

# SOURCE CRITICISM IN THE DIGITAL AGE

ANCILLARY HISTORICAL SKILLS AS AN ESSENTIAL COMPETENCY  
FOR HISTORICAL SCHOLARSHIP AND ASSOCIATED DISCIPLINES.

**On 1 November 2015, Eva Schlotheuber, Institute of History, University of Düsseldorf, and Frank Bösch, Centre for Contemporary History, Potsdam, issued a call to action to all German historians via the [Historikerverband](#), highlighting the need to ring-fence “Grundwissenschaften”, fundamental historical skills. This is a debate which is of relevance beyond Germany, pertinent e.g. in the context of teaching Medieval Studies in the UK. The following is a translation of this call for action by Mary Boyle (Merton College, Oxford) for the ‘Teaching the Codex’ initiative ([@TeachingCodex](#))**

Here is what Eva Schlotheuber writes about the background for the debate: In Germany, a move to organise programmes of study on a modular basis has led to the virtual disappearance of academic source criticism from the university curriculum. As a result, a third of university chairs in the area of ancillary historical skills (palaeography, codicology, epigraphy etc) have been lost in recent decades. At the same time, however, there has been substantial financial and scholarly investment in the digitisation of archival and manuscript sources, largely thanks to the DFG (*Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft*), the main German research foundation. If, however, we are to make full use of this digitisation project, it is imperative that the gap in skills training is addressed, before we find ourselves facing a situation in which the Faculty also lacks the relevant expertise. Our aim is to begin a debate about the discipline’s scholarly foundations, culminating in a discussion at the *Historikertag* (the annual convention of all German historians) in Hamburg in September 2016.

**Join the debate below! What is your impression of German research in the humanities? What are its strengths, and potential points of contact? Is it time that we had a similar discussion in British universities?**

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## PRELIMINARY REMARK

The ability to decipher the written and material sources of the past, and to bring those findings to bear on one’s own questions, is an essential prerequisite for all historically informed disciplines – not just for the discipline of History itself, but for related subjects, from Philosophy to Modern Languages, Theology, History of Art and Legal History. The ability to reach independent conclusions, and to make scholarly evaluations of original source material (source criticism) marks the essential difference between an interest in history and scholarly research.

## PRE-MODERN SOURCES

Courses in ancillary historical skills are responsible for teaching palaeography, codicology, epigraphy, diplomacy, numismatics, record-keeping, heraldry, and sigillography, and yet they are currently disappearing from the German university landscape. Between 1997 and 2011, the discipline lost a third of its university chairs. The situation has been worsened by the simultaneous reduction of courses offered in Medieval Latin, which have traditionally included the necessary fundamental training in palaeography, codicology, and history of the book.

There is therefore a danger that this decline in basic knowledge and skills amongst students will eventually be reflected to such an extent in the Faculty that it will become impossible to access and assess the cultural heritage of the past. The skills necessary to read and categorise medieval and early modern – and even early twentieth-century – manuscripts and records, not to mention classical or medieval inscriptions, texts or papyri, have almost disappeared at many universities. Only a few universities still offer regular courses in ancillary historical skills. Once it was one of Germany's most renowned academic disciplines, and countless international researchers were drawn to German institutions because of its reputation. Classical and digital editorial techniques, as well as methods of source criticism, were developed within the framework of the great editions of primary sources (*Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, *Inscriptiones Graecae*, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*) and these have set a global standard. Even today, where these skills are firmly rooted, and where they can be passed on to the next generation of scholars, they continue to have an international influence. In the field of medieval and early modern manuscript studies, German research is also of exemplary quality, thanks to decades of assistance from the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft* (German Research Council). In this way, important historical source materials are still being made systematically available for further research. This, however, is a resource which can only be tapped if future generations of scholars have the relevant skills.

## MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY SOURCES

In addition to the problems of interpreting pre-modern sources, new challenges have arisen in the field of contemporary history, where it is equally necessary to have an in-depth understanding of critical approaches to both media and source materials.

Firstly, the statistical mapping of society and the rise of the social sciences have meant that historians increasingly have to work with the results of complex assemblages of data, without being able to fully understand the origins of that data. If they are to avoid interpreting these results naively, they will need to understand the relevant methods of data collection.

Secondly, visual, audio, and audio-visual sources are key resources in the history of the twentieth century, and yet historians have not thus far been adequately trained in their analysis. Digital mass archives (newspapers, for example) represent a new methodological challenge. It is therefore essential to teach the basic tools for the analysis of media as ancillary historical skills.

