Dan Cohen's Digital Humanities Blog » Blog Archive » The Pirate Problem

Last summer, a few blocks from my house, a new pub opened. Normally this would not be worth noting, except for the fact that *this bar is staffed completely by pirates*, with eye patches, swords, and even the occasional bird on the shoulder. These are not real pirates, of course, but modern men and women dressed up as pirates. But they wear the pirate garb with no hint of irony or thespian affect whatsoever; these are *dedicated, earnest* pirates.

At this point I should note that I do not live in Orlando, Florida, or any other place devoted to make-believe, but in a sleepy suburb of Washington, D.C., that is filled with Very Serious Professionals. When the pirate pub opened, the neighborhood VSPs (myself very much included) concluded that it was strange and silly and that it was an incontrovertible fact that no one would patronize the place. Or if they did, it would be as a lark.

We clung to this belief for approximately 24 hours, until, upon a casual stroll by the storefront, we witnessed six pirate-garbed pubgoers outside. Singing sea chanteys. *Without sheet music*. The tavern has been filled ever since.

Such an experience usefully reminds oneself that there are ways of acting and thinking that we can't understand or anticipate. Who knew that there was a highly developed pirate subculture, and that it thrived among the throngs of politicos and think-tankers and professors of Washington? Who are these people?

My thoughts turned to pirates during my experience at a workshop at the

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill[1] a week ago, which was devoted to the digitization of the unparalleled Southern Historical Collection[2], and—in a less obvious way—to thinking about the past and future of humanities scholarship. Dozens of historians came to the workshop to discuss the way in which the SHC, the source of so many books and articles about the South and the home of 16 million archival documents, should be put on the web.

I gave the keynote, which I devoted to prodding the attendees into recognizing that the future of archives and research might not be like the past, and I showed several examples from my work and the work of CHNM[3] that used different ways of searching and analyzing documents that are in digital, rather than analog, forms. Longtime readers of this blog will remember some of the examples, including an updated riff on what a future historian might learn[4] about the state of religion in turn-of-the-century America by data mining our September 11 Digital Archive[5].

The most memorable response from the audience was from an award-winning historian I know from my graduate school years, who said that during my talk she felt like "a crab being lowered into the warm water of the pot." Behind the humor was the difficult fact that I was saying that her way of approaching an archive and understanding the past was about to be replaced by techniques that were new, unknown, and slightly scary.

This resistance to thinking in new ways about digital archives and research was reflected in the pre-workshop survey of historians. Extremely tellingly, the historians surveyed wanted the online version of the SHC to be simply a digital reproduction of the physical SHC:

> With few exceptions, interviewees believed that the structure of the collection in the virtual space should replicate, not obscure, the arrangement of the physical collection. Thus, navigating a manuscript collection online would mimic the experience of navigating the physical

> collection, and the virtual document containers—e.g.,
> folders—and digital facsimiles would map clearly back to
> the physical containers and documents they represent.
> [Laura Clark Brown and David Silkenat, "Extending the
> Reach of Southern Sources," p. 10]

In other words, in the age of Google and advanced search tools and techniques, most historians just want to do their research they way they've always done it, by taking one letter out of the box at a time. One historian told of a critical moment in her archival work, when she noticed *a single word* in a letter that touched off the thought that became her first book.

So in Chapel Hill I was the pirate with the strange garb and ways of behaving, and this is a good lesson for all boosters of digital methods within the humanities. We need to recognize that the digital humanities represent a scary, rule-breaking, swashbuckling movement for many historians and other scholars. We must remember that these scholars have had—for generations and still in today's graduate schools—a very clear path for how they do their work, publish, and get rewarded. Visit archive; do careful reading; find examples in documents; conceptualize and analyze; write monograph; get tenure.

We threaten all of this. For every time we focus on text mining and pattern recognition, traditionalists can point to the successes of close reading—on the power of a single word. We propose new methods of research when the old ones don't seem broken. The humanities have an order, and we, mateys, threaten to take that calm ship into unknown waters.

[*Image credit: &y[6].*]

This entry was posted on Tuesday, April 22nd, 2008 at 12:12 pm and is filed under Academia[7], Archives[8], Audience[9], Research[10], Scholarship[11]. You can follow any responses to this entry through the RSS 2.0[12] feed. You can leave a response[13], or trackback[14] from your

own site.

References

1. ^ University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (www.unc.edu)
2. ^ devoted to the digitization of the unparalleled Southern Historical Collection (www.lib.unc.edu)
3. ^ CHNM (chnm.gmu.edu)
4. ^ what a future historian might learn (www.dancohen.org)
5. ^ September 11 Digital Archive (911digitalarchive.org)
6. ^ (flickr.com)
7. ^ View all posts in Academia (www.dancohen.org)
8. ^ View all posts in Archives (www.dancohen.org)
9. ^ View all posts in Audience (www.dancohen.org)
10. ^ View all posts in Research (www.dancohen.org)
11. ^ View all posts in Scholarship (www.dancohen.org)
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