CAIS Paper: Making Time for the Past: Historical Scholarship in the Information School

Thomas Haigh (University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee)
Nadine I. Kozak (University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee)
Maria Haigh (University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee)

Abstract: The transition from library to information school marginalized historical teaching and scholarship. The information school has potential as interdisciplinary space where scholars can integrate historical research methods with other social science and humanities traditions. Ongoing research projects will illuminate one vision for the future of history within the information school.

Professional schools have traditionally made a place for history within their curricula and within the ranks of their faculty. This was true of library history within the library school, and of business history, legal history, and the history of medicine within other schools (McNally 1986; McNally 1996; Boschma 2005). This was driven in part by the professionalization process itself. Studying the history of the profession was an opportunity to celebrate its heritage and document its ongoing importance, telling stories that reinforced the socialization of students into professional culture. History also bolstered the intellectual respectability of such schools within universities dominated by liberal arts education, demonstrating that a professional education was more than just vocational. In addition, history provides a crucial perspective for understanding the profession and related issues such as information access and intellectual freedom. The Library History Round Table of the American Library Association (ALA) argues that "A knowledge of history and an understanding of historical methodology are indispensable [sic] elements in the education of library and information professionals" (American Library Association n.d.). The group states that history and historical methodology should infuse library and information science curriculum.

Despite past practice and the ALA's arguments, professional schools of all kinds have been deemphasizing history. Liberal arts in general and the humanities in particular are dwindling on most campuses (Godwyn 2009) and are no longer useful in demonstrating intellectual seriousness. Faculty are increasingly emphasizing quantitative research and statistical rigor, while students demand practical and relevant training. The change has been particularly noticeable within schools of the library and information science world, as many institutions have been deemphasizing librarianship and shifting resources to education and research in information technology.

Unlike the library school the information school is a professional school without a corresponding profession, at least in the classic sense of a group reflected by a single professional association whose members share a strong identity. A session on "History in the iSchools" at the 2014 iConference in Berlin revealed a few schools in which history is a central part of the curriculum, but suggested that most credentialed historians employed within in information schools had little opportunity to teach history and had been hired primarily for other skills (Mak, Black and Schiller 2014).

In the face of these challenges, how can we safeguard the place of history in the future of the information school? One problem, recognized by scholars such as Alistair Black (2006), is that the relevant historical scholarship has been scattered among many subfields such as library history, communication history, media history, and the history of computing.

Integrating the perspectives and insights from those fields, into a broader study of "information history," would match the breadth of the information school itself. Indeed, the perspectives of historians might be crucial in understanding why these things were once thought of as separate and how they came to be subsumed under the banner of "information."

We do not, however, believe that the unification of information history will be enough to guarantee the future of history in this environment. One of the challenges of a truly interdisciplinary school, in which faculty are drawn from a variety of backgrounds, is the risk that faculty feel that their interests and perspectives are shared by only a handful of colleagues or students. The situation is not unique to historians, but to one degree or another is felt by many of those working on information policy, information ethics, anthropological or ethnographic studies, or other areas seen as "fuzzy" or non-technical. In some of these areas a response has been to align with higher-status areas such as computer science, providing social-scientific input to interdisciplinary projects exploring "socio-technical systems" or "information infrastructure." Such alliances are less welcoming to history. The discourse of information technology has always been written in the future tense, and so the new rhetoric of "iSchools" has tended to reinforce what science studies scholars have called "rupture talk," the idea that new technology is opening a division between future and past so fundamental that history can no longer be a useful guide (Hecht 2002). In a field fixated on the future, why would anybody care about things that already happened?[1]

In other areas, however, historical scholarship and perspectives are productively integrated with other perspectives. This has often been true in the field of science studies, as represented by the Society for Social Studies of Science (4S) or in the landmark *Social Construction of Technological Systems* volume (Bijker, Hughes and Pinch 1987). In the humanities, meanwhile, there is a long tradition of interdisciplinary dialog based on a shared commitment to argument and narrative. Historical perspectives have been integrated into landmark work in economic sociology, environmental studies, and gender studies in a way that has not been true in information studies (Scott 1998; Cronon 1991; Zelizner 1987).

Pragmatic and intellectual motivations both suggest, therefore, that the best prospects for securing the future of history within the information school lie with the building of connections with other research traditions informed by the humanities and social sciences. Within our own institution, and via a recent workshop within the iSchool world more generally, we have proposed the Social Studies of Information as an identity within which this integration might be pursued (Haigh and Kozak 2014). Between them the authors of this paper have graduate degrees in information studies, history, computer science, science studies, and communication.

