

Collections as Data: A First Look

Materials Needed

- This activity uses the information and data visualizations found on Elizabeth James' ["Jim Pepler Southern Courier Collection" website](#) as well as the [Alabama Department of Archives and History's collection of digitized images](#) by the same name. Tablets and laptops for students, or guided exploration by the instructor via a computer and projector, will be necessary.

Preparatory Work

- The instructor should familiarize themselves with the Jim Pepler *Southern Courier* Collection, including a brief review of the [Alabama Department of Archives and History's collection of digitized images](#) by Jim Pepler and [The Southern Courier's website](#), which includes information about the newspaper.

Instructions

- Based on your background preparatory work, provide students with a brief overview of the [Alabama Department of Archives and History's collection of digitized images](#) by Jim Pepler and [The Southern Courier](#).
- Have students examine the "Introduction" page and any or all of the visualizations on the "Places", "Subjects", and "People" pages of the ["Jim Pepler Southern Courier Collection" website](#). Encourage them to click on areas of interest within the visualizations to view relevant photographs or search for any individuals or words they do not recognize. Break students into groups and assign them a particular page or visualization and ask them to become the "five minute expert" on their page or visualization—i.e., look at the page and share with the rest of the class what their page or visualization is all about.
- After sharing a brief overview of their section, ask students to delve into the visualizations and information more deeply:
 - Were you surprised by any of the information you saw?
 - Was there any information you expected or wanted to see that you did not?
 - Where did the information for their page or visualization come from?
- Stop here. It is important to discuss that the vast majority of the information, or metadata, describing the images did *not* come from the person who took the photographs or the people depicted in the photographs. As a result, when looking at these digitized materials, we need to consider:
 - Who created the metadata and accompanying information?
 - What resources do they think the individual consulted when creating this information?
 - Is this person or the Alabama Department of Archives and History a reputable and reliable provider of information?
- After examining what is present, ask students to consider what isn't visible on the data visualizations or on the image descriptions.
 - Some students may be inclined to say "the images" or "the visualizations" for the visualizations and images respectively, but encourage students to think about the information that may not have been known by the person describing the image or

photographs that never made it into the Alabama Department of Archives and History as a result of editorial oversight or personal reasons. Information that isn't recorded or isn't known cannot be visualized as easily as known information.

- What information do they think should have been included that was not included to further their understanding of the collection in terms of content and context?
- What can we learn from looking at an individual image versus a data visualization that may display information about many images?
- When we examine primary sources, we are only examining the resources that survived and were specifically chosen to be digitized in the present day—all of these chance occurrences are impacted by societal values and biases. When we examine the digitized version of that resource and the related information provided by an Alabama Department of Archives and History staff member, that resource is being further interpreted through another person's lived experiences and area of expertise, which is often separated by decades of time since the original resource was created. That information was then further filtered through data visualizations. Ask students to consider:
 - Were there any materials not digitized? How would we know if so?
 - Can you rely on the person who accumulated the data and created the data visualization to be accurate and ethical?
- If desired, you can continue to zoom out from the subject further:
 - Does the Alabama Department of Archives and History present the digitized materials in a way that is accessible to individuals other than scholars?
 - Do you prefer the visualizations on Elizabeth James' site or the rows of image icons on the Alabama Department of Archives and History site when learning about this collection?
 - Is there another method that you might want to engage with these materials?
 - Are there ethical issues with sharing images of individuals who may still be alive, who may not have known their image would be shared outside of The Southern Courier?
- Finally, ask students to discuss ways in which the definition of information literacy (provided below) is relevant for their consumption of information through data visualizations and other digital information resources.
 - As defined by the Association of College & Research Libraries, information literacy is, "set of integrated abilities encompassing the reflective discovery of information, the understanding of how information is produced and valued and the use of information in creating new knowledge and participating ethically in communities of learning."