



Web 25. Histories from the first 25 years of the world wide web

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Web 25. Histories from the first 25 years of the world wide web, edited by Niels Brügger, is part of the Digital Formations series. Brügger’s collection takes the challenge of placing the (hi)story of the World Wide Web in a critical perspective seriously. The volume seeks to foster those working in web archiving, internet studies or web historiography to undertake innovative, cross-disciplinary research. The editor has brought together authors who collectively have contributed to a book that is a valuable addition to the emerging scholarship surrounding the study of the web and the web’s history. The book, divided in four sections, comprises ‘a number of probes into the vast and multifaceted past of the web’ (xi). However, the volume is neither designed to be exhaustive, nor comprehensive. It is broad in scope in relation to a number of aspects: (i) its variety of topics, (ii) its combination of case studies and methodological reflections and (iii) the compilation of chapters focusing on national as well as international WWW phenomena.

The first section of the book, aptly entitled ‘The early web’, includes four chapters that focus on the history leading up to the emergence of the World Wide Web, including how the web was narrated and understood in the early years. Brügger’s own contribution provides a brief history of the hyperlink. It argues that the hyperlink is part of the latest phase in the history of how segments of text are deliberately and explicitly connected to each other by the use of specific textual and media features. The second chapter by Natale & Gory focuses on ‘the particular imaginary hidden behind the story of the emergence and development of the World Wide Web’ (30). Drawing on sources such as Tim Berners-Lee’s autobiography and other web histories, the authors show how the story of the web follows the pattern of Campbell’s monomyth, with the hero in

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different stages (departure, initiation, return and reintegration of the hero). Natale & Gory show how narratives about the ‘birth’ of the world wide web played an important role in shaping the public’s imagination towards elements such as plurality, openness and creativity, while demonstrating that these ‘biographies’ of the web function as fields through which understandings of the web are constructed, reproduced and communicated. Next, Deken, describes the first years of the Stanford Linear Accelerator Center website, the first www site outside of Europe. The section ends with a descriptive discourse analysis by Barry deconstructing the language around the early web and examining how the web entered general public discourse.

The second section of the book contains three chapters each of which tells the story of a cultural phenomenon on the web in three different national settings; China, Italy and Australia. Hockx-Yu shows that the Western characterization of the web in China as nothing but censorship and repression does not do justice to the rich social and cultural significance that the web has there today. Next, Locatelli discusses the technological, economic, institutional and cultural dimension of early Italian blogs and identifies three phases in their history: 1999/2000–2003 (early bloggers with the first blogs); 2003–2006 (the success of Splinder, the first Italian blogging platform); 2006–2008 (when Google redesigned Blogger, and the blogosphere went mainstream). The third and last national setting is Australia; here, Nolan explores the creation of the Age Online, the first major newspaper website in Australia launched in February 1995. Drawing from his own experience working as a journalist on the newspaper (not the website) and from interviews with five key actors in the creation of the Age’s website, he notes that in 1995, forward-looking newspaper executives could already see the threat that internet advertising posed to the press and that, at first, online advertisements were described on the website as a free service to readers.

While the first two sections of Web 25 focus on web history and bring detailed accounts of specific historical examples, the discussion of various methods of web historiography in the third section titled ‘Methodological reflections’ may be more valuable to digital scholars. First, Weber sets out to consider key research problems that researchers had in the past. His chapter highlights three specific research challenges for working with web data today: (i) size and time dimensions of research, (ii) reliability and validity of web data, and (iii) ethical research questions. In the next chapter, Helmond takes a historical perspective on the changing composition of a website, considering the website as an ecosystem, through which we can analyse the larger techno-commercial configurations that it is embedded in. In her fascinating contribution, she develops a novel methodological approach by repurposing the browser add-on Ghostery to detect trackers in archived websites and to reconstruct the historical tracking ecologies the New York Times (NYT) website has been embedded in. Finally, Chakraborty & Nanni use websites as primary sources to trace and examine activities of scientific institutions through the years. Somewhat surprisingly they conclude that these institutions’ websites, traditionally viewed as authoritative and top down, have become key in interactive, multidirectional communication channels between museums and their visitors.

