How do we study media history?

An introduction to research questions and methods

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Types of questions media historians ask

• Biographical questions
  • “Inserting” an unknown person into the historical record, or examining some less-known aspect of a well-known person

• Institutional questions
  • Documenting the operation or evolution, and assessing the importance, of a particular media organization, in a particular era or over time
Types of questions, continued

- News-event/phenomenon-driven questions
  - Documenting and assessing how journalism (or advertising or film, etc.) depicted a particular event or phenomenon in history

- Medium-specific questions
  - Documenting and (re)assessing the evolution (or milestones in the history of) a particular medium (newspapers, magazines, television, advertising, film, photography)
Types of questions, continued

• Media-process questions
  • Using a historical perspective to investigate how and why media take the shape and content they do; investigating the evolution of standards (legal and ethical) and styles

• “Origins” questions
  • Searching for the roots, or precedents, for what we think of as contemporary media phenomena and issues
Types of questions, continued

• Audience questions
  • Documenting who was buying/reading/viewing what kinds of media, and where and how and for what purposes
  • Documenting what readers/viewers thought of media of the past, or how media changed people’s lives
Historical methods

• Textual analysis
  – This is the thematic study of systematically-chosen media texts (written or visual).
  – In historical research, this is usually qualitative research (not what quantitative researchers call “content analysis”).
  – Methodological terms within this area include:
    • Narrative analysis
    • Rhetorical analysis
    • Discourse analysis
Historical methods, continued

• **Document/data analysis**
  – This is the systematic study of
    • Documents—for instance, company financial records, internal memos, personal papers, etc.
    • Historical data—for instance, census data, industry-employment statistics, circulation figures
  – It differs from “textual analysis” in the sense that you are using the documents to get information, rather than studying their content and form.
Historical methods, continued

• Oral history
  – Interviews with living people who experienced a historical moment or phenomenon
  – Use of oral-history transcripts held in archives

• Biographical study or institutional study
  – Documentation and assessment of
    • the life and work of one person
    • a newspaper, magazine, professional society, etc.
  – Based on a wide range of material and on both primary and secondary sources
Methodological concerns

• Use of primary sources
  • This is the study of the thing itself—not a study of what other people have written about the thing. If you do not use primary sources, you are not doing original historical research. Primary sources include:
    – Media texts themselves
    – Oral-history interviews
    – Memoirs or diaries of journalists (publishers, artists)
    – Their personal papers (held in archives)
    – Their professional correspondence or memos
    – Company records
    – Press coverage of or cultural commentary on your subject published at the time
More methodological concerns

• Problems with using primary sources
  – Preservation and accessibility issues
    • What was saved, and in what form?
    • Can you get to it?
  – Their “truth”
    • Does the media text you are using provide an accurate and full account of the phenomenon?
    • Is the journalist’s memoir or diary written in a way to shed the best possible light on his/her work?
    • Are the company records accurate?
    • Do the factors of memory and time passage distort what people tell you in oral-history interviews?
More methodological concerns

• Secondary sources
  – These are works by other scholars who have researched your subject—for instance:
    • Biographies of individuals
    • Articles, books, or films about particular institutions (newspapers or magazines) or events (wars, the women’s suffrage movement, etc.)
  – Why do you need them? Because they:
    • Help to confirm what you find in primary sources
    • Provide historical context for your own understanding of your subject
More methodological concerns

- Avoidance of “presentism”—our tendency to evaluate the past according to present-day standards. For instance:
  - Notion of objectivity in journalism
  - Writing and rhetorical styles
  - Current ideas about gender, race, and class equality
  - Assumptions about audiences and their expectations
Differences between historical research & other kinds of research

• Inductive rather than deductive: “bottom up” research process
  – You start by forming a broad RQ and identifying a *likely* pool of good evidence
  – Then you immerse yourself in the evidence in order to refine your RQ—and this process often is repeated … a process of “adduction”
More differences

• Evidence is very important!
• Historical context also is important—you must know the era as well as your topic
• Sampling frowned upon
  – You try to do it only at the beginning stage of identifying the evidence you will study
  – Sampling is okay, though, when you’re dealing with huge amounts of data or a long time period
• Chicago style used because much extra info (not just citations) goes into endnotes
Trends/debates in historical research

• Historical scholarship (incl. media history) changed a lot in 60s and 70s due to
  – Civil Rights and women’s movements
  – Baby Boomers entering grad school
  – Globalization

• Growth of three subfields
  – oral history
  – social history
  – public history
More trends/debates

• Move toward theory & ideology
  – this meant not only documenting “what” and “who” but also asking “why” and “how”

• Interest in memory studies—related to:
  – huge boom in Holocaust studies in 1980s
  – (some) historians’ embrace of theory

• In 1990s, some backlash against theory & ideology, especially postmodernism
Ongoing criticisms of media history

• Too documentary
• Too atheoretical
• Focus on Great Men and Great Institutions
  – Women, minorities, and alternative press only “inserted” into an existing, Enlightenment narrative of history
• Too little research on audiences (because hard to do… they’re dead!)