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Drew VandeCreek

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"Webs of Significance": The Abraham Lincoln Historical Digitization Project, New Technology, and the Democratization of History

Drew VandeCreek <C60DEV1_at_wpo_dot_cso_dot_niu_dot_edu>, Northern Illinois University Libraries

Abstract

Lincoln/Net (<http://lincoln.lib.niu.edu>), a product of the Abraham Lincoln Historical Digitization Project at Northern Illinois University Libraries, represents a new type of historically oriented digital library resource. Like many other digital libraries, it contains a large amount of searchable primary source materials. Like a number of other historically oriented online resources, project staff have organized Lincoln/Net around a specific topic, in this case Abraham Lincoln's life and times in antebellum Illinois. In addition to Lincoln's own papers, the project's databases contain resources shedding light on his context, including letters, diaries, and publications prepared by his peers. Unlike most historically oriented digital libraries however, the project Web site also includes a wealth of multimedia materials, including image, sound, video, and interactive map resources. But Lincoln/Net is perhaps most unique in that it furnishes its users with an extensive set of interpretive materials. This approach suggests that historians may play an expanding role in the development of digital libraries. It can also provide them with a badly-needed means of communicating with an audience beyond their own scholarly community and students. This communication can facilitate what one digital history pioneer has described as the "democratization of history," as defined by an expanded user group enjoying primary source materials and using them to engage in historical thinking [Ayers 1999, 1].

Lincoln/Net (<http://lincoln.lib.niu.edu>), a product of the Abraham Lincoln Historical Digitization Project at Northern Illinois University Libraries, represents a new type of historically oriented digital library resource. Like many other digital libraries, it contains a large amount of searchable primary source materials. Like a number of other historically oriented online resources, project staff have organized Lincoln/Net around a specific topic, in this case Abraham Lincoln's life and times in antebellum Illinois. In addition to Lincoln's own papers, the project's databases contain resources shedding light on his context, including letters, diaries, and publications prepared by his peers. Unlike most historically oriented digital libraries however, the project Web site also includes a wealth of multimedia materials, including image, sound, video, and interactive map resources. But Lincoln/Net is perhaps most unique in that it furnishes its users with an extensive set of interpretive materials. This approach suggests that historians may play an expanding role in the development of digital libraries. It can also provide them with a badly-needed means of communicating with an audience beyond their own scholarly community and students. This communication can facilitate what one digital history pioneer has described as the "democratization of history," as defined by an expanded user group enjoying primary source materials and using them to engage in historical thinking [Ayers 1999, 1].

A number of pioneering historians have developed online historical materials. Edward L. Ayers, developer of the award-winning The Valley of the Shadow Project (<http://valley.vcdh.virginia.edu>), has argued that "history may be better suited to digital technology than any other humanistic discipline." Nevertheless, he notes that "the great democratization of history over the last few decades has not been accompanied by a democratization of audience." The rise of scholarship examining "a diversity of populations, topics and approaches in ways unimagined a few generations ago" has often left the academy "disconnected from the desires of the

general reading public." He muses that "perhaps the tools of the digital world can help us out of this lull." Lincoln/Net suggests how historians may indeed address this lull by building on the foundation of online resources that librarians have fashioned [Ayers 1999, 1–2].^[1]

Despite historians' prominent roles in the development of several well-known digital library projects, librarians have been prime movers in the development of online historical resources featuring primary source materials. Since the mid-1990s, they have used the World Wide Web, digital media formats, and database technology to provide a dramatically expanded public with an opportunity to consult books, manuscripts, and other resources long restricted in their use due to their rarity and fragility. Historically oriented digital libraries, most developed by college, university, and other research libraries, have been a boon to these institutions' core users: scholars, teachers, and students. These patrons readily grasp the context in which historical actors produced and collected primary source materials—scholars from a career's reading in the secondary literature and students from their course of instruction. But members of the general public often find digital library materials, in spite of their ready availability online, inaccessible in another sense. Lacking a knowledge of historical context and interpretation, they find little meaning or significance in primary source materials' discussion of events and controversies from the past. Only historians can provide this overlooked user group with the additional resources that they need to perceive and enjoy historical source materials.

3

Historians have yet to integrate much of their professional expertise into the digital libraries they produce. Many, like Ayers' Valley of the Shadow, have facilitated the use of digital libraries by collecting materials pertaining to a specific place, period, or historical episode. But these resources largely stem from an idea originally developed by librarians, the idea of "access". One leading librarian has defined access as a patron's "freedom or ability to obtain or make use of" library resources [Borgman 2000, 53], and to date historically oriented digital libraries have afforded a dramatically expanded number of users with this benefit. But they provide their users with only a fraction of what historians have to share, namely the perceptions and debates unique to their discipline. For generations most historians have made the dissemination of their special knowledge a part of their work. A significant portion of the work that historians do outside the research arena consists of providing concise and polished accounts of interpretations that fellow scholars agree upon, or, as importantly, argue about, to non-specialist audiences. In classrooms, exhibits, and public programs alike, scholars labor to share historical interpretations with audiences. Yet these summaries remain largely absent on the free-use World Wide Web. Providing Web users with this knowledge, juxtaposed to the primary source materials upon which historians based their conclusions and debates, represents a large step forward in the democratization of history.

