

SourceLab (An Idea)

Improving the Web for History by Building Digital Publishing into Undergraduate Education

By John Randolph

Introduction: Has this Ever Happened to You?

So there's this film [someone posted](#) on YouTube in 2010.

By the summer of 2015, over 71,000 people had watched it. The [video](#) appears to be haunting, archival footage—a documentary? a newsreel?—of work in a Parisian studio, circa 1918. But this is no ordinary studio. Instead of making busts of famous poets or rich patrons, the artists are sculpting new faces for soldiers gruesomely mutilated by World War I.

Art, medicine, war, movies: this is the sort of source that makes connections, that shows the lived past in all its power and complexity. It's the kind of thing anyone who wants to explore real history would find meaningful: from classroom teachers to specialist researchers to the public at large. But there's a catch.

Like millions of [other](#) digitized historical [artifacts](#) now available on the Internet, we don't know enough about this film to really use it in scholarship, teaching, or public history. Who made this document, when, why—and for what audience? Is this digital copy authentic, has it been edited? Where is the original now, who owns it—how can we use it or cite it? Will it be there tomorrow? Brilliantly successful at providing access to new sources, the Web all too often serves them up stripped bare of the kinds of information people need to think about the past.

In the Fall of 2014, students, faculty, and staff in the [Department of History](#) at the University of Illinois began to imagine a new, student-centered model of publishing, that would help higher education address this basic flaw in how historical artifacts are often presented online.

We're calling this concept SourceLab. The idea is to build the traditional practice of documentary editing—along with newer, digital publishing techniques—back into history education, with benefits for both our students and society at large. Our hope is to train students to create reliable, critical, free editions of previously digitized material, so that they can prepare the Internet's new historical records for by use by anyone who wants to explore the past.

We're planning to publish these student-created editions in a new, department-based series, under the supervision of both specialist experts and a rigorous, independent editorial board. The goal is for students to earn two kinds of credit for their work: course credit they can apply to their degrees, and author credits they can add to their

resumés, to demonstrate their accomplishments after they graduate.

This online brochure describes these and other ideas behind SourceLab in more detail, as they exist today. But the first thing you need to know is that we're still getting going. We'd love to [hear](#) your thoughts, ideas and suggestions for how this might work. Follow the path below to learn more.

More About the Aims: History Education and the New Historical Record

The publication of historical sources was a traditional part of the historian's craft. Over time, however, this practice drifted out of undergraduate education in the US, with few departments making space in their curriculums for it. There were reasons for this. Documentary editing demands specialized skills and training. In a world where original sources were often physically inaccessible in far away archives—and the definition of what counted as a historical source was relatively narrow—leaving the practice to academic presses and professional scholars perhaps made sense. An instructor's main job was to select "the readings" and the student's main job was to read them.

But we no longer live in that world. The new historical record being created on the Web is transforming both the size and the nature of history's source base. Digitization makes inaccessible information suddenly accessible, objects multiply online by the second, and the kind of sources available is changing as fast as the number. Personal papers as well as official acts, archives of the intimate and the marginalized as well as the public and the privileged, images, sounds, movies as well as texts: whole new worlds of the past are being made available to explore. Neither scholarly presses nor professional researchers, it seems, can keep pace with the scale of these changes on their own.

That may be true, but it raises an obvious question. Why do we need a renewed attention to editing and publishing, if the Web is expanding all by itself and we can just read it? Isn't the [raw](#) availability of information provided by the Internet enough?

Not if we really care about the past. Because you can't write good history with bad sources. And a source whose origin, nature, importance and evolution over time you don't understand is the very definition of a bad source. You can't trust the judgements about the past you make from such artifacts, until you understand their own history better.

In effect, the Internet has provided a solution to one traditional goal of historical publishing—getting people access to sources they need to understand the past—while sidestepping or even ignoring another: getting these materials to people in a format that makes them compelling and reliable windows on history. And indeed, many instructors report that students are less interested in reading "the readings" than ever before: which if you think about it, only makes sense. In a world where history is everywhere and nowhere—and with a source base whose origin and nature are utterly unclear—why bother to think about any one thing systematically or seriously?

