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Response: Search and Serendipity

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When the idea first came up for a roundtable on the anniversary of the publication of “Googling the Victorians,” my first thought was, “Has it really been ten years? Already?” So much has happened in the world of digital-assisted research since that essay appeared: the Internet Archive, British Newspaper Archive, Google Books, Hathi Trust, Gale Cengage databases, ProQuest collections, advances in text mining, and the explosion of social media. And yet I still feel that we are only at the beginning of a new era of discovery. Along with our readier access to the astonishingly vast and various printed heritage of the nineteenth century is coming a heightened awareness of how constrained and inadequate our understanding of many dimensions of Victorian life and thought has been. As Paul Fyfe and Bob Nicholson make clear, unexpected encounters with odd bits dredged up from the unplumbed depths of the newspaper and periodical press still have the power to startle, puzzle, and intrigue us. That keen sense of strangeness is one measure of how much we have yet to learn about the Victorians.

The ubiquity and ordinariness of the experiences recounted in “Googling the Victorians” reveal just how ingrained they have become among specialists and non-specialists alike. For many scholars, the availability of digitized facsimiles of nineteenth-century newspapers and magazines has been a convenience, not the focus of their work; they dip into such collections now and then to search for, say, a publication notice or an obituary, to gloss an allusion, or to fill out a footnote. Yet even these comparatively

casual uses represent the beginning of an important shift in scholarly practice. Searching the newspaper collections for references to the people, ideas, publications, institutions, or events one is writing about is quickly becoming not merely an option but a necessity borne of the certain knowledge that if you do not take pains to make a careful search for these references and check your assertions against those references, someone else who is writing on the same subject--or, God forbid, someone who is reviewing your book--will certainly do so. Family historians and local historians are likewise trawling for proper names, filling their files with information that they might not otherwise have found in a lifetime of research with printed sources or microfilmed surrogates. I strongly suspect that the cumulative effect of years of this kind of routine use of digitized newspapers and magazines--the tidal deposit of all of these bits of information, much of it hitherto undiscoverable, about the quotidian lives and beliefs of people in the nineteenth century--will wind up being the most impressive legacy of these collections, dwarfing the discoveries of even the most ambitious digital humanities projects. That accumulation is already having an enormous impact on the annotation of Victorian texts, the writing of Victorian biographies, and much else.

For students of the Victorian press itself, such abundance has nevertheless come with roadblocks to further progress. As Bob Nicholson notes, commercial collections, with all of their expense and their restrictions on sharing, have far overtaken smaller non-profit digital initiatives, although the latter continue to move forward in important ways. If I could change only one thing about the currently available nineteenth-century full-text digital collections from commercial publishers, it would be for them to follow the lead of the National Library of Australia's Trove project and the British Library's estimable

British Newspaper Archive by making the underlying, uncorrected text directly available to researchers, a form of access that would not only allow for crowd-sourcing of improvements in the accuracy of that text but would also hugely facilitate the kinds of scholarly sharing that Bob notes are crucial to our progress. Laurel Brake helpfully recounts how other barriers to accessing both printed originals and digital facsimiles have continued to bedevil the enterprise of historical and literary research. The bulky volumes of newspapers and magazines that remain in libraries have steadily migrated from open stacks to closed stacks to often distant off-site storage. A great many of those titles remain entirely un-digitized, and many that have been digitized have been aggregated into expensive subscription-only collections that cannot be accessed except through subscribing libraries. These are real problems, and independent scholars like me are disproportionately affected by them. Yet while acknowledging these concerns, I cannot help asking, “Compared to when?” For surely the widening of access to research materials, and particularly to periodicals, has progressed tremendously in the last ten years. Back then, I pointed out that more people had greater access to more of our nineteenth-century printed heritage than at any time since the nineteenth century itself. And that was *before* the democratizing revolution wrought by Google Books, the Internet Archive, and Hathi Trust. Yes, researchers who have easy access to big research libraries still enjoy some key advantages over those who do not, but this is less true now than it has ever been.

More worrying to me is the material to which researchers could gain access, but choose not to. “The offline penumbra” was a bit of phrase-making that I hoped would catch on; I am still waiting. But the thing itself is an everyday reality. The problem is not

merely that many important periodical titles and relevant manuscripts remain un-digitized or that many will likely never be considered good candidates for digitization. The root of the difficulty lies in the allocation-of-resources calculations that all scholars are obliged to make. The very success of the conversion of the nineteenth-century press into searchable online surrogates has heavily weighted those calculations in favor of digital resources and against modes of research that require more time and money to accomplish and whose ultimate yield is often uncertain. Put another way, if serendipitous discovery is going to happen, it will happen faster and cheaper online than in a physical archive. The time available to write one's thesis, article, or book is always a scarce resource, and the money required to accomplish the underlying research is even more limited. In such circumstances, it makes sense to design the research project from the beginning in the most cost-efficient way possible. This is not laziness or sloppiness but a clear-eyed recognition of the hard choices facing every researcher. When digital surrogates of dozens of titles can quickly be searched and inspected remotely, even the most conscientious scholar must decide whether the likelihood of useful discoveries obtained by travelling to a distant library or record office to inspect a few un-digitized titles or a set of unseen manuscripts is worth the trouble and expense. Often, the answer is no.