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In recent years a number of leading historians have remarked upon their profession's seemingly increasing detachment from public discourse. In 1986 Thomas Bender worried about "the declining significance of history in the general intellectual culture of our time" [Bender 1986, 120]. Eight years later he argued that "Professional historians are becoming increasingly isolated from the general public and writing primarily for other historians" [Bender 1994, 997]. In 1997 Joyce Appleby, in her capacity as president of the American Historical Association, insisted that, in addition to their scholarly work, professional historians have a responsibility to promote a better public understanding of how they go about the work of exploring and analyzing the past. She urged historians to "seek every possible opportunity to talk to a non-historian...about how history is produced" [Britton 1997, 23]. Douglas Greenberg scored "academic contempt for the public" and added that American historians faced an obligation to give the public the resources necessary to make interpretations of the past that "resonate with their own lives" [Greenberg 1998, 304]. Although primary source materials represented a significant component of these necessary resources, Greenberg emphasized that they also included "the best work that professional historians are capable of producing" [Greenberg 1998, 304]. A slowly increasing number of historians have begun to appear in documentary films and other public programs, and even on the World Wide Web. But many scholars do not seem to grasp how the World Wide Web can help them to reach the general public in new ways.

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Over seventy years ago Carl Becker dubbed "Everyman His Own Historian" in an address to the American Historical Association. In it Becker called for a "living history" that would provide members of a broad audience with a sense of meaning and identity, rather than a history "that lies inert in unread books" and "does no work in the world". Even as his colleagues built a professional edifice around the goals of objectivity, Becker argued that history was "an imaginative creation, a personal possession which each one of us... fashions out of his individual experience" [Woods 1995, 1111]. Recent technological developments have helped Becker's vision come to fruition in ways that may discomfit many historians. A brief review of some historical materials available on the World Wide Web suggests that the rise of new technologies have helped individuals and groups lacking historical training to bring materials, often of dubious value, to a significant audience. If professional historians do not bring their ideas and interpretations to the free-use World Wide Web, this new generation of digital entrepreneurs will provide Web users with a variety of historical resources largely unsupported by their discipline's standards and discourse. As increasing numbers of individuals turn to the World Wide Web as their reference tool of choice, this situation can only exacerbate historians' isolation and irrelevance in public discourse.

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II

The Abraham Lincoln Historical Digitization Project builds upon the tradition initiated by the Library of Congress' American Memory Project (<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/index.html>), the Valley of the Shadow Project, and other successful digital libraries and online archives. It began in 1998 as a partnership in which a number of Illinois institutions, including museums, archives, and research and academic libraries, sought to share historical materials with the public. With the advent of the Internet and World Wide Web, representatives of these institutions met in the forum provided by a statewide library consortium to discuss potential ways in which they might use the new technologies to produce a digital library site combining materials from each of their collections. The subject of Abraham Lincoln quickly came to the surface. While the Library of Congress and National Archives hold large collections of Lincoln's presidential materials, resources from his life before the presidency remain scattered throughout the collections of individual libraries, museums, archives, and private individuals. Among these many collectors, Illinois institutions boasted some of the largest and most coherent collections of pre-presidential Lincolniana. The librarians and archivists planning the Abraham Lincoln Historical Digitization Project thus focused their attention upon this period of Lincoln's life, much of which of course took place in Illinois itself. United in a single World Wide Web site, these materials could prove extremely useful to a variety of audiences.^[2]

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Upon beginning work as Project Director in 1998, the author of this article brought an historian's perspective to a project facing several immediate challenges. While over a century of scholarship and study suggested that a large audience existed for online versions of Lincoln's letters, speeches, and other writings, these materials had been gathered and published as the *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, and were soon to be presented on the World Wide Web by another organization. A number of project planners had also suggested the digitization of large collections of materials created after Lincoln's death as parts of celebrated, subsequent, research projects or the larger cultural work of mythologizing a martyr president. But thanks to a large grant provided by the Illinois State Library (as agent for the Institute for Museum and Library Services), the project enjoyed an opportunity to grow in scope. In place of the official *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, staff members identified an earlier compilation of Lincoln's works, prepared by his personal secretaries in the late nineteenth century and therefore in the public domain [Hay and Nicolay 1894]. These provided a core comprising Lincoln's writings and speeches. But the institutions collaborating in the project held collections containing far more than materials directly linked to Lincoln himself. Together they boasted extensive resources shedding light upon society and politics in Lincoln's era, the context in which he lived. These materials provided the project with an opportunity to use Lincoln's renown and high public standing to attract a public audience to a wide-ranging digital library. They also provided an interpretive framework that might make these materials more intelligible and attractive to novice users.

