

Historicising the Internet:

OII Summer Doctoral Program, Brisbane, July 2009

Associate Professor Matthew Allen

Internet Studies, Curtin University of Technology

The importance of history

- History demonstrates contingency: nothing is naturally so (by some unchangeable state of nature, morals, human law, or technology)
- History provides a 'natural' laboratory for the exploration of differences and the consideration thereby of causes and effects in human affairs
- History contextualizes the scholarship of others so as to explain their presumptions, research interests and conclusions

Why history can be misleading

The myth of origins

- History often involves seeking the 'origin' of something in our contemporary world; but what are the consequences and values of such stories of when and how things came into being?

Arbitrary periodicity

- History often involves saying that such and such a period of time exists, marked by specific features which differentiate it from other 'periods' in history; but do continuities, contradictions and pre-emergence suggest periodicity is a construct, imposed on the past, and not part of it?

Histories from the ground up

- Where we will together, individually, in small groups and as a whole, write a new kind of history of the Internet – *our* histories of the Internet from its origins, through its key moments, and our sense of 'changes' which might periodise even the Internet's short history. (SEE OVER FOR INSTRUCTIONS)

Some novel uses for 'history'

Historicity – being who you are 'in history'

- People live in the contemporary world, in a dialogic relationship to times past and times to come. More or less depending on what they are doing, the particular state society is in, and their reflexivity, people experience life through historicity – through consciousness of 'being in time'.

History as Discourse - what is believed true of the past acts as if it were true

- We might, intellectually, question and critique the apparent truth of 'history', yet this very critique reveals that historical truths influence our world regardless of whether or not they are 'true'.

INSTRUCTIONS:

Histories from the ground up

This is a whole-of group exercise. Please use the following instructions to help us collectively explore the multiple, different 'histories' of the Internet which we may write for ourselves. After each stage, we will discuss as a whole group and share what we are doing.

Step One: Your origin myth (do this on your own) (5 minutes)

When did you first 'logon', 'start using', or otherwise become so conscious of using the Internet that, if asked, you would say 'this is the point of origin, for ME, of my history of the Internet'? Why? What happened?

Write down on a piece of paper the YEAR, and briefly what it is and why it is your origin.

Step Two: Your most significant Internet events (do this with a partner) (10-15 minutes)

Working with a partner, share with each other the one or two most significant 'events' or moments of your history of the Internet so far in your life – things which stand out from the everyday, regular uses of the Internet which, as you look back on them you would see as shaping your understanding and knowledge of the Internet. What were they? Why are they significant?

Write each one down on a separate piece of paper: what's the YEAR, and briefly what it is and why it is significant.

Step Three: The big change for you (do this in a group) (10-15 minutes)

Working in groups of about 4-6, try to identify what has been the one big change for you in using the Internet in your own history; something which, if you like, creates a periodisation – 'before' this, and 'after' this time. What was this event or moment? Why did things change? How different is it for everyone else?

Write each one down on a separate piece of paper: what's the YEAR, and briefly what it is and why it is significant.

For your information

Matthew

m.allen@curtin.edu.au; <http://netcrit.net>

Internet Studies @ Curtin

<http://netstudies.curtin.edu.au>

Association of Internet Researchers

<http://aoir.org>