Evaluate the impact of technology and the digital age on the construction of history.

Figure 1 [24]

Synopsis:

I initially started to research the Apollo 11 Moon Landing, with particular emphasis on the conspiracy theories surrounding this topic. I then broadened this to cover the impact of technology and the digital age on the construction of history on both public and academic scholars. Over the last few years, I have developed an interest in the field of technology's impact on society's perceptions of events. Through various mediums including books, magazines, movies, and online documentaries, I was able to grasp a clearer understanding of the advancements and challenges in recording history in the digital age. My shift in focus not only extended my knowledge in this field of study, but it further increased my curiosity towards technology's impact on modern historiography.

This historical investigation examines the impact of technology and the digital age on the construction of history.

It explores how technology has opened access to historical knowledge, allowing individuals to challenge traditional narratives and engage with primary sources. However, it also highlights concerns about historical objectivity in digital sources. The investigation discusses the challenges posed by digital sources, such as source authenticity and reliability, and the need for critical evaluation. It also analyses the proliferation of differing representations of history through visual media, interactive platforms, social media, and their impact on public perception. The research also examines the role of technology in the creation of conspiracy theories surrounding significant events and explores the advancements and challenges in recording history in the digital age.

This subject of study has made me aware of the fundamental influence technology has had on how we perceive the past. It has made me keenly aware of the many variables that affect how events can and are perceived.

Essay:

Traditionally, history is the discipline that studies and interprets past events, societies, cultures, and individuals through the analysis of written archival evidence, sources, and narratives. Historians have predominantly sought and consulted a vast expanse of sources, which may include written documents, artifacts, oral or visual evidence to reconstruct and identify the past.

Today, the digital age has revolutionised the field of history, transforming the way we access, interpret, and represent historical events. It is important to distinguish between public and academic history. Public history utilises methods outside of the traditional academic realm of history, whereas academic historians translate and interpret scholarly sources through qualified processes. Technology has democratised access to historical knowledge, allowing individuals to engage with primary sources and challenge traditional narratives. This creates discourse between those deciphering public history from professional academic history. It also raises questions about historical objectivity present in digital sources where individuals bias is prevalent.

Historians such as Roy Rosenzweig and Robert Darnton have explored the implications of digital technology on historical scholarship, emphasizing the need for critical evaluation and collaboration between historians and technologists. Furthermore, the digital age (which began in the 1980s with the humble personal computer, the internet, and early websites), has witnessed a proliferation of differing representations of history through visual media, interactive platforms, and social media, which have influenced public perception and understanding.

The digital age has democratised access to historical information. Online archives, digitized manuscripts, and open-access databases such as JSTOR, Trove and Research Gate have made historical sources more widely available than ever before. Technology has empowered individuals to engage with primary sources and conduct independent research, thereby challenging traditional historiographical narratives such as diaries, letters, speeches, journals, or autobiographies.

Robert Darnton (1982), a historian of the 'book' whose focus on archival records, books, the circulation of information in the 18th century as part of his research, has discussed the democratisation of historical knowledge through digital platforms. In 'The Case For Books: Past, Present, and future' (Darnton 1982)[1], Helene Moorman's review of this book further states Darnton explores the impact of digitisation on historical research, and his emphasis on how the influence of different perspectives can affect public opinion. (Moorman 2008) [2].

Historian Roy Rosenzweig explored the implications of digital technology on historical scholarship. In 'Digital History: A Guide to Gathering, Preserving, and Presenting the Past on the Web' Rosenzweig and Cohen(2005)[3], which examines the opportunities and challenges of recording digital history, Rosenzweig argued the importance of critically evaluating digital sources and the need for collaboration between historians and technologists. This ensures the professional and accurate recording of historical digital information and a set, agreed upon process. He states, "For some, that might involve joining "the international effort to make research articles in all academic fields freely available on the Internet," (Cohen et al.,2005)[3] as embodied, for example, in the Budapest Open Access Initiative.". This initiative's goal was "to accelerate progress in the international effort to make research articles in all academic fields freely available on the internet." (Budapest Open Access Initiative 2023)[4].

