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Australian history:

online and insatiable

ABSTRACT

The Internet has changed the relationship Australians have with information. In particular, as history rises in popularity as a genre for leisurely entertainment, the way people interact with Australian history online is changing. Digital history is democratized; it has never been easier for both scholars and the general public to access historical content, or to develop and share historical works. However, these developments in presenting, creating and storing historical data online are not without complication. The proliferation of online histories has fostered a digital space where it is sometimes hard to distinguish credible material. Issues of subscription and accessibility also complicate individual abilities to consume particular histories.

By examining Australian histories online, such as genealogy archives and databases, the idea of popular history as commodity is explored. In this paper, these complexities and exciting developments in digital history as a popular genre are discussed – as is the potential of digital Australian histories to be informative representations of the past. This paper examines the complex relationship that Australians have with their digital histories, and how the consumption of these representations influence understandings of Australia's past.

KEYWORDS

digital history

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AUSTRALIANS: ONLINE AND INSATIABLE

In *Consuming History*, Jerome De Groot states that technologies, like computers and the Internet, are changing people's relationships with historical information (2009: 94). Accessing Australian history online, for both professional and leisurely purposes, is an in increasingly popular pastime. Previous methods of accessing information have been altered; the trips to libraries and archives, and transcribing documents and letters by hand, while still

important and widely used ways of acquiring and storing information, are not as necessary when, for example, it is conceivable that one could access an entire database on a smartphone or tablet instantaneously. These changes to the availability of information have affected the ways in which Australians investigate, and interact, with historical information.

Historians are presently just one field of professionals which create versions of history, as producers, designers, journalists and many others producing historical narratives for public consumption. It is inaccurate to associate this democratization of history simply with the dilution of quality historical work – as some sceptics fear comes with the plenitude of digitally available histories. If anything, the desire for authenticity and compellingly researched history online is growing as we come to recognize how important digital formats are in creating historical experiences and creating meaning within those experiences (Munslow 2010: 127). Representing the past online has created an abundance of different histories that are more accessible than ever to the Australian public, with a variety of positive effects on the public engagement with history. This growth of popularity in Australian digital histories comes despite reports that there are demographics who are disinterested in learning about the nation's past in more conservative formats and environments, as exemplified in Anna Clark's History's Children, where Clark discusses the fraught relationship many young Australian school children have with history (2008: 2).

All manner of histories are available for access in the forms of video, audio, photo and text via the Internet, thus allowing the public to utilize these components to shape their interpretation of Australian pasts. Making digital copies of old documents, newspapers, photographs and manuscripts and digitising recently published historical journals have become common practice, and have increased accessibility to historical information for both the public and professional scholars. Australian collections available on platforms like Trove, the National Library of Australia webpage, and the National Archives of Australia webpage, often allow access to enormous assortments of historical documents; as some of the most popular, and successful, hubs for Australian history online, these digital collections are important both for research purposes and for preservation purposes.

It cannot be denied that the use of the Internet has become important for modern historians (Rosenzweig and Cohen 2005). The ease of finding relevant literature, digitised copies of original sources, and recently published works using the Internet creates options for historians to explore new histories and different narratives without much difficulty. De Groot acknowledges this in his work, although he makes the point that the immense volume of historical information made accessible by the digital era is confrontational for some (2009:

92). Before digital databases, archives and library catalogues, historians were once concerned with not having access to enough information to support their work. Now, they face the dilemma having too much information to sift through what Roy Rosenzweig describes as an 'information overload' (2011: 6).

Gertrude Himmelfarb, a self-confessed neo-Luddite, questions the benefit of the proliferation of digital histories both to the field of history but also in terms of teaching history (1997: 51). Scepticism of digital histories, while appropriately critical of trends and occurrences at the present time, often does not fully register the potential that these technologies possess for educating, researching and rethinking history in the future (Rosenzweig 2011: 30). Still, the use of these internet technologies provides an effective way to retrieve, publish and deliver information to many people with ease and efficiency (Ross and Laurence 1999: 74). History online is not simply a 'technical problem' for the historians of today, but a transformation of the field of history that reminds historians of how such a stereotypically solid and unwavering area of inquiry is actually influenced and inspired by historical change (Rosenzweig 2011: 6).

