Fibber McGee’s Closet:
How Digital Research Transformed the Archive – But Not the History Department

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One of the biggest topics among historians of my generation is not the ease of doing research in the digital age, but its difficulties; not the pleasure in how much we can see online, but how little we can see on our own computers as documents are tucked away in files. In fact, the shift from paper to digital – and the promise that more and more will be available online every year without even traveling to the archive itself – has produced a syndrome among historians of all ages that I call “Fibber McGee’s Closet.”

For those of you who don’t know them, Fibber and Molly McGee were middle class radio characters created during the Great Depression by vaudeville comedians Jim and Marian Jordan. In April 1935, the fictional married couple from 79 Wistful Vista made their debut on the NBC network, pioneering a genre that would come to be a staple feature of twentieth century media entertainment: the situation, or ensemble, comedy. One of the show’s running gags had to do with Fibber’s hall closet, which the audience knew was jammed with, perhaps useful, but random and unsorted items. At some point in the show, Molly would suggest that something Fibber needed was “in the closet,” or a guest would try to exit just as Fibber said:
“That’s not the front door – that’s the closet!” An avalanche of nameless clutter then jangled through the airwaves as audiences roared with laughter. As the final items clattered to the floor, Fibber would deliver his rueful catchphrase: “I gotta clean out that closet someday.”

Five years ago, when I still worked in Connecticut and had an office closet, it was as full as Fibber’s. It was packed with large file boxes of research on the Federal Bureau of Investigation that had accumulated over the course of over ten years. Prior to moving to the office, these boxes of paper, brought home from archives a couple pounds at a time as I moved from one stage of my career to the next, had lived in a closet in my house. I had amassed many of these Xeroxed documents (about four feet of them, in archival parlance), and handwritten index cards (say, four or five inches worth) for a dissertation; I added another couple feet when I turned this research into a book. Although I had begun using a computer to write while still in graduate school, I never imagined a moment without well organized boxes of files that could be laid out on the floor and covered with post its, the now we inhabit, in which we describe the size of a personal or archival collection in gigabytes.

These papers, mostly from the FBI FOIPA Reading Room, the National Archives, and the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Library, were the product of what had been, in the 1980s, new technology. Innovations in photocopying made the duplication of documents, although not always desirable, affordable by the mid-1980s: a few archives would accommodate desktop copiers that were the size of a small suitcase. Yet diversion of archivists’ valuable time to mundane duplication,
excessive handling, harm to documents from the light and heat of copying machines, and the disordering of folders caused some libraries to keep prices just high enough – sometimes as much as 50 cents or even a dollar a page -- to discourage the kind of mass copying that I favored early in my career. Assuming an archive permitted duplication, however, the researcher could eliminate the copious, finger-numbing, and sometimes error-ridden, note taking with number 2 pencils that had constituted the previous state of play in historical research.

I can’t explain why I still owned those files in 2011 (although Matthew Connelly’s reference to his own paper-ridden home yesterday caused me to suggest in a Tweet that we historians and archivists are all wannabe hoarders.) Nostalgia for a youth spent in the windowless basement of FBI headquarters in Washington, D.C., where every trip to the bathroom required an escort by a strapping female Special Agent? Perhaps. Fortunately, just as I was approaching the moment when the closet where the boxes lived was almost full, my friend and colleague Beverly Gage announced that she planned to write a new biography of former FBI director J. Edgar Hoover and asked if I had anything tucked away.

The perfect solution had arrived: I could clean the closet and be a good colleague at the same time! I loaded the boxes in my car, drove to New Haven, and left them in Bev’s capable hands. On my way out the door, I said: “There’s only one rule: you must never. Ever. Give them. Back.”

Today, were I to be sharing my current research on anti-pornography campaigns during the Reagan administration, I would have handed Bev a two by four inch external drive that had three times as many documents on it that I had
photographed or scanned, as well as – among other things – documents and interviews downloaded from online collections, videos downloaded from YouTube, and my own videotaped and transcribed oral histories. I doubt that most people who are in graduate school now will ever be faced with the dilemma of redundant paper files. But that problem has been replaced with other challenges: the larger volume of documents we can own but that can obscure or complicate the bigger story we are trying to tell; others related to the difficulty of working across collections when you can’t easily move from document to document as you could when they were laid out on the floor.

For those of us who work in what Renee Romano and I have called “recent” or “contemporary” history, the decades between 1970 and the present, that volume has several causes. One, for we political historians at least, is the expansion of the state and its individual bureaucracies. To point to only one part of that, the expanded activities of the White House, larger staffs dedicated to the political and international work of the Presidency, and the diverse technologies that have been adopted over the years, has produced – as Matthew Connelly spoke about yesterday – a massive increase in data. This data is not just on paper, and as communication technologies have developed – photography, radio, newsreel, television, audio tape, video, fax, and digital media, these larger staffs have more ways to record and be recorded.