And yet, as Laurel Brake is so keenly aware, there is much that we as a community of scholars need to know about the Victorians and the press that only that un-digitized title or that unseen manuscript may be able to tell us. Even the largest digital collections remain crucially incomplete, while many thousands of pages of potentially illuminating ledgers, diaries, correspondence, and other manuscript materials lie in repositories around the world, from major libraries to small museums, record offices, and

private collections. To leave these primary sources permanently shrouded in the offline penumbra would be a disaster for scholarship. The very abundance of “hits” returned by our searches of digital collections results in what I have come to think of as the “plenitude effect,” a natural but very dangerous suppression of our awareness of, and curiosity about, what is absent from those results. The danger is that those absences may be of critical importance to the questions we are trying to answer. Like the drunk who has lost his keys in the dark, we look for them under the street-lamp because that is where the light is.

The Curran Fellowships that have been offered by RSVP over the past several years are in part intended to address this very problem. The purpose of these awards is to subsidize the inspection of primary sources, whether on paper or microfilm or screen, that illuminate any aspect of the nineteenth-century press. Thanks to the generosity of the late Eileen Curran, the Society will be expanding these fellowships in the future, but they have already contributed to a wide range of projects that have shone a light in many areas of the offline penumbra. Support of this kind, whether from RSVP, the NEH, or other funding bodies, can make a critical difference in the allocation-of-resources calculation. In parallel with such support, scholars continue to pool their efforts to make hitherto obscure materials, such as the unpublished letters of writers like Olive Schreiner and Charlotte Mary Yonge, available to researchers online in carefully marked-up transcriptions. At the same time, scholars are opening new territory for exploration by mapping that territory with increasing sophistication. To mention only two such projects, Gary Simons’s revitalized Curran Index relies on Googling of many kinds to push forward the attributional research begun by the *Wellesley Index*, while taking it in new

directions and covering new titles; similarly, the Periodical Poetry Index, under the direction of Natalie M. Houston, Lindsay Lawrence, and April Patrick, takes up Linda Hughes's challenge to repair the *Wellesley's* neglect of poetry by constructing a bibliographic research database of this material. Both projects benefit from social media and welcome contributions from the scholarly community.

The use of newspapers in historical studies has always been particularly subject to the iron grip of these cost-benefit analyses. In the pre-digital past, these calculations tended to weigh against such research, not only because they were hard to access but because it was so difficult to find anything in them unless you already knew exactly where to look. For that reason, the traditional employment of newspapers in historical research was tightly bound to chronology and centered on events. With a set of dates in hand, the historian could read through various newspapers for accounts of, say, the Peterloo Massacre, the Crimean War, or the Second Reform Bill. A fine example of this approach is Perry Curtis's thoughtful 2001 study of London newspaper accounts of the Ripper murders.

Much excellent work of this kind will continue to be done with the aid of full-text digital collections, whose speed and variety offer enormous advantages over older methods of access. But what are truly new are the kinds of research questions that simply could not have been addressed at all before the advent of digital media. This is what most excited me when I wrote "Googling the Victorians," and I think it is just as exciting now. Some of these approaches involve an exploration of discursive practices that we are only now able to trace in detail, aided by searching strategies that make use of more nuanced understandings of the range of nineteenth-century semantic practices. For the first time,

students of Victorian intellectual life are able to move far beyond the works of the great Victorian sages, the Mills, Bagehots, and Ruskins, with all of their eccentricities, to look at the quiet daily, weekly, and monthly ebb and flow of opinion in many kinds of periodicals all over Britain, in communities large and small. One advantage of these tools is the ability to test long-standing assumptions about nineteenth-century debates and attitudes. Leslie Howsam's "Public History in Print Culture" project explores the many ways in which historical events and ideas were conveyed in the Victorian press, an exploration complemented by the Popular History in Victorian Magazines Database at the University of Freiberg.¹ Daniel Cohen and Frederick Gibbs's experiment testing Walter Houghton's conclusions through text mining, though brief and inevitably crude, at least shows some of the possibilities of a "conversation with data" that includes other kinds of research from other sources.² Similarly, Albert Pionke's analysis of the ways in which Cuba was portrayed in the magazines that make up ProQuest's British Periodicals database makes use of concordance software, applied with special permission to the collection's raw data files.³ Natalie Houston has similarly applied computational analysis to what she calls "digital reading" of Victorian poetry in periodicals.⁴

