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The Critical Role of Historiography in Writing IS History

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Abstract:

Insightful histories of an academic field can only be written when there is sufficient raw material to serve as "grist for the mill" for historians. This is the first task for those who are monumentally interested in preserving the origins of a field from the ravages of time is to collect artifacts—written, verbal, visual, and physical—that can later be used in historical inquiries. But the critical perspective to know what to collect and how much to collect is served by historiography, the science that elaborates on the variety of methods and procedures that historians use. A simple but incomplete set of these variations include: political history, intellectual history, cultural history, and social history. Each of these viewpoints brings with it a different set of assumptions about what is important and, although there is considerable overlap among them, each brings a different set of requirements for artifactual evidence. Historiography should not be overlooked when the field of information systems begins an all-out effort to collect data about the history of the field.

Keywords: IS History, Historiography, Cultural History, Intellectual History, Political History.

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I. INTRODUCTION

If one were to ruminate on what activities would be most essential to begin writing the history of any academic field, no doubt the collection of important historical artifacts, both physical and digital, would be extremely high on the list. This is indubitably a critical activity as the IS field enters its second or third generation of existence. It has likely always been an important agenda item for the field (Mason, McKenney, & Copeland, 1997), but the urgency of the moment makes it even more so crucial (Hirschheim, Saunders, & Straub, 2012). Many of the field's original organizers (1950s-1960s) are either retiring or have passed. Thus, it is essential to capture as much information as possible now (and continuing into the future) to serve as grist for the mill of subsequent interpretive historians.

What may not be nearly as clear to present or future historians of the IS field is the central importance of the underlying structural elements of history writing and how this impacts the collection of certain documents and the ignoring of others. Historians adopt a historiographic viewpoint when they write histories, whether they know/are conscious of it or not. This perspective, therefore, needs to be ever-present and, even better, conscious on the part of historians when decisions about what artifacts to collect and how much to collect are made.

Let's think about a simple example of what I am talking about to anchor this discussion in real-world decisions. If a historian is interested in the social history of IS, then gathering data about IS academics' networks, interactions, ethnographic accounts is relevant. If a political history is the primary goal, then raw materials about the "movers and shakers" of the field by professional event or activity is key. These are undoubtedly overlapping sets, but it is possible to focus on one to the detriment of the other and such a decision would be an inexorable one that could likely never be corrected at a later time.

II. CONSIDERING HISTORIOGRAPHIC PERSPECTIVES IN THE COLLECTION OF RAW MATERIAL

Historians place high stock in historiography; that is, the methods and procedures used to interpret the past (a "lens" if you will) and the selected focus on a particular topic, such as the history of Greenland. In Section 3, I present a brief history of historiography to show why this orientation is so important, especially at this, the first major push in recent years to write the history of the IS field.

One of the first commentators on the need to consider how the historian must needs reflect their own period view or lens when writing history was Giambattista Vico in his 1725 opus *Scienza Nuova* (Vico, 1725). Vico argued for the value of other, newer ways of presenting the history of a phenomenon and, in so doing, showed that different eras will approach the interpretation of events in very different ways. In this sense, Vico was the father of historiography and historicism (Berlin, 1976; Hösle, 1990; Tagliacozzo & White, 1969; White, 1976).

III. POLITICAL, INTELLECTUAL, AND CULTURAL HISTORIES OF THE IS FIELD

Varying perspectives on the history of a place and period, for example, might involve a focus on the political, intellectual, or cultural leaders. These would be referred to, respectively, as political, intellectual, or cultural histories and, accordingly, the primary data for writing, for example, the first case, would be interpretations of acts of high-profile political leaders such as dictators, kings, organizers, officials, and presidents as told by contemporaries, previous historians, and/or physical artifacts such as the Bayeux tapestry (which tells of the invasion of England by William the Conqueror in 1066). The IS field has seen published histories with this orientation before (Copeland & McKenney, 1988). In fact, efforts could and should focus on gathering the stories and philosophies of the IS field's "movers and shakers" while they are still active so that future political histories of the field can be written.

As opposed to political histories, intellectual histories have given the world deep knowledge of why people think the way they do. One classic work is Lovejoy's *Great chain of being* (Lovejoy, 1964), which is a first-rate example of this school of historical writing as is Cohn's monumental tome on apocalyptic visions and the coming of the millennium (Cohn, 1957).