I’m not telling you anything you don’t know, particularly if you are an archivist, but here is a crude comparison from my own research career. The FDR library, where I did a chunk of the research for my first book, has about 17 million
documents; the Ronald Reagan library has over 50 million presidential documents (generated in two, not three and a half, terms, and with no World War), 1.6 million feet of photographs, and a half million feet of film, audio and video tape.

Furthermore, the work archivists and oral historians are doing beyond the presidential library to create, collect and make political history sources accessible online expand the possibilities for what we can know, what we can download in .pdf to mark up and tag, and –frankly – what we become responsible for when we take on a book project. Even historians who are working in small collections have a volume problem in the digital age. Like Cold War spies, we make sense of a folder as quickly as we can and create images rapidly with the tacit promise that we will read and sort them later. In fact, although taking more home is a burden, it makes a trip away from home shorter and cheaper, and intellectually it can be a good idea. Just as a whole document offers more context and less room for interpretive error than a note card, lesser documents in a folder can create important connections between major documents, as well as between the central characters in a book.

This new research environment requires new skills, ones that may occupy a portion of a research seminar, but are rarely given the close attention they deserve in graduate or undergraduate teaching, except in courses exclusively devoted to digital practice. However, for some of the reasons I have described above, all twenty-first century historians need to think like an archivist: this is, in some ways, the central characteristic that unified the otherwise diverse and dissimilar field of digital humanities. Archives have definitively exceeded the archive, and they require management.
Furthermore, however much or little the archivist herself has intervened, a collection tells a story by how it is arranged; historians tell new stories derived from, or sometimes temporarily hidden by, those collections. When put in dialogue, collections may tell another story altogether. When we take from an archive, we have to replicate the organizational schema of each collection so that we can reproduce it in our citations and, importantly, not lose the sense of chronology and interconnection that the original collection reflects. At the same time, we have to modify that archaeology to reflect and support the direction and emerging argument of our own research. This requires a higher level of mental organization and the ability to make well-chosen tools and apps work together to produce the newly curated collection.

Our situation in history today is this: the hard drives of many of our colleagues – not to mention their email accounts and Google Drives -- more closely resemble Fibber’s closet than they resemble what I just described. In many cases, the capacity to collect and reproduce research in digital form far exceeds the capacity of many of us to make good use of what we have collected. In fact, because many historians aren’t really interested in technology at all, they often regard their computers as lovely typewriters that occasionally and inexplicably do bad, bad things – hiding critical documents and erasing stuff inexplicably, and reinforcing the unfortunate notion that technology is an obstacle to be overcome on the way to a book. Graduate students and younger historians – having never used a typewriter – often do better, but not because most of their mentors have taught them how. The fact is that archivists can now produce more sophisticated resources than the vast
majority of historians are prepared to actually use, and that many historians outside DH are not inclined – or feel they do not have the time – to collaborate with archivists in learning how.

Because of this, minus some nips and tucks, graduate education has simply not changed that much in the last thirty years. The fact that digital historians often work outside history departments, in institutes of various kinds, schools of media, and in the library, has exacerbated this problem even in institutions with robust digital academic cultures. Few history departments teach the forms of epistemological organization and information architecture that are better associated with DH projects like Cristina Patuelli’s “Linked Jazz Project;” the collection and curatorial approaches of Meredith Evans' “Documenting Ferguson.” Nor are students schooled in how one might choose tools for data analysis, or for the perception and visualization of patterns among documents, that Matthew Connelly and Dorothy Waugh described. In fact the forms of collaboration – with communities and with other scholars – that we heard about yesterday are frowned upon by omission in a field that still builds careers on the single-author book.

Lacking acknowledgment from history departments – not that the world has changed but specifically how it has changed -- the best planned research, transported from the archive and to our digital devices – can quickly become muddled, unidentifiable and intimidating junk that is difficult to really see and understand. Having thousands of documents on a hard drive or cloud, literally at our fingertips, is an amazing phenomenon – until you realize that you can’t lay them in piles or put Post-Its on them and that, collectively, it’s hard to see the big picture.
The humanities have many challenges before them, but how historical scholarship and methodology will change in the age of excess, as Connelly implied, is one of them. This has become even more apparent as we contrast the scope and style of digital history projects, even those produced by comparatively junior historians, and book projects, which sometimes seem surprisingly narrow in ways they would not have a decade ago. In contrast to the wealth of evidence DH'rs are collecting, the big questions they are asking, and the stories their data tells across time and space; books -- good ones, bad ones, and excellent ones look pretty much the way they always have, with scholars often containing the possibility of chaos by designing research around old models that are particularly insufficient for the networked world that began to emerge as early as the 1970s.

