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No Grants, No Travel, No Excuses: Researching and Writing Early North American History in the Digital Age

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Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche

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No Grants, No Travel, No Excuses: Researching and Writing Early North American History in the Digital Age[1]

José António Brandão

While I am not a Luddite, I am skeptical about reliance upon technology – in its myriad forms – in research. It is not that I'm unaware of the benefits of technology – I do use it and it has changed both how I work and what I do. Rather, I have come to realize that for all its benefits, there are problems with uncritical use of, and too much reliance upon, technology and the web, and that those problems can, if not compensated for, create serious problems in professional development and in the quality of the final research project.

My general research interests are the ethnohistory of Native peoples and of Native-European contact in the years up to 1783 in North America. Within this area, I have focused on the study of the history and culture of the Five (later Six) Nations Iroquois and their relations with Indian and European neighbours, especially with the Indians of the Great Lakes and the French in Canada up to 1763. Researching and writing Indian history offers a number of challenges. Great Lakes Indians did not have a written language and their history must be recovered based upon their oral traditions and material culture, and the written records of interactions with Natives left us by various European invaders[2].

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[1] A version of this paper was presented at the conference on *Archivi e biblioteche: dalla memoria del passato al web*, Cagliari, Italy, Nov. 25-26, 2009 organized by the Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche, Instituto di Storia dell'Europa Mediterranea. I'm grateful to CNR director, Prof. Luca Codignola-Bo for his kind invitation to discuss technology's impacts on my work, to the local organizing committee for their professionalism and gracious hospitality, and to the other panelists for their comments and insights.

[2] For a short review of the ethnohistorical approach see James AXTELL, "The Ethnohistory of Native America", in Donald FIXICO (ed.), *Rethinking American Indian History*, Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 1997, pp. 11-27; Russell J. BARBER and Frances F. BERDAN, *The Scope of Ethnohistory*, *The Emperor's Mirror: Understanding Cultures through Primary Sources*, Tucson, University of Arizona Press,

The problems with these types of sources, and of using them, are few, but they are substantial. Oral traditions, like written ones, are subject to change over time. Unlike written sources, however, we have few copies of the earliest versions of the oral traditions and cannot compare the changes over time – although some stories were recorded in the early contact period and have appeared in print. A few were even "written" by Indians themselves[3]. Nonetheless, modern versions of oral traditions reflect selective choices of the story tellers which are related to contemporary issues facing Native communities[4]. Again, the same is true of written histories penned by non-Indian scholars, but we have the early versions of written sources against which to compare[5]. Another problem of oral traditions is that when Native groups disappear, as have many, we are left without their "voice". Thanks to the work of archaeologists, however, we have a good record of the material culture of Native peoples and it has endured even if the group that produced it

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1998, pp. 5-32. In Europe this approach is most readily understood as "historical anthropology". See for example, Peter BURKE (ed.), "Introduction", in *The Historical Anthropology of Early Modern Italy: Essays on Perception and Communication*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987, pp. 3-14; R. Po-Chia HSIA & Robert W. SCRIBNER (eds.), *Historical Anthropology of Early Modern Europe*, *Problems in the Historical Anthropology of Early Modern Europe*, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 1997, pp. 7-34.

[3] See, for example, Carl F. KLINCK and James J. TALMAN (eds.), *The Journal of Major John Norton, 1809-16*, Toronto, Champlain Society, 1970; William WARREN, *History of the Ojibway People,* St. Paul, Minnesota Historical Society, 1984 [Minnesota Historical Society, 1885].

[4] The controversy over the merits of oral history as a source stems in large part from the differences in understanding between Indian and non-Indian scholars about what history is to do. For most Native writers, whose history is that of oppression and dispossession, historical writing is often a means to rectify the historical treatment of their people's past. Some question whether non-Indians have a right to treat the subject at all. An introduction to this issue, from the Indian perspective, is Devon MIHESUAH (ed.), *Natives and Academics: Researching and Writing about American Indians,* Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1998.

