Silences as News: The Relevance and Urgency of Preserving Historical Newspapers in Postcolonial Settings

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Abstract

• In postcolonial countries in the Caribbean, more than natural disasters, newspapers are threatened by oblivion, stemming from indifference in and dismissal of a traumatic past. Traditionally, scholars have read historical newspapers for the information they contain. More recently, area studies and digital tools have enabled us to read them against the grain. The result has been greater awareness of the intricate web of silences underlying the information contained within. Making this content available for scholarship, safeguarding it for posterity, and facilitating access is a priority.

• This talk’s focus will be the digitization of The Barbados Mercury Gazette, a project funded by a British Library Endangered Archives Programme. The project is an international collaboration of scholars and practitioners abroad and in Barbados.

• The presentation will be in two parts: The first part will describe “lessons learned” based on the intricacies, unexpected delays and necessary adjustments during the project. The second part will discuss how the project team aims to promote the newspaper as a fertile resource for research and a new understanding of the island’s history. The presentation will also examine the opportunities arising through this project for community involvement and empowerment. Finally, future directions and work inspired by this project will be presented.

To read more about this project, see the blog posts here:

http://archiveland.com/category/grant/the-barbados-mercury/
Overview of the presentation

*Part I:*  
“Lessons learned”

*Part II:*  
Opportunities for scholarship and future directions

*NOTE: These slides have been slightly modified from the original presentation.*
The Barbados Mercury

1783 - 1839

c. 10,570 pages

Funding:
British Library
Endangered Archives Programme grant

Learn more about this project here: http://archiveland.com/category/grant/the-barbados-mercury/
An international, collaborative project can teach you a lot...

18 lessons learned *(and counting)*
Stages of a project

• Euphoria
• [Stuff happens]
• Anger
• Denial
• Acceptance
• Resilience
• Time to think and learn
LESSONS LEARNED
In the post-colony, the community *is* the archives

- You cannot understand the archives without its people
- The Archives carry their traumas
- They bear the memory of the past inscribed
Expect distrust

In archives, libraries and museums in post-colonial countries, people have been taken advantage of by

• Looting colonialism
• Rapacious capitalism
• Unscrupulous scholars
• Exploitative consultants
• Thieves

It will take a lot of effort on the part of scholars and institutions in the “Global North” to undo this legacy.
As a professional working abroad, you are an outsider.

- Do not assume that
  - you are better
  - you know more
  - your way of doing things is the correct one

- Be kind, respectful and graceful towards everyone.
Respect heals

It translates the traumas of the past into opportunities for:

• Collaborating
• Building new communities of practice
• (Working + seeking + doing) together
• Inventing alternative ways to understand
• and also
• Question the affordances and limitations of tech solutions
Collaboration starts with humility

• Learn to listen.

• Be silent.

• Let others define what is important.
International collaborations

A balancing act.

Be clear and sincere

Define expectations

Know how to juggle different mentalities
The power to form connections

• “Old dusty stuff”?

  • In postcolonial societies, historical newspapers can have the power to heal.
  
  • Historical newspapers can help bring people together.

  • They can instill in people pride in their past
  
    • Help them see slaves not as passive, but as people who fought back.
Decolonizing the records is not a top-down, but a bottom-up practice

• Create digital resources that matter for the people

• Do things that are important to people

• Do not try to understand and describe alone what you cannot know
  • Ask for input and help
Digitization is secondary

In post-colonial settings, digitization is not urgent.

