stories, and Family and Community Life. This is an education based site, teaching students about the practice of history, how to go about research, how to do oral histories, and giving access to academic experts as they explain what they do. And then, the digital tools are there so students can create their own digital stories.

The most expansive category of historical production is of course the category of encyclopedias. Wikipedia is a single entry example of an online encyclopedia, using an open and democratic production model. Biographical dictionaries flourish, while other enterprises try to use more of the opportunities offered by the digital humanities. Te Ara, encyclopedia of NZ, the Historical Atlas of Queensland and the Dictionary of Sydney are exciting, successful examples of encyclopaedic projects. At this point I'll declare my interest: I *do* chair the Board of Trustees for the Dictionary of Sydney and so I *will* wax lyrical about it. But I believe in the project because I am a public historian and I support all parts of the community contributing to and learning from history projects.

Practising

Digital history is being produced by cultural institutions, by historical societies, and by individuals. I've only touched upon a few of the ways local and community history is being presented on the digital frontier. I haven't even bothered to touch upon blogs, another bounteous arena for the presentation and discussion of history.

It's hardly controversial in this gathering to say digital history is transforming the way we present and do history. But it is something I believe academic historians need to consider more seriously. What does it mean for the practise of history?

I want to talk about the three C's -- Connectivity, community and collaboration – and how together they are once again bringing local history into the foreground of historical practice.

One of the exciting things about digital history is its connectivity. Each piece of information can become suspended in a web of connections.

Connectivity in the digital humanities places new demands on the way historians write and how history is produced. By connecting disparate articles, items, facts, in a large digital humanities project like the Dictionary of Sydney, arguments and historical facts can be cross-reference and compared. The amalgamation, layering and linking of articles can make new connections and bring scholarship into new contexts.
[So we can discover that Edward Flood was the builder of the Garrison Church, a founding member of the Australian Cricket Club, and was Mayor of Sydney and a member of parliament.[5]]
It can lead to a greater accuracy than that demanded by the most rigorous editor. Research from 20 or 30 years ago is not always standing up to the modern research methodologies of digitisation projects. Digital history is forcing historians to become more accountable.

The Dictionary of Sydney's historical model, with its strong emphasis upon place, geo-referencing and time, is also forcing historians to be more specific about where and when things happened. Many of our academic contributors, particularly of larger thematic pieces, have often found it challenging to drag the thematic back down to the particular. But it is exciting for the local historian, to consider how the local fits into the regional, state and national narrative.

Now let's talk a bit about community – and more particularly, the globalisation of community history. Digital history projects have enormous potential for local and community history, especially for the way family and local history can be connected into and reflect the complexity of urban history.

Place and time can be mapped and visualised in digital projects. Suddenly, historians can represent the complicated relationships of a community and demonstrate how they change over time. Historical networks of families, businesses and government, can come alive through digital connections.

[5] http://www.dictionaryofsydney.org/person/flood_edward

The new information structures offered by digital histories mean that the presentation of history no longer has to be article-centric. By themselves the information structures can connect and demonstrate the complex relationships and networks of a city and can provide a different historical narrative.

Through such digital histories, local history has the potential to be a leading light in historical scholarship and production once more, a position it hasn't really held since the 1970s.

There are many types of collaborative structures available in digital production - Crowd sourcing, open source production, share-and-share alike - which is exciting for public historians.

Love it or hate it, Wikipedia encourages everyone to contribute and share their knowledge. Even if you don't always agree with the output, historians have to acknowledge the process is closely aligned with historical methodologies. As Roy Rosenzweig pointed out (in his excellent critical analysis of Wikipedia) "the process of creating Wikipedia fosters an appreciation of the very skills that historians try to teach".[6] And if we look at sheer volume, local history is one genre of history that is strongly represented.

The Dictionary of Sydney takes an alternative route, embracing shared authority. All articles are authored, but there are multiple voices and perspectives. It highlights the diversity of Sydney's cultures and communities, while also providing a unified framework through which Sydney's history can be accessed. And this allows historiography to flourish and changes in historical understandings to be visible over the long-term development of the project.

But whichever mode of production you endorse, public history and digital history is being written by a wide range of people, and the sources, resources, interpretations and voices out there are growing exponentially.

Rethinking history methodologies

[6] Roy Rosenzweig, *Clio Wired*, p. 73.

The democratisation of historical production is very exciting, but it does raise some questions and challenges for history methodology, especially around public understandings of how historical research is undertaken and how history can be presented.

First. Are some sources being privileged?
In the Making History website, Museum Victoria encourages students to use online collections for their research. Of course this allows greater access to a whole range sources from the classroom, rather than a visit to one collection or museum. But does digitisation lead to the privileging of certain sources and will historians neglect other sources?

I am driven to ponder this, not out of any self-righteous belief in the importance of original records in the archive, but through personal experience. I now use TROVE, and particularly the digitised newspapers, virtually every day in my work at Sydney City Council. On the odd occasion of technical problems, I've had a moment of panic. I have to really stop and think: what other sources I can call upon quickly to answer my research questions? Am I privileging certain sources because of ease of access, and is this changing or distorting the history that I am writing?

