
The Abraham Lincoln Historical Digitization Project, the World Wide Web, and the Public Humanities

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The Abraham Lincoln Historical Digitization Project (*Lincoln Project*) at Northern Illinois University presents primary source materials shedding light upon Abraham Lincoln's life and context in antebellum Illinois (1831-1861) on its *Lincoln/Net* World Wide Web site (<http://lincoln.lib.niu.edu>). Begun in 1998 as a model digital library project, it has gathered texts and images (over twenty-five million words of text, and over 2500 images) from significant historical collections in the state of Illinois in a single set of searchable databases, and thus dramatically expanded the ability of students, teachers, scholars, and the public to use them.

But the *Lincoln Project* has grown to become more than a large digital library. It also features original interpretive materials, written by leading scholars, which help the site's users to think about the historical context in which Lincoln lived, and in which he and his contemporaries produced the historical materials on display. In recent years the project has also produced a documentary film examining Lincoln's role in the Black Hawk War of 1832 and a nationwide reading program for public libraries (in collaboration with the *American Library Association*). These projects have added new resources to the web site, including over one hundred streaming video clips featuring segments of the project film and leading scholars discussing major themes in this period's history.

While scholarly researchers make wide use of the *Lincoln/Net* site, the *Lincoln Project* also represents an attempt to use the opportunities presented by digital technology and the World Wide Web to expand the scope and effectiveness of the public humanities.

These opportunities have emerged at several levels. First, a web site like *Lincoln/Net* provides its users with an opportunity to explore primary source materials within an integrated learning environment including interpretive materials. Many digital library users who are not professional scholars often wonder "What should I search for?" These secondary resources help site users to learn about the fundamental questions that scholars

ask about this period in American history. They also help site users to begin to fashion research questions with which they may explore the databases. This ability to pursue original explorations in primary source materials can contribute in new, rare ways to the public's appreciation for historical contingency and change.

The World Wide Web and digital technology also provide a new opportunity to support and enrich more traditional humanities programming. Traditional public programs in the humanities provide isolated opportunities to attend lectures, films, symposia, or other events. But often attendees are left with nothing more than the few notes they may have scribbled during the event. The World Wide Web provides an opportunity to furnish program attendees with an opportunity to follow up their lecture experience with further explorations in pertinent primary source materials and additional scholars' interpretations of them. A web site also provides more prosaic services: the opportunity to read the text of the original lecture at one's leisure, or the ability to view a film again via streaming digital video.

While many members of the *ACH* and *ALLC* have devoted their efforts to devising new scholarly applications for digital technology and the World Wide Web, I would like to argue that they represent an unprecedented opportunity for scholars to open a new dialogue with members of the public who may harbor an interest in humanities subjects, but find little opportunity to nourish it. I have built the *Abraham Lincoln Historical Digitization Project* on the hypothesis that a significant segment of the public harbors an interest not only in exploring primary source materials, but also in imbibing and considering scholars' research questions and conclusions. The *Lincoln/Net* World Wide Web site thus presents an opportunity for these scholars to reach out to a new audience, not by persuading the public to read their monographs or textbooks, but by boiling their research conclusions down into readily accessible interpretations of the primary source materials that are, thanks to new technology, readily at hand.

This public discourse can serve the humanities well. It can return them to the civic role that they often enjoyed before the era of ever-narrower scholarly specialization. Increased appreciation for, and comprehension of, scholarly work by even a limited segment of the public can also prove valuable in a political climate that has often witnessed taxpayer assaults upon university and college budgets.

I hope that this poster presentation and/or paper will lead conference attendees to consider using new technology to do more than refine research techniques, and reach out to a public audience.