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Abraham Lincoln clearly represents a popular, even iconic, figure in American history. The opportunity to reach a significant non-scholarly audience presented itself. But Lincoln's iconic stature did not begin with his assassination, or even his election to the presidency. During the heated campaign of 1860, Republican Party managers identified Lincoln, as yet largely unknown outside of his native Northwest, as a "rail splitter," a "representative man" [Hinton 1860, 125] who shared experiences with many average Americans. Like many of his countrymen, Lincoln had moved west with his family in search of a better life. He had worked with his hands on farms, steered keelboats down the Mississippi, and fought in an Indian War. He could boast of very little formal education, and had failed in a number of occupations before finding that his talents suited the practice of law. As a politician he had lost more elections than he had won, but now had gained another opportunity to seize the main chance. When Republican leaders chose to identify Abraham Lincoln as a representative man, they hoped that he would serve as a lens through which Americans, or at least non-slaveholding Americans, might see themselves.

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Likewise, Abraham Lincoln serves as a lens through which today's World Wide Web users may examine and interpret the past, and thus provides the Lincoln/Net site with an interpretive framework. His life experiences shed light upon significant themes that historians have developed in their discussion of the antebellum period. Lincoln's early struggles illuminate the realm of economic development and labor in this period, and his role in the 1832 Black Hawk Indian War temporarily placed him at the center of the unfolding tragedy in which American settlers removed Native Americans from their lands. Lincoln's subsequent legal career brings issues of law and society to the forefront, and his well-known political activities outline the rise and fall of the Second Party System, including the genesis and development of Whig and Democratic political cultures in this period. Much of Lincoln's political activities came to focus on the conflict over African-American slavery and, hence, race relations. Like many other Americans, Lincoln confronted the period's evangelical religion and made his peace with it. Like many other American men, our sixteenth president married, raised a family, and wrestled with the nineteenth century's rapidly changing gender roles.

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The Lincoln/Net World Wide Web site's searchable databases and interpretive materials provide users with over thirty million words of searchable text, more than 3000 images, and over 100 sound and 100 video files. In keeping with the idea of Abraham Lincoln as a lens through which users may examine and explore his context in antebellum society and politics, project staff members have added a wealth of materials created by, and describing, his contemporaries to the project's collection of Lincoln materials. Project users may explore texts including antebellum Illinoisans' letters, diaries, and formal publications, stored in a database system, through the use of the PhiloLogic software suite. Developed by the University of Chicago's ARTFL Project and the University of Chicago Libraries' Electronic Text Services Division, PhiloLogic facilitates user searching by author, title, date, and genre, as well as familiar string searches. In addition, project users may explore subsets of texts corresponding in content with each of the project's eight themes. Project staff members and workers have marked these texts up in a scheme

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compliant with TEI Lite that also uses customized Dublin Core headers to identify resources by the above categories.

Project image materials include maps, engravings, and early photographs, available through a MySQL database using the PHP scripting language. Project staff members and collaborators have also used digitized period song books to record performances of selected songs. These sound files are available in RealAudio format on the Lincoln/Net Web site. They present students and lifetime learners who find musical materials particularly instructive with a rich resource. They also provide an audience increasingly comprised of individuals familiar with, and expecting to find, online multimedia materials with the materials they seek. These song books also tell us something about Abraham Lincoln's context, and digital libraries' potential for illuminating the past. Historians of American society and politics have largely ignored nineteenth century song books as worthwhile source materials. But these publications played significant roles in each. Available in increasing numbers thanks to dramatic advances in printing technology, antebellum song books shaped many Americans' leisure time, time often spent today with radio, television, or video games. They also served as important levers for cultural work. Singing of course played a major role in religious services, as hymns placed religious doctrine in a participatory format contrasting with the Bible's text or a minister's spoken word. While a fair share of song books disseminated popular ditties, many others mirrored hymnals by setting powerful normative arguments to music. These included publications echoing the period's popular advice literature, such as the *Young Lady's Songster*, as well as song books devoted to temperance and other reform programs [*Young Lady's Songster* 1850]. Indeed, singing came to assume important roles in politics, both cultural and electoral, in the antebellum era. New technology provides an opportunity to recreate these important resources for today's audience.

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The Lincoln/Net site also features dynamic historical maps generated by Geographic Information Systems (GIS) technology. GIS maps provide project users with an opportunity to explore another type of historical resource: statistical data gathered by censuses or latter-day social scientists. At the same time that librarians and humanities scholars developed online digital libraries filled with searchable databases of texts, images, sound files, and video files, geographers and their collaborators in the world of systems analysts and computer programmers developed Geographic Information Systems. GIS provides an opportunity for its users to examine and analyze spatially-oriented materials in dynamic new ways. It manages and displays map information in a database environment that enables its users to submit queries, which in turn instruct the GIS software to create maps depicting only the types, or "layers," of information that the user has requested. For example, a GIS user may request a map of a region representing its railroad network, on a specific date, alone, without the clutter created by other types of information. That user might also ask GIS technology to render a map depicting the railroad network as well as results from the United States Census for a particular year, rendered to represent population density, for example. This map might facilitate preliminary research on the relationship between railroad development and economic development. The ability to isolate, depict, and overlay these layers of information makes GIS a formidable tool for the integration and analysis of a wide variety of data, and provides individual GIS users with a flexibility that facilitates inquiry and research. ^[3]

