Digital History: Project-Based Learning through 5 Million Documents on the JFK Assassination

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The Five “D’S” of DIGITAL HISTORY


D1. DEFINE THE TOPIC AND SOURCES

• The NARA Citizen Archivist website: https://www.archives.gov/citizen-archivist
• The Five “D’S” of DIGITAL HISTORY
• 28 years ago congress passed the John F. Kennedy Assassinations Act. All government documents must be made available to the public.
• Government agencies (including intelligence services) have been declassifying or redacting 5 million pages to the National Archive.

D2. DIGITIZE TO MAKE COMPUTER-READY

Before we started transcribing, we looked at all kinds of samples from the JFK records. In many cases the documents were mimeographs or carbon copies – in some cases these pages were the bottom sheet from a duplicator – very hard to read. Others were handwritten on forms. Once the necessity for digitizing was clear we moved to the transcription project. We signed up to be citizen-archivists for the NARA in a crowdsourcing effort to help them prepare documents for release by October 26th. Each student was responsible for transcribing and analyzing an FBI Key Person of interest folder.

D3. DATABASE TO ORGANIZE & ACCESS SOURCES

Dozens of digitized document repositories are accessible to the public in addition to the NARA site. For teaching purposes this gives us the opportunity to compare the various archives and collections, point out strengths and weaknesses, and help them assess legitimate websites from the conspiracy theorists.

D4. DISCOVERY WITH DIGITAL TOOLS

After transcribing, we had a lot of typed data to use for analysis. The exercises included word clouds, GIS Social Explorer, Palladio for social network graphs, and more. Students had been working individually on their folders – now, we combined them into clusters: the people who were at Dealey Plaza, the people of Parkland Memorial Hospital, the people who were interviewed because they knew Lee Harvey Oswald, and finally the motorcade participants like Gov. Connally and his wife Nellie, or the Secret Service on duty during the parade.

D5. DISSEMINATION ON THE WEB

In teams, the students each prepared a section of a digital exhibit called JFK Witnesses. Using their new tools and research materials, they built their sections and presented it to the class.

The project-based learning approach was satisfying from my end because I could really see how much they had learned and the fruits of their labors. I also noticed a growing expert de corps as they moved from the roles of an individual student to participating as a community of researchers. This course ended up not just as a class, but included experiential learning through field trips, and we had professional archivists, librarians, and historians come speak with us about how they apply every day what we learned in class.

Feedback from Course Evaluations

“Enjoyed the field trips, and learning digital history tools. Would definitely recommend to all history/humanities majors. Professor Cline did an amazing job drawing on experts in the field of digital history to come teach the class about the real world applications of what we learned in class. Makes you appreciate the topic of digital history. Interesting subject. Lots of flexibility in what we covered, which made for more interesting class and I feel like I truly learned a lot. The Sandburg Labs allowed for practice using software and learning new software. Guest lectures gave information that could be applied to the course and future work. The analytic tools we learned in class were very practical, useful, and applicable to many other academic fields. My favorite aspects of this class were the final project, which effortlessly combined everything we learned over the course of the whole semester, and National History Day. The latter was something I thoroughly enjoyed but would have never participated in had it not been for this class. I really thought I learned a lot in the class. And I was really excited to take it. Digital History is a different way of looking at history and I think it is very relevant to our current world.”