

Surf City: A Guide to the Web for Urban Historians

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The World Wide Web is useful for the scholarly needs of urban historians. Not only can it present information in the traditional print format, but it can also provide information in the visual form that urban scholars are usually concerned with. Writing about social geography, contested public spaces, the material culture of the inarticulate, physical planning, and environmental injustice without iconographic materials is difficult. For this the web is ideally suited. Indeed, it adds three new weapons to our traditional arsenal. The web can display moving images, provide sound, and enable hyperlinks to related materials—all options unavailable in print. With the appearance of the peer-reviewed electronic publications, Maria Balshaw, Anna Notaro, Liam Kennedy, and Douglas Tallack, eds., *City Sites: Multimedia Essays on New York and Chicago, 1870s–1930*¹ and Philip Ethington, “Los Angeles and the Problem of Urban Historical Knowledge,”² the world wide web has moved firmly into the realm of publishing respectability with formatting appropriate to the new medium.

The web has also made a range of research materials much more accessible. At this point its best use is for building bibliography. However, there are valuable collections of scanned texts on line, limited in scope to be sure, but with the great advantage of being word-searchable. Not much historical material has been scanned yet, but this will change over time. In principle this seems to me to be little different from the microfilm collections that already exist.

Right now the most important research materials on the web are photo collections and databases. The extremely rich iconography is better indexed and certainly more easily examined and manipulated than in the original archive. In at least one important case, there are images available on line that no longer exist in real space. The web also allows much easier access to governmental databases, e.g., the U.S. Census, although relatively little time-series data is available on line.

More commonly, urban scholars have created web sites covering their own cities, mostly for the public or students. Such general scholarship is functionally akin to writing textbooks, which are not peer-reviewed. Devalued as this work may be by our colleagues, it is an important part of the service functions that university administrations, especially at big city universities, expect. Almost without exception, urban historians are already drawn into the history of their localities, even when most of the scholarship focuses on general topics or other cities. One thinks here of Ken Jackson gradually moving toward becoming a New York City historian or Joel Tarr’s work on Pittsburgh. In a sense, both are local historians, although describing them that way misses the importance of their work. These local sites often contain valuable information, especially historical photos and timelines.

There are some general web issues that I do not want to discuss at great length, but are worth noting. There is a tendency to see the web as a tangle of problems especially by the kinds of technophobes and traditionalists that are often found in history departments. In a widely publicized book,³ Nicholson Baker points out that original paper documents may be destroyed or warehoused inaccessibly by librarians after reproduction, a legitimate concern, but one little different from issues about microfilm. Scanned works are certainly more accessible than an

archive 5,000 miles from home. Word searching of scanned material facilitates research, especially on elusive topics where one or two items are buried in thousands of unindexed text. I do worry about the originals disappearing, but this would hardly be a reason to stop scanning, any more than it has stopped microfilming. ProQuest, the corporate successor to Bell and Howell, has announced plans to digitize the historical collection of microfilmed newspapers that it already sells to libraries, including the *New York Times*. Scanned newspapers are a huge improvement over microfilm and, in some ways, over the original printing, because they can be word searched. To be sure, they will have all the problems of current microfilms: usually only one edition is copied, some sets don’t copy advertising or “fluff” Sunday sections, and minimum-wage copying staff sometimes miss or duplicate pages.

The web does increase the possibility of plagiarism (by students and, sad to say, colleagues). Students especially have a hard time distinguishing between good and bad web sites. It is not clear to me how this is different from the current state of affairs. Web plagiarism is much more easily detected than let us say copying a 1949 M.A. thesis at the University of Alaska. Quality evaluation is harder on the web. Students usually rely on “good” books because they do research at a university library that has gatekeepers watching what goes into the collection. They can, and should, be taught to be more discriminating on the web.

As currently constructed the web has an odd combination of strength and weaknesses for research. It is American-centric, although that is rapidly changing. It privileges the statistical and visual over the documentary. Almost everything is searchable, both internally and externally, but there are serious search limitations and those limitations are not always transparent. Libraries and other content providers rarely mention what they’ve omitted. Also standard search engines can give so many hits as to be useless. For example, looking for Richard Harris (former editor of this periodical) on Google—probably the best search engine—drew over 600,000 hits. Even Clay McShane, a far less common name, drew 2260 hits, most of them irrelevant. However, Google also has an advanced search function. Searching under “geography,” limiting the search to sites that have the exact phrase “Richard Harris,” excluding sites with the word “actor” (usually genealogy is a better word to eliminate, since genealogists love the web) and confining the domain to “edu,” gets it down to 1800 hits. Google expects to put a search function on line soon that will allow even more accuracy.

Finally I should note that, this essay is likely to seem American-centric. I’m an Americanist by training and close to a monoglot. I have sought contributions, mostly without success, in a number of other countries.⁴ Much of this work derives from editing a webography for H-Urban.⁵ The “drop dead” point for this essay was June 6, 2001, an eon ago in cyberspace. Undoubtedly two dozen new urban sites have gone on line since then. Probably ten percent of the sites cited here have changed their URLs before publication. If the URL does not work, search by title with a search engine.