The book’s fourth and final section discusses ‘Web archives as [a] historical source’ and discusses the impact of web preservation on web historiography. Webster takes a closer look at the cultural history of the web archiving movement, investigating why, by whom and on whose behalf web archiving is done. This is important. It ‘[...] serves to orient users as to some of the questions they should be asking of [about] their

sources, and of the institutions that provide them' (176) as web archiving constitutes an interplay between the interests of 3 key stakeholders: libraries, owners of content (in particular established media companies) and end users. The section continues with Koerbin presenting short case studies of web artefacts from the National Library of Australia's PANDORA archive, reflecting upon research issues related to early web content. He uses the framework of taphonomy, the branch of palaeontology that studies decaying organisms and their processes of fossilization, and argues that 'web archives present artefactual evidence for the digital archaeologist that also comes with biases resulting from the processes that led to the objects being removed from the "living" web to be held in the digital archaeological locus of the web archive' (205). In 'Looking back, looking forward. 10 years of development to collect, preserve, and access the Danish web', Laursen & Moldrup-Dalum do just this from three perspectives: legal, technical and curatorial. In line with Koerbin, they contend that a web archive's history is pertinent to all users of the archive, in particular, it is relevant in order to evaluate it as a source. They also stress the importance of data mining skills and supporting systems when looking at, or working with web archives. They extensively describe their multiple-method approach. As such, they demonstrate that the so-called 'computational turn' in humanities and social science – the increased incorporation of advanced computational research methods and large datasets into disciplines which have traditionally dealt with considerably more limited collections of evidence – indeed requires new skills and new software. The final chapter of *Web 25*, written by Paloque-Berges, deals nicely with records of computer-mediated communications (CMC) and, in particular, with the Usenet archives, which have not, as yet, become the focus of institutions' appraisal process of web archiving, despite the fact that this aspect of the web can function as a critical environment for building and studying the heritage value of CMC.

Web 25 has several important merits. Firstly, it emphasizes how a set of fundamental web features such as http, html and the hyperlink have transcended time and still function as the 'nuts and bolts' of the web. The book also shows that the discourse on the history of the web follows the recurring pattern of heroic narratives. Secondly, it demonstrates that web culture is not necessarily by definition a uniform, globalizing phenomenon, but that it can have surprisingly local characteristics. It shows that there is no one single and fixed history of the web, but rather, there are multiple local, regional and national webs and a variety of ways that the world wide web has been imagined, used, shaped and regulated. Thirdly, by providing methodological reflections on web archiving, the book emphasizes that all web archives, to a greater or lesser degree, can only attempt comprehensiveness, and that the processes involved in harvesting and preserving content from the live web involves biases resulting from technical, resource and curatorial constraints. In this way, it offers an important point of departure for further critical examination of the web and its history. Finally, the book offers valuable and realistic starting points for further methodological development. Not only does it point to some novel and out-of-the box methods, such as repurposing the browser add-on Ghostery to detect trackers in archived websites, or utilizing the framework of taphonomy to consider how certain web archives came about, but it also illustrates how various methodological approaches can be applied.

If *Web 25* has any shortcomings, it is that, in a few instances, the book leaves the reader in the dark about the overall context. I would have welcomed a timeline or an infographic, showing an overview of important events or websites in the history of the web in order to contextualize the issues discussed in the various chapters better. Secondly, sometimes the book might have needed a more developed methodology: for example, archiving social media content is hardly discussed. However, this is quite problematic as the methods for preserving digital artefacts are currently not up to the challenge of preserving what happens on social networks. Hence, archivists and memory organizations will need to develop new methodologies in order to probe and document social networks, such as Twitter or Facebook, in order to accurately capture what it is like to live online today and to understand these algorithmic systems. Thirdly, to conclude, the book could have benefited from some more editing and proofreading work, especially in terms of internal cross-referencing. Although this is a shortcoming seen in many edited books, it is a shame that not more effort was made to textually link the individual chapters and, as a result, creating less of a mix of various probes into the vast and multifaceted past of the web, which this book ultimately presents.

Web 25 provides a critical and thoroughly documented guide to understanding the first 25 years of the web and is a noteworthy contribution to the field of web historiography. It is a well-written and accessible contribution to an expanding field. Throughout the book, I found a clear analysis of the history of specific websites and methodological reflection, founded on well-selected sources. This makes it a must-read both for web historians, academics and cultural heritage professionals, involved in web archiving and for a wider audience with an interest in Web history.