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Essay: Lost in Digitization

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ESSAY
LOST IN DIGITIZATION: THE CHANGING FACE OF
HISTORICAL RESEARCH IN SPAIN¹

ADRIAN SCHUBERT

The invitation to give these thoughts to you means a lot to me and I want to thank the Association, and especially Enrique Sanabria of the University of New Mexico, for inviting the paper. I have been attending the Association's meetings for exactly 30 years now; my first was in Boston in April 1983, and that was the first fully-fledged conference at which I gave a paper. I was hugely nervous, my session was the first of the day and facing breakfast was a challenge. The only clear memory I have is the flow of encouragement coming from the panel chair, Joan Connelly Ullman. Ever since, SSPHS - as I can't stop myself from calling it - has been much more than an association to which I belong, it has been a professional home.

The occasion is doubly meaningful because, as Jane Slaughter mentioned, in the mid-70s I did my MA here at the University of New Mexico, where I had privilege of studying with Robert Kern, a generous mentor and fine teacher, as well as with a number of other of the outstanding historians who were in the History Department at the time: Charles McLelland, Jan Roebuck and Peter Bakewell as well as Jane herself.

This coincidence, as well as the fact that my 60th birthday is fast upon me, pushed my thinking about the topic for this talk in a reflective direction. I was originally thinking of calling it something like "Reflections of a grumpy old Hispanist", but I realized that if that title appeared on the program it would drive too many of you to the bar too soon. I also realized I needed something more focused, so I decided to talk about the ways in which doing historical research in Spain has changed since I started back in 1978. I chose the title "Lost in Digitization" because it seems to me that the digital revolution is the most profound change that our craft as historians of Spain and Portugal has experienced in that time - and one that will continue to change that craft. It is also intended to capture the sense of finding ourselves in an environment in which the ways of doing things to which we are accustomed, and with which we are comfortable, may well become much less predominant.

¹ This paper was first presented as a featured address at the 44th Annual Meeting of the Association for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies, April 2013.

The idea of talking about digitization came to me one day a few months ago when I was sitting in my study doing some work on my current project, a biography of Baldomero Espartero. Specifically, I was using the *Biblioteca Virtual de Prensa Histórica*, a wonderful tool created by the *Ministerio de Cultura* in collaboration with the governments of the *comunidades autónomas*. At last count, the site brings together 2,026 titles from 178 cities and towns in 55 provinces held in 78 libraries. It contains more than six million pages from more than one million issues with chronological coverage starting in 1753 and ending last year.² Simply entering “Baldomero Espartero” in the basic search gave me 734 hits from periodicals from a number of cities across Spain. It would not have occurred to me to look in most of these titles, such as the Barcelona humour magazine *La Carcajada*, or *La Lucha*, the organ of the Liberal party of Gerona. Indeed, I’d never even heard of many of them.

The periodicals that turned up in my search came from forty different repositories, but by far the largest number were from the *Hemeroteca Municipal de Madrid*. When I first went to Spain as a doctoral student in the fall of 1978, the *Hemeroteca* was one of two places I did most of my research. Since then it has changed dramatically. When I first went there, it was located in cramped quarters in the Casa Alvaro de Luján in the Plaza de la Villa. This is one of the oldest buildings in Madrid. It was full of atmosphere, and not just in the architecture: the antique reading room featured bare light bulbs strung above the desks. It did not even have its own photocopier. If you wanted to have copies made, you had to ask an *ordenanza*, who would take the bound papers to a shop around the corner that did have a Xerox machine, and who would charge an amount per page, I can’t recall how much, beyond the cost of the copies themselves.

