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Distance Researching via the Internet: A Researcher's Perspective

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In 1995, an advisory panel asked a group of graduate students in Britain whether it was viable to undertake doctoral research in the field of American Studies given that the majority of the material they would require was likely to be housed three thousand miles away. By its very nature a doctoral dissertation relies heavily on primary source material, exactly the type of material that would appear to be out of the reach of the long distance researcher. How could they hope to carry out the amount of research needed to fulfill the requirements of a Ph.D., with the twin problems of ever increasing travel costs and of limited funding? The slightly indignant students assured the members of the panel that, despite the difficulties, they could manage and that the tasks they had undertaken were most certainly worthwhile.

Although students in Britain have managed to conduct graduate research in the field of American Studies for several

decades,[1] the question did raise the financial issue that is fundamental to all postgraduates. Funding for research in the humanities is highly competitive, and given the constraints placed on universities in the present economic climate, this is a situation which seems set to get worse. Even for those students fortunate enough to obtain either a financial award or a graduate teaching post, having to undertake several research trips is both time consuming and a severe strain on their budgets.

As an American Studies student at Keele University, the subject of my own doctoral research focuses on the developments that took place in southern[2] women's higher education from 1880 to 1910, and how these developments reflected the idea of a distinctive Southern Progressivism that sought to "reconcile progress and tradition."[3] Southern women's education, especially in the late nineteenth century, is an area which has hitherto been largely ignored by historians, but one which I feel is highly significant in

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[1] At Keele University, where Professor David Adams,O.B.E., founded the American Studies program in the early 1960s, there were thirty-five students registered for research in the American Studies department during 1996–1997 (Department of American Studies Annual Report, 1996, and American Studies Student Handbook, 1996/97).

[2] For the purpose of my dissertation, the South is defined as the ex-Confederate States.

[3] See Dewey W. Grantham, *Southern Progressivism; The Reconciliation of Progress and Tradition* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1983). Grantham maintains that "the great eductional awakening" which took place during this era was the "aspect of social reform" that "touched the lives of more of the region's inhabitants" than any other. It was also the movement which reflected most "faithfully" all the "ingredients in southern progressivism." p. 246.

understanding how southern society evolved during the second half of the nineteenth century.

Before my project could progress, there were several important issues to consider. For example, given the scope of the research, how many trips to the United States would I *need* and how many could I *feasibly undertake*? Would I be able to gather enough material to reach any significant conclusions, or would I need to limit the geographical scope of the research?

I started, as any researcher does, by examining the few secondary sources available to me at the time. From these I compiled a very basic list of institutions which were operating or founded during the latter part of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth century. I then worked my way laboriously through a copy of the *American Council on Education's Review of American Universities and Colleges*, taking note of all those southern institutions founded in the nineteenth century which provided higher education for women. Next, much to the amusement of some of my colleagues, I sat down and wrote several letters to college archives requesting information about the data held in their libraries, and impatiently awaited their replies.

In the meantime, having just acquired an on-line computer at home, I decided to see just what this "alien" technology had to offer. In the privacy of my study, where my complete lack of computer literacy could remain hidden, I found my way onto the "net" (Internet). Here, thanks to the "information super highway," the collection of material relevant to my project proved almost overwhelming. I have managed to locate the records for many of the pertinent

including some no longer in existence. Also, by using electronic mail (e-mail), I accumulated a vast amount of material—college catalogs, bulletins, library catalogs, student yearbooks, president reports, alumnae tracking records, and even conference papers—all vital to the research. Most exciting, I achieved all this without having to leave Cheshire!

Initially, I decided to try a simple search on the World Wide Web using the phrase *American colleges* and was surprised when I immediately gained access to a list of institutions across the continent. This I found could be further refined by state, by region, or by the type of college.[4] While it would appear that these web pages were designed mainly for the use of prospective and existing students, they proved to be an invaluable source of wider information. The amount of detail included on these sites tends to vary, but nearly all provide a brief history of the college or university which allowed me to select those relevant to my research. Even more important, the majority of the college web sites also supply direct links to their libraries and special collections. These library pages contain anything from a brief outline of the material held to detailed inventories, bibliographical information, and e-mail links to archival personnel. The more sophisticated web sites also assist with links to other valuable