[5] Compare, for example, the view of Jesuit missionary efforts in New France offered by Francis PARKMAN in his *The Jesuits in North America in the Seventeenth Century*, Toronto, George N. Morang, 1907 [Boston, Little, Brown, and Company, 1867] with that of James AXTELL in his *The Invasion Within: The Contest of Cultures in Colonial North America*, Oxford U. Press, 1985. Parkman, a Protestant, Whig, American Nationalist painted a negative image of the Catholic missionaries while Axtell, an ethnohistorian, corrects Parkman's biases and offers a nuanced image of Jesuit values and conversion tactics.

has not. Leaving aside the often questionable, if not immoral, way in which much of that material was gathered (graves robbed or desecrated, sites excavated without the consent of the descendants of those whose history is being unearthed), museums have preserved important elements of Native culture for study[6].

The bulk of material used to study Native people and their interactions with Europeans in North America, however, are those records left by the Europeans. These written sources come in a variety of forms: maps which show locations of Native groups and what happened to them over time, letters or longer *memoires* which describe elements of Native culture and/or Indian actions, and accounts of treaty agreements and negotiations which are often the only place where we can "hear" Indian voices from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The major problem with this type of source is that it represents a record of the conquered left by the conqueror and the biases inherent in such material are legion and obvious. For example, a cartographer who has never visited the area he is representing on a map for his king, for the sake of a territorial claim against another monarch, is liable to exaggerate the extent of territory in question. A missionary describing a "pagan" practice that he wants to eradicate, or a French governor describing the behaviour of a Native group against whom he proposes war, is not likely to offer a very objective view of Indian culture and the motives of Indian negotiators.

All of these problems with the sources that I use are compounded by the fact that they were difficult to access. Indian communities are widely scattered, poor, have little in the way of resources – financial or human – to preserve their history and there was no assured way to ascertain which groups had any materials that I could consult. Museums had catalogues of their holdings, but they were rarely available in places outside their own doors, and were too were widely scattered to be consulted thoroughly. Indeed, it was difficult enough to get a grant or fellowship to consult a known archival collection, let alone one to see if a collection existed. It was even worse applying to visit museums if one was a historian. Historical organizations and funders would not give me

[6] On attitudes towards, and views of, Native people in the United States, and some of the implications for relations with, and treatment of, them see Robert BERKHOFER, *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian From Columbus to the Present*, New York, Alfred Knopf, 1978.

money to do that – it was the work of archaeologists, and organizations that funded archaeologists would not fund me because I was a historian. I was reduced to planning family vacations – a word my wife and son would not use to describe our trips to museums and reservations – to do some research.

Technology – the pre-web/internet version – however, came to my rescue even in my earliest research work and in a most unfortunate way. The vast majority of the documents that I relied upon for my research on the Iroquois were produced by the French and in the 1950s the Canadian government had turned to the newly cost effective technology of microfilm and copied hundreds of French maps and thousands of volumes of letters, etc., from the French national archives and deposited them in the National Archives of Canada in Ottawa, Ontario. I was, thus, "spared" the "need" to spend my summers in Paris. Indeed, I came to avoid even Ottawa since the microfilm was available via interlibrary loan. Today, I don't have to leave my home as that entire collection is now part of a project which I direct and is at my home university[7]. I am still happy to forgo a trip to Ottawa, but Aix-en-Provence, where those materials in France related to my work have been moved, would be nice to visit.

Among the other aspects of my work impacted by the sources that I needed, and their locations, was the cost of photocopying what was distantly held because it was even more expensive to return to the various archives and museums to consult them. Research, at least serious work, had to be limited to summers when one could get away from teaching and home base, long enough to travel to consult repositories of needed materials. And, more seriously, I did very little with material culture resources and oral history because of the costs and problems associated with trying to use those sorts of sources.