The other place I worked in 1978 was the *Biblioteca Nacional*; let me tell you now – and I’m sure that many of you will not be the least surprised at this – that the *Biblioteca Nacional* is the place that has changed least over the last 35 years. Indeed some of the people who were working at the requests desk last May were there in October 1978! And getting photocopies made has become, if anything, more difficult. (So too was getting to the bar!) That said, the library has certainly entered into the digital age: its *Biblioteca Digital Hispánica* currently contains some 60,000 works. This project was given a major boost in 2008 when the library signed an agreement with *Telefónica*, the first such arrangement in Spain, which gave it 10 million Euros over the period 2008-2012 in order to digitize 200,000 items, which contain a total of 25 million pages. The library also has a *Hemeroteca Digital* with 12 million pages which was accessed by 1.5 million people in 2010. In late 2011 the *Biblioteca Nacional* was digitizing 30,000

² <http://prensahistorica.mcu.es/es/consulta/estadistica.cmd>

pages per day. You can ever share these digitized works on Facebook and Twitter.
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All major Spanish repositories, and many lesser ones, have some level of digital presence. Those of you who are on the listserv of the *Asociación de Historia Contemporánea* will have received an email in January announcing that the *Fundación Primero de Mayo* had posted the documents from the first ten congresses of *Comisiones Obreras*. The *Filmoteca Española* website has a large number of No-Dos starting from January 1943. Even that well known bastion of forward thinking, the *Real Academia de la Historia*, is posting some of its massive archival collections online.

So too, in a very small way is the municipal archive of Mieres, the major town in the Asturias coalfields. I mention this in particular because it too was a place I did a lot of work in 1979 and 1980, and is a striking example of how much change there has been since then. Today, there is website with a picture of a comfortable looking reading room, information on opening hours, and a small collection of digital documents, with an information page in English, French and Bable as well as in Spanish.

None of that, not even the reading room, existed when I did my research in Mieres town hall 35 years ago. Then I was escorted down a steep narrow staircase into the damp basement, along an equally narrow corridor that led to a flimsy wooden door. Lit by a bare light bulb was a small room with a few wooden bookcases and quantities of papers strewn around the floor. As I was scavenging through them – and you can imagine the condition they were in given the Asturian climate – I heard a haunting sound that I at first thought was being made by a dog or cat outside the building but I soon discovered was coming from the town jail, nearby in the basement, where a young man was sitting alone on an army cot and crying. Only after escaping to a nearby bar for a *coñac* to settle my nerves could I return to the “archive” to work.

In addition to these individual collections, there is also the powerful tool called PARES (*Portal de Archivos Españoles*) which was launched in 2007 and resides on the Ministry of Culture website. The portal brings together twelve archives run by the Spanish state, including the *Archivo General de Indias*, the *Archivo General de Simancas*, the *Archivo de la Real Chancillería de Valladolid*, the *Archivo de la Corona de Aragón* the *Centro Documental de la Memoria*

³<http://www.academia.edu/754707/> Spain in Coordinating digitisation in Europe. Progress report of the National Representatives Group coordination mechanisms for digitisation policies and programmes 2007

Histórica in Salamanca, and the provincial archives of Alava, Vizcaya and Guipúzcoa. By last summer, the site had almost 30 million digital images.⁴ It was through PARES that I was able to find and consult the *Respuestas Generales del Catastro del Marqués de la Ensenada*, which I had been unable to locate otherwise.⁵ In the Catastro, which was done in the 1750s and constitutes Spain's first modern census, I found important information about Espartero's parents and the small Manchegan town, Granátula de Calatrava, where he was born.

PARES also contains a link to another invaluable resource, *the Censo-Guia de Archivos de España e Iberoamérica*.⁶ This was a project that began in 1972 as a purely Spanish endeavor, and it was a chance meeting in 1978 with Margarita Vázquez de Parga, who was in charge of the project at the time, that led me to the Mieres archive I mentioned earlier. Now it brings together libraries and archives from eighteen Latin American countries as well.⁷ A simple search for Espartero led me to a potentially valuable source I would never have encountered otherwise, the papers of Joaquín María López, a leading *progresista* of the 1830s and 1840s who played a significant role in the coup that brought Espartero to the Regency in 1840 and the one that sent him into exile three years later. The López papers are in an out-of-the-way and unexpected place, the municipal archives of his home town of Villena, about 60 kilometres northwest of Alicante, and the listing in the *Censo-Guia* mentions that they contain a memoir of the López's ten-day presidency in May 1843 that brought the political crisis of Espartero's regency to a head. I intend to visit this archive on my next trip to Spain.

