Literature Review:

Historians' Information Community

INFO 200 – Stephens

Theresa Berger

San Jose State University

Spring 2017

Introduction

Historians are the people that "do" history. The Oxford English Dictionary (2016) defines a historian as "a writer of history, especially one who analyses events critically." This writing that historians do, "the business of history," explains Margaret Stieg (2009), "is to provide answers to two fundamental questions: what happened and why did it happen?" To answer these questions, historians require evidence, often in the form of primary sources. Such sources "offer an inside view of the event" and "are the heart of any research project" (p. 2070).

As an information community (Fisher & Durrance, 2003), historians partake in different behaviors to find these primary sources, often utilizing digital technology. They then share their findings by writing and publishing, as well as engaging in discussions with their peers and the larger public. In the words of one of their own, and conforming to Fisher and Durrance's requirements that an information community "remove barriers to information about… participating in civic life" and "foster social connectedness within the larger community" (p. 5), historians study history to "gain access to the laboratory of human experience" and develop "a real grasp of how the world works" (Stearns, 1998). In short, historians look to the past to better understand the present.

While it is no exaggeration to say that "anyone" can be a historian, the needs of genealogists, amateur researchers, and history enthusiasts are best understood as the needs of separate information communities. For purposes of this review, a definition of historians will draw from Rhee (2012) and be limited to those connected with academia, specifically history faculty members and history doctoral students. I will not distinguish between the two, and will refer to them collectively as "historians" or "academic historians." Limiting the parameters of

this definition to historians involved with academia is more than satisfactory given both the size of the community as well as the depth of the literature conforming to these standards as illustrated in the discussion below. To better illustrate this first point, though, the American Historical Association (AHA), the nation's largest professional organization dedicated to serving the needs of historians, boasts over 14,000 members, with nearly 70% – or 9,800 – of its total members affiliated with a four-year college or university (Townsend, 2011). Moreover, according to Rhee, academic historians form one of the largest user groups of special collections libraries and archives (Introduction). Thus, the noble work of historians as described by Stearns as well as their user status in library and archives justifies a LIS-centered study of their needs from both a philosophical and a practical standpoint.

This literature review will assess the major LIS-related scholarship focusing on the information needs and behaviors of historians with emphasis on their search for primary sources. It will highlight the prominence of the historical community in studies of information science and consider the process of historical research within the context of core theories of information-seeking behavior. It will also provide an overview of scholar's approaches to studying the historical community as well as a general discussion of their results. The literature's treatment of historians' response to rise of the digital age and digital resources will also be discussed. Finally, this review will conclude with an assessment of different areas of historians' information behavior in need of further study as well as a discussion of how the literature addresses the relationship between historians and information professionals. Areas in which community-based resources support the scholarly literature or expand upon it will be addressed when appropriate.

Review of Writings

Prevalence of Research in LIS and Connection with Core Theories of Information-Seeking

Behavior

With the exception of Erdelez (1999), and Kuhlthau (1991), all of the peer-reviewed

studies in this literature review are explicitly about academic historians. Even more significant,

over half of the articles cited are from academic journals focusing on Library and Information

Science or a field within it (i.e., archival science). Based on the topical data generated from this

small sample set alone, it becomes clear that information professionals are interested in studying

and understanding the needs and behaviors of historians. It is also worth noting that they are

interested in studying the community by going directly to the source itself. All but two (Rhee;

Woodward, 2008) of the historian-centered information studies cited in this review include the

use of participant surveys or questionnaires in their methodology. Information professionals

studying historians thus rely on historians to get information about historians' information needs.