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In the years immediately following its introduction in the early 1990s, GIS users employed stand-alone computer workstations to tap databases and generate dynamic map resources. This state of affairs largely restricted usage of the technology's dynamic data layering and map generation capacities to professional geographers, university professors and their students, and employees of well-funded business concerns and government agencies. But by the late 1990s GIS developers and vendors had adapted their technology for ready use on the World Wide Web in the form of products such as Environmental Systems Research Institute (ESRI)'s ArcIMS. This development places Geographic Information Systems' considerable analytical power within the reach of a much larger audience, including, potentially, the users of online digital libraries. Much like digital libraries use metadata and full-text string searching to make text, image, sound, and video materials both accessible and subject to manipulation and analysis for a dramatically expanded audience, Geographic Information Systems unlock the potential of spatially-oriented data.

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In addition to large, searchable databases of historical materials shedding light upon Abraham Lincoln and his context in society and politics during his pre-presidential years, the Lincoln/Net World Wide Web site features interpretive materials discussing Lincoln and these contexts. A brief, original Lincoln biography places local and national events in a temporal context. Original interpretive essays using episodes from Lincoln's life also present a public audience with an overview of the literature in each of eight fields: Frontier Settlement, Economic Development and Labor; Native American Relations; Law and Society; Political Development; African-Americans and White Americans' Racial Attitudes; Religion and Culture; and Women's Experience and Gender Roles. Lincoln/Net also features streaming video files in which leading historians discuss episodes in Lincoln's life as they relate to major themes in their scholarly publications.

15

Lincoln/Net's interpretive materials, prepared by project staff members and other scholars, provide project users with an opportunity to locate primary source materials in what one scholar has called "webs of significance." Over thirty years ago the influential sociologist Clifford Geertz argued "that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun. I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning" [Geertz 1973, 5].^[4] These webs run through and envelop the primary sources at several levels. In one sense, Lincoln and other individuals and groups in his era created webs with their discussions of their lives and surroundings. These webs emerge in the primary sources

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featured in the project databases. The traditions and discourses in which historians have analyzed and discussed these sources and what they may reveal represent webs of significance as well. In their work scholars have produced an interlocking and overlapping set of texts and spoken-word events, many referring to each other, that enable their audience to imagine the past in specific ways.

Historians' interpretive work situates historical actors and the materials that they created within these webs by emphasizing different portions of the historical record and explicating selected aspects of the actors' experience. Individual works may analyze actions and events with special emphasis upon the social, or the cultural, or the political context in which they took place, and frame their argument and methodology through a discussion of works in this field. Scholars interested in different aspects of historical experience often find meaning in, and highlight, divergent portions of the source materials. For example, American historians who introduced a new focus on social history in the 1970s identified and worked with a very different set of source materials from their predecessors. The political, intellectual, and diplomatic historians who had dominated the discipline in previous decades largely drew upon state papers and the work of well-known intellectuals and policy-makers. The new generation of social historians dug into records, long considered largely insignificant, that shed light upon the lives of minorities, working people, and women. They also employed quantitative techniques drawing upon census returns and other statistics. By the 1990s another generation of scholars had begun to explore the connections between society and politics in light of the new social history.

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These structures provide World Wide Web users with a variety of interpretations of historical materials, and ask them to weigh the available evidence in order to assess their persuasive power. But these interpretive schemes need not be mutually exclusive. The Web enables librarians, historians, and other collaborators to present what Janet Murray has called "the kaleidoscopic canvas that can capture the world as it looks from many perspectives — complex and perhaps ultimately unknowable but still coherent" [Murray 1997, 162]. Online historical resources composed of digital library materials selected to illuminate specific aspects of historical experience, matched with historians' interpretations of these problems or themes, offer the possibility of fulfilling the new technologies' democratic promise by prompting World Wide Web users to become their own historians. Ayers' student, colleague, and collaborator William G. Thomas, III places this goal at the center of digital historians' agenda when he notes that "We...are trying to democratize history with our projects." As he puts it, "We want to give students and others access to the materials of the past, allowing them to engage in the process of doing history..." [Thomas 1999].

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This democratizing initiative traces its roots back to at least two major movements in the historical profession. First, public historians, or those historians working outside of academia in museums, historic sites, or other public forums, argue that they seek to enable their patrons to think historically, to explore the complexity and contingency of change over time. In 1978 Robert Kelley, a leader in establishing the nation's first public history program at the University of California, Santa Barbara, argued that his students brought "the historical method" to the public [Kelley 1978, 17]. Another public historian has argued that he and his colleagues can help laymen "learn to participate in the research process" [Cole 1994, 11]. At the very least, they share "the basic goal of encouraging people to think about the past for themselves" (Karamanski, quoted in Cole 1994, 17). Public historians' exhibits and programs have realized these goals in that they have brought selected primary source materials and artifacts, framed by scholars' interpretations in broad outline, to public audiences [Cole 1994, 17].