There are also a large number of digital resources available outside of Spain, and more keep appearing. To name just a few I have found – or in most cases stumbled upon:

- Last May, the University of Warwick announced the creation of an online library consisting of 13,000 documents relating to the Spanish Civil War, including the evacuation of Basque children to the UK.

- The Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives have a digital library consisting of documents from four collections housed in NYU's Tamiment Library.

⁴ http://www.mcu.es/archivos/Novidades/novedades_PARES_NuevasImagenes1.html

⁵ <http://pares.mcu.es/Catastro/>

⁶ <http://censoarchivos.mcu.es/CensoGuia/portada.htm>

⁷ <http://censoarchivos.mcu.es/CensoGuia/acuerdos.htm>

- Last November CBC Radio did a program on Canadians who fought in the Spanish Civil War and posted interviews done with a number of them 50 years ago but which, for political reasons, were never broadcast.⁸

- No one would deny that the widespread digitization of archives and other sources is a benefit for scholars of all sorts. To begin with the obvious, online sites are accessible from everywhere at any time; no more strategizing around the limited opening hours of Spanish institutions, private as well as public. The word search capability may lead us to places we would never have dreamed of otherwise. Digitalization also democratizes access: to take one example, in 2009 the PARES portal had some 376,000 visitors compared to the 6,600 people who actually went to its member archives and they consulted more than 100 million documents compared to 190,000.⁹ Clearly, not all of those virtual visitors were professional historians. Digitization also contributes to preservation, as what are now being called analogue documents are handled less often.

Virtual archives and libraries also facilitate collaboration among institutions, both inside Spain and beyond. Needless to say, Spanish institutions also participate in broader European initiatives, such as Europeana, the portal that aggregates items from more than 2,000 institutions across the continent, and the European Library, a portal that connects 48 national libraries as well as many other research libraries.¹⁰

They also are working with a number of Latin American institutions. The BNE has a lead role in the *Biblioteca Digital del Patrimonio Iberoamericano* which was launched in September 2012. The other partner institutions are the national libraries of Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Panama and Portugal. PARES also has a Latin American component. Its portal on Ibero-American migratory movements brings together documents from Spanish repositories, including the *Listas de pasajeros y emigrantes del Consulado de España en Veracruz* in the *Archivo Histórico Nacional* and passport files from the *Archivo Histórico Provincial de Cádiz* for the period 1810-1866 with sources from a number of American archives including the *Registro Nacional de Extranjeros en México*, *Libros de Pasajeros de Policía de Montevideo*, and the *Registro de Nacionalidad*

⁸ <http://www.cbc.ca/player/search.html?q=Spanish%20Civil&page=1>

⁹ “New Goals of PARES: Spanish Archives Web Portal”,
<http://www.slideshare.net/icaruseu/alfonso-snchez-mairena-pares>

¹⁰ The Spanish members are the Universidad Complutense, the Universidad de Valencia and the Biblioteca Nacional.

del Consulado de España en Rosario, Argentina. Currently, this portal gives access to almost 150,000 documents.¹¹

This kind of integration allows us to find things of interest in places we would never have considered looking. To return to my current project on Espartero, a search in *Europeana* turned up images from the National Libraries of Austria and France that I had not found in Spain. It also has the potential to facilitate research on transnational and comparative topics.

But digitization also has its disadvantages and even its dangers. Most obviously, as ambitious as digitization projects may be, only a tiny percentage of the historical record is available online today. The digital archive will surely continue to grow but it will be a very long time before all the resources to carry out what any one of us would consider a respectable research project will be so available. Edward Ayers, a pioneer in digital history and co-creator of the famous Valley of the Shadow website, has talked about “the illusion being created that all the world’s knowledge is on the Web” and the danger that “material that is not digitized risks being neglected as it would not have been in the past, virtually lost to the great majority of potential users”.¹²

The obstacles to comprehensive digitization are many. Money is the most obvious, and public institutions are particularly hard pressed in tough economic times. There are also technical issues. For example not all scripts can be easily read by digitizing equipment and the size of certain items can make digitization impractical. Still others are too fragile.