In addition to gathering data from historians, the literature also looks to foundational

theories in information-seeking behavior to make sense of the historical community. Several

studies discuss the role of "browsing" in historians' search for information and sources related to

their topic (Case, 1991; Dalton and Charnigo, 2004; Delgadillo and Lynch, 1999; Duff and

Johnson, 2002; Rhee). The serendipity of encountering information (Erdelez) experienced by

historians during their search is also discussed. However, contrary to Erdelez's emphasis on the

randomization and happenstance of information-seeking, Case, Duff and Johnson, and Rhee all

contend that the way in which historians locate information and resources follows a rational,

methodical search or knowledge-building process. Indeed, as Duff and Johnson explain,

historians' discovery of information "is influenced less by serendipity and more by the deliberate

tactics of the expert researcher" (p. 495). Thus, historians' comparative place in the LIS literature

is especially worth noting.

Similarly, the steps involved with the "process" of historical research are considered in

relation to wider theories of information-seeking behavior. Duff and Johnson make explicit

reference to Kuhlthau's Information Search Process (Duff and Johnson, p. 478). Yet, they as well

as the rest of the authors in this review are keen to emphasize that historians' search for

information is not a linear experience progressing from one stage to the next as Kuhlthau

suggests. Rather, stages in historical research, especially those having to do with the location of

primary sources, can occur "concurrently" (Case, p. 79), "simultaneously" (Duff and Johnson, p.

492), and "move back and forth" from one feature to the next (Rhee, Features of historians'

information-seeking behaviour). This methodical yet non-linear approach to gathering

information is a key, unique feature of historians' information-seeking behavior.

Topics and Approaches

Topical divisions in the LIS literature studying historians tend to categorize the historical

community in one of four ways: historians as humanities scholars or social scientists, historians

as researchers in libraries, historians as a sub-group of archival users; or, historians specifically

as archival users. All four approaches are represented by the sources cited in this review, though

more recent scholarship tends to look at the community through topics two and four (historians

as library researchers and historians as archival users). It should be noted that Rhee stands alone

from the group through her emphasis on a "multidisciplinary and comparative" approach that

gathers data from previous studies utilizing all four of the above groupings. As Rhee explains,

pigeon-holing a study of historians into one category or grouping (historians as social scientists

for example) runs the risk of limiting the literature's understanding of "how and why historians'

information-seeking behaviour and historical research are unique" (Introduction). Interestingly,

the community appears to reinforce Rhee's sentiments. On the AHA's website, visitors and

historians alike can find articles on history's role in the humanities, first-hand accounts of

research experiences in both libraries and archives, and bibliographic listings of archives across

the nation (AHA, 2017). Rather than "choose a side" or classification, historians appear to

demonstrate a much more inclusive and multifaceted approach to expressing their identity and

experiences to the larger public.

   Information Behaviors and Information Needs Within these approaches, the focus of

LIS studies of historians tends to be divided between two subjects of interest: studies of

historians' information-seeking behavior and/or studies of historians' resources and information

needs. Studies centered on determining key features of historians' information behavior include

those by Case, Duff and Johnson, Rhee, and Tibbo (2003). Studies addressing the actual

information needs and types of resources used by historians include those by Beattie (1989),

Duff, Craig, and Cherry (2004), Stieg (1981), and Woodward. Studies explicitly addressing both

topics include those by Delgadillo and Lynch as well as Dalton and Charnigo, though it can be

argued that each study contains elements of both approaches.

  Despite the literature's various approaches to studying historians, significant

commonalities can be identified across the authors' findings. The literature discussing historians'

research behaviors consistently notes the importance of footnote tracing, consulting with

colleagues or information professionals, browsing, and web searching (if the practice was

available at the time of the study). The literature discussing information sources used by

historians consistently identifies these sources as: finding aids, bibliographies, catalogs (print and online), and colleagues or other authorities in the field. Specific rankings between these individual behaviors and sources somewhat vary, often depending on whether or not the study's focus was placed on historians as library or archival users. For example, Duff, Craig, and Cherry's research rates archivists of "high importance" in historians' search for primary sources in archival repositories (p. 13-14), while Delgadillo and Lynch conclude that historians rarely consult with reference staff when researching in libraries (p. 251). A more thorough analysis of these findings, including a detailed definition of each behavior or source will be included in the research paper following this review. Suffice it to say, though, the literature appears to have reached a consensus on the general types of information needs and features of historians' search for sources. Additionally, web-based community sources, with their inclusion of archival repository listings, bibliographic databases, discussion forums, and blogs encouraging posts and conversations between colleagues (AHA, 2017) seem to confirm these findings.