So on to the good news.

If there is anything we can know about the future of research, it is that – like all technology-driven fields -- every advance produced in the realm of digital and archival practice will be accompanied by new intellectual and practical burdens that must be anticipated, if possible. These burdens must then be apprehended, managed and acted on by teams of historians and archivists working together, consciously and mindfully. These burdens might be organizational, ethical or pedagogical; or they may involve reworking how the historian learns and what the writing process looks like. For example, the historian who opens a computer folder, anticipating a good day’s writing, and comes to terms with the fact that she has several thousand brownish digital files with time stamps on them, has several options. The first is to return a digital document to its manuscript form. My own beloved former
dissertation advisor told me, to my great (and I hope well-concealed) horror, that she does exactly this: she prints each document out and treats it like a photocopy.

The second option, and one I make no secret of preferring, is to regard these burdens as opportunities that allow us to think more keenly about our research practice, about how we learn, about how we teach, and ultimately, perhaps what we might do with history that is different. I don’t think that this means abandoning what we value as historians, but I do think it means revisiting what we value about scholarship, why we value it, and how to take advantage of what the digital world offers to enhance the practice of history. As Cathy Davidson points out in her wonderful 2011 book, Now You See It: How Technology and Brain Science Will Transform Schools and Business for the 21st Century, “Because we learn to pay attention differently depending on the world we see, when the world changes, there’s a lot we’re seeing for the first time and even more we suspect we’re missing.” The critical question is, as Davidson formulates it, is this: “How can we focus on what we do best without missing new opportunities to do better?” (Davidson, 17)

On the surface, the digital world seems cleaner, saner and better than Fibber’s unpredictable closet. We aren’t killing trees, we aren’t toting around boxes of heavy paper, and we aren’t waiting for photocopies that we have paid through the nose for and someone – usually a woman – with at least one advanced degree has taken time away from her work to produce. We are doing less harm to the documents by not slapping them down on a hot glass plate and covering them with a rubber mat. At a place like the Schlesinger Library, which limited each scholar to 500 copies a year (often necessitating the employment of graduate students as
undercover agents, each of whom was entitled to her own 500 copies), we can walk away with as many documents as we like.

This is all good. But, to make a short detour, this orderly research world isn’t any cleaner than other aspects of technology. For example, beautiful iPads like the one I am using now are made possible by exploiting factory workers, miners, and other laborers abroad. Imagine every Camera Upload file in Dropbox, every stick, every external hard drive full of these .jpgs that you have collected in various archives as another, even scarier version of Fibber McGee’s disorderly, jumbled closet, but this time in a landfill.

If every digital file is to be useful, it has to be made useful by the combined effort of and nothing digital is, on the face of it usable. What is in the document is not clear unless it is opened, and opened with the correct tool; and the connections of the documents to each other – the key to roughing out any chronological narrative or historical argument – is also opaque without intervention. Unlike those boxes of documents I gave away, it’s not in the least obvious what a .jpg means by glancing at it, nor can you put more than a couple electronic files side by side to get your chapter organized or understand how documents are speaking to each other. Although you can mark them up, those markings and notes, unlike Post-its (one of the great technological inventions of the twentieth century, I might add) are also internal to the .jpg unless the scholar establishes a taxonomy that emerges from the structure of an argument or narrative.

These are research and writing problems, to be sure, but they are also cognitive problems that can be addressed through new forms of training. Archives,
of course, have always represented systems of cognition, but when either the nature of the archive or the way the archive is used changes, we must agree to change with it. We who were used to working in the old way have had to rethink what it means to collect, absorb and analyze the research we have done, imagining narratives across documents that we may not be able to see simultaneously as we did when we laid them out across the dining room table. Even the scope of what is possible to take home from a manuscript collection means that decisions that were often made in the archive (copy this, don't copy that, take notes on this) can now be put off until later, meaning that we may have a more kaleidoscopic view of what our subjects are up to as we write, but also a potentially more chaotic one. This more expansive view is not a bad thing, of course, but it requires some adjustment: for me, it means that interesting new characters are often popping up and leading me down some garden path or another. That path can be pointless (wow! It looks like Radical Feminist X was actually a lesbian after all!) (Speak to the ethical questions raised by Benjamin Moser, and the partnerships between archivists and researchers that are based on a crowdsourcing model.)