Private funding has provided some help on the money issue, and I have already mentioned the *BNE-Telefónica* agreement, but this has not prevented the BNE from feeling the impact of the current crisis. Isabel Bordes, who is in charge of the digitization program there, told me in a recent email that the library has had cutbacks in personnel who are directly or indirectly involved in digitizing its collections so that less work is being done this year than in previous ones.

Spain lacks the plethora of foundations enjoyed in the United States. And even here what foundations and other well-heeled institutions that have been involved in digitization projects can do is limited. In 2008, Microsoft dropped a

¹¹ <https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/show#uri=http://hr-search-api:8080/searchapi/search/collection/1888427>,
<http://pares.mcu.es/MovimientosMigratorios/staticContent.form?viewName=presentacion>

¹² <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/10/business/yourmoney/11archive.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>

project to digitize 100,000 volumes from the Yale library without any notice. Both IBM and the Mellon Foundation have become more and more selective. The objective of the Mellon Foundation has been to identify “stand-alone collections that have a durable appeal in the market place of scholars”. How many of the documents that interest us would pass that test?

An archive such as the *Archivo General de Indias* is, in theory at least, a comprehensive collection of the documents generated by the institutions created for the governing of Spain’s American empire. In many cases, this comprehensiveness disappears with digitization. One does not have to subscribe to the view expressed by Matthew Pratt Guterl in the latest issue of the *American Historical Review*, that archival digitization projects are driven by “topical whimsy”,¹³ to ask who determines which documents or sets of documents make it to the web and what criteria they use to make these decisions? The *Biblioteca Nacional* says that it is digitizing its manuscripts in the order they appear in the general inventory, which is reasonable. But with a little over 30,000 items this is a relatively small collection and putting it all online is an achievable goal. At the Library of Congress, digitization has been driven at least in part by, “the kinds of searches that bring users to the library’s [web]site... events of interest to a broad constituency”, to quote one of the people in charge of its digitization program.¹⁴

With public institutions under increasing pressure to justify their activities by serving as many people as possible, to engage in knowledge mobilization in the current jargon, such an approach is understandable but what does this mean for online collections as sites of serious research? Or for archives and their functions more generally? Will digital democratization trump other concerns? In a major speech he gave three years ago, the then new chief archivist of the National Archives of Canada ‘spoke of the “public memory monopoly **once** exercised by archives,” and bemoaned the fact that the “documentary moment” in the analogue world is hopelessly long. Archivists, he said, are lost “within an anachronistic time and space,” noting that in the age of self-documentation, information needs to be ubiquitous, instant and unmediated.’¹⁵ In such a world view, are people like us an increasingly insignificant part of the clientele, and an elitist one at that?

¹³ Matthew Pratt Guterl, “The Futures of Transnational History”, *American Historical Review*, Feb. 2013, p. 138

¹⁴

http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/10/business/yourmoney/11archive.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

¹⁵ Susan Crean, “National Archive Blues”, *Literary Review of Canada*, January 2011, <http://reviewcanada.ca/essays/2011/01/01/national-archives-blues/>

Dangers also loom over the experiential side of our research. Of these, one of the most serious is the threat to our direct experience of the country whose history we study. In my own case, and I would be surprised if anyone in this room would disagree, good research, and even more good history, is not just a matter of access to sources. Engagement with the country - as frustrating as that can be at times - and engagement with its historical community - are crucial ingredients, and the increasing availability of digital sources may well help undermine these. The thin, or not so thin, edge of the wedge is already here: some funding agencies are demanding that applicants for research grants indicate whether or not archival materials are available online before awarding money for research travel. And selection committees have been known to reduce a requested travel budget on the grounds that with a digital camera, the six weeks an applicant wanted to spend in the archives could be cut down significantly. Email and social media are undeniably powerful networking tools but will the relationships they allow be of the same quality as the relationships we have all developed through face-to-face encounters?