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Second, historians concerned with classroom education have promoted an ideal of "active learning" using primary source materials. Deanne Shiroma has summarized this line of thinking by arguing that "As students work with primary sources, they have the opportunity to do more than just absorb information; they can also analyze, evaluate, recognize bias and contradiction, and weigh the significance of evidence presented by the source" [Shiroma, 1]. Randy Bass and Roy Rosenzweig add that "The analysis of primary sources, and the structured inquiry learning process that is often used in such examinations, are widely recognized as essential steps in building student interest in history and culture and helping them understand the ways that scholars engage in research, study, and interpretation" [Bass and Rosenzweig 1999, 29]. They go on to add that "virtually all versions of the national standards for social studies and history" call for the use of primary source materials in an active learning environment [Bass and Rosenzweig 1999, 29].

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Digital materials built around librarians' concept of access thrive in institutional settings like schools, colleges, and universities, where students can bring knowledge gained through classroom instruction and reading lists to bear in the crucial formulation of their queries. This intellectual capital, amplified through teachers' workshops and the other professional development events, greatly facilitates students' becoming their own historians. But members of the general public using the World Wide Web for educational purposes, or "lifetime learners," usually encounter an online archive in far different circumstances, and with quite different needs, than student groups. Unlike enrolled students, these individuals and groups usually lack any recourse to instruction or other forms of historical expertise that may inform their exploration of a digital library. The more diligent and/or ambitious among them may find a wealth of stimulating materials on the Valley of the Shadow Project World Wide Web site, but they will largely rely upon their own interests, formed from personal experience, to guide their database queries. Some may employ historical training they received in high school or college classrooms. But many others will shy away, intimidated, from its mass of data. One reviewer of the Valley of the Shadow Project World Wide Web site noted that it fails "to outline conceptual frameworks through which a user might approach the archive" [Brown 2001, 210]. Another remarked that "To get much out of...the Web site...users must have a prior notion of what kind of information they are looking for" [Kornblith 2001]. As the historian Roy Rosenzweig has concluded, "While digital collections may put 'the novice in the archive', he or she is not so likely

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to know what to do there" [Kornblith 2001, 16].

Lincoln/Net's interpretive resources provide Web users, and especially lifetime learners, with a new level of access to primary source materials, complementing the "freedom or ability to obtain or make use of" them. The Oxford English Dictionary suggests other aspects to the concept of accessibility. It defines "accessible" as "able to be (readily) understood or appreciated." In order to enable users outside the educational community to understand and appreciate their collected materials, Lincoln/Net furnishes its users with more than the opportunity to examine excellent digital reproductions of primary source materials, or even a metadata scheme reflecting the state of academic discourse. It also provides users with accounts and summaries of this discourse itself, laying out both the events that they discuss and scholars' various interpretations of them. A new generation of online historical resources, matching historians' ability to frame and pose historical questions and debates with digital libraries' new technologies, can make historical materials more fully accessible to the general public. Armed with these tools, members of the public can begin to "engage in the process of doing history."

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Professional historians may instinctively recoil from presenting members of the general public with such a custom made opportunity to comb over their research methods and findings as an affront to their authority. But historians must surely believe that in the vast majority of cases this phenomenon will serve to buttress that authority by demonstrating historians' judicious use of the evidence. By injecting themselves into the rapidly widening historical forum that the World Wide Web represents, historians can win new significance in the formation of public historical consciousness, and contribute to the general public's ability to come to understandings of the past fashioned from their individual experience. These understandings will serve to bridge the gap between scholars' interpretations, long available only in monograph or article format, and the literate public. Developed from their own analysis of primary source materials and evaluations of scholars' interpretations, they may also provide individuals with the sense of meaning and identity that Becker sought.

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III

If Lincoln/Net represents a departure from digital archives and libraries featuring primary sources alone, it also diverges from the vast majority of other World Wide Web sites providing historical interpretation. With the rise of the Web a new generation of online entrepreneurs rushed to furnish its users with a wide variety of online resources on which advertising might appear. As is the case in a number of other disciplines and subjects, these Web sites have become for many Americans a principal source of information. Today many students, lifelong learners, and other members of the public turn to the World Wide Web or, more specifically, the ubiquitous Google search engine, for a wide variety of data and interpretation. Recent research in library science shows that "Google, or similar web search engines, is the information finding tool of first choice for many users - far ahead of proprietary online services or libraries and light years ahead of print sources" [Tenopir 2004, 30]. One educator allowed that "Our librarians are fully aware that Google is our students', our faculty's, and sometimes our own first choice to find information.... Everyone starts with Google except librarians" [Minkel 2003, 37]. Google provides its users with lists of Web materials in response to words, terms, or phrases that they have typed into its search interface, ranking these materials' potential usefulness principally by two criteria: their total number of users, and the number of times that other Web pages have provided links to them. World Wide Web sites that appear among Google's first responses to a simple, broad query appear there because they have received significant attention on the Web. Their position on the crucial first page, or even first several pages, of Google's retrievals will of course contribute to their continued popularity. ^[5]