Today the situation is much changed and I rely on technology and the web quite extensively if with some reluctance. The shift in my work practices began in earnest around 1998 when I became more involved in an archaeological project aimed at discovering and excavating Fort St. Joseph, a French fort, mission and trading post located – we now know – in Niles, Michigan[8]. I had relied upon the work of archaeologists before when working on the history and culture of the Iroquois Indians

[7] <http://www.wmich.edu/history/peyserendowment/collection.html>.
[8] <http://www.wmich.edu/fortstjoseph/>.

but, for the reasons noted above, I mostly relied on the reports of their findings. I had not participated in an actual dig. Technology proved to be vital to the discovery and recovery of Fort St. Joseph. It is true that archaeology is, as my colleague Michael Nassaney likes to point out, history at the point of a trowel. And shovels, picks, and trowels remain the basic tools of the discipline. But to identify where to use those tools others had to be applied first. Magnetic Imaging and Ground Penetrating Radar systems were used to create images of what lay deep below the ground. Brightly coloured images of what lay beneath the earth, and how far down, appeared on a computer screen to tell us where the earth had been disturbed; where rocks appeared in shapes that could not be random. And indeed, the shovel and trowels confirmed what the computer suggested.

Nor was my initiation to technology to end there. Recovered materials were cleaned, scanned using high-tech equipment, and digitally photographed and catalogued. The latter may sound mundane, but those images could then be posted to websites and shared with researchers around the world. An artifact of which were uncertain – it turned out to be a cilice, a device used by the penitent for self-mortification – was sent to researchers around the world in a matter of minutes and within a few days our conclusion about the artifact was confirmed[9]. This, it turned out was increasingly done by archaeologists who created websites to post their findings, raise questions, and share images of their artifacts. Museums increasingly post virtual displays of special exhibits featuring portions of their collections[10]. Indeed, some museums have begun to photograph specific portions of their collections in three dimensional format so that complete research of the item can eventually be carried out from one's home. Colgate University, in Hamilton, New York, has done this with all of their Oneida Iroquois materials and is looking for funding to be able to post that data to the web[11].

Embarrassed by my colleagues embrace of technology and what it could offer, I began searching the web to see if my life could be made

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[9] The story of this object can be found in José António BRANDÃO & Michael Shakir NASSANEY, "Suffering for Jesus: Penitential Practices at Fort St. Joseph (Niles, MI) During the French Regime", in *The Catholic Historical Review*, XCIV, 3, July 2008, pp. 476-499.

[10] <http://www.penn.museum/flickr-gallery-highlights.html>.

[11] <http://offices.colgate.edu/longyear/>.

easier and my work transformed by it and found that since I had begun working on my dissertation much had changed. As noted above, museums had web pages, catalogues of collections were available on-line and, in some cases collections of artifacts were increasingly available for research on-line. Native groups had organized and had web sites with their histories recorded there[12]. Usually it was their oral traditions provided in written form, but in some cases actual voice recordings made generations ago can be found as well as recent recorded "story retellings". Indeed, for a small sum I could purchase the video or DVD of the event during which the story was told and recorded.

In terms of the written documents upon which I had relied so much, even there great change had taken place. DVD and on-online versions of old and rare books were now readily available – multi-volume works on one compact disk. There was no longer a need to wait to plan a trip to a distant archive or rare book room of larger universities. Secondary sources that my library did not have and which used to require a visit to a larger research library in another city, or weeks of waiting if it was available via inter-library loan, were now available in electronic format. And, even if my university library did not have it, I could access it from another university library via the web due to a resource sharing arrangement between university libraries in my home state[13]. A consortium of major university libraries in the United States recently announced that they have millions of works available for viewing on-line[14]. Collections of manuscript documents were now readily available on-line as well[15]. A few months ago, while searching for a collection attribution to use in putting together a grant to consult the journals of an anthropologist Frederick Waugh, I found that his journals were available on-line. Yet another trip to Ottawa avoided.