Thirdly, historical research is no longer primarily nationally focused. Its increasingly global perspective demands a type of source analysis which goes far beyond classical document formats. Specific methods of contemporary historical research, such as oral history, carry new weight, as do skills relating to research into intercultural communication, if we are to attempt to interpret digital records with a global circulation.

## THE CONSEQUENCES OF A LACK OF FUNDAMENTAL SKILLS

The DFG is currently preparing a systematic Open Access digitisation of original historical sources in two pilot phases. This is a combined effort on the part of libraries and archives, requiring substantial financial investment. Accordingly, a significant proportion of the funds earmarked for historical research and discipline-specific information systems will be spent on the digitisation scheme and on modern administrative systems for the digital copies created. This is to be welcomed, and indeed is in the interests of German historical scholarship, which is exceptionally open to the challenges of the digital era. However, this useful investment will fail to fulfil its potential if members of the academic community gradually lose the skills necessary to investigate this large and increasingly accessible cultural heritage resource adequately, and make fruitful use of it in their own research. It is imperative that the investment is backed up by the embedding of ancillary historical skills, preferably in all faculties of history which systematically teach the skills required for academic work with historical materials and, additionally, specialist digital skills. This is equally true for source-based philological work and for other historically-orientated disciplines whose specific approaches to cultural heritage needs to be represented in academic training.

Universities do not adequately recognise the problem that, on the one hand, a type of knowledge is being lost which will be difficult to re-establish later, and that on the other hand, no skills are being taught to enable our discipline to meet the demands of the digital world. Both are necessary today, and of interest both to current students and to future generations of scholars. Workshops and summer schools in which students have the opportunity to work with original source materials are just as attractive and in demand as those in which digital skills are transmitted. But these summer schools can never be a replacement for systematic training in fundamental skills. A move in this direction – to phase out fundamental skills training, rather than to expand it – risks two major problems:

Firstly, that German research will lose its link to Anglo-American research, which, with regard to fundamental skills, is currently aligned with Germany and Austria's still outstanding research tradition, but has at the same time expanded specialist digital skills.

Secondly, the dramatic drop in fundamental research skills threatens a situation in which the compatibility of university research with cultural heritage institutions like libraries, archives and museums would be completely lost. Significant numbers of these institutions rely on universities to provide a comprehensive education for their young researchers in the handling and use of their holdings.

## INTEGRATION OF DIGITAL HUMANITIES

Fundamental historical training transmits the basic and necessary skills to investigate our cultural heritage, and to make it useful for our own time. They are as vital in collections and museums, in archives and in libraries, as the ability to explore the possibilities and new horizons offered by Digital Humanities adequately. Only through an integration with Digital Humanities can that crucial synergy develop; only in this way can its findings be taken up in scholarly discourse, different perspectives examined and its possibilities be fruitful in a variety of contexts. Collaboration and synergy between university and non-university institutions has in the past been no small part of the appeal of German research institutions, and has contributed to the international renown of German scholarship in this field. If digitisation can make our cultural

heritage available to a broad scholarly and non-scholarly audience, then it is of even more concern to historians that the skills necessary to deal with this heritage properly are not lost, and that they can be acquired by future generations.

## CONCLUSION

The 'digital revolution' therefore requires enhanced skills, as much in classical source criticism as in media studies. The free availability of original historical sources through Open Access must be accompanied by an increase in the critical understanding of sources and media by current and future users. Only in this way can academic standards be maintained in the long run, and the findings of German researchers stand up internationally. Teaching these skills is a fundamental part of the remit of a university education in history. Historical institutes and faculties do not currently have the resources for this ever-expanding task which, in the context of the digital revolution, is both topical and urgent. We call upon the discipline, the universities, and politicians, to look for new solutions.

## AT A GLANCE:

- Ancillary historical skills comprise the ability to decode original written and material sources of the past, and to bring those findings to bear on one's own research
- Ancillary historical skills are relevant to pre-modern, modern and contemporary sources, as well to their digitised forms.
- The 'digital revolution' requires these skills to be developed to a greater level in both classical source criticism and the critical understanding of the media.
- Only if these skills are firmly rooted in history teaching programmes will it be possible to save German research from an imminent loss of competence and reputation.

Discuss new solutions (in German or English) with us at → <http://www.hsozkult.de/> or on our blog → [blog.historikerverband.de!](http://blog.historikerverband.de/)

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