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Free Websites of Value for Humanities Students and Faculty Researchers

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Introduction

The information needs and behaviors of humanities researchers have been studied extensively. We know that humanities researchers consult colleagues and print material for references as well as using book reviews and personal collections. Library catalogs are used to find both primary and secondary sources. Citations in books or journals are heavily used, but scholars also consult bibliographies. Browsing is used to find related material and physical access to libraries and collections is valued highly (Boone 1986; de Triatel 2000; Broadbent 1986; Blazek and Aversa 2000; East 2005) Hacker (2005, 1) states that, “[r]esearch in the humanities generally involves: interpretation of a text or work of art within a historical and cultural context frequently bringing to bear a particular type of analysis and often relying on establishing connections, attributing significance, exploring contradictions or ambiguities,” and so “primary sources, secondary sources that critically analyze primary sources, and sources that answer questions that may arise” are the objects of humanities researchers. The literature of the field tells us that humanities researchers use electronic resources such as texts and databases from established providers like DIALOG and have from the early 1990's (Hockey 1994, 676; Bates 1996, 515).

Importance of the Study

The Internet offers websites with tremendous amounts of information on virtually every topic, but do humanities students and faculty researchers use them for their research? Studies show that faculty members question the accuracy, reliability, and sufficiency of web resources for research. Susan Davis Herring surveyed 1,129 full-time faculty at 30 post-secondary institutions in Alabama. She found that faculty in the sciences were more positive about the accuracy and format of the web than faculty in the social science or in language and literature. Generally, those faculty thought the information on the Internet is “without a recognized selection process, carried out by accepted and reputable organizations or publishers.” Herring found that “faculty teaching in the language and literature fields tend to be the least satisfied with the Web overall, and specifically, were less satisfied with its content and accuracy” (Herring 2001, 216).

Undergraduate students, on the other hand, report that the web provides them with information that they use to complete assignments. In 2001, Deborah Grimes and Carl Boening studied students enrolled in an English composition course and found that many students were using unevaluated Internet sites “because of the ease in locating and printing out the results and because of a perceived abundance of information compared to books and periodicals” (Grimes and Boening 2001, 20-22). Juris Dilevko and Lisa Gottlieb studied undergraduate students in a large metropolitan university and found that 50.8% of the undergraduate respondents in humanities (154 students responded to the survey) reported that they

used online sources at least 75% of the time for their research papers. Forty-seven percent of undergraduate students across disciplines reported that they consulted online sources first 90% or more of the time. Dilevko and Gottlieb defined online sources as “electronic online resources of any kind” (Dilevko and Gottlieb 2001, 384-385). Increasingly, students are using online sources, including the web, for their assignments, The ideal would be for them to use websites that have value in the eyes of faculty in the humanities.

Rating systems for websites have emerged to provide a mechanism that would convey reliability. For example, the “Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval,” which is given for reliable merchandise, was extended to websites. Websites displaying the “[Good Housekeeping Website Certification](#)” have “met the Good Housekeeping Institute’s Standards for security, privacy and product integrity. The Web Certification is not a warranty; it is a verification that the website is trustworthy and safe for customers.”

Similarly, a rating system developed by librarians allows websites to be evaluated using a rigorous process. Larson (1999, 28) says that, “[i]n 1998, the Machine-Assisted Reference Section (MARS) of the Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) of the American Library Association (ALA) appointed an ad hoc task force to develop a method of recognizing outstanding free reference sites on the World Wide Web. The result in 1999 was a list of 25 sites, nominated, annotated, and then voted on by a task force of 13 practicing reference librarians representing academic, public, special and government libraries.” Each fall, a list of the Best Free Reference Web Sites is published. The following criteria were adopted by the task force to evaluate the websites:

- Quality, depth, and usefulness of the content
- Clear statement of the content, including any intended biases
- Appropriate for intended audience
- Provides appropriate links to other websites
- Attention to detail—absence of grammatical errors, etc.
- Usefulness for reference to answer specific questions
- May also give a broad perspective of a particular subject
- Ease of use
- User-friendly design—easy navigation
- Good search engine
- Attractive—graphic design leaves a good impression on the user
- Easy output (printing or downloading)
- Currency of Content
- Links are kept up-to-date
- Update frequency is appropriate for the subject matter
- Authority of producer
- Authority and legality clearly stated
- If not easily recognizable, an explanation of the history and purpose of the
- Organization
- Uniqueness of content
- Uniqueness of the resource as a whole—creativity
- Useful in a variety of reference settings
- Appropriate use of the Web as a medium
- Components are well integrated (audio, video, text, etc.)
- Effective use of Java, other newer technologies
- Efficiency
- Graphics load quickly
- Any required plug-in is available for easy download
- Reliable server (Larson 2000, 32).