We offer two short case studies drawn from our own ongoing research projects as examples of the contribution that this integration of historical and non-historical perspectives can provide to iSchool research. The first of these explores the history of what is now called the Chernivci University Library in Chernivci, Ukraine (Haigh 2009). Since its founding in 1852 as the first public library in Bukovina, a province of the Austro-Hungarian empire, it has been in succession part of independent Romania, the Soviet Republic of Ukraine, Nazi-allied Romania, the Soviet Republic of Ukraine again, and independent Ukraine. These transitions had profound influence on its collections, staffing, mission, and the broader institutions of which it was part. Library history approaches have traditionally focused rather narrowly on the institution itself. We argue

that by broadening our focus to consider the library as an information institution involved in the project of nation-building we can build productive questions with ideas from sociology and political science. The idea of nations as "imagined communities," introduced in the work of Benedict Anderson (1983), is particularly important here.

The second case concerns the construction of a fiber-optic network in a remote Wyoming town, several years before public adoption of the Internet and without any obvious immediate application (Kozak 2015). This is a story about information infrastructure and policy in the recent past, making sense of it required the integration of tools from science studies, and in particular the concept of a "technological imaginaire" as a collective vision of a technological future that exerts a powerful influence on the adoption of new technology (Flichy 2007).

Our conclusion is that historical research methods and perspectives can and should occupy a prominent place within information schools, but that this is only likely to happen if historians are able to make common ground with other disciplinary traditions drawn from the humanities and qualitative social sciences. We believe that the concept of the "social studies of information," chosen by analogy with the success of fields such as the social studies of science, provides a productive framework for such dialog.

References:

American Library Association. "Statement on History in Education for Library and Information Science." *ALA.org*. Accessed April 26, 2015. http://www.ala.org/lhrt/governance/lhrtpositions/historyeducation.

Anderson, Benedict. 1983. *Imagined Communities*. New York: Verso.

Bijker, Wiebe E., Thomas P. Hughes and Trevor Pinch, eds. 1987. *The Social Construction of Technological Systems: New Directions in the Sociology and History of Technology*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Black, Alistair. 2006. "Information History." *Annual Review of Information Science and Technology* 40: 441-473.

Boschma, Geertje. 2005. *Faculty of Nursing on the Move: Nursing at the University of Calgary, 1969-2004*. Calgary: University of Calgary Press.

Cronon, William. 1991. *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*. New York: W.W. Norton.

Flichy, Patrice. 2007. *The Internet Imaginaire*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Godwyn, Mary. 2009. "Can the Liberal Arts and Entrepreneurship Work Together?" *American Association of University Professors*. http://www.aaup.org/article/can-liberal-arts-and-entrepreneurship-work-together#.VNUySp3F98E.

Haigh, Maria. 2009. "Making Ukrainians in the Library: Language, Libraries, and National Identity." *Canadian Journal of Information and Library Science* 33 (3/4): 144-158.

Haigh, Thomas and Nadine Kozak. 2014. “Exploring the Social Studies of Information.” In *iConference 2014 Proceedings*, 1189-1190. doi: 10.9776/14248.

Hecht, Gabrielle. 2002. “Rupture-Talk in the Nuclear Age: Conjugating Colonial Power in Africa.” *Social Studies of Science* 32 (6): 691-727.

Kozak, Nadine I. 2015. “‘If You Build It, They Will Come’: Lusk, Wyoming and the Information Highway Imaginaire, 1989-1999.” *Information & Culture: A Journal of History* 50 (2): 236-256.

Mak, Bonnie, Alistair Black and Dan Schiller. 2014. “History in the iSchools.” In *iConference 2014 Proceedings*, 1196-1198. doi: 10.9776/14203.

McNally, Peter F. 1986. *Readings in Canadian Library History*. Volume 1. Ottawa: Canadian Library Association.

———. 1996. *Readings in Canadian Library History*. Volume 2. Ottawa: Canadian Library Association.

Scott, James C. 1998. *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Zelizner, Viviana A. 1987. *Pricing the “Priceless” Child: The Changing Social Value of Children*. New York: Basic Books.

[1] The physical form of historical research products, particularly articles, poses an additional challenge. Even for qualitative work, iSchools increasingly value a more formal social science approach with explicit literature reviews, hypotheses, discussion of research methods chosen, and the like. Historians, in contrast, are taught to get quickly to the narrative and to introduce the work of others only as needed to support specific points. Explicit discussion of method is usually consigned to a footnote, such as this one.