I don't think that it is possible to underestimate, or to fully enumerate, the changes that technology and the web has made to my work and how I work. It is hard to imagine, even ten or twelve years ago, that so much of what I relied upon to do my work would be

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[12] <http://www.akwesasne.ca/>.

[13] <http://elibrary.mel.org/search>.

[14] For a review of the overall project see <http://massdigitization.com/>. On the number of volumes currently available see: <http://www.mlive.com/opinion/ann-arbor/index.ssf/2009/06/other_voices_google_agreement.html>.

[15] <http://www.archivescanadafrance.org/english/accueil_en.html>.

available at my finger tips. I could not imagine why anyone would go to the trouble and expense of photographing and digitizing old French maps, letters, and reports to put on-line, let alone images of artifacts from archaeological projects long ago terminated. At best technology would, I thought, allow me to see old books on-line. I could see how a book could be photo-copied and it was not much of a stretch of the imagination to think of images of pages posted on line. Three-dimensional images of artifacts were beyond my thinking nor could I see how Native groups could gather, let alone devote, the resources needed to establish websites and all that would go on them. I underestimated technology, the decrease in its costs, and its popularity. The web, and all that went with it, became a tremendous tool for getting out information to people and everyone wanted to share what they had – in some cases to shape the dialogue about who they were and what they wanted. Today my work, thanks to the web, can be carried out year round. I am not limited to research in summers when I get away from teaching and administrative responsibilities. Costs associated with research are diminished or eliminated entirely because of ready access to research materials via the web or new, inexpensive, digital formats. Maps, reports, oral histories, and the material culture of the groups I study are at my fingertips – literally.

But all this comes at a cost. Much of the information, other than that on websites of acknowledged research institutions is not reviewed. It is whatever those who maintain the website and post information to it want users to know and a good deal of it is either unsupported or poorly researched history, personal opinion, or propaganda. Researchers who can't get their work published in peer reviewed publications post their musings to their websites. Native groups offer uncorroborated, and in some cases plainly false, versions of their histories as fact. In my area of research the major myths are those that Iroquois women, who were remarkably free in comparison to Euroamerican women, were the inspiration for the Women's Movement in the United States and that the League of the Iroquois – a clan based system of government where leaders were appointed by female clan leaders – served as the model for the US Constitution[16]. Even if serious scholars can pick out the dross,

[16] On these claims, and why they are unfounded, see: Elisabeth TOOKER, "The United States Constitution and the Iroquois League", in *Ethnohistory*, vol. 35, 4, Fall 1988, pp. 305-336; Elisabeth TOOKER, "Rejoinder to Johansen", in *Ibi*, vol. 37, 3, Summer 1990,

most students and casual researchers such as history teachers cannot – and this is a problem.

There is also too much information on the web. It is practically impossible to consult all the manuscript and artifact collections available on-line related to my work. It takes forever to winnow out the wheat from the chafe and one soon runs into the problems of different sites referring to the same things using slightly different wording. At what point does one say enough is enough and conclude that one has made a reasonable effort to track down sources: after coming across the same things in two, three, four sites? What if in the sixth or seventh one the manuscripts really are relevant and different? When one had to travel to conduct research there was a certain amount of leeway granted if one overlooked or failed to consult something. Today there are no excuses for not achieving complete coverage and one is bound to be accosted at a conference, if not in a review or lengthy e-mail, for overlooking a document, a collection or someone's ancestor, be it relevant or not to thesis of one's work[17].