In other words, the digital world has the capacity to make us more efficient – and it has the capacity to make us less efficient. On the one hand there is this simple rule: a misfiled, or irretrievable, document, is a lost document. What you collect has to be something you can locate again on your own computer or cloud (imagine if Fibber McGee had had access to a consultant from California Closets, for example!)

Second, being inefficient might not be a terrible thing. The cognitive challenges of the digital world force us to grapple with differences in how each of us
pays attention and thinks, something else that historians rarely discuss. In the
digital world, what is useful is all crammed up against what is not useful, what might
represent another research project altogether, or what might keep you clicking
through until you discover how someone lost 80 pounds in only a month. Similarly,
what often what drove the absent-minded Fibber McGee to his closet was the need
for a raincoat, an umbrella, or a lost briefcase – something he needed for work,
which was buried in footballs, fishing waders, umbrellas and appliances awaiting
repair.

If you are engaged in recent history, where much of the secondary material is
in literary, cultural or performance studies, or not written up at all, being willing to
roam through the trash of the Internet can be crucial. Writing a short piece about
the recent history of celebrities coming out as lesbian, gay, bi and transsexual, an
assignment triggered by Jodie Foster’s speech at the Golden Globes earlier this year,
I found myself watching and taking notes on endless Ellen de Genere videos on
YouTube. Because there had to be a connection, right? Much of what I wrote was
eventually edited out of the piece. It was a distraction, and it made the essay too
long. On the other hand, although I cut what amounted to days of research and
writing, like most good research, I finished the piece confident that I understood the
broader terrain of lesbian celebrity. This is more like twentieth century research
than one might think, with one exception: YouTube is entirely uncurated, and its
possibilities are infinite. Creating a bespoke archive that has some integrity without
the help of a librarian or an archivist thus becomes a foundational skill for writing
the history of celebrity and queerness in the digital age.
Another piece of good news is that what used to be put off to research trips can at least be begun at your desk. For example, I was reading a 1982 memo that Elizabeth Dole sent to Morton Blackwell, Ronald Reagan’s policy chief, in which she mentioned a General Accounting Office report on organized crime and the distribution of pornography. (God Bless her little legally trained Republican soul, she also noted the reports reference number in parentheses.)

What I used to do with that information was write it on an index card and put it in a card file box marked: “Next Washington Trip: Odds and Ends.” What I do now is abandon what I am writing, and Google the report number. To my great joy, the it came up, leading me to the GAO website where – miracle of miracles! – our federal tax dollars are once again at work! The GAO has scanned and uploaded every report they have issued in the last forty years! I downloaded about fifty and sent them to my research assistant to tag and upload to Zotero.

Does facing this future mean you will – or can – become a digital historian? Maybe, but probably you will just be a better historian. At The New School, I am trying to promote this possibility with a Digital Humanities Initiative that, among other things, is the base for a pilot called Digital Across the Curriculum. DAC is a faculty development strategy for teaching digital humanities as a twenty-first century literacy. This year we have put digital humanities (DH) fellows in six classes, implementing and supporting one DH assignment in each class, and often taking the class to the New York Public Library. The program will be fully established in 2017-18 with enough capacity that all undergraduates can have at least one class with a DH component. At the same time, I run a lab where, on a daily basis, students can
come to us for support for their projects; or bring an assignment that might be done using digital tools, even if the ultimate result is a conventional essay. The collaborative atmosphere of the lab also encourages students to develop, and learn to manage, their own digital projects, supported by other students drawn from across the university, including Parsons Design and Technology and the School of Media Studies. One of these projects was presented as a poster session at the American Historical Association in 2015, the only undergraduate presentation at the event. Two of these students, both able young historians, are currently applying to graduate school in information technology and archival management.

In conclusion, the capacity to teach digital literacy across the history curriculum and embed it in a twenty-first century research world will be a competitive and intellectual advantage for those departments willing to embrace the partnerships with archivists that it requires. Digital practices enhance our capacity to think, teach and write history to the high standards we cherish. They sharpen close reading and editing skills. DH allows us, and our students, to represent the past better through design, visualization, text editing, analyzing metadata, mapping and other practices associated with DH.

In the 21st century, we all are, and must be, digital learners. Yet a great many faculty and graduate students do not have the support they need to make imaginative, or even practical, use of digital resources currently available in other parts of the university. If not encouraged, some faculty will simply be left behind through no fault of their own, leaving part of our
curriculum – and many of our students -- untouched by crucial university investments and aspirations. I don't think we have any choice but to jump into the morass of the digital, engage it enthusiastically, and turn it to our advantage. The future of scholarship is on the Internet.