One way higher education can address this problem, it seems, is to build its resolution

back into the work we do in the classroom. The idea behind SourceLab is to build a new experimental space—a laboratory for the development of new modes of scholarly source publication—within the history undergraduate curriculum.

In some senses, this involves returning to older, editorial traditions of history instruction, largely abandoned in recent decades. At the same time, we'll also be taking advantage of digital publishing tools and platforms to make our web-based editions as useful and accessible to people interested in history as possible.

More about the Niche: How Does this Differ from Other Digital Publishing Initiatives?

Digital publishing has been developing for decades, reaching incredible scale with such [mass digitization](#) projects as [Hathi Trust](#), [Google Books](#), and [Eighteenth Century Collections Online](#). Thanks to long-term initiatives such as the [Internet History Sourcebooks Project](#) and [Digital History](#), online versions of historical sources are now integrated throughout US history teaching, in high schools, colleges, and universities. For-profit media companies such as Pearson respond to teacher demand by integrating such digital material into the textbooks they sell; the [Open Educational Resource](#) movement features them in its freely-distributed curricula.

All the same, it seems that an initiative such as SourceLab could occupy a distinctive niche within this rapidly evolving publishing world.

First, we aren't a mass digitization initiative (though we're very grateful to them). We aren't trying to place large amounts of new material up on the Web. Instead, we hope to make exciting new materials already digitized by others—such as "Red Cross Work on Mutilés (1918)," as our film is formally known—ready for historical work. Using new digital platforms such as Scalar (on which this brochure was made), we'll build our editions as 'frames' around resources that already exist online, making sure students and researchers have what they need to use them.

Second, our editions will be built with their use as historical sources specifically in mind. Since our goal isn't just to 'get it out there,' but to get things ready for history, making our sources available in just any old form isn't enough. We'll provide readers with basic information and scholarly commentary about each artifact, clarifying its origins, evolution, meaning over time and current location. We'll establish each source's copyright status, and include guidance as to how it should be cited in both teaching and research. We'll also provide our editions in multiple formats, to cater to different uses and preferences. Want a paper copy of the edition to print off, or prefer to view it as a download on an e-reader or tablet? We'll get you covered. Think an audio-text recording of the original poem would help your students understand its artistry? We're learning how to make audio-files, as well, using platforms such as [LibriVox](#). In short, we want our editions to help people to think historically, in addition to providing them the raw source material to think with.

Finally, and most importantly, SourceLab is distinguished by its ambition to draw

students into the process of preparing Internet resources for teaching and research. Unlike most digitization projects, we're not seeking to build a collection or a catalog. Rather we're trying to create a new kind of educational practice within college departments, one that will allow them to respond to the new opportunities Web-based resources offer for teaching, research, and public history, as they arise.

More about the Means: How Might it Work?

So what might a department-based program for the critical edition of historical sources look like? In 2014-2015, a Working Group composed of students, staff, and faculty met to begin to figure out how to build out our SourceLab.

While the conversations continue—with the goal of formally establishing the program by the end of this coming academic year, 2015-2016—here is some of what we've planned so far.

Perhaps the easiest way to approach the question of how to build this new program is to approach it from the point of view of the participants. What sort of room, what sort of resources would students need, to produce good, critical editions of [online](#) materials?

When approached in this manner, it can be seen that the 'lab' in question is not rooted in a particular physical space, but rather in finding a place within the student experience for learning how to edit historical documents, and then in creating editorial structures that would allow students to develop their projects into formal publications.

First, you need courses or workshops at the entry level (100 or 200 level) that could introduce them to the specific craft of documentary editing, as developed and practiced by long-term professionals and societies such as the [Association for Documentary Editing](#) and the [Dixit Project](#).

Second, you need a standing Editorial Board that could solicit project ideas for the proposed series (via an annual Call For Proposals), create common templates and standards for the editions, organize teams of students to complete them, and then oversee the review and publication of approved projects as part of a running, SourceLab series.

Third, you'd need a credit-bearing practicum or 'internship' program, which would allow students or teams of students to earn course credits by completing said editions for publication in the series, under the supervision of the Editorial Board. Likely structured as an independent study, such a program would encourage students to remain involved in the program after their initial training in the introductory course.