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[4] The CollegeNet at <http://www.collegenet.com/cgi-bin/Webdriver?Mival=cn search_*_input&HSCODE=O> allows one to search by state, region, name of school, majors, sports, and by type, such as public, private, with or without religious affiliation.

resources such as state or county archives.[5] In addition, a few produce lists of electronic sources, known as E-sources, which refer to a group of web pages which cover specific topics, such as women's studies.[6]

Before going any further, there are several points that need clarification. Firstly, this article has not been written by a computer whiz-kid but a technologically challenged individual who, until very recently, would never have dreamed of "surfing the net." This fact clearly highlights a very important advantage of the Internet, its simplicity! Virtually the only skills one needs to carry out this method of researching are a modicum of common sense, a degree of lateral thinking, and the ability to read instructions.

Secondly, research trips are never going to become obsolete, at least not in the foreseeable future. They are still essential if dealing with large collections, oral testimony, or manuscripts held in private hands. One must also recognize that archival Internet sources usually represent only a fraction of an individual institution's holdings. However, no matter how careful one is, research trips to the United States are

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[5] For example, LaGrange College Web site, <http://www.lgc.peachnet. edu/l_c_hoom.htm>, gave me a direct link to the Troup County Archives at <http://www.lgc.peachnet.edu/archives/tcarchiv.htm>, which proved invaluable in my search for material on not only LaGrange but also the Southern Female College. Similarly, the Society of Georgia Archivists have a page devoted to Archives and Archive-Related Resources, <http://www. peacock.gac.peachnet.edu/~sga/links.html>.

[6] Duke University has a special interest in women's higher education, and their bibliogaphical material was particularly helpful, <http://odyssey. lib.duke.edu/women/higher.html>. They also have a page for Women's Studies Resources on the Net, <http://odyssey.lib.duke.edu/women/cyber. html>.

costly affairs, a fact that tends to limit them both in terms of number and of length of stay. Assuming one has access to the necessary equipment, using the World Wide Web (WWW) and e-mail to trace and request material helps to minimize the number of such visits required. Just as the word processor has attributes and advantages not found in a typewriter, there are several distinct benefits to be derived from researching via the Internet. These include cost-effectiveness, speed, more effective time management, and the ability to cover a wide geographical area. To illustrate these points, in 1996 I spent three weeks travelling around the South during which time I carried out intensive research at two universities, one college, and two archives. In the past year, via the super highway, I have regularly "visited" well over thirty archives in eleven states and "dropped in" to dozens of others, "travelling" from Kentucky to Louisiana, from Massachusetts to Mississippi, from Alabama to Virginia. These "visits" have resulted in the accumulation of hundreds of documents essential to my research.

Thirdly, when discussing researching via the Internet I am in fact talking about two distinct yet interwoven aspects of the modern communications network. Firstly, there is the World Wide Web. This is a graphical user interface, which is a way of being able to store and retrieve information by hypertext or graphics via a computer terminal.[7] Secondly, there is electronic mail, perhaps the area of the Internet with which

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[7] Raymond Day, "American Studies on the World Wide Web," *Journal of the Library and Resources Sub-Committee of the British Association for American Studies*. Quoted in *American Studies Library Newsletter*, 43 (January 1997): 12.

scholars are most familiar. By using a combination of these twin resources, researchers can now gain access to a wealth of university libraries, archives, and other repositories across the world. As an increasing number of people go "on-line" at home, and as most British universities now provide free Internet facilities, scholars have the opportunity to delve into areas of research that once they could only dream. Distance ceases to be a stumbling block, and the ideal of a truly global academic community moves a step nearer.

So the WWW can enable the researcher to track down repositories and also to construct a relevant bibliography. Even if one goes no further than this, the Internet can help a scholar plan a research trip more efficiently. However, and even more excitingly, it can give the scholar direct access to primary source material via the computer screen. This is made possible by the digitizing, scanning, and electronic encoding of documents, books, photographs, and the like. While this is still a relatively new innovation, the amount of material available in this form is growing daily. Among the most prominent sites delivering this type of service are *Documenting the American South: The Southern Experience in 19th Century America* (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill), the *American Memory Collection* (Library of Congress), the *Making of America* (University of Michigan), and the *Valley of the Shadow* project (University of Virginia).[8] The