In the context of IS's academic field, intellectual history can be readily captured by placing primary material into a digital repository. These would include journal articles, books and book chapters, editorials, white and technical papers, and working papers. Indeed, to date, most of the extant histories of the IS field have been intellectual

histories. Articles in the 2012 *JAIS* special issue on IS history presented numerous examples of this kind of intellectual history (Bélanger & Carter, 2012; Buhl, Roeglinger, Fridgen, & Mueller, 2012; Davern, Te'eni, & Shaft, 2012; Grover, 2012; Hirschheim & Klein, 2012; Hosack, Hall, Paradice, & Courtney, 2012), as do other analyses of research trends that are positioned or contextualized within time periods (Culnan, 1986; Culnan, 1987; Culnan & Seanson, 1986; Sidorova, Evangelopoulos, Valacich, & Ramakirshnan, 2008; Taylor, Dillon, & van Wingen, 2010). Previous efforts to frame or capture important ideas of the field via historical accounts would include Mason et al. (1997) and Copeland and McKenney (1988).

Whereas it is highly likely that cultural histories overlap significantly with intellectual histories, the historian's lens can be described as "cultural" if the stress is on values and beliefs as being distinctive of a group of persons or related to a certain ethnicity. With regard to cultural histories, for instance, C.S. Lewis provides a good example in his study of courtly love through the literature (and peoples) of the ancient world and the Middle Ages in Europe in his *The Allegory of courtly love* (Lewis, 1936). Another monumental seminal work by Ernst Robert Curtius (*Europäische Literatur und Lateinisches Mittelalter,* translated into English as *European literature and the Latin middle ages*), also focuses on how and why a certain group of people adopted Latin as their language of choice for literature and the symbols and icons they used to represent new and old ideas.

In IS, "cultural" histories might stress how different research paradigms study certain problems, with their varying methods, epistemologies, and interpretive centers of gravity. There could be histories of the development of IS security, for instance, that would relate how behavioral scholars view the user, manager, inside-and-outside attacker complexities of the security of organizational and home systems. These might be countered with analytical studies that have mathematically modelled past, current, and future human/technical security systems. Design scientists have also created artifacts that explore the ways in which anti-social individuals penetrate systems and, because this knowledge creation has occurred over time, historians could investigate the context of the assumptions and potential insights offered by the paradigm. Cultural histories could also reveal how qualitative approaches to security have changed in their perspectives and discoveries over time. Cultural histories stress values and beliefs of a sub-group and in this way differ from intellectual histories which stress the ideas themselves. Historical studies almost always use time itself as an important element of interpretation and this gives us a sense for how such cultural histories would eventuate. Moreover, interpretation of causality in human affairs is also an important element in many/most histories and in the IS domain such histories should investigate why certain paradigms developed as they did.

What data should be collected for cultural histories to be later written? Qualitative methods would include interviews with those who were members of the sub-groups, how they experienced the era, and why they did what they did. Rich ethnographic data could also be collected if the scope of the research culture being studied were narrow enough and the time period limited.

For example, how did action research emerge as a significant research culture in the IS field? Richard Baskerville and colleagues (Baskerville & Wood-Harper, 1998; Baskerville & Pries-Heje, 1999) are usually attributed with bringing this methodological paradigm to the IS field, but what is the more complete backstory? How and why did they promote it from its heritage in other social sciences and how did they modify it? What was the underlying culture, including the base epistemology, that allowed them to visualize it and articulate it the way they did? Certainly, culture emerges from the written word (i.e., the published papers as artifacts), but a fuller delineation should also include their stories about what was happening in this time period.

We have excellent examples of such cultural histories already in the field. The Hirscheim and Klein (2012) history dwells on how certain paradigms (in the large) such as qualitative research in IS developed over time. The paper stresses the values and beliefs (including epistemological beliefs) that characterized the paradigm as it struggled for legitimacy in the field. Hosack et al. (2012) also discuss how the DSS community advanced through iterations of design science research (such as GDSS software innovations) and subsequent behavioral studies. This history shows how the research cultures were reacting, quite naturally, to changes in the technological environment.