There is clearly potential in virtual and digital formats to provide new histories of Australia, as demonstrated with the development of Virtual Warrane II, which simulates the pre-settlement area of Sydney using videogame technologies. Virtual Warrane II allows consumers to explore areas of the past, reconstructed digitally, and interact with the recreations of the Gadigal Aboriginal people (SBS: 2012). Consumers literally get to play in history with these projects. This type of historical representation is very popular in museum exhibitions, where the interaction of space, sound and digital technologies can combine to create entertaining places for historical engagement. Virtual Warrane II is not a stand-alone case of experiencing history through video gameplay though, as framing games around historical narratives is a growing theme in the video game industry. However, these large projects, like Virtual Warrane II, are less likely to be accessed at home, whereas present and popular Internet histories can be.

Thus, in this paper, I intend to briefly explore and discuss popular representations of Australian history on the Internet, including the consumption of data on genealogical websites; the presence of digital archives; the steadily growing trend of historical debates on vlogs and popular content sharing blogs online. These virtual spaces, I will argue, stimulate large-scale investigation into versions of Australian pasts and provide individuals with tools for reimagining and redefining personal and national histories. In arguing this, this paper also contends that digital Australian histories are a part of a consumer experience, which, while

leisurely, is potentially profitable for organisations using historical data as saleable, though intangible, goods.

De Groot describes the phenomenon of virtually available histories, and digitized historical evidence, as a kind of cyber-history (2009: 60-61). Cyber-history can be accessed at any time via the Web without having to travel to archives or locations or libraries and can be recorded in multiple forms – provided there is Internet access for the interested parties. With screenshots and copy/paste functions, a researcher has the ability to create high quality copies of data. It takes the physical contact and movement out of research, and makes content available to view instantly and to be recorded for private use in some cases. This is essentially the designed purpose of the Internet. The Internet was intended to work as a link between intellectuals across countries for the benefits of sharing data (Rosenzweig: 1998: 1533-1534).

Presenting, organising and circulating data, historical or otherwise, enables the internet to function as a 'meta-medium' which brings together aspects of aural, oral, optical and textual information, or evidence, for forming ideas (Rosenzweig 1998: 1552). This mixture of formats presented on websites can feel satisfying for consumers, who feel they have accessed a vast amount of information that is directly in their interests and stimulates the senses. The use of the Internet for accessing narratives of the past is leisurely, as it can be enjoyed in the comfort of home (again, provided there is an Internet connection). But, exploring Australian history online can also be very personal for the consumer. Hope Jensen Schau and Mary C. Gilly write that 'consumption can be a self-defining and self-expressive behaviour', which reflects the fact that consuming these histories online, as a private entertainment-based activity, can influence the ways people construct their identities (2003: 385).

Using the Internet to find migrant histories has been particularly popular, especially in creating relationships with consumers where their involvement produces historical narratives online, adds to collected data, and explores representations of the past. Genealogists, professional and amateur, have 'found the Web a welcoming arena for engaging in their passion for the past', Rosenzweig has argued in Clio Wired; the accessibility and networking possibilities of the Internet complement genealogists' hunt for fragments of the past (2011: 209). The Destination Australia project makes use of this environment where leisure is put to productive, informative and entertaining uses. Destination Australia, created by the National Archives of Australia in conjunction with the Australian Government, displays roughly 21,000 photographs of migrants involved in various

activities in the Australian community – and thus is a free to access, free to edit digital archive. The website explains that these photographs were taken after 1945, when post-war immigration was encouraged by successive governments, and these photographs were mostly used for promotional purposes such as attracting prospective migrants, and promoting cohesion in Australian society (Pennay 2013: 134). Currently, the online archive is used as a national project where people may explore, discuss and add information to the collection. In 'Material memories and the Australian memorial imagination', Paula Hamilton discusses memorials as being available to the public in many different types, and while Hamilton's article focuses on physical memorials, it is not a stretch to consider parallels with digital projects where public, online communities form a kind of memorialising space (2011: 11). Interestingly, many popular Australian physical memorial sites now also have websites, such as The Australian War Memorial in Canberra. The Australian War Memorial also has a free to access digital collection, links to the memorial's YouTube channel, and educational guides for the public online. Its online presence is impressive and allows for interested parties to investigate the memorial without physically travelling to the site.

