Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

Civil War Era Studies

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Big Interp: Processing Massive Meaning

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Abstract

There's been this term bandied about in the historical circles I've been running in of late: Big Data. As far as I've gathered, it's the byproduct of our information age, when more and more data gets fed into more and more machines and is accessible at the fingertips of more and more inquiring minds. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

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Disciplines

Cultural History | History | Public History | Social History | United States History

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Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public is written by alum and adjunct professor, John Rudy. Each post is his own opinions, musings, discussions, and questions about the Civil War era, public history, historical interpretation, and the future of history. In his own words, it is "a blog talking about how we talk about a war where over 600,000 died, 4 million were freed and a nation forever changed. Meditating on interpretation, both theory and practice, at no charge to you."

Interpreting the Civil War

Connecting the Civil War to the American Public
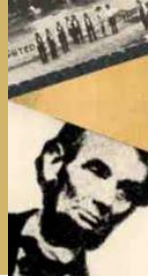
Big Interp: Processing Massive Meaning

TUESDAY, APRIL 16, 2013

There's been this term bandied about in the historical circles I've been running in of late: Big Data. As far as I've gathered, it's the byproduct of our information age, when more and more data gets fed into more and more machines and is accessible at the fingertips of more and more inquiring minds.

But I'm not a new social historian. I tend to aim for the micro-historical, not the grand and sweeping systematic conclusions. It means that much of what I produce is ignorant of this new boon for the historical profession. I make, as Brian Jordan lovingly put it once, "brick-in-the-wall histories." My work is the basis upon which, when joined with that of hundreds of my comrades, helps folks like the soon-to-be Dr. Jordan make broad structured conclusions.

I actually love that role. It means that what I do has deeper impact, but that I don't need to fuss with those broader conclusions quite as much.

But the follow on from my role as a brickmaker is that I understand the *value* of big data, I just can't understand the *mechanics* of big data.

But I am starting to imagine the *scale* of Big Data through Big Interp. What does an interpretive project look like when it grows into a massive, sprawling beast? I've been working on one of those projects for nearly a year and a half now. Imagine trying to figure out the inner workings of dozens of peoples' everyday lives 150 years ago, their comings and goings, their ideas, thoughts and beliefs, their fears and thoughts. It's impossible, but not. Tracing people on a landscape becomes far easier than you might think, trust me.

So the project is starting to coalesce. Big Interp, what it means to craft a highly complex web of meaning, which virtual visitors can "pluck" from any individual thread and see the reverberations, just might happen. If all goes well, you'll want to make sure you have a Twitter account by early May. You'll want to make sure you're ready to watch history unfold. You'll, hopefully, be able to relive the Gettysburg #invasion63 through a few curious observers' eyes.

The past uses the future to see the past.