Historians' Reconstruction of the Past: The Internet Web of Serendipity

Jean L. Parsons, University of Missouri, USA, Sara B. Marcketti, Iowa State University, USA

How do historians cope with the overabundance of both primary and secondary sources that are now digitized and available online? In addition, how do we sort through additional material added and commented on by bloggers and amateur historians that may or may not have accurate attribution? The increased digitization of archival sources along with Internet sites such as ancestry.com offer non-historians the ability to write personal histories that may offer research potential but also may spread historical myths. The question then becomes: how do historians practice history within the abundance, but also the uncertainty of a digital age?

The purpose of this presentation is not to detail the many complexities of conducting historical research on the Internet, nor to make broader judgments about the web as a data source, but to describe and explain the "web" of research trails the authors followed for one piece within a larger history project. This project was focused on a significant group of ready-to-wear designers working in the 1930s to 1950s who are largely unknown today. These research trails had intentionality but also benefited from serendipity, as a wide range of digital material was searched. The majority of the data collected came from digital sources, both traditional, such as newspaper archives and digital records at the Library of Congress, but also sources such as Pinterest, flickr commons, and personal blog postings.

Research began with collection and evaluation of a large body of dress patents by U.S. apparel designers, over 5,000 design patents in total. This was entered into an excel file with fields for designer, company, year and patent number. The initial data was collected from a traditional documentary source: the *Official Gazette of the U.S. Patent Office*. As the project evolved patents were cross-referenced with the now digitally available patents accessible through Google. This offered the ability to quickly access images and to create a visual data bank of the actual designs, and indeed, almost all the patents found in the original listings were also on Google, as Google Patents continuously digitizes past records. To narrow the data for analysis, it was decided to focus on the 4,433 dresses patented between 1937 and 1942, the most active period. This span of years was also selected as it represented the zenith and demise of the Fashion Originators' Guild of America (FOGA), the most successful industry attempt at design protection (Marcketti & Parsons, 2006).

Eight hundred and five designers patented dress designs from 1937 through 1942. While the data included recognized names such as Bonnie Cashin and Hattie Carnegie, most of the names are unfamiliar to us today and not recorded in fashion history textbooks, dictionaries or encyclopedias. This group of designers worked anonymously for wholesale manufacturers, but the majority (ninety-eight percent) held patents under their own name, not that of their employer. Although this made it difficult to connect the designer to a manufacturer or store, knowledge of

the names offered a beginning point for research. Initial digital searches connected some of the designers to their employers through newspaper and fashion advertisements, articles written by *The New York Times* fashion editor Virginia Pope, and obituaries. Further research aided in placing the designer geographically through searches of internet sites that record cemetery lists and images of tombstones. Census records accessed through ancestry.com also provided basic biographical information. In several cases, a broad image search for the designer's name yielded sewing patterns with both designer name and company.

One of the designers, Zelma Golden, offers an illustration of the research process and includes perhaps the most serendipitous of the searches to date. Initially, some evidence was discovered through a single advertisement in *The New York Times* that included her name with a list of other American designers. She was listed as designer for Adler and Adler. Additional searches in *Vogue* and *New York Times* yielded articles and advertisements that placed Golden as a designer for Lord & Taylor's and Neiman Marcus. While a Google search for Zelma Golden yielded sewing patterns of interest, they had unclear company information. A search for "Zelma Golden, fashion designer," however contained the most interesting result: a Pinterest posting by her granddaughter. Additional social media searches led the researchers to contact this relative, and ongoing email correspondence produced detailed biographical information that helped round-out the history of this once important designer. The granddaughter also informed the researchers of an online database of scanned New York area newspapers previously unknown to them.

The term digital curation has been used to describe the process of managing digital materials. According to Flanders (2014), it can also apply to the "raw and abstracted data" that is part of any digital research project, and historians should be responsible not only for reporting the findings of their research, but also for preservation of the data, and communication of the methods used in its discovery. This is especially true with online research, where data may be subject to reinterpretation and reuse or may completely disappear if a poster decides to delete information. This presentation provides both the results and communication of methods in the search for designers of the past. It is anticipated that participants will share their own webs of serendipity and discovery.

Flanders, J. (2014). An introduction to humanities data curation. Retrieved from http://guide.dhcuration.org/intro/

Marcketti, S. B., & Parsons, J. L. (2006). Design piracy and self-regulation: The Fashion Originators' Guild of America: 1932–1941," *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal* 24, 214–28.