

How Historians Verify Information

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Historians reconstruct the past by relying on sources that 'tell' them about it. Because this information is not always straightforward, can be untrue and sometimes the sources themselves can be falsified, researchers of the past have developed methods of verifying this information. These processes can also be ideal for checking the information we come across on the internet.

When talking about historical sources, we usually think of documents stored in archives. It is worth remembering, however, that for historians sources may also include relics of material culture (from pottery crocks excavated by archaeologists to huge buildings), works of art, cultural texts (e.g. poems, novels and music scores), private notes and letters and, for researchers of more recent history, newspapers, photographs, films, recordings of radio and television broadcasts too. Today, researchers are already analysing digital sources – electronic correspondence, entries in social media, videos documenting various events posted on the web, as well as what is known as big data: large collections of data, for example, about consumer behaviour when buying online. Moreover, historians of recent history can produce new sources themselves by recording the accounts given by witnesses of the events they are interested in.

However, regardless of whichever sources we are talking about, the methods of analysing them and verifying the information they contain remain the same.

Source criticism

Source criticism is what historians call the process of analysing sources. It consists of two stages: first the external criticism and then the internal criticism of a given source. The aim of these processes is to verify the authenticity of the source as well as to determine its credibility and its value for research.

External criticism, also known as erudite criticism, seeks to establish the basic facts about a given source. Sometimes it literally covers its external features – for example, whether a document's medium could have been produced in a certain epoch. Anyone who studies medieval history will immediately notice that a document supposedly produced in 12th-century Europe could not have been written on paper made from cellulose. Let us take a more contemporary example – if we analyse a text file written using Microsoft Word, the commonly used word processor, we know that it could not have been created before 1983 (the first version's date of publication), even if the description of the document suggests otherwise.

Such doubts, however, are relatively rare. External criticism usually boils down to an attempt to establish basic data about the source: the date and place of its creation, its author(s), whether it is an original or a copy, whether the source is preserved in its entirety, etc. Sometimes, this information is given directly, and sometimes it has to be reconstructed by analysing the content (for example, the dates appearing in a source sometimes make it possible to determine at least approximately when it was created). The more of these data you can establish, the more reliable the source. In other words, **if you analyse a source produced by an unknown author at an unknown time and place, and one that you do not know whether is a copy or the original, or whether it has survived in its entirety, it is not very reliable.** This does not mean that it should be rejected outright, but certainly the information it contains must be treated with great caution. Other factors, such as where the document is stored, also affect the assessment of its reliability.

Internal criticism, also known as hermeneutics, focuses on analysing the content of the source. It can be a text, an image, a sound or even the shape of a given object. At this stage, the historian tries to ask as many questions as possible and obtain answers to those. One of the fundamental questions concerns the purpose for which the source was created. If you analyse a document containing a description of some event, it is important to establish whether it is simply an account of its course, a complaint or a document that glorifies one of the participants, and whether it is an official report or a private note. In each case, the answer to the particular question makes you treat the information it contains differently. Similarly, it is important to return to the perspective of the author: for example, the course of a battle is perceived

differently by a commander of troops and by an ordinary soldier. The key question is whether the author of the source was a direct witness to the event or whether they are passing on information heard from someone else. For example, if a painter immortalized an important event in a painting, the information contained in the image will be more relevant if they saw it themselves. A very important question is to find out what the author did not say and why? This is called inference from the silence of sources.

All these and other questions serve the purpose of extracting as much information as possible from the analysed source, including information that is not given explicitly. Again, they also allow us to assess their value and reliability, bearing in mind that different information from the same source may be assessed in a variety of ways.

Verification of information

'Extracting' the information contained in a source and evaluating it in the course of criticism does not, however, end the historian's work as it requires further verification.

The simplest method of verification, as in the work of journalists, **is to check whether the information is confirmed by other sources.** If it is known only from a single one, it should be treated with particular caution. It is also worth remembering that sometimes the multiplicity of sources is illusory – they can all be based on the same thing. For example, many newspapers may have written about an event, but if they all used the same agency dispatch, the multiplicity of sources is a sham. Similar phenomena occur on the internet because information published in one place may be copied in many others, but this does not mean that it is more reliable. In such cases, it is always necessary to find the original source of information and subject it to analysis and verification.

The other basic method consists in **confronting the obtained information with your general knowledge**, which is called 'non-source knowledge', that is knowledge not resulting from the analysed source. If the information is inconsistent with it – for example, if in a photograph that is captioned as coming from the First World War, you can see a weapon constructed and used during the Second World War, it would cast

doubt on the information obtained. Of course, every once in a while a reliable source challenges the existing state of knowledge, yet this does not happen very often.

All the methods given above may seem complicated. However, once you start using them, soon all these analyses can be done almost automatically. It is important to get into the habit of treating all sources critically.

Be like a historian!

The methods used by historians to analyse sources and verify information are worth applying to everyday life. We live in a time of an extraordinary deluge of news and deliberate disinformation campaigns. **If you do not want to be misinformed, fall for fake news or be manipulated, be like a historian!** Look critically at the sources of information and ask the following questions: who is the author? Where does the information really come from? Is the source genuine? Why is the information being disseminated? Is it correct to the best of our knowledge? (If you do not know, look it up or ask your teacher.) Does the photo/video really show what the description suggests? Could the author of the description really have witnessed the events? If you make a habit of asking these and other questions, you will not be manipulated and you will be able to make informed decisions.

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