Ranke.2 - Teaching Source Criticism in the Digital Age
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Why Engage with Digital Source Criticism?
Humanities scholars of the 21st century are experiencing the consolidation of the 'digital turn'. At the same time a backlog can be observed in teaching students how to apply source criticism to retro-digitised and new-born digital sources that are published on the web. (Fickers 2012, Kemmman et al, 2014). The key objective of the teaching platform Ranke.2 - Source Criticism in the Digital Age, developed at the *Luxembourg Centre for Contemporary and Digital History,* was to bridge this gap by creating a series of multilingual online open source teaching modules on this topic. This paper discusses how *Ranke.2* evolved from a traditional Digital Humanities approach requiring learners to fully engage with the cycle of the digital research process, to designing small interventions more suited to the hybrid analogue-digital practice of teaching.(Zaagsma, 2013) The name *Ranke2* is a 'wink' to the German historian *Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886)*, who is generally seen as the father of source criticism, but had many predecessors that are less well known.

Crucial for the creation *of Ranke2,* was taking into account the constraints and specificities of teaching in academia. With regard to constraints, there seems to be lack of time for innovation in teaching, lack of space within the regular structure of curricula, uneven levels of digital skills among students and lecturers, lack of suitable working environments such as computer labs, and inflexible centralized regulations with regard to purchase of and access to software and server space. The second category, the specificities, refers to existing learning practices that are regarded as fundamental for academic training in a humanities discipline - close reading of complex texts and intensive practicing with academic writing. These practices take time, and are perceived as coming under pressure due to a push towards the digital.
How to reconcile the time consuming investment in skills development that is crucial for being able to apply digital methods, with the time needed to acquire an overall, topic-oriented knowledge of a field? How to avoid that students limit their searches to easy to digest and to reproduce bits of information instead of reading complex long texts that sharpen the mind? The key question seems to be: what can and should we in- and exclude in terms of basic and extended information into the existing and institutionalised time frame of our standard courses?
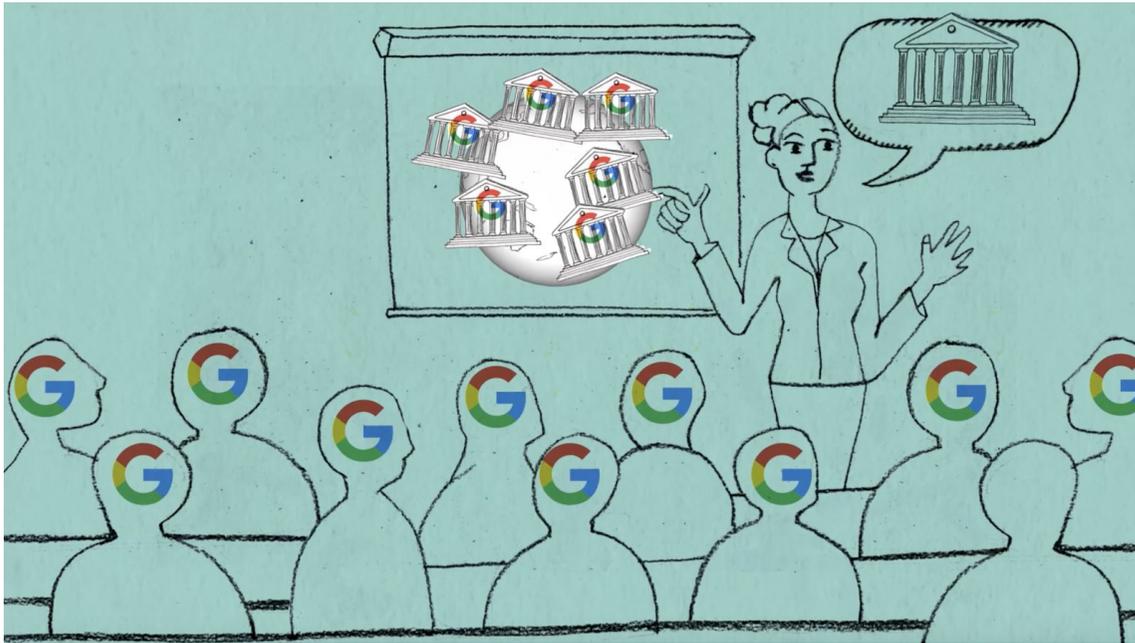
Still from the animation "From Archival to Digital Turn', Allthingsmoving.