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World Wide Web users employing general terms like "American History", "Civil War", and "Woman Suffrage", can unearth a diverse collection of resources comprised in part of online digital libraries produced by academic and historical institutions. These searches more readily direct users to a set of materials produced by individuals and business enterprises outside the library, historical, and archival professions, however. Some of these Web sites mix a smattering of digitized primary source materials and interpretation with advertising and promotional materials and a plethora of links to other, similar sites. Many contain no primary sources at all. Librarians and historians have noted that these sites present users with the challenge of assessing their reliability. But they are attracting far more online visitors than digital libraries governed by professional standards. ^[6]

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A review of a number of these Web sites provides a snapshot of professional historians' relative standing on the World Wide Web today. In response to a search for materials pertaining to "American History", Google produced a list topped by <http://americanhistory.about.com>. The larger About.com Web site contains the following welcome:

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Each month more than 20 million people visit About.com. Whether it be home repair and decorating ideas, recipes, movie trailers, or car buying tips, our Guides offer practical advice and solutions for every day life.

About.com developers go on to describe their approach to distributing content:

About.com was founded in 1997 with the simple premise, that people are the best Guides to the Internet...Today, when you read an article on About.com, you are tapping into a powerful network of 475 Guides — smart, passionate, accomplished people who are experts in their field... [About.com]

About.com's top-ranked American History page features an introductory statement from Martin Kelly, "your Guide to American History." A summary of Kelly's qualifications reveals that he holds a B.A. and M.A. from the University of Florida. He has worked as a secondary school Social Studies teacher for eight years and is currently at work on the Advanced Placement American History Course for the Florida Online High School. Mr. Kelly is clearly a credentialed and industrious educator. But the Web site that he administers quickly reveals clear signs of its place within a larger media conglomerate.^[7]

The About.com American History site itself attempts to provide coverage of a wide variety of periods and themes, but lacks a comprehensive organizational scheme. A brief investigation of available materials reveals that the site principally provides a series of links to other online historical resources, some hosted by universities and colleges. A few contain primary source materials. A click on the link entitled "Wars and Diplomacy" produces a list of three recommended resources, including "Top American History War Movies," apparently selected by Mr. Kelly. A click on "Government and Politics" yields a list of two resources: "Political Humor" and "U.S. Government Information and Resources." The list of "Political Humor" materials emphasizes current events, leading with a story entitled "Video makers famous for filming women flashing their breasts plan to donate revenues from 'Girls Gone Wild' episodes tied to Mardi Gras to help Hurricane Katrina victims, CNN reports." About.com developers clearly try to repackage existing Web resources, including current events journalism, as historical materials. But, perhaps more significantly, they find no place for professional historians. Neither the About.com site, nor any Web site to which it provided a link, featured the work of a professional historian, either in selecting materials or interpreting them [About.com].

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The HistoryNet.com and U-s-history.com also appeared in the top ten responses to a search for American History. The HistoryNet.com site boasts that it delivers "the deepest and broadest collection of articles from leading writers and historians, accessible to novices and students as well as experts." A review of available materials reveals that the Primedia History Group, "the world's largest publisher of history magazines" provides TheHistoryNet "with a steady flow of high-quality editorial content and the authoritative input of editors who are among the leaders in their respective fields." A search for this content leads to a toolbar prominently displayed atop the HistoryNet.com page, which serves to direct users to a set of activities quite at odds with finding actual historical materials: "Subscribe, Renew, Shop, Classifieds, Forums, Book Reviews". Of these activities, "Forums" provides access to online web logs, each directly tied to a Primedia publication [HistoryNet.com 2006].

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The Historical Text Archive appeared at number nine on Google's list of materials. Its opening page announces "The HTA publishes high quality articles, books, essays, documents, historical photos, and links, screened for content, for a broad range of historical subjects" (<http://historicaltextarchive.com>, accessed September 22, 2005). Cutting directly to the chase, the HTA's front page also declares that it contains "682 articles, 68 books, and 5938 links." A review of a number of these materials reveals that the site attempts to provide materials pertaining to a dizzying array of historical themes and periods. Many of these articles consist of primary source materials, including Lincoln's Second Inaugural. They also include the work of professional historians, including Russell F. Weigley's "The Civil War as Fought in the West: Was It Different?", a detailed discussion supported by a wealth of footnotes. This document takes the form of a scholarly article or book chapter, yet appears without citation, again leading to questions about copyright infringement.

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However, the authority of the Historical Text Archive is compromised by its inclusion of materials which, though presented as part of the site's historical content (in sections entitled "Other History Articles" and "Informative Articles"), in fact serve to guide the user to commercially sponsored links. A review of these materials, listed under headings including "Black Lights" and "Cell Phones" shows a series of broadly informational discussions of these devices, framed by the same attractive graphics that accompany the site's primary sources and professional historians' interpretations — but including, in most cases, several links to commercial web sites selling the product in question. Many World Wide Web sites rely upon advertising revenue in order to make materials freely available to the public. Created by Donald F. Mabry, an historian and administrator at Mississippi State University, the Historical Text Archive represents the work of a professional historian, and it presents a significant amount of valuable historical materials. But the Archive's presentation of purportedly informational materials that in fact serve to introduce and direct its users to advertising sites badly undermines its credibility.