Destination Australia is essentially an archive of snapshots of migrant pasts. However, without a reason for having these photographs on display there would be a risk that the sheer amount of photographs would just add to the 'background noise' –part of the masses of seemingly unusable, irrelevant data- available on the Internet (Eamon 2006: 298). The Destination Australia page gives purpose to these pictures by involving viewers in a process of discovery. There is encouragement to read and enjoy labelled photographs as well as assist in the identifying process, both of which stimulate a searching process. This process does not spoon feed consumers, but asks them to invest time and thought into the project – and in return it satisfies a desire to act as a detective piecing together fragments of the past. Consumers of the digital content on the website, and many other websites with similar purposes, who wish to contribute names, details and other stories to the archive of particular photographs, are requested to register to make these contributions. The registration encourages multiple visits as it draws in consumers as members of the Destination Australia project. Another element which encourages consumer involvement is the status rewards for contributing to the archive; upon registering, members are dubbed with an 'Initiate' status until making contributions which will, in time, reward them with little bronze, silver, gold or platinum stars alongside their status as a contributor. While these stars have no physical reward, they are symbolic possessions that act to 'authenticate' the consumer as a contributing, valued member of the virtual group (Jensen Schau and Gilly 2003:386).

Even with the concerns of authenticity and abundance that have surfaced with the use of the Internet as a portal to accessing evidence and narratives, historical narratives on the Internet are still very popular. With the idea of history as a hobby growing over the last twenty years, personal inquiries into family history have surged as a popular Australian pastime. Genealogy has been described as the fastest growing hobby in Britain, America, Australia and Canada, and is now often explored online where consumers can sample and compare various records and data (Cannell 2011: 462). Exploring migrant and family historical narratives online gains some promotion from the popular biographical documentaries such as SBS's *Who Do You Think You Are?,* an instance of history's 'entrance into lifestyle programming' (De Groot: 2009: 17).

The online sites created for genealogical enquiry, such as the enormously popular Ancestry archive, present migrant pasts to consumers as part of an identity shaping experience (De Groot 2009: 101). Recent advertisements on television encourage this, with an unknown narrator confiding in her digital family tree that 'when I was lost my Ancestry tree showed me the way, that led to you, and I saw you, coming home' (Ancestry 2013). Ancestry turns historical documents and evidence into a commodity, where subscribers have to pay in exchange for the opportunity to access Australian migrant records. The commodification of historical knowledge in this case means that subscribers are asked to make a commitment to the pursuit of leisurely history, and they are sold the idea that they will journey through time and that history will unfold before them (De Groot 2009: 60). This virtual journey through the past bypasses the trajectory of evidence-to-text where professional historians construct histories for consumption, and allows, with some limitations, consumers to construct their own interpretations of various documents (Icke 2010: 551). This means that consumers become the gatekeepers of their own history, so long as they pay the required subscription fee. This contrasts starkly to democratised platforms for research, like the Destination Australia project, and displays part of the binary existence of digital history – where some forms of historical knowledge are sold like goods.

One of the major issues with subscription packages for genealogy software and digital archive access is that cost might influence the kind of history a viewer consumes (Risinger 1998: 354). Ancestry offers three packages to their clients; the 'UK Heritage' package that allows subscribers to search Australian and British documents; the 'UK Heritage Plus' package, which offers documents from Australia, New Zealand, Ireland and Britain; and finally the 'World Heritage' package which provides complete access to the entire archives of Ancestry regardless of document origins. These packages are all priced

differently, with the 'World Heritage' package costing the most at just under $500AUS per year for access to intangible documents (Ancestry 2013). This cost influences and limits the type of package a person interested in genealogy purchases, and in turn puts limitations on the documents that they consume. The imagined past of a person's ancestors relies on the documents they find, and in being limited by anything less than complete access to the digital archive, consumers are limited in possible research outcomes.

Of course, these are just a few of the very formal kinds of cyber-history. While there is still room for error in large digital histories such as Ancestry and Destination Australia, it is not as high as in other kinds of amateur history making and online exploring, such as blogging and vlogging. Blogging and even vlogging, the video alternative or complement to a blog, have become very popular ways to share historical narratives online. There is a plethora of blogs dedicated to Australian history, and these include: the blogs of retired academics, such as the blog of Marion Diamond, called 'Historians Are Past Caring' (Diamond 2013); the blogs of postgraduate historians, such as Jo Hawkins' 'History punk' (Hawkins 2013); and also of teachers, museum volunteers, and amateur family history project blogs. There are also blogs which collect submitted posts rather than featuring regular posts by a sole author. The Mneme Project, organised by Clare Muston as part of her Honours dissertation, is a blog designed to collect the submitted histories of Australian women– whether textual or pictorial- and is an example of how these blogs are sometimes used to gather information from digital communities (Muston 2013). In this case, the blog host site is Tumblr, which is just one of many free and accessible blogging platforms available online, and the material is most likely aimed at the growing bloggers interested in the history, Australian history, women's history, and feminism tags.

