Michelle Baldon, MIT Libraries

Philosophy, History, Anthropology, and Science, Technology, & Society Librarian

**The Interview Subjects**

**Professor A** is an environmental historian who received her Ph.D. in 1975 and has been on the MIT faculty since 1980. She holds an endowed chair. Her third and most recent monograph studies an episode of environmental conflict in the Lake District of England in the 19th century.

**Professor B** is an historian of 20th-century physics who joined the MIT faculty after he received his Ph.D. in 2000. He holds an endowed chair. His second and most recent monograph is about a community of American physicists in the 1970s.

**Jennifer** is a sixth-year doctoral student studying environmental history. Her dissertation is about livestock breeds in the late 19th-century British Empire. She has conducted research in the UK, Australia, and New Zealand.

**Sheila** is a fifth-year doctoral student studying the history of mathematics. Her dissertation is about the development of the American mathematical community during the post-World War II period.

**Nanci** is a fourth-year doctoral student who is expanding research for an earlier project into her dissertation research.

**The Interview**

**Introduction**

The decisions that academic libraries and special collections make today, in a context of rapid technological and other change, will shape the research of historians of the future. Certain types of primary sources of special interest to historians of science and technology— including scientific texts, journal literature, archival documents of research institutions, and manuscript papers of scientists and engineers—are often stewarded by academic libraries, with particular responsibility assumed by science- and technology-focused institutions. Recent trends in collecting practices and management will have major implications for tomorrow’s scholars. What does it mean for both current and future historians of science and technology that more and more sources are full-text searchable online, and that more and more primary sources are now off-site? Will scholars be affected by licensing rather than owning digital content? Will today’s born-digital counterparts to yesterday’s paper publications, documents, and images be accessible? Are researchers libraries and special collections currently capturing and preserving the same kinds of primary sources that historians of science and technology have relied on, and are there other kinds of sources we should be preserving?

**Methods**

To gain some insight into these questions, I conducted interviews with two faculty members and three graduate students in programs for which I am a liaison at MIT. History, Science, Technology, & Society (STS); and the doctoral programs in History, Anthropology, and Science, Technology, & Society (HASTS).

- Semi-structured interviews focused on interview subjects’ recent or current major research projects (the professors’ most recent monographs and the graduate students’ dissertations)
- Subjects described research topics, types of primary sources, and how they identified and obtained sources
- Most interviews took around 75 minutes and were recorded
- Four additional graduate student interviews are scheduled, and I plan to schedule at least one more faculty interview

**Findings So Far**

**Enthusiasts Can Do Some of the Work for You**

“The ideal system is the one that works the best in some areas, which is that someone at the time has collected it for me, in the way of a scrapbook or archives.” — Prof. A

- Prof. A was very appreciative of the John Johnson Collection of Primed Fruits at Oxford. For her most recent book, she found periodical articles through clipping services, including one she consulted both for the book and has used for a complete lifetime.
- Contemporary approximations of these scrapbooks or collections assembled by enthusiasts might include Wikipedia or web sites maintaining personal versions of a particular topic, which were used by Prof. B to identify government documents and other material: “Enthusiasts group on the web that make their own sites about Upper Canadian all-you-can-eat-beer festivals – and I don’t have in mind a word of their slaves here is this is useful, I’ll argue independently. I can see book and E-V-E-L the things myself, and I know what she is.”

**Footnotes, Footnotes, Footnotes**

“The first way you look for primary sources is in other people’s bibliographies.” — Prof. A

- All five researchers stressed the importance of following footnotes to find leads, this can include identifying collections, publications, repositories, and specific sources
- “This was especially true for Jennifer.” — Prof. B

**You Say Secondary, I Say Primary**

- There’s some slipping between “secondary” and “primary,” but the neologism for historians of science who use scientific literature as primary sources
- Bibliographic search tools themselves can serve as primary sources, or provide primary data
- Prof. B often uses the Science Citation Index to understand intellectual communities or the influence of certain papers; he cites a library catalog and the Dissertations and Theses database in his recent book

**Archival Research Can Be an Emotional Experience**

“I just love the personal interaction, it’s a particular archive, I want to go there all the time.” — Nancy