Emphasis on Digital Resources More recent literature on the information needs and behaviors of historians tends to address the historian's relationship with digital resources. Dalton and Charnigo, Delgadillo and Lynch, and Duff and Johnson all include discussions of digital or electronic resources in their studies. Duff, Craig, and Cherry as well as Tibbo go a step further and make the effect or use of digital sources in historians' work the primary focus of their work. The authors in these studies all acknowledge the positive impact on meeting historians' information needs granted by online catalogs, internet searches, and digitized archival finding aids over the last 15 years. However, studies do not indicate a radical shift in behavior or satisfaction of needs due to digitization as one might assume. Indeed, in 1995, Dalton and

Charnigo noted historians' preference for using print sources (p. 256), a sentiment echoed by

Duff, Craig, and Cherry in 2004, almost 10 years later (p. 18). Similarly, after concluding that

historians are not using them as frequently as intended, Tibbo asserted that it was long time to

"make the electronic finding aid and archival databases historians' tools" (p. 29).

Recommendations for improving the relevance or use of digital resources by the historical

community, including more standardized updates and descriptions in archival finding aids are

included in the articles by Duff and Johnson, Duff et. al, and Tibbo.

Gaps and Biases

While the breadth of the literature indicates large interest in historians by the LIS

community, the overall focus of the research tends to rely on a broad understanding of the work

and focus of historians. Most of the authors in the above-referenced studies make it a point to

include historians that specialize in various geographic regions or time periods in their

methodology (i.e., the United States, Europe, Latin America; the 20th century, the pre-Columbian

era, the 1800's). Yet, they largely fail to recognize or consider various *types* of history –

immigration history, gender history, cultural history, etc. – in their approach. As Beattie and

Woodward demonstrate in their respective studies of women's historians and social historians

interested in local history, the resource needs and behaviors of these subgroups within the

historical community differ from the needs and resources of the historians considered in the rest

of the studies cited above. For example, the social historians' use of local records emphasizing

"ordinary people's lives" calls for a different approach to searching, and consequently, writing

archival finding aids (Woodward, p. 87). Compared to scholars in the field of LIS, the historical

community appears to be much further along in addressing these needs. Indeed, the AHA allows

members to search various directories, affiliated sites, and community forums specializing in one of these subtypes, while separate organizations such as the Western Association of Women's Historians (WAWH) and the American Society for Legal History (ASLH) include resources for locating primary sources or "doing" history within their fields (AHA, 2017; WAWH, 2017; ASLH, 2017).

Conclusion

The literature indicates that historians are a well-studied and frequently discussed community in the LIS field. This makes sense as they are one of the largest user groups of libraries and archives. The needs and behaviors of the community have been widely studied, and through a variety of lenses and approaches. There also appears to be a commitment to reevaluate and update scholars' understandings of historians' needs when new avenues of research, such as electronic resources, are presented. Despite various approaches to studying the community, the information-seeking behavior of historians can be generally understood as careful, methodical, and conforming to a process in which different aspects of research are performed simultaneously to address a larger information need. The literature also reveals that historians tend to rely on the same sources and patterns of behaviors throughout their research including footnote tracing, the use of indices, archival finding aids, and other persons to locate information. One area where the literature appears to fall short in addressing the needs of the community is in developing an understanding of the various needs and behaviors of historians specializing in different types of historical study. The community-based literature appears to reinforce these observations and shortcomings. Nonetheless, each one of the historian-centered scholarly sources included in this review emphasizes the importance of communication between historians and information

professionals. They also recommend ways for information professionals to better meet

historians' needs. All evidence indicates that this will continue to be the case and that the

information needs of historians will continue to be assessed, considered, and hopefully met by

the LIS community.

