Reading history in the mass-digitized age: opportunities and challenges

In Australia in the 19th century, lending libraries were accessible to only 3% of the population (Askew and Hubber) and half of all local literary journals are estimated to have collapsed in their first year of operation (Lurline 1). But there were hundreds of newspapers, and this thriving industry provided readers' main source of fiction: local and imported. In Australia in the 21st century, the National Library of Australia's *Trove* database hosts the largest open-access, mass-digitized collection of historical newspapers internationally.

This fortunate confluence of two technological systems (newspapers and mass-digitization) enabled the discovery of over 16,000 publications of novels, novellas and short stories in 19th century Australian newspapers. As well as dramatically increasing our record of literature in Australia and Australian literature, this body of works enables insights into the cosmopolitanism of the early Australian reading public (newspaper fiction came from around the world, including America, Austria, Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Holland, Hungary, and beyond). The resulting database of fiction (http://cdhrdatasys.anu.edu.au/tobecontinued/) also supports new understandings on the relationship between reception and the emergence of a national literary tradition.

With reference to this newspaper fiction project, this paper explores the opportunities and challenges for reading history presented by new mass-digitized collections, and the digital methods for analyzing them, including important issues of scale, modes of inquiry, and data sustainability: Is bigger always better in big data research, or is the situation more complex? What new data-rich methods are useful for reading history? And what happens to all this data when our projects finish? I also demonstrate how crowdsourcing has enabled the contemporary Australian reading public to engage with the fiction that formed and sustained their historical counterparts.

References

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