Each year, approximately 25 websites are evaluated using these criteria and the list is published in the fall of that year. The websites listed cover a multitude of subjects. The purpose of this study is to evaluate the websites that are rated by professional librarians using the criteria listed above and published in the journal *Reference and User Services Quarterly*, to identify websites of value for humanities researchers, especially students and faculty, and for the reference librarians who assist them.

Procedure

A content analysis of the annotated lists published each fall in *Reference & User Services Quarterly* from 1999 to 2005 was conducted. Each of the 20 websites discussed here was originally evaluated originally and listed in Larson, et al. (1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005).

Sites discussed here were evaluated for their value to humanities students and faculty. They were evaluated by the researcher based on her educational qualifications (MA in English) and her experience teaching Information Sources & Services in the Humanities. For the purposes of this study, fields in the humanities are philosophy, religion, the visual arts, the performing arts, language and literature, and history. Sites were designated as having value for humanities researchers if they provide primary sources, secondary sources, or can be used to answer questions during humanities research. Of the 197 websites listed in the seven year period, 20 were found to be of value to humanities researchers using this study's criteria.

Websites of Value for Humanities Researchers

The following websites were selected, based on the study's criteria, for their value in humanities research. The websites are not listed in any particular order.

1. Bartleby.com (www.bartleby.com)

Purpose: "publisher of literature, reference and verse providing students, researchers and the intellectually curious with unlimited access to books and information on the Web, free of charge." Features *Columbia Encyclopedia*, 6th ed., *American Heritage Dictionary*, 4th ed., *Roget's II: The New Thesaurus*, *American Heritage Book of English Usage*, *Columbia World of Quotations*, *Simpson's Contemporary Quotations*, *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*, *King James Bible*, *Oxford Shakespeare*, *Gray's Anatomy*, *Shrunk's Elements of Style*, *World Factbook*, *Columbia Gazetteer*.

Resource type: Secondary sources; Answer questions

Audience: Researchers, students, and "the intellectually curious."

Navigation: Easy. Can search by author, subject, or title.

Author/Creator: Bartleby.com, an Internet publisher.

2. The Encyclopedia Mythica (www.pantheon.org)

Purpose: "an encyclopedia on mythology, folklore, legends, and more." It contains 6,100+ articles on gods and goddesses, heroes, legendary creatures and beings from all over the world. Areas include Mythology, Folklore, Bestiary, Heroes, Featured Items, Image Gallery, and Genealogy Tables. The site contains hyperlinks and images, tables of major mythical families as well as a pronunciation aid. Contributing editors verify and edit information accepted for the site.

Resource type: Secondary sources; Answer questions

Audience: Researchers, students studying mythology at all levels.

Navigation: Easy.

Author/Creator: M. F. Lindemans, founder and chief editor. Sponsor: by Ultimium-IT.

3. Biography.com (www.biography.com)

Purpose: “provides historical and biographical information on more than 25,000 people past and present.” Links to related people, places, and organizations are provided.

Resource type: Answer questions

Audience: Undergraduate students

Author/Creator: A&E's Television Networks.

Navigation: Easily searchable.

4. AskOxford.com (<http://www.askoxford.com>)

Purpose: “searchable access to the *Compact Oxford English Dictionary* and other helpful resources for writers and students. Features include *Ask the Experts*, *World of Words*, *Better Writing*, *Games*, *Global English*, and *Foreign Languages*. The *Better Writing* section offers spelling and grammar tips, the *Games* section includes crossword puzzles and the *Global English* provides etymology.

Resource type: Answer questions

Audience: Lower-level undergraduates

Navigation: Easy to use

Author/Creator: Oxford University Press.

