Blog Module 2, week 3

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We are asked to think about the issues, ethics and, I suggest, both the opportunities and the limitations of digital history. Ian Milligan points out two issues which I find also apply when doing even the most old-fashioned history – 1) who made the source we are using and how did that making shape the source; and 2) be polite and respectful towards the owners of the material but also, I think, thoughtful of the other history students who might today or tomorrow use the same material. The manner of respect may be different (slowing down the wget versus not playing 52-pickup with a fonds) but the object of respect is the same.

There is a third question which came up in the introduction the manual gave respecting the Recovered Histories – how do we assess credibility. Here we have a new twist which I feel is an important insight to be gained from thinking about digital history. When I go to Library and Archives Canada and order a fonds, I believe in the organization having done its archivist job according to known standards. The organization itself gives credibility. I know that the fonds is as complete as it was on the date it was accessioned, including the microfilmed or digitized version. If the entire collection was not microfilmed or digitized, the rest is still available in hardcopy. Any missing pages (unfortunately usually the page I want) went missing before it went into the archives. As well, though, when I am working with actual documents, I can see the paper and the ink, see any annotations, see any scratches out. I can assess if there might be questions about the source even as I bear in mind a good fake can fool the experts. Just think Hitler Diaries.

So when I looked at the Recovered Histories it came across as a normal collection with credibility based on the organization’s stated intent and its partners (from the “About the Collection” page) and based on a cursory scan of the “Educational Resources” book list suggesting the titles are what I expected to see. I *was* left questions as to who is Anti-Slavery International and what is its big purpose – how political or how balanced. Given its slogan “anti-slavery today’s fight for tomorrow’s freedom”, I suspect it is a political group trying to raise awareness about modern-day slavery. In this case, of course, balance is moot as I do not think enslaving people is a subject on which balance is appropriate – rather like talking about “some very nice people” at a KKK-infested rally. But there are sites where I would want to think about balance. As well, however, I would have liked to have seen an explanation of how the collection became a collection. That information would help me to understand the extent and comprehensiveness of the collection.

My final thoughts this week is that I think digital historians shoot themselves in the foot when they hype the digital as revolutionizing history. Cameron Blevin writes about digital historians talking about what digital history will do but they are so in love with the methodology that they forget the meat. I would argue further that digital historians should stress, not the word digital, but the word history. I think this is what José Igartua was moving towards in his comments about mentioning cliometrics history in the Digital History work. In other words, digital historians should stress what is still being done, what is unchanged, what makes their work history – that is evidence-based argument about the meaning of past events. I said in an annotation this week that I thought a digital history course should be one of the core MA subjects in the history department right up there with theory. By this I mean more than inviting an archivist in to talk to the MAs as was done in my time but jumping them through the hoops being presented in front of us here. The computer work is painful particularly when your computer is not cooperating as mine is not. But the questions being posed in the workbook direct us towards questions which are the same as in the general courses. It would be useful for students to discover this for themselves as I am discovering it.