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[8] Web sites are *Documenting the American South*, <http://sunsite.unc.edu/docsouth/index.html >; *American Memory Collection*, <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/amtitle.new.html >; *Making of America*, <http://www.umdl.umich.edu/moa/html >; *Valley of the Shadow or Valley Archive*, <http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/vshadow2/tour.html >.

material available on these sites ranges from slave narratives, autobiographies, and diaries to photographic and daguerreo-type collections while the scope of the topics included is infinite, covering Twentieth-Century Architecture to Civil War photography and Californian Folk Music to the Military records. In addition, *The On-Line Books Page*, which is updated every few days, lists all the books available in encoded text on the Web.[9] Depending on the speed of the equipment used, the time needed to retrieve and download this type of material may be quite considerable. However, particularly for the distance researcher, the advantages of being able to access material this way outweighs the disadvantages.

A criticism that has been levied at using the Internet for serious research is that it cuts down the instances of serendipitous finds. This is simply not the case. One site or page will invariably provide routes to others; therefore, it is more than possible to experience the thrill of the unsolicited discovery in cyberspace. For example, a part of my thesis involves examining the way that southern women's higher education changed after the Civil War, so I decided to pay a "visit" to a relatively new site entitled *Civil War Women: Primary Sources on the Internet.*[10] By way of their Diaries and Letters page, I "travelled" along the super highway to

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[9] For the latest update and new listing on *The On-Line Books Page*, < http://pecan.srv.cs.cmu.edu/afs/cs/misc/mosiac/common/omega.web.book new.html >. From here, one can connect to the main page, but this is a very large site and takes a significant amount of time to load.

[10] *Civil War Women Primary Resources on the Net*, < http:// scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/women/cwdocs.html >.

Virginia's *Valley of the Shadow: Two Communities in the Civil War* site. This proved to be a comprehensive web site, and during my "walk" around the "shelves," I obtained an annotated copy of the diary of Sarah Cordelia Wright (1853), a pupil at one of the establishments included in my research; an article from the *Staunton Vindicator*, 17 June 1859, putting forward the Methodist Episcopal Church's argument for further female education; and from a database of the 1860 Census, a breakdown of all the female teachers in Augusta and Franklin Counties, their names, their place of work, place of birth, age statistics by mean, mode, and median, real estate statistics, and personal estates. In addition, I was able to download the population of the two counties by age and sex and by denomination.

On yet another "trip," I came across digital transcripts of *Education of Woman: Baccalaureate Address of Thomas Holmes D.D.* (1874), *The Educator: or Hours With My Pupils* (1876), plus *Educational Reminiscences and Suggestions* (first published in 1874, and written by a pioneer of female colleges in America, Catherine E. Beecher).[11] The latter highlights the debates going on during the second half of the nineteenth century about the detrimental effect of higher education on women's health, whether women should be admitted to men's colleges and professional schools, and how far women should be allowed to climb up the academic ladder. This information, totally unsought, and unexpected,

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[11] Catherine Beecher, *Educational Reminiscences*, <http://www.umdl. umich.edu/cgi-bin/moa/sgml/moa-idx?notisid=AJL6688>.

was gathered in a couple of hours for the cost of a local phone call.

So within hours rather than weeks researchers can effectively sift through a vast amount of data pinpointing that which is relevant to their own fields. Moreover, it is not only the large academic establishment that offers sophisticated tracking and retrieval resources. One of my earliest contacts was with the director of a county archive who, to my amazement and delight, e-mailed me, as an attachment, their holdings on two nineteenth-century female colleges and told me to let them know which items were of interest to me![12] However, having located the required material, the next problem was to find a way of accessing it. It is here that e-mail comes into its own. Once again, there is nothing to prevent a research student simply sending a letter by regular mail or faxing or telephoning a request, but it is quicker, cheaper, and more convenient to use the super highway.

Internet users readily accept the immediacy and intimacy of e-mail over other forms of communication. Electronic mail circumnavigates the globe in seconds.[13] Having located a source and obtained a contact e-mail address, one can simply "order" material, which is then forwarded in return, usually in the form of photocopies or microfilm. In one instance, I was sent actual scanned material by e-mail, which was yet another

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[12] Kaye Lanning Minchew, Troup County Archives, in LaGrange, Georgia. In many ways, this contact made me realize that my project was indeed feasible.