5. Networked Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations Union Catalog (<http://zippo.vtls.com/cgi-bin/ndltd/chameleon>)

Purpose: dedicated to “improving graduate education by developing accessible digital libraries of theses and dissertations. One goal is to increase the availability of student research for scholars, empower students to convey a richer message through the use of multimedia and hypermedia technologies and advance digital library technology worldwide.”

Resource type: Secondary sources; Answer questions

Audience: Scholars, students, professors.

Navigation: searching by subject, title, author, institution, year, language.

Author/Creator: A Networked Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations (NDLTD), OCLC, VTLS.

6. American Memory: Historical Collections for the National Digital Library (<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/in d ex.html>)

Purpose: “provides free and open access through the Internet to written and spoken words, sound recordings, still and moving images, prints, maps, and sheet music that document the American experience. These materials, from the collections of the Library of Congress and other institutions, chronicle historical events, people, places, and ideas that continue to shape America, serving the public as a resource for education and lifelong learning. More than nine million items are organized into more than 100 thematic collections that can be browsed or individually searched.

Resource type: Primary sources; Secondary sources; Answer questions

Audience: Undergraduates, professors, general audience.

Navigation: Easy to use and frequently updated. Collections can be browsed or individually searched.

Author/Creator: Library of Congress.

7. The Making of America Project (<http://moa.cit.cornell.edu/moa>) (<http://www.hti.umich.edu/m/moagr>)

Purpose: “a digital library of primary sources in American social history from the antebellum period through Reconstruction (1850-1877). Subject areas include: education, psychology, American history, sociology, religion, and science and technology, general interest periodicals. The project consists of digitized pages of books and journals. Includes scanned pages from original volumes. A collaborative endeavor between Cornell University and the University of Michigan with funding from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Current (October 2005) online holdings at the Cornell University site include 907,750 pages, 267 monograph volumes and 955 serial volumes. Current online holdings at the University of Michigan site include 3,304,594 pages and 11,329 volumes.

Resource type: Primary sources; Secondary sources; Answer questions

Audience: Graduate school study, scholars, researchers.

Navigation: The pages are full text searchable. A Frequently Asked Question (FAQ) list is included.

Author/Creator: A collaborative endeavor between Cornell University and the University of Michigan with funding from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

8. OAIster (www.oaister.org)

Purpose: “to create a collection of freely available, previously difficult-to-access, academically-oriented digital resources that are easily searchable by anyone. The digital collections include electronic books, online journals, audio and image files, and movies provided by the research community. As of September 30, 2005, the site includes 5,914,431 records from 536 institutions. Material included: the Library of Congress' *American Memory Project*, digital thesis and dissertation collections.

Resource type: Primary sources; Secondary sources; Answer questions

Audience: Scholars, serious researchers, professors, college students.

Navigation: Easy. One can search by browsing institutions or subject, title, creator.

Author/Creator: University of Michigan Digital Library Production Service. The project was built through collaboration with the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

9. Perseus Digital Library (www.perseus.tufts.edu)

Site's Purpose: "an evolving digital library of resources for the study of the humanities." Collections include text, images, maps, and facsimiles on materials included. It begins with the Archaic and Classical Greek world, Latin text and tools and Renaissance-related materials. Also included are Tufts University historical material, the Bolles collection on (nineteenth century) London, and materials on the United States' westward expansion and other materials of early American history including the American Civil War.

Resource type: Primary sources; Secondary sources; Answer questions

Audience: Scholars; Anyone interested in the study of humanities.

Navigation: A searchable database. There is a table of contents, browsing and the Perseus Lookup Tool, a map to the subject areas. A Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) list help with searching.

Author/Creator: Perseus Project, Department of the Classics, Tufts University.

10. Project Gutenberg (www.gutenberg.org)

Purpose: To "provide access to books in electronic text format a short time after they entered the public domain. Project Gutenberg is the first and largest single collect of free electronic books." Texts include light literature (Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Edgar Rice Burroughs); heavy literature (such as the works of Shakespeare); and reference sources such as almanacs, encyclopedias, and dictionaries. The 16,000 e-books in the project are free to anyone living in the United States.