- Need for more groundwork
  - Inventories, catalogues, finding aids
- Facilitate search and discovery
- Enable and promote scholarship
CONTEXT IS EVERYTHING
Become part of larger initiatives

Example: Transatlantic Digitised Newspapers project

• Transnational flow of information around the globe

• Innovative approaches to the digitized archives of historical American and British newspapers

Also, become part of other runaway slave ads projects (patterns, networks).

http://www.ucl.ac.uk/dh/events/archive/transatlantic
Colonial newspapers:
Reading in-between lines and against the grain

The written text above:
• The illusion of normalcy

The web of silences beneath
• Networks forming; resistance patterns; revolts
The power to change scholarship

The example of The Barbados Mercury

BUSSA’S REVOLT (April 1816)

- Usually presented through a triumphalist narrative about a strong, charismatic male leader

- Using the Mercury: Possibility to update scholarship to reflect the role of women, and the power of networks of everyday people
Open Access

The elephant in the room....
Actively seek to reconstruct the historical record
Slaves do not exist as “creators” of documents but as ITEMS in:

- A newspaper runaway ad....
- A slave ship’s cargo list
- A plantation’s holdings
- An owner’s will

“The full story is not told unless the cargo has a voice and the population speaks.”

*J. Bastian, “Reading Colonial Records Through an Archival Lens: The Provenance of Place, Space and Creation,” 2006
Even when digitized, voiceless populations remain “locked away”

1. Documents scanned as images
2. Not searchable
3. Metadata that favor the ‘creator’
Digitizing historical newspapers: Opportunities for further scholarship and public humanities projects about the enslaved
Need to consciously create the archival record for underrepresented groups

- Create information “retrospectively” from collections
- If the information is “locked away,” we need to extract it

“Collections as data”: opportunities for novel scholarship
COLLECTIONS AS DATA

http://merrick.library.miami.edu/cubanHeritage/cubanlaw/lagaceta.php

https://github.com/UMiamiLibraries/collections-as-data/tree/master/LaGaceta
"Can a man serve God faithfully & possess slaves?"

Sharon Leon, “Re-Presenting the Enslaved Community sold by the Maryland Province Jesuits in 1838”
Slave Revolt in Jamaica, 1760-1761
A Cartographic Narrative

Map Legend

- Size of Force
  - 100 people

- Clash with Rebels

Troop locations

- Rebels
- Militia
- Army
- Navy
- Haroins
- Conspiracy
- Slave Court
- Uncertain location

Base map legend

http://revolt.axismaps.com/
Distant reading: LARGE SCALE ANALYSIS

From: Enabling complex analysis of large-scale digital collections: humanities research, high-performance computing, and transforming access to British Library digital collections

Digital Scholarship Humanities. Published online May 02, 2017. doi:10.1093/llc/fqx020
Close reading: “Did the enslaved work in print houses?”

Question raised during the workshop.

The answer was found as workshop participants were browsing The Mercury (May 17, 1783).

Ad talking about 2 runaway negro men from Martinique:

• Raphael, a barber, 22 y.o., 5’ tall
• Charles, around 23 y.o., is **printer by trade**

“with a lowering ugly look”

“Speaks both French and English”
Digitizing the Barbados Mercury: FUTURE POSSIBILITIES FOR CULTURAL HERITAGE AND PUBLIC HUMANITIES PROJECTS

• Collaborations with cultural heritage community and scholars in Barbados & abroad

• Seek grants to support work for extracting data and creating datasets

• Make available these datasets to researchers for digital humanities projects

• Mobile applications (e.g. walking tours)
  • Starting from well-developed network (e.g., Jews)
  • Building upon it by adding other networks (e.g., slaves)

• Augmented reality applications
  • E.g., adding information (documents, photos) that people can “see” with their mobile devices while visiting the city
It takes a village... 

• Be part of a community.

• For me, it was
  • In the US:
    • dLOC (Digital Library of the Caribbean)
    • University of Florida Smathers Libraries librarians
  • In Barbados
    • Scholars and practitioners in cultural heritage and educational institutions
Work with the Barbados Synagogue Restoration Project in dLOC (http://dloc.com/ibsrp)
We specialize in seeking grants, developing proposals, and managing projects in the cultural heritage sector. The aim of our non-profit organization is to promote access to tangible and intangible heritage by connecting people, resources, and institutions in the Caribbean and beyond through educational and cultural initiatives.”

http://herittedge.foundation/
THANK YOU!

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