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Online historical materials thus run the gamut from the Library of Congress' impeccably documented, well-organized "American Memory" projects to TheHistoryNet's transparent attempts to market its paper publications. Somewhere in between lies Donald Mabry's attempts to support his Historical Text Archive through online advertising. Many American Memory collections feature largely bibliographical introductions presumably prepared by librarians. But well-funded, sophisticated digital libraries and home-made Web sites alike present American History to a vast public largely without scholars' queries, interpretations, and debates.

31

Professional historians cut a negligible profile on the World Wide Web. While most university and college students and faculty enjoy access to their monographs and articles in for-pay online formats, the rankings in Google search responses suggest that large numbers of individuals not attached to institutions of higher learning (and likely many who are) often make use of the variety of other online historical resources discussed above. While most historians have largely ignored the World Wide Web, the rise of new technologies has undermined long-standing structures and hierarchies of authority. Independent journalists and bloggers using the Web have caused untold headaches for political campaigns and, in the case of individuals discrediting Dan Rather's investigation of George W. Bush's National Guard service, humbled a major news organization [Friedman 2005, 93]. These developments have also leveled the playing field in the world of intellectual and cultural life. Digital technology and cheap, widely available home computers and scanners enable anyone with access to a library to digitize texts, images, and multimedia materials. The Web itself has allowed anyone with the ability to design a Web site and access to an Internet Service Provider to offer their ideas to the world. These individuals and groups include history enthusiasts and digital entrepreneurs who have provided the public with a new set of popular historical Web sites. In part because professional historians have produced so few online resources examining significant historical events, many laymen turn to these resources for their knowledge of the past. Lacking the command of historical details necessary to evaluate these sites' reliability, their users often consult resources that most historians would find highly dubious, at best. This unfolding technological and social dynamic challenges historians' authority in the public eye. It also obliges them to step forward and share their ideas and interpretations with the public.

IV

The rise of online digital libraries and archives like the Library of Congress' American Memory projects or the Valley of the Shadow Project has enabled scholars, educators, and students to explore primary source materials far more readily than ever before. Only a few years ago an individual found him or herself obliged to travel to a library or archive, and often a single, specific library or archive, in order to examine these sources. Today, the World Wide Web's expanding reach provides many of these individuals with an opportunity to examine these materials at their leisure. But high quality digital library projects reflect only a portion of new historical materials available on the World Wide Web. Many Americans make use of sites developed by amateurs or commercial concerns seeking to use historically oriented content to attract web users. Too often About.com, TheHistoryPlace.com, and other, similar resources provide shallow, unfocused, and undocumented collections of historically oriented materials. From a scholar's point of view, they do not provide significant educational resources. Their significance lies rather in the way that they have democratized history in a way quite unlike what Ayers and Thomas imagined. These materials' rapid emergence online have truly made "everyman his own historian." Carl Becker imagined laymen thinking about history in new ways that enabled them to relate scholars' accounts of past events to their own experiences and identity. Today everyman not only locates obscure historical documents on the World Wide Web; everyman produces his or her own historical Web site. These online resources illustrate the impact of the last decade's pervasive set of technological changes more fully than librarians', and a few prescient historians,' production of digital libraries.

33

Technology's pervasive democratization of history cuts against the grain of the historical profession's development. In the twentieth century historians defined themselves as professionals in part by largely removing themselves from public discourse. Moving away from the work of the nineteenth century's more literary historians, professionalizing scholars increasingly devoted themselves to a new ethos emphasizing objectivity, research, and the expansion of knowledge. This orientation led historians to produce articles, monographs, and book reviews speaking almost exclusively to a limited audience of fellow professionals. In an era marked by rapid technological changes, increasing functional specialization, and the rise of large bureaucracies, historians devoted themselves to establishing a hierarchy of what one scholar has called "sound opinion" [Haskell 1977, 239]. In the first half of the twentieth century, a period marked by considerable deference to experts, this approach gained historians considerable cultural authority. But in the postwar era Americans increasingly came to doubt and challenge their experts. A variety of factors, including the arrival of a generation of GI Bill students on college campuses and the United States' Cold War emphasis upon funding higher education, combined to convince historians that their disengagement from public discourse produced large rewards. But as politicians and taxpayers increasingly demanded that public universities educate more students with less state financial support, historians' isolation from the public became a liability. Today, historians increasingly find themselves obliged to prove their value to the public [Novick 1988].

