



KEYNOTE

WHAT INFORMATION CAN HISTORICAL NEWSPAPERS PROVIDE? (in English)

Ryan Cordell (The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign)

Drawing on the Viral Texts research project, this talk reflects on the information of historical newspapers in two senses. While the project's computational study of the medium illustrates the kinds of information that circulated widely during the nineteenth-century, it also highlights the malleability of historical newspapers' textual record. As texts circulated through newspaper exchanges, they shifted continuously to align with the political, regional, or aesthetic priorities of editors and readers. Considered at the corpus scale, the nineteenth-century newspaper is not a stable and coherent source of historical information, but a tempestuous record of contested narrative, revision, and omission. From here the talk pivots to reflect on historical newspaper data as a source of scholarly information in the twenty-first century. Summarizing a series of exploratory analyses using digitized newspapers to examine the editorial and compositional practices of newspaper production through the nineteenth-century, the talk demonstrates how textual data can help illuminate not just the content of historical media, but also its material features, such as how material was organized on the page, how the length and structure of newspapers varied in different locations and changed over the decades, and how expectations of currency accelerated during the century. Finally, these exploratory analyses serve as a means to reflect on our sources for computational research in the twenty-first century, offering a critical fulcrum for evaluating how the construction of digitized newspaper corpora can result in unevenness of coverage, exclusions of historical regions or communities, and variations in data quality that determine what can and cannot be learned about history from the resulting data. Like the information found in nineteenth-century newspapers, twenty-first-century information about historical newspapers must be approached with a critical eye.