There is a natural tendency for those who gather historical raw data to focus heavily on political history, which, in the case of IS, would include video interviews with our major journals' current and past editors-in-chiefs. Interviews with other key figures in the field could and should, no doubt, include: the current and past executive directors of AIS; key AIS staff members; past, current, and future chairs of our major conferences; past and present AIS presidents and vice presidents; IS department chairs, LEO award winners; and AIS fellows. A more complete repository could also encompass leaders of the special interest groups (SIGs) and groups that have had a long record of meeting about when ICIS occurs, and doctoral consortium and junior faculty consortia chairs. The list of potential interviewees is, of course, extremely long: it could even include senior and associate journal editors, both past and present, and many other persons in the field who have influenced its organizational-institutional politics and subsequent evolution.

Without such raw material in a readily-accessible repository, future historians will be hamstrung and forced to engage in interpolation and even speculation about why and how certain events played out as they did. Gathering such raw material puts the field in a good position to write political histories of the IS field. As scientists, we can appreciate that historians function at their best when they have empirical evidence to support or confirm their causal theses and hypotheses.

However, I repeat a note of caution about stressing one historiographic viewpoint to the detriment of another. Alternative historiographic views that could be even more telling about the development of our field would be social or cultural histories. In social history, for example, the stories of ordinary people are told and assessed rather than just the leaders, more famous, or wealthier members of society. More on this will appear below.

IV. CURRENT TREND IN HISTORIOGRAPHY: SOCIAL HISTORY

Which aspect(s) of historical interpretation is in vogue today? By determining this, organizers of efforts to capture the raw artifacts for future historians' use would hopefully place more time and resources on gathering the archival data needed to support these avante-garde views of historical writing and public presentation. In fact, social history has been favored by many historians in the last half century in part, no doubt, because it has been an under-represented historical lens throughout the ages. In the 1970s and well into the 1990s, for instance, interest in social history among American professors rose from 31 percent to 41 percent while, at the same time, interest in political history fell by the same percentage from a high of 40 percent (Haber, Kennedy, & Krasner, 1997). A similar shift in academic interest occurred in the UK (cited as "Teachers of history in the universities of the UK 2007—listed by research interest" in Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historiography)).

This is not to say that we have never seen social histories before this noted resurgence of interest in the 1960s. Over the centuries, there have naturally been many exceptions, such as the English Restoration period's *The diary of Samuel Pepys* covering the period 1660-1669 (Pepys, 1970-1983). Many other diarists throughout the ages have been published, and these works can either be thought of as social histories in their own right or as the primary material for other social historians. Even the *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (1793) holds long passages that reflect on the social history of the early American colonies as does Boswell's monumental biography of Dr. Samuel Johnson for the late 18th century in England (Boswell, 1791). Biographies tend to emphasize the social side of life more and, in doing so, they include elements that describe what life was like as it was lived on a daily basis.

For example, the raw material for future social histories of the USA are being collected by the nonprofit corporation StoryCorps (http://www.npr.org/series/4516989/storycorps). Ordinary citizens can record important life stories in the repository, which will then conceivably be available for historians to understand how lives were lived in a given era of American history. One could argue that social media such as Facebook and Twitter are also automated vehicles for capturing the stories of at least the literate population.

What should organizers of historical projects do to collect raw material for future social historians of the IS field? Perhaps the only perhaps tractable way to do collect the required raw data would be an automated process such as StoryCorps. Individual university staff members (both IS and non-IS staff members) could be invited to record their "stories", which would then be added to the repository. Stories could focus on events or responses to pointed questions posed by the gatherers of historical artifacts or they could take on a free form and ask people to choose their own content. Under all circumstances, the goal would be to collect information, thoughts, feelings, and interpretations while the field was unfolding. In a real sense, thus, this project would be never-ending.

V. CONCLUSION

We are at a crucial junction in the development of the information systems field. We can still capture data that will represent the field's early beginnings and its subsequent development. The vast majority of individuals who initiated the ICIS conferences, for instance, are still alive, even though many others have, sadly, passed on. Fortunately, it is not too late.

But adopting a historiographic viewpoint toward this effort raises the serious question about what exactly we should focus on. Different forms of historical raw data need to be assembled depending on whether the intent is to write a political, intellectual, cultural, or social history of the field. This list is by no means exhaustive, incidentally. I indicate that there have been histories that rely heavily on the technological developments that emerged over time. Whereas we might couch these histories under the rubric of "histories of computing", there is no question that IS studies react and respond to changes in the technological environment as do the practicing IS professionals we serve.

There is no need to debate the merits of each of these at this time. But it is imperative that the data gathering is not so narrowly focused that future historians are crippled in their ability to interpret the past.

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