

Interview with Prof. Mills Kelly, vice-director of the Center for History and New Media, George Mason University, Virginia, USA.

The Center for History and New Media (CHNM) - best known for Zotero, an open source bibliographic tool - also runs various innovative projects related to History and New Media. Tour d'horizon.

Prof. Kelly, the 9/11 Digital Archive¹ is collecting documents online about the September 11 attacks. Are you creating a new type of historical Archive ?

M. Kelly : It is very different for historians, as this is collecting history as it is being created. It began actually with a project on the collecting of history of science and technology, and we had money for that project. And then the September 11 happened and our funders, the Sloan foundation, they were based in New York, and so they wanted us to check some of the things we had learned about collecting history of science and technology and use it for the collecting of history of September 11 2001.

This was controversial because we're collecting things from people, first of all we don't know who they are, because many of them just sit down at the computer and type in their story. And we cannot verify who they are, whether their story is true, anything like this.

It's an open archive, and an open archive is completely different from a standard archive because in the standard archive you have the archivist who decides should this be in the archive or not. We take everything. Everything which is not obviously spam. So we take it all, and then it is up to the historian to sort it out later and determine it is good or not.

How to assess the veracity of a digital source ? Will historians need digital forensics techniques in the near future ?

M. Kelly : It is absolutely crucial because anyone can create anything online. So the joke in America is: "No one knows you're a dog in the internet", and there is a photograph of a dog typing in the computer. So how do you know ? One of the purposes of my courses is to teach the student to be sceptical, because they are not sufficiently sceptical about online sources.

So I teach them digital forensics. I never use this term, but I teach them for instance how to do a "who is" search for a website. Who does a website belong to ? No student knows how to do that. Almost no one knows how to search the owner of that domain, or how to track an IP address. Or take an image and then backtrack to the copyright holder. Or any of these kinds of things. So we started to teach people these in the same way we used to teach students you have to always know not just who is the author of a book, but you need to know something about that author.

Another project at the CHNM is called "Hacking the Academy"². Are New Media calling into question the traditional forms of university and academic education ? To what extent ?

So the joke in America is: "No one knows you're a dog in the Internet", and there is a photograph of a dog typing in the computer.

¹ <http://911digitalarchive.org/>

² <http://hackingtheacademy.org/>

M. Kelly: I think we don't know how far it goes yet. The Hack the Academy project is a very interesting example of that, because it is testing the boundaries of what is possible. And I think it is very unclear, because with new media opened up this world of information in a way that was never possible before. So all of a sudden, you and I can collaborate on something without even knowing we are collaborating. Because I write something and then post it online and then you connect to it in some way and add something to it. So this is what we are trying to test in "Hack the Academy": how far we can push the boundaries.

The largest university in the United States is the University of Phoenix. It has no physical presence, no classrooms. It is only online (...)

To what extent are new media connected with this questioning of traditional educational structures ?

M. Kelly: I think they are completely connected because increasingly in the United States more and more education is going online. The largest university in the United States is the University of Phoenix. It has no physical presence, no classrooms. It is only online and they have 145'000 students. We call it distanced education. So everything online, and no physical contact with the faculty members ever. So that stretches the boundaries. I don't know what the quality of the education is in these online-only universities.

You also re-invented the model of the scientific conference via the THATCamp³ project. Can you explain what is THATCamp ?

M. Kelly: THATCamp I think is one of the most exciting things that the CHNM

is doing now. There will be one in Florence shortly. And it was begun by graduate students, not by faculty members. Jeremy Boggs, who's one of our PhD students and David Lester, who now works at the university of Maryland but was one of our students, this was their idea. And the idea is based on the fact that the traditional academic conference doesn't work any more. It's a model, which has failed. It's boring ! And anything to do with digital media is already interactive. So how can you listen to someone present a paper about digital media and not participate ? I mean what we did today (i.e. Workshop Geschichte und Web 2.0) is frustrating in a way.

THATCamp is using the unconference model. And it is very exciting. I participated in a number of unconferences now, THATCamps and some others, where you go with some ideas that you want to talk about, and at the beginning of the day, everyone pushes their idea out, and then the day is planned based on the participants desires. You know in advance like "I'm going to moderate a session, but I don't know what session I'm going to moderate." And so what emerges from that is a conversation about the things that people are most interested in at that moment. As opposed to - I'm writing a conference proposal right now for a conference in September 2011, but everything will change by then ! And if you're working on digital media, you can't propose things two months in advance, because things will have changed so fast.

(...) the traditional academic conference doesn't work any more. It's a model, which has failed. It's boring !

³ <http://thatcamp.org/>

The other thing that is so exciting about it is what I see emerging from that. First of all that THATCamp has become a worldwide phenomenon, they are everywhere now. Secondly, the collaborations, which grow out of those experiences, are very strong. For me, one of the first THATCamp I attended is now going to result in a very large grant proposal, which I think will probably be funded, with someone who I never would have met otherwise. And I wouldn't have gone to a conference that she was in, because we work on two completely different areas. But in THATCamp we were both interested in the application of G.I.S. in historical research. So she was in the same room, and now we are proposing a project together.

As an historian, what is your opinion about Wikileaks⁴ ?

M. Kelly: I am very much in favour of Wikileaks because I used to be a diplomatic historian. You know for diplomatic documents you have to wait forty years ! In Britain you have to wait fifty years plus the life of the person. It goes on forever, and this handicaps historians but it handicaps the public as well. This is why I think Wikileaks is such an advantage. They defend the free access to information. I like John Stuart Mill. I believe that free access to information is important to a free society. And so if the government wants to hide something, that's bad, because in a democracy, I should have access to that information. So I think it's all to the good. And not just Wikileaks but any sort of information sharing website. The more information - information that is real information, actual documents - the better !

Because in the United States, a very large percentage of the population believes

that our president is a Muslim. It's not true, there is no basis for it, but an other large percentage believes he is also not American, and so he shouldn't be president. I mean there is a whole movement to try to prove that he is not the president, or not an American, and so illegal as a president. This is crazy ! It is because people create facts on the internet and then they turn them loose, and then there is no actual document to show that those facts are wrong. So the more actual documents available to the public, the better.

(...) people create facts on the Internet and then they turn them loose, and then there is no actual document to show that those facts are wrong.

Prof. Kelly thank you very much !

⁴ <http://wikileaks.org/>