Fourth, a technological platform for both authoring and archiving the editions, as well as agreed-upon conventions governing their life and use following Editorial Board approval and publication.

While we don't have a ratified master plan for exactly how we'll assemble these

elements—and of course there are other parts to our 'lab' we'll no doubt learn that we need—we have made some progress in prototyping this program in the past year. The SourceLab Working Group has mapped out the organizational and curricular aspects of the program, and is working on the development of a formal SourceLab charter this coming year.

Meanwhile, a special student seminar met to develop prototype editions of web-based resources, which we hope to present to the public this Fall. Our prototype editions have been built in [Scalar](#)—the blog-like publishing tool used to create this brochure—under a Creative Commons License. Currently, like the other scholarship authored in Scalar, they are hosted at the University of Southern California, thanks to the [Alliance for Networking Visual Culture](#).

More about its Uses: Who Benefits?

As members of a public research university, we [see](#) SourceLab as an initiative that should benefit society more generally. Specifically, we're hoping our initiative may be useful to the public in three ways.

First, all SourceLab editions will be freely accessible online, and available for all uses and users. We plan to produce our editions under a free culture license such as an [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](#), allowing others to adapt, re-purpose, and even commercialize our efforts (for example, by producing for sale paper versions of them) as they see fit. In this way, teachers, students, researchers, and members of the public will be able to build upon our editions to answer their own questions about the past.

Second, not only our sources, but also our organizational, curricular, and technological processes (as detailed in a SourceLab Handbook we are developing) will be published as Open Educational Resources. That way, other schools and organizations can use them to build similar programs, or to collaborate with us as they see fit.

Last, we hope to see benefits both for and from our students themselves. As already mentioned, SourceLab will help students earn course credit toward their degrees even as it offers them author credits (on the resulting editions) that they can add to their resumés.

Yet this education, we think, should not be seen simply as something that benefits them alone. Rather, by being trained in the skills necessary to link the new digital record to the craft of writing history, our students will be able to help society keep track of what can really be known about the past, amidst the new tide of information. Given that we all live in time—and always imagine what we will do based on judgements about what has already happened—that's a pretty big deal, in every walk of life.

How Can I Get Involved?

Know of a [source](#) you'd like to use in the classroom or for research, but it needs a proper

edition? Want to know more about our initiative, or have ideas about how it could or should develop?

Whatever you have in mind, we'd love to hear your thoughts! Write us at SourceLab2015@gmail.com.

And thank you for your attention!

Post Script: What About that Movie? Where Did it Come From?

We are working on an edition of the [film](#) described in the introduction to this brochure, as well as prototype editions of the other sources featured here. Down the line we'll be able to link to them! But they're not quite ready, so in the meantime here's what we've discovered.

In publishing this clip on YouTube, user Gilbert Kantin identifies a Smithsonian Magazine article from 2010, "[The Faces of War](#)," as its source. This article—which describes the development of plastic surgery more generally after the war—provides the clip as an illustration. It identifies the action as taking place in a studio run by the American Sculptor Anna Coleman Ladd. But it does not say much more about the film itself, as source.

By contacting the magazine, two University of Illinois students (Amanda Marcotte '15 and Alex Villanueva '17) were able to learn the following.

“Red Cross Work on Mutilés at Paris, 1918,” as the film is formally known, was shot by a special movie division of the Red Cross. As part of its efforts to mitigate the horror of war—and to present Allied governments as doing something about it—the Red Cross apparently produced scores of such films. They were shown widely in movie-houses, as shorts preceding the main feature. Only a few of these films survive today, however.

This particular footage is now preserved by the Otis Historical Archives of the National Museum of Health and Medicine, in Silver Spring, MD. It indeed shows work in a studio run by Coleman Ladd (who features in the film). The Red Cross sponsored the studio, explaining why the organization took pains to document its work.

Comparing a digital copy of the original footage, sent to us by the Otis Historical Archives, with the YouTube version provided by Gilbert Kantin, we have been able to confirm that they are identical, and the latter is a full copy. That said, we have also, with the permission of the Otis Historical Archives, placed a [copy](#) in the public, fair-use archive, Critical Commons.