Resource type: Primary sources; Secondary sources; Answer questions

Audience: Students, professors, scholars and general audiences

Navigation: Easy. The site can be searched by author or title.

Author/Creator: Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation (a 501 (c) (3) organization. Gregory B Newby is the volunteer CEO. Michael Hart, Founder and Executive Director in 1971 at the University of Illinois.

11. The Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project at Stanford University

(<http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/>)

Purpose: "to assemble and disseminate historical information concerning Martin Luther King, Jr. and the social movements in which he participated. A video archive, photo archive and a searchable bibliography are included.

Resource type: Primary sources; Secondary sources; Answer questions

Audience: Students and professors, general audience

Author/Creator: A collaborative effort by the King Center for Nonviolent Social Change and Stanford University. Clayborne Carson, historian at Stanford University.

Navigation: Easy. There are hypertext links and a searchable bibliography.

12. The Nobel Foundation (<http://nobelprize.org/>)

Purpose: “official site of the Nobel Foundation, which awards prizes in physics, chemistry, physiology or medicine, literature, and peace. Winners of the prizes in Physics, Chemistry, medicine, literature, peace and economics as well as their acceptance speeches, biographical information and bibliography are listed.

Resource type: Answer questions

Audience: Professors and students, general audience.

Navigation: Easy to use and search.

Author/Creator: the Noble Foundation

13. Artyclopedia: the Fine Arts Search Engine (www.artcyclopedia.com)

Purpose: To be “the definitive and most effective guide to museum-quality fine art on the Internet.” The site indexes 1800 art sites. It contains 60,000+ links to 150,000 artworks by 8,100 artists. An artist must be included in an arts museum collection somewhere in the world to be linked to the site. The artist’s works must be viewable online. A search by artist name finds links to articles, image archives and links to online museums.

Resource type: Answer questions

Audience: Undergraduate teachers, students and anyone with an interest in fine art.

Navigation: A custom search engine primarily oriented to name searching.

Author/Creator: John Malyon, the creator of Artyclopedia, Inc. is an IT professional and web developer.

14. Guide to Philosophy on the Internet (www.earlham.edu/~peters/philinks.htm)

Purpose: “a comprehensive, peer-reviewed resource of collected links to scholarly works, Websites, and texts of philosophers that are online. The site includes links to: Philosophers, Journals, Guides, Associations, Bibliographies, eTexts, Projects, Quotations, Guides, Dictionaries, Hippas, Jobs, Teaching/Learning, Newsgroups, Preprints, Topics, and Miscellany.

Resource type: Answer questions

Audience: Students and professors; anyone needing background in philosophy

Navigation: Easy. The table of contents and search feature help with navigation. Suber stopped updating the site in February 2003. While there are dead links, it is valuable for what is there.

Author/Creator: Peter Suber – Professor in Philosophy Department at Earlham College until May 2003. Now, a researcher and consultant.

15. AMDOCS: Documents for the Study of American History (www.vlib.us/amdocs)

Purpose: “contains links to the full text of 400+ primary-source documents relating to the study of American history that have been digitized by a variety of academic institutions. (AMDOCS is part of the University of Kansas Digital library, CARRIE: A Full Text Electronic Library). The documents are organized by century beginning in the year 1000 to the present with the latest entry as of March 2008 being George W. Bush's last State of the Union address.

Resource type: Primary sources

Audience: College professors, college students, history researchers and general audience.

Navigation: Easy. The sites vary in the materials available.

Author/Creator: Original author, Lynn H. Nelson, Professor emeritus, History. University of Kansas.

16. Internet History Sourcebooks Project (www.fordham.edu/halsall)

Purpose: “A World Wide Web project designed to provide easy access to primary sources and other teaching materials in a non-commercial environment.” The materials included are collections of public domain and copy permitted historical texts. The three main sourcebooks are: *Internet Ancient History Sourcebook*, *Internet Medieval Sourcebook* and the *Internet Modern History Sourcebook*. *Subsidiary sourcebooks include: African History, East Asian History, Global History, Indian History, Islamic History, Jewish History, History of Science, Women's History, and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans* History Sourcebooks*. Historical studies links and comprehensive bibliographies are included.

Resource type: Primary sources; Secondary sources; Answer questions

Navigation: Easy to use searchable site. There are graphics on each page.