In considering the role personal relationships, we should not forget our relationships with archivists. Their knowledge of the peculiarities of their analogue collections can also be an invaluable resource for our research, something from which many of us will have benefitted.

Digitized documents also dilute our experience of the past. Here I can do no better than to quote Sir John Elliott's recent book, *History in the Making*: "There is an excitement about opening a bundle of documents for the first time, not really knowing what to expect...[M]any historians today never get to see or handle the documents they consult" and this has "taken away a form of direct contact with the past that nothing can quite replace. The sight or even the smell of sixteenth - or seventeenth - century documents, the dried brown ink, the paper itself sometimes crumbling in one's hand - all these sensory qualities enhanced... that imaginative and intuitive sense which is so important for the historical reconstruction of past societies".¹⁶ To which I would add only that the same goes for those of us who work on later centuries. Coming across the small, unadorned piece of paper on which, in July 1854 with revolution raging around her, the 24-year-old Isabel II wrote a few short lines to Espartero begging him to come to Madrid and assume the presidency of the government was an unforgettable experience, and one that has added to my understanding of that critical moment.

¹⁶ J.H. Elliott, *History in the Making*, (New Haven, 2012), p. 14-15

There is even a question as to whether these things will be seen as losses. We have all had to deal with undergraduates who expect that all research can be done online and who, for that reason, don't feel the need to go anywhere near the university library. Is there a possibility that this mentality will find its way to more serious historians and that research trips will come to be seen as undesirable, or even unnecessary? Is there something ominous in the wording of this post on George Mason University's History News Network? "I can imagine scenarios in which academics and postgrad students make decisions to restrict research projects (largely) to what they can do at their computer, where they would previously have unwillingly endured research trips."¹⁷

Perhaps what I am voicing here is my own nostalgia, and current realities are rendering my own experiences, dank basements, crying prisoners and all, irrelevant. In an age of diminishing research funding opportunities, perhaps graduate students and younger scholars will take the loss of contact with country and document as the price of doing business.

So far I have discussed the phenomenon of archival digitization and the ways it might change the way we do research on Spain. I had planned to conclude with some brief comments about the emergent field of digital history and what it might mean for the type of history that actually gets produced, but a bit of analogue serendipity – and hard copy serendipity at that – led to a related but different topic: video games. On March 2, the Toronto *Globe and Mail* ran a long essay entitled "Are video games like Assassin's Creed rewriting history?"¹⁸ We are all familiar with debates over the historical accuracy of movies that dramatize historical events, and this year's Oscar season, with *Argo*, *Zero Dark Thirty*, and *Lincoln*, and - on the foreign film side - *A Royal Affair*, about enlightened absolutism in Denmark, produced lots of grist for that mill. Yet the people we encounter in our class rooms will spend much more time with video games than with movies. According to one gaming expert, "99% of boys under 18 and 94% of girls under 18 report playing videogames regularly. The average young person racks up 10,000 hours of gaming by the age of 21 -- or 24 hours less than they spend in a classroom for all of middle and high school if they have perfect attendance."¹⁹

To give one example, Assassin's Creed III, which is set in the American Revolution and which is at the centre of the *Globe* piece, sold more than 12

¹⁷ <http://hnn.us/blogs/entries/36392.html>

¹⁸ <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/technology/are-video-games-like-assassins-creed-rewriting-history/article9237302/>

¹⁹ http://www.ted.com/conversations/44/we_spend_3_billion_hours_a_wee.html

million copies in the four months after its release last October and is being made into a movie starring Michael Fassbender.

