

New Media, Teaching and Learning, Seminar #683
Chair: Ryan Kelsey, Professor Frank Moretti

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***Toward a Democratic Digital Past:
Prospects and Problems
Roy Rosenzweig, George Mason University***

Roy Rosenzweig, the Mark and Barbara Fried Professor of History & New Media at George Mason University, discussed the democratic possibilities of digital technology at the University Seminar held by the Columbia Center for New Media Teaching and Learning. Professor Rosenzweig founded George Mason's Center for History and New Media (CHNM) in 1994, with a mission to democratize history using digital media and computer technology. Throughout his years of working with the Center, Professor Rosenzweig has encountered a broad range of possibilities for academic and public history that digital technology provides, but he has also confronted new limitations and complications posed by digitalization. His talk presented both idealistic and realistic perspectives on the impact of technology on the teaching, writing, and learning of history.

Professor Rosenzweig prefaced his talk by explaining that there is often a great dissonance between fantasy and reality when we speak of technology; that is, what a technology promises to deliver and what it is actually capable of. He gave a brief summary of his entry into the world of digital technology, which came in 1990 with his work on a CD-ROM project called *Who Built America?* Around the same time, he went to his first conference on interactive media, in which Tom Corrdry, then head of Microsoft Multimedia Publishing, said that he started every work day by holding up a paperback book and asking, "Can you top this?"

Prof. Rosenzweig has asked himself the same question many times, but realizes that the question is both too specific and too broad. There was a moment in the 1990s when people believed they were trying to improve on the technology of print. Seventeen years later, it's still not clear that you *can* top the book. But the question remains useful in the broad sense: If we're trying to do something better, what are we trying to accomplish?

Corrdry had a simple measure of doing his job well: dollars and cents. But historians don't have such simple measures to decide if they're doing their jobs well. Prof. Rosenzweig would argue that in some ways, the very reformulation of historians' goals has been more important than digital technology itself. Often, starting with narrow questions of technology gets us to much bigger questions of what we do and how we do it.

Prof. Rosenzweig's simple answer about the benefits of digital media is stated in the mission statement of George Mason's Center for History and New Media, which declares that digital media creates new possibilities for a "democratic digital past." According to Prof. Rosenzweig, this democratic digital past consists of three central components: democratic content (the presentation of multiple historical voices); democratic access (availability to multiple audiences); and democratic practice (the ability of multiple groups of people to participate in the production of history). Prof. Rosenzweig explained that he would run through some of the Center's projects

to illustrate these principles, stressing the Center's collective "we"; 350 people have worked on its projects over the last 15 years. He explained that his talk would consist of an optimistic and more utopian beginning about technology's democratic possibilities, followed by an assessment of problems and possible solutions.

To illustrate "democratic content," Prof. Rosenzweig referenced the CD-ROM *Who Built America?*, now a kind of historical artifact in terms of digital media, but once a visionary project. Coming out of the social history efforts of the 1970s—which stressed the importance of "ordinary" people's voices—this project was able to *literally* do just that, with dozens of historical sound clips of "ordinary" Americans interspersed with historical text. It was finished in 1993, but by the emergence of the Web in mid-1990s, CD-ROMs had started to become obsolete. While once proudly able to present dozens of voices via this software, the web could expose thousands of voices at a time. Prof. Rosenzweig suggested that the greatest potential may come in the future. What will it be like when the voices are *all* available to us?

Regarding "democratic access," Prof. Rosenzweig recalled a mid-1990s conference on American memory in which an audience member asked of digital media enthusiasts, "Isn't it better to send students to the library?" The answer is "yes" if that student is at a great university, but "no" if not. With that in mind, a lot of the CHNM's projects bring resources to high school students for free, as do many other institutions with similar missions. Historians have many audiences, and going digital means they can reach them more readily and cheaply than ever before. For example, he explained, the Library of Congress doesn't let high school students into its physical space, but students of any age can now use the library electronically through the "American Memory" Web site.

Prof. Rosenzweig defined "democratic practice" by explaining that digital history creates the potential for a new, wider population of people to write history. Already, the number of authors of history Web pages exceeds the number of authors of history books (both academic and popular). He cited history blogs and Wikipedia as prime examples. Wikipedia's gaffes have been widely publicized, but on the whole it's impressively accurate. At George Mason's CHNM, their democratic writing efforts center on the Exploring & Collecting History Online (ECHO) project, which is meant to broaden the range of people writing history by providing opportunities for a wide range of groups to write and record their own historical accounts.

However Professor Rosenzweig explained that in spite of his dreams for a "democratic digital past," he remains a techno-realist. He would suggest that new technology doesn't overturn old structures, but rather creates new possibilities for working within them. For the rest of the talk, he turned to an examination of those structures and their limitations, beginning with the Internet. The Web brings millions of voices online, but will they all be heard? Will those with money and power *allow* them to be heard? The *Who Built America?* CD-ROM project was bundled and distributed by Apple—until high schools complained and the company threatened to cease distribution unless the creators altered their progressive treatment of homosexuals and abortion, among other topics. More serious censorship now takes place outside of the US. The Chinese government has developed the most sophisticated Internet screening system in the world (aka the "Great Firewall of China"), blocking access to all information deemed "controversial" (such as

coverage of Tiananmen Square), and Google has given into their limitations in order to tap the large Chinese market.