Audience: University professors, college students, high school teachers and their students.

Author/Creator: Paul Halsall, PhD in History from Fordham University. MA in Classical Civilization from the University of London (Birkbeck College). Teaches history at the University of South Florida.

17. Best of History Web Sites (www.besthistorysites.net)

Purpose: A portal that consists of annotated lists of 1000+ history websites. Sections include: Prehistory, Ancient/biblical, Medieval, U.S. History, Early Modern European, 20th Century, World War II, Art History, Maps, and General Resources. Also included are sites for: Lesson Plans/Activities, Multimedia, and Research.

Resource type: Answer questions

Audience: History educators, researchers, students and general history enthusiasts.

Navigation: A searchable site; it is updated frequently. The Middle East Crisis links were added in September, 2005.

Author/Creator: Thomas Daccord (B.A. Princeton University and Université de Montréal), academic technology specialist and history teacher.

18. HyperHistory Online (www.hyperhistory.com/online_n2/History_n2/a.html)

Purpose: “HyperHistory is an expanding scientific project presenting 3,000 years of world history with an interactive combination of synchroptic (simultaneously presented and viewable) lifelines, timelines, and maps.”

The site provides a spatial representation so time can be viewed. Events and people in science, religion, politics and the arts are depicted on color coded maps. Hyperlinks in the maps to 2000+ text biographies allow further research. Additional bibliographies and links included.

Resource type: Answer questions

Audience: Undergraduate and general users.

Navigation: Easy. Each page contains a Menu panel and a Text Panel so the user can easily switch from one category to another.

19. The American Civil War Homepage (<http://sunsite.utk.edu/civil-war>)

Purpose: “To provide a comprehensive directory of hypertext links about the Civil War period (1861-65). This Internet directory covers the war from the major military, political, and social perspectives.” Links to sites that supply narrative overviews, bibliographies, photographs, and primary source documents. Links are organized in 13 categories: General Resources (including Music of the Civil War Era), Biographical Information, Images of Wartime, Documentary Records, Histories and Bibliographies, The Secession Crisis and Before, State/Local Studies – by State, Battles & Campaigns, Rosters & Regimental Histories, Civil War Round Tables, Fictional Accounts of Wartime, Civil War Reenactors, Other Military Information.

Resource type: Primary sources; Secondary sources; Answer questions

Audience: Serious Civil War researchers, general audiences, and beginners.

Navigation: Easy to use, just click on the hypertext links to the electronic files. Frequent updating (October 14, 2005), with some dead links.

Author/Creator: Dr. George H. Hoemann, assistant dean for Distance Education and Independent Study at the University of Tennessee. (Mary Myers, original co-author).

20. American Women's History: A Research Guide (<http://www.mtsu.edu/~kmiddlet/history/women.html>)

Purpose: “American Women's History provides citations to print and Internet reference sources, as well as to selected large primary source collections. The guide also provides information about the tools researchers can use to find additional books, articles, dissertations, and primary resources.”

“The site contains 2100+ citations to print and Internet sources and 500+ links to Digital Collections of Primary Sources. The site is updated at least monthly and uses a link checking program to minimize incorrect links.” The links to primary sources are organized into 75 sub-fields under five main sections: Subject Index to Research Sources, State Index to Research Sources, Research Tools, Finding Primary Sources, and Research Tools, Finding Secondary Sources.

Resource type: Primary sources; Secondary sources; Answer questions

Audience: "Serious researchers, independent scholars, graduate students and upper-division undergraduates."

Navigation: Easy to use and has an intuitive layout.

Author/Creator: Ken Middleton, reference/microforms librarian, at Middle Tennessee State University Library. He holds a second master's degree, with an emphasis in American women's history.

Conclusion

Free websites of value for Humanities students, faculty and the librarians who serve these users do exist. Librarians use a rigorous evaluation process to identify the accuracy and reliability of websites. The results of that analysis are published annually in *Reference & User Services Quarterly*. The present study analyzed those websites using the same criteria and found 20 websites of value to humanities students, faculty, and the librarians who work with this user group. Future research using the websites listed in *Reference & User Services Quarterly* could uncover websites of value to students and faculty in other disciplines.

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