References

American Historical Association (AHA) [website]. (n.d). Retrieved from https://www.

    historians.org/

American Society for Legal History (ASLH) [website]. (n.d.) Retrived from http://aslh.net/

Beattie, D. L. (1989). An archival user study: Researchers in the field of women's history.

    Archivaria 29. Retrieved from http://archivaria.ca/index.php/archivaria/article/view/

    11607/12554

Case, D. O. (1991). The collection and use of information by some American historians: A study

    of motives and methods. *The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy 61.*

    Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/4308543

Dalton, M.S. & Charnigo, L. (2004). Historians and their information sources. *College &*

    Research Libraries 65(4). doi: 10.5860/crl.65.5.400

Delgadillo, R. & Lynch, B. P. (1999). Future historians: Their quest for information. *College &*

    Research Libraries 60(3). doi: 10.5860/crl.60.3.245

Duff, W.M., Craig, B., & Cherry, J. (2004). Historians' use of archival sources: promises and

pitfalls of the Digital Age. *The Public Historian 26*(2). Retrieved from http://

www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/tph.2004.26.2.7

Duff, W.M. & Johnson, C.A. (2002). Accidentally found on purpose: Information-seeking

behavior of historians in archives. *Library Quarterly 72*(4). Retrieved from http://

web.b.ebscohost.com.libaccess.sjlibrary.org/ehost/detail/detail?sid=7f796e6f-e580-4918-

a94c-2a8039bcc06c%40sessionmgr102&vid=2&hid=118&bdata

=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#AN=502886257&db=lls

Erdelez, S. (1999). Information encountering: It's more than just bumping into

information. *Bulletin of the American Society for Information Science 25*(3). Retrieved

from http://libaccess.sjlibrary.org/login?url=http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/bult.118

Fisher, K., & Durrance, J. (2003). Information communities. In K. Christensen, & D. Levinson

(Eds.), *Encyclopedia of community: From the village to the virtual world.* (pp. 658-661).

Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc. Retrieved from http://libaccess.sjlibrary.

org/login?url=http://knowledge.sagepub.com/view/community/n248.xml

Historian. (2016). In *Oxford English Dictionary online.* Retrieved from http://www.oed.com.

libaccess.sjlibrary.org/view/Entry/87295

Kuhlthau, C. C. (1991). Inside the search process: Information seeking from the user's

perspective. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science, 42*(5), 361-

371. Retrieved from http://libaccess.sjlibrary.org/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/

login.aspx?direct=true&db=lih&AN=16734380&site=ehost-live

Rhee, H. L. (2012). Modelling historians' information-seeking behaviour with an

interdisciplinary and comparative approach. *Information Research, 17*(4). Retrieved from

http://InformationR.net/ir/17-4/paper544.html

Stearns, P. (1998). Why study history? Retrieved from https://www.historians.org/about-aha-

and-membership/aha-history-and-archives/archives/why-study-history-(1998)

Stieg, M. (1981). The information needs of historians. *College & Research Libraries 42*(6). doi:

10.5860/crl_42_06_549

Stieg, M. (2009). Historical sources and their users. In *Encyclopedia of Library and

Information Sciences* (3rd ed.). M. Bates and M.N. Maack (Eds.). doi: 10.1081/E-ELIS3

Tibbo, H. R. (2003). Primarily history in America: How U.S. historians search for primary

materials at the dawn of the Digital Age. *The American Archivist 66*. Retrieved from

http://www.jstor.org/stable/40294216

Townsend, P. (2011). AHA membership on the rise again in 2011. Retrieved from

http://blog.historians.org/2011/07/aha-membership-on-the-rise-again-in-2011/

Western Association of Women Historians (WAWH) [website]. (n.d.). Retrieved from

http://www.wawh.org/

Woodward, E. (2008). Social history and local records: Historical methods, archival theory, and

the Library of Virginia. *Journal of Archival Organization 6*(1-2). doi: 10.1080/15332740

802235406