In terms of vlogging, there is a much smaller consumer output of Australian histories – though there does appear the desire for such video content. A YouTube search of the phrase 'Australian history' brings up mostly documentaries and very infrequent, and poorly articulated, crude animations. Consumer desires for specific, quality YouTube productions are implied though, as seen in a brief response to commentary and requests by John Green, the host and co-creator of the highly popular Crash Course World History series on YouTube. In Crash Course #27, The Amazing Life and Death of Captain Cook after mentioning the Australian continent, Green states that 'now all you Australians have to shut up about how we've never mentioned you', indicating that there has previously been no mention of Australia in this global history series and that this apparent gap had been highlighted and discussed by Australian and New Zealand viewers (Green 2012).

In saying this, Green refers less to casual viewers and more to the Nerdfighteria community: a popular culture community which primarily functions online, and was established initially as the fandom surrounding the Vlogbrothers project, where John Green and his brother Hank Green communicated for an entire years solely via YouTube videos. Presently, Nerdfighteria has no set requirements for being a member in the community, but members are most usually fans or participants involved in the many projects hosted by the Green brothers or other Nerdfighters. Both the general YouTube community and Nerdfighteria communicate with John and Hank to request specific content in popular video shows on history, literature, physics, chemistry, and sex and gender. More recently, in conjunction with Emily Graslieof the Field Museum, Chicago, the Green brothers have assisted in the creation of videos about taxidermy, museology and biology. In another recent move, fans of these online series now have some financial input in the production of these shows via Subbable, an online donating platform where consumers may subscribe and support certain YouTube channel producers. Subbable allows for subscribers to commit monthly or one off donations to specific channels. Specific donation amounts allow subscribers to receive perks, such as posters or personalised messages in videos. These sponsorship programs are changing the ways that creators fund and produce educational YouTube videos, primarily by moving away from advertisements as a source of revenue but also by providing committed viewers with the opportunity to invest financially in projects which appeal to the consumer personally.

These cyber platforms are great for attracting large audiences and for being involved with online history groups, but aren't without complication. Blogging platforms such as Tumblr rarely filter content, so anyone can essentially create a blog about any period of history they like – regardless of referencing or peer review. There is the potential there for grave ignorance, or simply poor design – few amateur producers have the luxury of producing work as thoroughly researched as Green's Crash Course, or even the ability to produce works of history in conjunction with graphic designers and historians. This creates problems when people, including school students, read and use this material; it can influence their understanding of Australian pasts, and possibly affect academic outcomes. Another major complication is theft: particularly on sites like Tumblr; Tumblr hosts blogs, and allows for blog creators to make their own text, image, sound, link, video and chat posts, but also has a reblog feature. The reblog tool allows a blogger to repost somebody's work, with full sourcing and added comments, and is a great way to share art, news and jokes. Posts can be stolen, though, by saving the content on a computer and then re-uploading it onto a different

blog without credit to the original content creator, though this is not solely isolated to posts on Tumblr and happens on many blogging platforms.

Another option is searching 'tags', where posts relating to Australian history can be found by searching for relevant keywords. These searches can reveal posts by blogs that make attempts to properly source and reference materials, and can reveal reblogged memes and general musings by bloggers on Australian pasts; posts can cover numerous topics, and can contain numerous media, from artworks featuring former Prime Minister Gough Whitlam, to detailed articles on the treatment of Indigenous Australians by colonial authorities. All aspects of Australian pasts are open for discussion online. Upon observation, the material in these Australian history tags is growing very quickly, though there is not the same sheer mass of material that other clique-history tags receive.

The volume and quality of popular Australian histories available and created online is definitely developing to meet an insatiable appetite for the past, though it is of an uneven quality presently. People purchase and consume history for incorporation into their private and social lives, but with the Internet they can also share their passion for the past (Donnelly and Norton 2011: 153). These cyber-histories satisfy the need for a particular kind of historical experience, where consumers are both gaining knowledge and actually producing it. I would argue that the proliferation of Australian history online is not only a change to how history is accessed and consumed, but also to how history is produced and circulated. History as a genre is more popular than ever before, with film, television, literature, and even videogames are all capable of providing engaging historical representations (De Groot 2006: 391-392). The market for the consumption of historical narratives and historical data, particularly about Australian pasts, is very entertaining, enjoyable, and certainly profitable.

Internet communications have connected histories to consumers, and have been part of the changes that history as a field of study has undergone in recent years. And yet, the virtual spaces and experiences that transmit historical narratives remain under-examined, though they are a crucial influence on imagined histories – both national and personal.

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