At the same time, there is too little available on the web. Rarely is the collection that one wants completely available. If, in my area, the correspondence from Canada to France is available – and it is – it remains true that letters from France to Canada are not and they need to be consulted as well. Frederick Waugh's journals, which I was so happy to find on-line, are not all available. Only six of the nine he wrote are viewable and his letters, which also need to be consulted, are not digitized at all. For the uninitiated, including many of our graduate

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pp. 291-297; Philip A. LEVY, "Exemplars of Taking Liberties: The Iroquois Influence Thesis and the Problem of Evidence", in *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, LIII, 3, July 1996, pp. 587-604; Samuel B. PAYNE, *The Iroquois League, the Articles of Confederation, and the Constitution*, *Ibi*, pp. 605-620; William A. STARNA and George R. HAMELL, "History and the Burden of Proof: The Case of Iroquois Influence on the U.S. Constitution", in *New York History*, Oct. 1996, pp. 427-452.

[17] Genealogists are particularly adept at using documents available on-line to track relatives and there are an endless number of such organizations dedicated to just about every ethnic, linguist, and/or cultural group. A Google search of French Genealogical Societies results in 559,000 "hits". Inevitably those who contact me to chide me for overlooking their long dead relative are concerned that I have failed to indentify him or her, or to mention that they were a member of the French or Native American nobility. Given how few of the former ever lived in North America, and that the Indians of the Northeast had no nobility as such, one is always impressed by the persistence of this claim.

students, there is a tendency to think that what is available is all that there is – research stops with what is found. We find ourselves in the position of having to teach our students how to use archives and libraries. There is far less need to travel to do research now than ever there was and that is good because travel is expensive and budgets are tight. But there is no substitute for visiting an archive, discussing its holdings with archivists who know its history and collections in ways that never appear in catalogues or on-line listings[18]. Nothing in research exceeds the thrill of finding a document no one else has found or used. No matter how prepared I ever was, I never failed to visit an archive without discovering something that I was not searching for because I did not know it existed. My second book was one such discovery and my next planned project is another.

Lastly, and this may be a particularly American problem, the access that the web has provided can diminish careers and intellectual development. It is harder to get grants to travel to do research because funding agencies want you to use the web, as do the universities for which we work, if we are asking them for funding support[19]. Yet, external grants are a barometer of our standing in the profession and the fewer of those we get, the less we can "show" our status among our peers. Fewer research trips also means diminished opportunities to meet researchers with like interests and fewer opportunities to exchange ideas, and offer and receive guidance about research collections and projects.

There is no doubt that technology and the web has transformed what I do and how I do it. For example, I do more with material culture than was ever possible including in my research dealing with the French in America. I can now say a good deal more about daily life and value systems of the French in Canada because of access to the archaeological record that I did not have before. And there are other benefits to the web that I have not mentioned. "Google" searches lead us to people who we might never had a chance to meet because they have more limited travel budgets or travel in different conference

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[18] For a fuller discussion of the role of archivist as mediator see the presentation by Dr. Stefano Vitali at: <http://www.isem.cnr.it/materiali%20pdf/M1/vitali.pdf>.

[19] I sit on one such funding committee at my home university and chair yet another. We regularly seek to ascertain the availability of on-line sources, often by having grant seekers "prove" that they don't exist, before considering funding.

circles. A like process has led people from Portugal, Italy, and Czeckoslovakia to contact me about my work. Potential graduate students from distant parts of the United States have access to my name and research projects and apply to our growing graduate program. "H" websites – H-Indian, H-German, H-Atantic – offer instant links to a broad community of scholars with like interests who are more than ready to engage with one's ideas. (Although this, too, is a double edged sword: one can spend so much time discussing minutiae that one gets little real research or writing done, and there is pressure to belong to the "right" list and engage with the "postings" there regardless of how much, or little, intellectual heft they may have.) But, for all the benefits that it has brought, the web and its resources must not be a substitute for what we do. As humanists, we must not let the conveniences of the web take the human element, in all its myriad forms, out of our work. Scholarship should always include "facilities based, face to face learning" – to borrow the language of those at my university who seek to eliminate both those things – should include interaction with primary sources and people, and it always done best in a library or archive, surrounded by vestiges of the past we study.

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