Prof. Rosenzweig went on to explain that some critics are highly skeptical of the quality and authenticity of information disseminated on the Web, with its potential for forgery and misinformation. There's no denying that there is a slew of false information on the Web, he explained, but misinformation on the Web is no more of a problem than misinformation in the rest of society. He would argue that it is the job of historians to teach students how to read history critically—not to ban Wikipedia entirely, as the Middlebury history department has done.

Prof. Rosenzweig cited other academic critics who argue that one gets far too many results through Google, and what one ends up with is often of poor quality. He argued that the situation is not so problematic for two reasons. First, search engines can rank Web sites for quality, and while not perfect, they go some distance toward separating the good from the bad. Although the Web includes many poorly written and erroneous pages, the medium actually does a good job of encoding data. Secondly, the Web contains a set of social mechanisms and peer review, and has provided a platform for guardian Web sites directed at steering people away from problematic sites. The CHNM's Zotero project is a free filtering tool that can serve as a check on the Internet's sources of misinformation.

Prof. Rosenzweig acknowledged that there are still economic realities affecting technology: the digital divide—which has diminished over years, but still exists; and the fact that amateurs don't have the same resources to publicize or bolster their Web sites as do those with corporate backing. Also, massive corporations charge libraries high prices for the digital resources they control, and a series of buyouts have resulted in an increased consolidation of resources. In the end, our access to large amounts of information depends on the corporations who control it.

Will the diverse and eclectic public history Web survive the onslaught of massive private corporations? Prof. Rosenzweig pointed to one hopeful sign in the growth of open source, open content, open education, and open access movements, which have all seen an astonishing growth in the past decade. Free speech resources will prove crucial as we develop more data-mining applications. Unfortunately, academics have tended to lag behind librarians and amateurs in advocating these open access Web sites, viewing them with suspicion and disdain. He suggested, in conclusion, that we need to put our energies into expanding the rich public archive on the Web, and to join historians in fighting for open access. "Open sources" should be the slogan of academic and popular historians alike.

DISCUSSION

Prof. Rosenzweig invited questions from the audience. Mark Phillipson asked him to address Wikipedia and the disparity between a truly flat, populist view of contributors and the rumored reality, that it is more of an oligarchic "chosen group" maintaining quality assurance. He also commented on the difference between Wikipedia and Zotero: that the price of Wikipedia is giving up identity, while with Zotero, users retain their identities and share collections through networking. Prof. Rosenzweig agreed that there is a myth of Wikipedia's democracy, but argued that there is still relatively wide participation. To address the second question, he pointed out that Wikipedia is not the only model for public collaboration, and scholars may feel more

comfortable in environments with more personal identity. The goal of Zotero is more to build community and to share, though they may move into doing some things in an anonymous way.

Alberta Arthurs asked Prof. Rosenzweig to address Google Library and the problem of intellectual property rights. He responded with high praise for Google Library, but acknowledged its shortcomings. When you start to use it, he explained, you confront the depressing reality of copyright because there is a huge quantity of material that's not up there, or appears only in short snippets because it is esoteric and has no economic value. This is a huge problem particularly for 20th-century history, where post-1923 stuff isn't fully available.

Alyson Vogel asked Prof. Rosenzweig if he had any thoughts on democratization and language translation. What happens when scholarly research is available in languages that are inaccessible to people? She explained that she and her colleagues have been confronting this problem at Teacher's College. Prof. Rosenzweig responded that he was not sure of the answer to this question, but that it is very easy to do language localizations through Firefox, which makes it easier to make things available in other languages. He is interested in the question of whether machine translation could get effective enough to reach the masses. It might be that the quality is good enough to be used for research in the future.

Harriet Jackson noted that it can be difficult to remember the sources in one's bibliography, and asked if it will someday be possible to download all the bibliographic information from books, so that we can search them digitally. Prof. Rosenzweig responded that this is already possible to some extent through JSTOR, and that when the CHNM has made the server version of Zotero available, it will enable users to run massive searches on bibliographies.

Frank Moretti turned the conversation back to Prof. Rosenzweig's use of the word "democratic." He explained that he shares Prof. Rosenzweig's ambivalence towards the "digital sublime" and can also wax utopian about digital possibilities, but he worries that the rhetoric of "democratization" oversimplifies complex political ideas. Democracy has to have something to do with people understanding something and then being able to act and choose. When you look at the Web as a totality, is it advancing or retarding the ability of the public to make choices with any kind of conviction?

Prof. Rosenzweig replied that his thoughts come down on the narrowly optimistic side of the "democratic" debate, but that he would agree that open access—which he strongly supports—doesn't necessarily mean that people know what to do with that material. Students need to know how to evaluate sources. Are we doing a better job of that in 2007 than people were in 1997? He would say that it's contested, but we should be struggling to move in that direction. It is patently wrong to say that the Internet has democratized society, but he would argue that technology has opened up possibilities that we need to take advantage of. Ten years ago, academics were arguing that if we just ignored the Internet, it would go away. No one's saying that anymore. It's a tool we have, and we ought to take advantage of it (though perhaps "democratic" is a sloppy, sloganistic term).