AHRC ICT Methods Network Student Bursary Awards

AHC-UK (Association for History and Computing UK) Conference
Distributed Ignorance and the Unthinking Machine: The Challenges of Teaching History and Computing
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CONFERENCE REPORT

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I am a post-graduate student in Medieval History at the University of Durham. I specialize in thirteenth century France, and my current research topics include researching how political changes in France from Philip II to Philip IV were reflected on the Jewish population. Computing is still of growing importance in this field, as many of the important texts were written in the 1950s and 1960s. However, basic digitized resources (such as JSTOR) are particularly important because they allow much wider dissemination of important but otherwise relatively unknown resources. Because of the limited number of computing resources in this field, it is very important that practitioners find the right balance between relying too heavily on resources that as yet do not cover the whole field, and ignoring the possibilities that databases hold for research in populations, financial and other records.

The AHC-UK Conference provided a great opportunity to consider my research interests and how they relate to the broader subject of research in history. I believe that the uses of computing in history research and the various benefits of using technology in teaching and researching are fascinating subjects. The conference reinforced my belief that it is important for people who are interested in the uses of technology in research to pursue the latest in information search and retrieval technology. Jone Garmendia's presentation on the records of the National Archives highlighted the importance of a thoughtful, knowledgeable user rather simply relying on the 'unthinking machine' as one does in a full-text search.

It is training researchers to become thinking users, rather than relying on the unthinking machine that is the job of a modern librarian and archivist. As generalist search technology such as Google becomes more prevalent as an academic research tool, it becomes more important for researchers and academics to realize that sometimes searching for materials and information requires more than just a Boolean search string. Simon Trafford's report on the classes he offers showed why this is a challenge. He reported that most younger students he has don't sign up to take basic internet/computer research classes as they have (or they think they have) the basic technology-based research skills required. However, this often means that younger students don't get the necessary skills for advanced research such as Jone was demonstrating.

It is this challenge that interests me. The pedagogical role that technologists in history must take is essential for all practitioners of the profession to fully utilize and adapt to the changing technology. As Ian Anderson pointed out in his presentation, the level of technology used in history teaching in many cases leaves a great deal to be desired. One of the issues that proponents of technology in history need to grapple with is to ensure that when technology is used, it adds value—and that technology is not simply used to tick boxes. For instance, presentation software such as PowerPoint—one of the most frequently applied forms of technology in courses from level 1 to level four—can be a useful tool in making presentations, but it does not contribute the same level of utility as database management or spreadsheet creation. In order to be both widely accepted and broadly useful in history, technology must provide utility that is not otherwise available to a historian, and it is this that is the challenge for technologist/historians to provide.