The creators of historically-located games don't make claims to complete historical accuracy, but neither do they fall back on the "this-is-art-not-history argument" that filmmakers and historical novelists have long used. The protagonist in the American Revolution version of *Assassin's Creed* is a Mohawk warrior who fights for the American rebels, even though the Mohawk actually supported the British. The creative director for the game invokes contemporary ways of doing history to defend this decision: "I think anyone who argues that history is objective or static is very confused... I don't think that there's a single event that hasn't gone through multiple interpretations or iterations in terms of what people believe even happened, let alone what was important about it, or what led up to it or what followed it. We don't take the majority view that historians used to 50 or 60 years ago. The philosophy today is that history is more about different points of view." The historian who worked on the game, a newly-graduated BA, said that "Is any video game 100 per cent accurate? No... But neither is there any history that is either."²⁰

If game makers reach a wider, and probably more attentive, engaged and committed, audience than we do, and use history to do it, what are the implications? Are games something that should concern us? Do they represent a threat to our professional authority, or even to how history as we understand it should be produced? Are video games, as the author of the *Globe* article comments, "the cusp of a bigger change – a shift in the way facts and truth are flexed in digital culture, where everyone can have a voice, an opinion, and at least surface authority"?²¹ Or are they ways of creating an interest in history among young people that can potentially work to our benefit? One of my department's graduate students quoted in the *Globe* article tended to this view. For him, accuracy is secondary to engagement: "Thousands and thousands of teenagers have now played it. A weekend at colonial Williamsburg, surrounded by people dressed as peasants and churning butter, would make them shudder. Whereas if you can be an assassin in colonial Williamsburg – it's cool. Then you can sympathize with the way people lived, with what it was like back then, and the seriousness of the decisions they had to make".²²

²⁰ <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/technology/are-video-games-like-assassins-creed-rewriting-history/article9237302/>

²¹ <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/technology/are-video-games-like-assassins-creed-rewriting-history/article9237302/>

²² <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/technology/are-video-games-like-assassins-creed-rewriting-history/article9237302/>

For those of us who work on Spanish history, these are not just theoretical concerns. There are now a number of video games set in the Spanish Civil War. The first of these, “Shadows of War”, was released in 2007 – on November 20 no less! - in the midst of the debates generated by the Zapatero government’s Law of Historical Memory. Players can fight with either side, including the Condor Legion, and produce different outcomes from those that actually happened, even have the Republic win. In its article on the controversy, the *Guardian* noted that “in one section players take on the role of a young female republican guerrilla, with a mission to inform her comrades of the position of Franco's elite Condor Legion. Her tight-fitting trousers and revealing top are more reminiscent of Lara Croft from Tomb Raider than Spanish guerrilla fighters.”²³

The game generated considerable controversy about rewriting history and trivializing events that continue to touch emotional chords. Santiago Macías, vice-president of the *Asociación para la Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica*, didn’t object to having a video game set in the Spanish Civil War, but he did object to its lack of accuracy: “Treating the two sides equally can give a mistaken impression. A video game about the Civil War should have an educational component, making it clear that there was a military uprising against a legitimate government. For games set during World War II this is no longer necessary but the Civil War is relatively new territory that requires this educational work”.²⁴ The game’s developer defended it on the grounds that the Civil War is often overlooked in Spanish schools so that “there are a lot of young people in this country who don’t know much about the war and this is an opportunity for them to learn”.²⁵

What exactly will they learn? Well might you ask. Let’s look at the Spanish trailer: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IXCu4RXdYHg>. In spite of negative reviews, some 60,000 copies were sold during the 2007 Christmas season and a second installment, with new missions, including the aerial bombardment of Barcelona appeared, the following year.²⁶ And in case you were wondering, you can also game other aspects of Spanish history: the “Age of Empires II, the Conquerors” game has four “single player campaigns” including Montezuma's defense against Hernan Cortez and the adventures of El Cid”.²⁷

²³ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2007/nov/17/spain.international1>

²⁴ http://elpais.com/diario/2007/12/03/radiotv/1196636403_850215.html

²⁵ http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/22/world/europe/22iht-22spain.8439092.html?_r=0

²⁶ <http://www.hoytecnologia.com/noticias/Amplian-videojuego-sobre-Guerra/79272>

²⁷ http://ageofempires.wikia.com/wiki/Age_of_Empires_II:_The_Conquerors

We have already entered much further than we realize into a new digital landscape. There are things here to help us, but this is also a terrain one where many of our established professional certainties are being called into question. We may well be on the verge of becoming lost in digitization.