Source Criticism applied to the digital

The digital turn has not only brought about changes in the way we interact with historical sources, think of our work spaces (archive or desktop), the speed of our searches, and our sensory engagement with data, it has also magnified the inclusion of non-textual sources such as images, objects and audio-visual data. (Sternfeld 2014) (Owens 2017) In analogue research practices, the contexts of creation of a source are widely divergent, with its physical materiality reflecting such diversity. Fragments of a vase can be seen either at an archeological site or in a museum showcase, to handle a manuscript we wear gloves, to listen to a recording we push the button of a magnetic tape-recorder. Once digitised and published online, these sources can all be accessed by means of software on a screen. This means additional questions have to be asked to the digital representations of these sources, as new layers of selection and manipulation have been added. In the case of retro-digitised sources, that already existed in tangible form, we need a basic understanding of technologies of digitalisation and search algorithms. With regard to digital-born sources, we need to understand the basics of web technology and of the mechanism behind social media. This 'homogenisation' of data also poses questions with regard to the delineation of disciplines and the definition of source criticism. Does the term mean different things within archival and library sciences, information science, media studies, history, social and ancillary sciences? Has it become or has it always been a transdisciplinary concept? At what point do social media data become historical data? Do disciplinary boundaries still make sense now that data and tools of humanities scholars increasingly consist of computer code? There are no clear cut answers to all these questions, but they are recurring in the teaching material published on Ranke.2, in order to teach students to problematize what seems given once they identify a source on the web.

Still from the animation "From Archival to Digital Turn', Allthingsmoving

Defining Digital Source Criticism

The historically most appropriate way of defining the term "digital source criticism" is to emphasise the continuity of its purpose: the critical assessment and evaluation of the origin of a historical source. Good professional historians have always practiced source criticism, what has changed is the need for a mathematical and forensic understanding of digital phenomena. The challenge here is to understand who has to teach what to whom, as we are in a transition phase with different generations socialised in different contexts of information literacy. Scholars educated before the 1990s, still have the library and archive as their core reference points. The 'digital natives', by contrast, are able to intuitively deal with digital tools, but are unaware of the fact that only a fraction of the content of libraries, archives and museums has been digitized and published on the web.They have to be taught about the specificities of the analogue research practice. Of the many questions that students and lecturers should pose with regard to 'Digital Source Criticism', the following can be regarded as key:

1. Why has the source been selected to be digitised?
2. Has this transformation from analogue to digital form affected its informative and artifactual value?
3. Why, when, how and by whom was the source published on the web?
4. How has the search engine retrieved the source? Have worthwhile alternatives not been retrieved?

5. Who holds the copyright to the source and what are the conditions to -reuse it?

Steps in Translating the concept of 'Digital Source Criticism'

The 5 sections of the paper will reflect the steps made in order to 'translate' the method of applying digital source criticism into free online teaching units that can be easily integrated into a variety of curricula.

Section 1 deals with the origins and evolution of the term 'digital source criticism', positioning it in the present hybrid context of analogue and digital teaching and research practices. Who has to apply it, in what form and in which context?

Section 2 deals with conditions to find a space in the regular curriculum. Digital source criticism may be a challenging concept to explore in depth for academic scholars, but when considering the structure of the curriculum, it competes with many other topics that are deemed as essential. How to balance the need for generic digital literacy necessary for all subjects taught at a university, and the focus on source criticism as a distinct practice of digital history?

Section 3 discusses the two pedagogical principles of the teaching platform: 1. Diversity in levels of complexity and time requirements, 2. Diversity in teaching formats. The first refers to the choice that lecturers have to choose between a *SMALL - MEDIUM or LARGE module,* depending on how much time they have at their disposal. The second, refers to the forms in which the content is presented: the first module consists of an animation and a short quiz to *'sensitise'* students to the topic, the second contains a series of assignments to *'problematize'* the concept, and the third offers a more time consuming *'hands-on experience'* to consolidate the acquired knowledge.

Section 4 presents the design of the front-end, the website, and the back-end, the architecture behind it. The visual concept is based on the phenomenon of the 'glitch', a problem in a computer device manifesting itself through ad random patterns of colored pixels that appear on a screen. It confronts us with the underlying structure of what we perceive as text and color, the source behind the appearance on the screen. With regard to the backend, a deliberate choice was made to draw on three existing tools: 1.*Google spreadsheets* for listing the bibliography and the metadata of the resources needed on the website, 2. a space in *Github* to create the various pages for the different sections of the website, that could be populated with data in markdown language and 3. the framework of *Jekyll,* a tool that can transform plain text in a static website, without the need for a database. The choice not to create a searchable database as underlying structure was deliberate, as it reduced the complexity of the workflow. It will hopefully encourage a slow and careful exploration of Ranke.2, without the use of a search box.

Section 5 Presents some lessons learned and plans for further development of the *Ranke2*. The teaching platform was launched in October 2018, and consists of three lessons with a Small and Medium module (digitised and digital born sources, oral history/interviews, web technology), and two lessons with Small modules (digital transformation, digitised manuscripts). At present a new lesson is in the making about digitised newspapers.

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