[13] In one instance, I e-mailed a request to a contact in North Carolina, and the reply came back shortly from Canberra, Australia, where he was on a four-month job exchange!

exciting experience.[14] If the order is large, then one can make payment by international money order or by credit card. So far I have always managed to operate simply by mailing dollars. However, one tip when placing an order like this is to try to make the request as specific as possible. This will save both the researcher and the archivist at the other end a good deal of time. Another advantage of using e-mail is that it allows both sender and recipient a degree of flexibility, and personal space, which can lead to more effective time management.

It is probably reasonable to assume that many researchers have arrived at archives, having checked out the opening hours in advance, only to find that this is the one day in the year when a special event is being held or that there is some other interruption in normal service. When the visit is part of a tightly planned schedule that has meant travelling several thousand miles, this can be very frustrating. By the same token many archivists must have had the experience of an irate researcher demanding material found immediately, if not yesterday! By using the Internet both these situations may be avoided. An archivist can simply acknowledge receipt of the request and, then, deal with it at a convenient time.

Doctoral research can be a lonely task, but through the various *Humanities and Social Sciences* (H-Net) discussions groups, the distance researcher can "meet" other scholars

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[14] The scanned copy of the Programme and Syllabus for the County Institutes of Kentucky (1888) was sent by Morehead University. In order to download this type of material, one, of course, needs the right program, in this case Microsoft Powerpoint, but the results are particularly rewarding. In fact, it is exactly like reading the document in situ.

with similar interests and keep abreast of current developments. H-Net even has a job guide which is updated weekly. An on-line book review site that it maintains "permits our reviews to reach scholars with a speed unmatched in any other medium [and] brings a new dimension to the world of academic publishing."[15]

All research, of course, is ultimately a voyage of discovery. One starts with a broad topic which then becomes more focused with time and effort. During this process something which initially may have appeared insignificant can suddenly become essential to the successful completion of the work. Again the Internet can prove to be an invaluable tool. For example, nine months after returning from an American research trip, it suddenly became apparent that what nineteenth-century female students went on to do after graduating was vital to my analysis. In the past such a discovery would have caused considerable consternation. Now, because of the wonders of the communications revolution, one can trace, order, and receive the pertinent material in a relatively short length of time. More importantly, the prospect of another costly trip fades.

Through the wonders of cyberspace I now have nearly all the material I need to complete my thesis and the wherewithal to obtain the rest. However, as we approach the millennium there are still things that need to be accomplished in order for researchers and archivists to get the most out of

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[15] *Humanities and Social Sciences On Line*, <http://www.h-net.msu.edu/>. For the Southern Association of Women Historians, contact h-sawh@h-net.msu.edu.

the Internet. Scholars need to be made more aware of the advantages attached to using the Internet for research while universities and established scholars need to be more willing to accept and promote the validity of this method of researching. Eventually, more archival collections will be electronically encoded and placed on the Web. It is vital to recognize that in order to accomplish this, individual archives will require significantly more funding. In the meantime, from a scholar's point of view, it would be a help if archives could find the resources necessary to automate inventories.

This perspective has sought to provide a few hints and a degree of encouragement to those engaged in long distance research and in web resource design. Because of my area of interest, the examples I have given tend to relate to the South in general and women in particular. However, as previously stated, the range of topics covered now on the WWW is vast. Raymond Day estimates that "there is not a single academic discipline that has not been affected by the development of the Web."[16] Having noted that, I feel I must point out that, despite all the advantages of electronic wizardry, web sites do not construct themselves. It takes the willingness, hard work, dedication, and foresight of archivists and librarians to create databases suitable for inclusion on the Internet. It is these people who have given me encouragement and, in real terms, have made my research possible. It is they who have dealt patiently with my frequent, less-than-organized inquiries and who have collected, copied, and mailed the material I

[16] Day, *op cit.*, p.14.

requested. So, I dedicate this article to all of them, both
North and South, because without their unfailing cooperation
my dissertation would not exist.[17]

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for the American Studies departmental library.

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[17] I have come into contact with dozens of archivists and librarians over
the past year, and to list all of them would require another article!
However, I give a special thank you to Patricia Albright, Mount Holyoke
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