On the flip side, what happens to all the community museum and local history collections that can't afford digitisation? Not to mention all the records in state archive collections that are too vast or so obscure that they will never make it on to the digitisation agenda? Who will be bothered to access these records?

Second. Will research subjects change due to accessibility of records?
Digitisation is an expensive business. Priorities need to be made on the digitisation of records. The availability of digitised records will inevitably shape the subject matter of historical research. Amazing digital history projects (like Digital Harlem) would not have been possible without the digitisation of newspapers and computer mapping. But the potential for all history is based on the accessibility and feasibility of source material. If the material is not readily available, the history cannot or will not be researched and written. Good public access to records, original and digitised, needs to be maintained or research avenues may be closed off.

Third. Will research practices change?
Stephen Ramsay has argued that the digital humanities are dramatically changing the methodological approach to our consumption of information. The proliferation of hypertext and interactivity encourages 'browsing' or what he calls 'screwing around'. Of course, the digital humanities allow for more powerful searching and research methods. But, Ramsay argues, 'once you have programmatic access to the content of the library, screwing around suddenly become a far more illuminating and useful activity'.[7]

This might be true for the consumption of information, but I think the opposite is true for history research methodologies. Google, digitised catalogues, and federated searches are shaping how history research is being undertaken, requiring more targeted research questions.

The ubiquity of keyword searching reinforces the primacy of names, which is the main research question for genealogists and family historians. As a key user group of archival and research collections, family history and genealogy researchers have a strong influence on how institutions catalogue and index their records, and on how they prioritise their digitisation projects. Professional historians cannot underestimate their influence and we need to be aware of how that might affect the accessibility of sources and research practices.

Expectations, particularly amongst the general public, are growing that historical research can be done instantaneously online. Remember Graeme Davison's term "speed-relating". Ancestry.com has built its entire subscription databases around this desire and sites such as the Making History also foster that impression.

Historical research, however, is not always instantaneous. It is not just about finding the sources. To produce good history you need to analyse the sources. Which brings me to my fourth point.

(Fourth.) Whither now context and meaning?

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[7] Stephen Ramsay 'The Hermeneutics of Screwing Around: or What You Do with a Million Books', Paper presented to the Playing with Technology in History conference, Niagara-on-the-Lake, Canada April 2010, p6 (Online). Available: http://www.playingwithhistory.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/04/hermeneutics.pdf (Accessed 10 November 2010).

Historical context, browsing and serendipitous discovery have long been part of history research.

Who hasn't found a piece of information whilst scrolling through the microfilm newspaper that provides a greater understanding to an event or editorial commentary? The instantaneous result in TROVE subverts all of this. The context of newspaper articles and archival collections can be lost in the digitisation and presentation of material. And it has to be said, it is much harder to view the newspaper as a whole, page by page, on TROVE than it is on microfilm or original paper format.

But the practise of history goes beyond that. Professional historians through years of research experience, training and expertise, are able to write compelling histories that draw out historical significance and provide historical context. The democratisation of historical practice through digital tools and publishing means that professional historians and their expertise are no longer the privileged producers of historical knowledge. And this changes the type of history that is written. It can be parochial, inclusive, trivial. It can lack a sense of historical perspective, context, and significance. This has always been the tension between amateur or popular history and professional history; but digital history production amplifies the tension.

So to my final point - How will academic scholarship respond to the broadening participation in community and local history?

A quick survey of university courses in Australia suggests that academic historians are unaware of or not responding to the democratisation of history provided by the digital humanities. The University of New England, led by Janis Wilton, is the only university actively teaching local and family history methodologies. Even when you widen the scope to embrace public history courses, on the understanding that this would need to be firmly grounded in the local, it is thin pickings. Courses are either one semester occasional offerings, or post-graduate courses. UTS has its Australian Centre for Public History, and Monash University leads the way in Victoria with its Institute for Public History. Broaden it out still further to urban history, you'll get a few more. But the alarm bells are already sounding. Primary school students study more local history than university history students do.

This is a call to arms. Local and community history is being digitised, researched and produced by a broad spectrum of our community, but relatively few academic historians are actively participating in this arena. Like the heritage movement before it, the capabilities of the digital world are generating popular interest in local history. The result can be a localism and parochialism that favours quirky facts over historical significance and context. Unless the critical methodologies of public historians are more widely embraced and taught, digital histories will be tarred with the same brush that antiquarians and collectors were in days of yore.

Public and academic historians need to come to grips with digital history to see how they can participate. Their experience and expertise in historical context and significance can greatly enhance digital history. We will need to start teaching new ways of thinking about history. History is not only about narrative and context; some of this gets undone in large digital history enterprises. In the future the historical model – the means of connecting and visualising the scholarship – will contribute to our historical narrative and understanding, shaping and connecting the historical product. Historians need to be prepared to be challenged in their approaches and views; and they need embrace the renaissance of local and community history.