Just as important for students of Victorian periodicals, newspapers, and other serials are the new methods of exploring the nineteenth-century press as a system. Searches across many different titles can function like dye injected into the bloodstream of the English-language press worldwide, revealing hitherto obscure patterns of movement across regions and continents. Bob Nicholson's deeply engaging research into the circulation of American jokes and language in British newspapers is one of the early bright spots in an area where a great deal of important work remains to be done. In a

small and unsystematic way, my recent essay about the “Dickens scandal” traces the uneven transatlantic circulation of gossip and commentary about the failure of Charles Dickens’s marriage, a journey whose curious result was that newspaper readers in small American towns like Superior, Wisconsin, and Bangor, Maine, were sometimes privy to details of London scuttlebutt that were denied to readers in London itself.⁵ Marianne Van Remoortel has shown how the Rossettis’ poetry migrated to and among American newspapers, where American readers experienced it in radically different contexts.⁶ Ryan Cordell and his colleagues with the Viral Texts Project, which seeks to map “networks of reprinting” in the nineteenth-century American press, may well provide methodological models that students of British newspapers and magazines can apply. We are only beginning to learn how ideas and information moved from one newspaper to another and how the contents of any periodical at any given time were shaped by a host of political, social, cultural, and competitive pressures.

Both Bob Nicholson and Paul Fyfe make interesting points about the newly important role played by serendipity, following up the suggestions in “Googling the Victorians” about the “fortuitous connections” made possible by online searching. For Bob, curious excerpts and images from nineteenth-century papers have been “reintroduced into the cultural bloodstream” as entertainment by selective re-tweeting, while Paul explores new ways of generating, or at least facilitating, serendipitous discovery. I find all of these developments intriguing but must confess to a certain wariness of them. So I was glad that Paul emphasized the importance of the application of “curatorial intelligence” to the evaluation of these findings, a phrase that came out of

our panel discussion at the 2014 RSVP conference in Delaware. Serendipity, after all, favors the well-prepared mind.

To this I would add what seems to me the crucial role played by the refinement of search techniques. Searches that use vague or anachronistic terms will of course yield the greatest number of unexpected results, and some of these might be interesting. But the more sophisticated and informed the search, the more likely it is that the results will illuminate, in unexpected ways, the subject that the researcher is exploring. The “plenitude effect” and the de-contextualized nature of the “hits” in our search results are just two examples of how the digital research experience itself can subtly work against our fullest understanding of what we discover, even as that research yields an ever greater quantity and diversity of information. Random discovery, while often exciting and intriguing, can be particularly dangerous in this respect. We cannot let the randomness of our own experience of these disaggregated texts and images from the nineteenth-century press blind us to the fact that their original appearance was anything but random. Every paragraph of gossip, every leader, every listing of shipping news, every illustration appeared where it did, and in the form it did, for reasons that it is our job as scholars to investigate.

We are still in transition between a scholarly economy of scarcity, in which very few periodical titles were available to more than a small number of researchers, to a scholarly economy of abundance. The great challenge for us now is to make sense of that abundance, to discover meaningful patterns in it, and to make use of it in ways that deepen our understanding of the period. To make the most productive use of these new modes of research, while remaining aware of their limitations, means keeping our focus

on what it is that we are trying to discover about the long-vanished world of the Victorians. As wonderful as they can be, these tools are a means to an end. Along the way, we will find answers to questions we had not thought to ask and will come to know much that we never suspected. But the journey begins with questions and moves forward with more questions. It's all about the search.

NOTES

¹ *History in the Victorian Periodical Press Online* (HiPPo), <http://www1.uwindsor.ca/historybook/6/history-in-the-victorian-periodical-press-online-hippo>; *Popular History in Victorian Magazines Database*, <http://phvm.ub.uni-freiburg.de>.

² Frederick W. Gibbs and Daniel J. Cohen, "A Conversation with Data: Prospecting Victorian Words and Ideas," *Victorian Studies* 54, no. 1 (2011): 69-77. I think the authors' conclusions about trends in Victorian publishing go too far beyond what this particular exercise can demonstrate and should be compared with Simon Eliot's *Some Patterns and Trends in British Publishing, 1800-1919* (1994), which makes use of trade journals and an early bibliographical database. However, Gibbs and Cohen's modes of discursive analysis do show great promise.

³ Albert Pionke, "Excavating Victorian Cuba in the *British Periodicals Database*," *Victorian Periodicals Review* 47, no. 1 (2014): 369-97.

⁴ Natalie M. Houston, "What Can Digital Reading Tell Us about the Material Places of Victorian Poetry?" (presentation, MLA annual convention, January 6, 2012), <http://nmhouston.com/2012/01/what-can-digital-reading-tell-us-about-the-material-places-of-victorian-poetry>.

⁵ Patrick Leary, "How the Dickens Scandal Went Viral," in Charles *Dickens and the Mid-Victorian Press, 1850-1870*, ed. Hazel Mackenzie and Ben Winyard (Buckingham: University of Buckingham Press, 2013), 305-25,
http://www.victorianresearch.org/dickens_scandal_went_viral.pdf.

⁶ Marianne Van Remoortel, "New Contexts, New Meanings: Dante Rossetti's and Christina Rossetti's Poetry in the American Press," *Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies* 22 (Spring 2013): 75-86.