- All five researchers commented on archive staff’s effectiveness; four commented on staff’s weaknesses
- All mentioned that they “love” working in archives or find it “fun” two talked of enjoying “detective work” and one talked of it as an “amusing” way to find information
- “I’ve found that you’re not really sure what you’re going to find when you go into an archive, and that’s always an exciting time.” — Prof. B

**What Would Make Archival Research Easier?**

- A better centralized, comprehensive, cross-searchable database of finding aids and/or metadata about collections

**Findings So Far (Cont.)**

**Digital Is Better than Print . . .**

- “I don’t know that the book would have worn down—certainly not the same way—before something like for five years, certainly not the way that this book is worn out environmentally.” — Prof. B

- Full-text searching in resources like Google Books and JSTOR help historians find they’ve done full, comprehensive searches for books (book reviews, and other publications ic., they find everything on a topic)

- It also helps them zero in on results, especially in periodicals, and newspapers in particular (i.e., they can see only what they need to know about a topic and nothing extraneous)

- “Prof. B found that online searches are more useful than print searches for more than just online databases; he’s found that online searches are more useful than print searches for more than just database searches.” — Prof. A

- In some cases, digitized sources suffice as surrogates for originals. Nancy used scanned MIT Reports to the Presidents, and

**. . . Except When It’s Not**

- The researchers nonetheless discussed cases where you can learn more from the print versions, or use them in more convenient ways.
- “I’ve scanned periodicals but have reservations about digitized books: ‘If there’s a way to read things in digitized. . . it’s easy to find that way. But I don’t know if I would think of it as a replacement or a supplement, because when it’s more right down to it, in a word, I have, for 15-20 days span on my desk, or on the floor, and there really isn’t a way to replace that.” — Prof. A

- Sheila needed to physically browse through 5 years of a bound math periodical that’s not available online: “I would have never had a feel for what I was reading, and I have in mind that actual periodical because it is the context . . . if it was digital, I might have found one or two articles, but I would not have looked through the letters to the editor – example – but ‘physical’ buttons moves me . . . If you take the bound journal and you go through it page by page, you get a much better sense . . . 50 years time-acrossing, but fun, you’re body, it’s more rewarding.”

- “I couldn’t sit and click through a journal online in the same way.” — Online browsing is often not even possible because publishers “only pull out the articles” for a journal, and leave out ads or special features that she finds invaluable.

**The Usual Places Aren’t Always Enough**

- Researchers often find material through personal or informal channels outside of regular types of

- Some unusual kinds of sources named include: travel guides, a 19th-century encyclopedia for banquets (Prof. A); home videos, photographs of cancelled cheques, a trip to a local TV news interview, advertisements in a yoga magazine (Prof. B); and herd and flock books (akin to a herd or flock’s genealogical record) and brooding documents and books (Jennifer)

- Prof. B typically purchases primary sources from rare book dealers for ready access; for her latest monograph, which included publications of a 19th-century company only available in 13 repositories that she needed to consult consistently while writing

- To obtain the publications and documents she needed, Jennifer had to visit the headquarters of breed societies in the UK, Australia, and New Zealand, where she was assisted by various staff, including an accountant and a “PR person,” she also visited “living history” farms to see heritage breeds

- Prof. B conducted several interviews and had numerous email exchanges with the physicists he studied, and he obtained many records and documents from their personal collections: “Enough of the stuff was sort of ephemeral—it wasn’t that many of the things were already archived or widely known— it wasn’t like I could just follow a documentary record without their help to build that documentary record”}

**The Challenge of Corporate Records**

- Prof. A was interested in the records of a 19th-century company that has gone through several transformations:

- “The boxes exist and it it must have endless ones of the records, but their use was extremely extraneous . . . So I didn’t pursue that, although those kind of records are important for a lot of research, I mean five or ten of a staff that staff graduate students do, but I don’t know how you get your — maybe libraries get access to these kind of things.”

- Prof. B talked of the “need for a corporate records department” at a university archives through much skimming by his research assistant and hiring yet another research assistant temporarily

- Corporate records are an important source for Nancy, and she is learning how to find them by

- “It was recently at a conference where everyone was entirely impressed that two of the people presenting had gotten some company records [of a large firm that had recently closed their archives] through entirely personal connections” — Prof. A

**Home Videos, Herb Books, Math Journals, & Parliamentary Papers**

**How Historians of Science and Technology Find Primary Sources**

**Preliminary Results from a Semistructured Interview Study**

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