

Source: History of Knowledge, February 3, 2017,

<https://historyofknowledge.net/2017/02/03/organizing-and-communicating-historical-knowledge-some-personal-observations/>

Publisher: German Historical Institute Washington DC

Organizing and Communicating Historical Knowledge: Some Personal Observations

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In my initial academic encounters with Germany in the late 1980s and early 1990s, one of the things that impressed me was the availability of [handbooks](#) as well as specialized encyclopedias such as [Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe](#). The textbook series [Oldenbourg Grundriss der Geschichte](#) was a new experience for me.^[1] Each volume offered a concise, chronologically organized survey (with key terms in the margins for rapid orientation), followed by a substantial historiographical discussion and bibliography. At the time, I did not appreciate the massive effort behind such compilation and systematization efforts. I just found these tools were quite practical for orienting myself in a given historical subject. Why didn't we have such useful tools in the United States?

Nowadays, it seems pretty clear to me that the difference had to do with how academic projects are organized and funded, and how their merits are perceived when hiring decisions are made. Perhaps, too, there is something in the academic culture that sees particular value in such projects, although I have no idea how one would separate such possible cultural predilections from the institutional organization of scholarship generally and of the discipline of history more specifically.

I do know that my doctoral advisor's approach to reading lists for our comprehensive exams at Georgetown University in the mid-to-late 1990s was unusual in the history department there. Roger Chickering gave us a massive bibliography for research purposes along with a so-called canon (read: very long list) of the texts that he expected every PhD student to know or at least know about.^[2] For my reading in Soviet, Imperial Russian, modern French, and modern British history, I had to write up my own reading lists, sometimes with suggestions by the professor, never with the ambitious, perhaps Sisyphean intention of producing a canon.

Roger Chickering, of course, is both product and producer of the American academic landscape, and he has deep ties in the German one too. The above example, however, is not meant to suggest that his approach was in any way related to its proximity to German academic culture. Instead, I mention it in order to underline what I sense is an additional reason for the (to my mind) weaker handbook culture in the United States, at least among historians. Such systematization is hard and its desirability not clear.

I bring this up because I was struck by a recent post on the francophone blog [Germano-Fil](#), a Franco-German production. The post is entitled "[Recherche bibliographique en France et en Allemagne](#)" and contains a wonderfully useful list of resources, the kind I would like to have had when I was studying German history. This list would also fit in one of the more traditional handbooks, but it is on a blog and can be accessed easily via the site's category links, which act like a table of contents. Does such a detailed resource even exist in English for the study of German history? Hard to imagine.

The nice thing about this blog is that it does not require massive overhead, although it does seem to have some institutional support. Nor must an entire handbook be conceived and created before anyone can use the knowledge being gathered and produced for it. The blog simply grows over time (since 2011) and can respond to new concerns and concentrations with tweaks to its categories and tags.

There are other German websites that mirror the old handbook and encyclopedia culture more closely in that they are the products of specific research grants, and they begin with a structure, like a book, instead of waiting for a structure to emerge, as is possible on a blog. In its current iteration, [German History in Documents and Images \(GHDI\)](#), a German–North American project, is organized in chronologically bounded volumes, each edited by a different historian (or team of historians).

Another site, [historicum.net](#), is a cross between a reference work and a reference library for students of history. Such an undertaking, of course, requires substantial institutional support, at least that is the impression I get from the extensive content, not to mention the logos of the project’s sponsors—the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, Universität Köln, and the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek.

[Docupedia-Zeitgeschichte](#) also recalls a multivolume handbook with a correspondingly large editorial team. Like on GHDI and [historicum.net](#), Docupedia’s articles contain no tags or links to establish connections across entries. Instead, each piece reads like a traditional handbook article. In other words, the enterprise comports with the traditional research and writing practices of professional historians.

I have been thinking about blogs in terms of academic cultures for another reason as well. The above-mentioned blog has an [ISSN](#), an identifier for periodicals. My encounters with academic blogs in the past decade or so have not involved this kind of identifier. Yet a number of academic blogs in Germany, at least blogs with some sort of institutional support, not to mention all blogs on the [Hypotheses](#) portal, are now using the ISSN. Why?

According to the international organization behind this numbering system, “The ISSN role is to identify a publication,” thereby preventing possible confusion with similarly named publications, for example. But this “digital code [is] without any intrinsic meaning.” The ISSN contains no “information about the origin or contents of the publication,” and, most importantly in the present context, “it does not guarantee the quality or validity of the contents.”^[3] Nevertheless, on the blogs I have been encountering, this number appears to be about making the web publication look more serious or legitimate. In Germany at least, but maybe further afield, the ISSN can apparently make blogs accessible to library catalogs, as well as to an international open access directory called [ROAD](#); however, it is hard to escape the impression that for blogs, the ISSN is more about gaining recognition.^[4] Academic culture might be a factor too.

Academic cultures with a long and deep history tend to influence the ways in which new media formats are used. Blogs, for example, offer the advantage of speed. One can put pixels to screen and share one’s thoughts almost instantly. Gatekeepers are practically nonexistent. Instead, it is up to bloggers to make clear who they are so that readers can judge for themselves the worthiness and reliability of the blog. In my view, these factors constitute advantages, but they can leave scholars uneasy, steeped as they are in a specific academic culture. Thus, some blogs take on the forms of more traditional academic publications.^[5]

See, for example, the impressive and seemingly well-funded [Verfassungsblog: On Matters Constitutional](#), whose posts often even include a DOI, a tool to ensure the long-term availability of a piece, even in the face of changing hyperlinks or dying websites. Aside from longevity, this approach might have the merit of making it easier for scholars to include any substantial blog posts they write on their curricular vitae. On the other hand, DOIs would seem to entail a prohibitive amount of extra work for many of us, perhaps militating against the rapid communication of ideas and research results that a blog can make possible.

Many research blogs give me the impression that their authors understand blogging and peer-reviewed journal publications as complementary. The former allows faster publication as well as more provisional and personal writings, but it in no way precludes developing one's blogged thoughts further toward a peer-reviewed article or book. Conversation can also occur more easily in the blog format, since a response to one blog post can be written and published in a matter of mere hours or days, if that long. The benefits of such speed and interaction would seem to outweigh any need to "legitimize" a blog by adding the trappings of a more conventional periodical.

None of these observations amount to a specific argument or program, but I thought they might be worth sharing in the context of a blog about knowledge. Self-reflexivity should be part of any scholarly undertaking. Moreover, some of our contributors might be new to or skeptical about blogging as a form of scholarly communication and knowledge production.

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1. Now there is the similarly conceived [Enzyklopädie deutscher Geschichte](#). ↩
 2. There was also the extremely helpful and systematic *Imperial Germany: A Historiographical Companion*, edited by Roger Chickering (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996). ↩
 3. [What is an ISSN?](#), ISSN International Centre. See also the [Library of Congress's explanation of the ISSN](#), last updated February 19, 2010. ↩
 4. See, for instance, [Mareike König](#), "ISSN für Wissenschaftsblogs – mehr als nur Symbolik?," Redaktionsblog [Hypotheses], March 10, 2016, which is as revealing as it is informative. ↩
 5. See Hannah Birkenkötter, "Blogs in der Wissenschaft vom Öffentlichen Recht: Ein Beitrag zur Erschließung neuer Formate," in *Formate der Rechtswissenschaft*, ed. Andreas Funke and Konrad Lachmayer (Weilerswist-Metternich: Velbrück Wissenschaft, 2017), 117–39. Thanks to [Alexandra Kemmerer](#) for bringing this piece to the attention of my colleague Kerstin von der Krone. ↩