34

The new technologies that have helped to produce an array of dubious historically oriented materials on the World Wide Web can contribute to democratizing history by taking up the challenges posed by Appleby, Greenberg and, ultimately, Becker. They can provide a vast public with a more complete set of historical materials, including both primary resources and historians' interpretations of them. Historians' concise descriptions and accounts of the circumstances in which individuals and groups created materials comprising the historical record can lay out a series of events allowing users to place individual source materials, and the events that they describe, in a temporal context. These accounts can also illuminate significant themes and arguments that have emerged from historians' evaluation of primary materials. Each of these interpretive elements provides digital library users with a framework within which they may begin to examine and assess elements of the historical record. These frameworks, or webs of significance, represent a new level of access to primary source materials, providing users with expanded ability to understand and appreciate them.

35

The World Wide Web provides an ideal platform for historians to reach out to a broad, public audience and show how their work pertains to, and enriches, Americans' lives. This approach represents an attempt to realize Thomas Bender's vision of a "civic professionalism." He argues that, in seeking to reach a public audience, "the point is not to displace the traditional scholarly question; rather we must think more clearly about its most fruitful relation to general education and the public world" [Bender 1994, 1001]. In 1994, when Bender wrote these words, he framed the effort to reach a public audience as largely a matter of achieving a new interpretive synthesis in written documents and other public pronouncements, like lectures. The World Wide Web's basic technology enables historians to set aside the thorny question of synthesis, at least for the time being. Rather, Web sites examining well-known public figures, episodes, or events can place historical materials in a light making them more attractive to the general public.

36

This is not to say that Web sites like Lincoln/Net simplify history. Like any relatively sophisticated Web site, Lincoln/Net can present a multiplicity of accounts and interpretations in parallel, enabling the user to draw his or her own conclusions or, in effect, create their own synthesis. As Janet H. Murray has argued,

37

We no longer believe in a single reality, a single integrating view of the world, or even the reliability of a single angle of perception. Yet we retain the core human desire to fix reality on one canvas, to express all of what we see in an integrated and shapely manner. [Murray

1997, 161]

Theoretical discussions of multiple perspectives can seem maddeningly abstract to members of the general public. But digital history resources focused on public figures like Lincoln, or similar topics, can furnish the public with a resource providing examples of divergent realities, as in the cases of different aspects of an individual's experience, or conflicting descriptions of single events. But these multiple realities may remain largely invisible to the uninitiated person using digital libraries containing only primary source materials. Only historians' participation in digital library projects, and especially their presentation of materials analyzing and interpreting primary sources, can begin to unpack these multiple perceptions, realities, and histories for a public audience. These webs of significance can help members of the public to begin exploring primary source materials for themselves and, ultimately, relate them to their own experience and identity.

If the Web represents an ideal environment for individuals' self-directed exploration of primary source materials, it also helps to facilitate historians' participation in the collaborative work necessary to produce these resources. Historians have benefited from the rise of digital libraries. Many have integrated large new sets of online primary resources into their teaching curricula. A farsighted few have explored new technologies' impact upon historical scholarship. But, to date, most academic historians have largely ignored these technologies' implications for their own roles in public life. In doing so, they have failed the American public. They have also failed their own self-interest. Academic historians can use the rapid technological changes that are shaping our society to demonstrate how their scholarship and debates relate to the general public and encourage critical thought - in other words, demonstrate their value to society. If they do not, they may soon confront significant portions of the American public relying on amateurs' undocumented online historical materials. They may also find themselves increasingly marginalized in their own universities and colleges as faculty members' ability to attract outside grant funding becomes an ever larger part of academic life. Finally, they may find themselves increasingly vulnerable to state officials' attempts to use new technologies, in the form of distance learning, to push scholars and critical thought farther to the margins in the world of higher education. A new, more democratic history is a part of historians' future, like it or not. Today they face the question: will they add their voices to this discussion?

38

Notes

[1]Ayers was among the first historians to explore this promise. With the help of Anne Rubin, William G. Thomas, and a team of lucky graduate students, Ayers built the Valley of the Shadow Project (<http://valley.vcdh.virginia.edu/>), a digital library that brought together materials that shed light on the Civil War experiences of two counties, one northern, one southern. The fact that all of these materials pertained to a common set of events made the Valley of the Shadow Project more intelligible than a less focused digital library. It also invited comparisons between northern and southern experiences. The project created a sensation, attracting favorable notice in national publications and sparking meaningful debate among historians [Ayers 1999, 1–2].

[2]I distinguish between materials that Lincoln wrote or otherwise created and other materials pertaining to his life and career, including campaign materials and commemorative objects created after his assassination.

[3]See [Delaney 1999]; [Haywood 1998]; [Cox and Gifford 1997].

[4]The author would like to thank Edward L. Ayers for introducing him to Clifford Geertz' concept of "webs of significance", although he believes that he has interpreted its importance in the development of online historical materials differently from Dr. Ayers.

[5]Also see [Ghaptery 2004]. For an analysis of how Google ranks web sites for its users, see [Zhao 2004]. For a discussion of how to assess online historical materials, see the Public History Resource Center's "Evaluating Web Sites" at <http://www.publichistory.org/evaluation/index2.html>.

[6]See [West 2003]; [Meulen 2003]; [Bates 2003].

[7] <http://www.about.com> identifies itself as a part of The New York Times Company.

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