The implications of this democratisation for historical objectivity, and the potential for bias in digital sources, is due to advances in technology and the endless access of digital materials. Modern day history has witnessed firsthand bias, the loss of objectivity and various depictions of information through the media. During the Arab Spring protests (2010-2012), social media platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, played a crucial role in mobilizing and disseminating information among activists and the public. Ordinary individuals, became citizen journalists, documenting and sharing videos, images, and direct accounts of the protests, demonstrations, and government crackdowns in real-time (Wikipedia 2022)[5]. This digital revolution allowed for the rapid spread of information and challenged the control of

traditional media outlets. It enabled individuals to access and contribute to the historical narrative of the events unfolding in the Middle East and North Africa. Digital platforms provided an alternative source of information, often bypassing government censorship and offering a more diverse range of perspectives. As a result of their research many academics have concluded that social media played a critical role in "mobilization, empowerment, shaping opinions, and influencing change". Gire (2014) [18]

While the increase of digital sources has expanded historical research possibilities, it also poses significant challenges for the construction of history. Digitisation may allow for wider accessibility and potential longevity of historical materials; but it also introduces risks. In his chapter 'Computing and the Historical Imagination' (Thomas 2004) [6] within the book 'A Companion to Digital Humanities' (Schriebman et al. 2004) [7], historian William Thomas explores the potential of digital sources and technologies in historical research. He acknowledges the challenges of source authenticity, accuracy, and reliability in the digital age, emphasising the importance of critical evaluation skills in navigating and interpreting digital materials.

The "fake news" phenomena during the 2016 United States election was a significant proliferation and exposure of false information and misleading narratives which circulated through digital platforms, particularly social media. Various 'actors,' including foreign entities and domestic individuals, deliberately created, and disseminated misinformation to influence public opinion, undermining the democratic process. The rapid and widespread dissemination of fake news through digital channels posed challenges for historians and researchers attempting to construct an accurate historical account of events. The nature of digital sources, where information can be easily created, altered, and shared, made it difficult to discern fact from fiction. Kathleen Hall Jamieson (2020), a prominent communication scholar and historian, has researched the role of misinformation and disinformation in shaping public opinion. In her book 'Cyberwar: How Russian Hackers and Trolls Helped Elect a President' (Jamieson 2020) [8], Jamieson argues that the dissemination of false information through digital platforms had a significant impact on public discourse and election voting. The reliance on digital platforms for news consumption and the speed at which information spread intensified the problem, impacting the reliability of history and its construction.

The internet and social media have changed how historical events are shared and understood. The internet provides instant access to vast amounts of historical information from diverse sources, granting individuals the opportunity to explore different narratives and engage with primary sources. However, the ease of sharing information on social media and the internet has also given rise to the spread of misinformation and historical inaccuracies allowing individuals to contribute to recorded history. This poses challenges in distinguishing reliable sources from unreliable ones as it creates a combination of both truthful and false narratives. Justin Champion (2003), an early 'modern' British historian, has argued for the power of television and film in shaping public understanding of history. In his article 'Screen Histories Seeing the Past: Simon Schama's 'A History of Britain' and Public History '[17], he reviews and comments on Simon Schama's 3 volume book series on Britain's history. Champion emphasises the emotional and immersive impact of visual storytelling in engaging viewers with historical events. He believes that these mediums have the potential to ignite curiosity, generate empathy, and foster a deeper connection to the past. This can alter public opinion and change how the past is perceived.

Investigative journalist, Cherry Salazar, writes about the spread of misinformation and historical revisionism on social media during the recent 2022 presidential campaign in the Philippines. "Historical revisionism is the main misinformation narrative in this election cycle." Salazar (2022) [19]. Robert Brent Toplin (1996) argues historical narratives, when translated into visual forms, often simplify, and distort complex historical events to fit into a clear and entertaining story. This troubled historians as "they complain about manipulation, invention, distortion, misrepresentation, and simplification in movies like *Mississippi Burning, Gandhi,* and *1492: The Conquest of Paradise."* (Toplin 1996) [20].

Technology, particularly the internet and social media platforms, has made it possible for conspiracy theories to flourish in the modern era. During times of crisis, such theories can thrive and gain popularity even without any evidence to back them up. In the past few decades, the world has seen economic and financial crises associated with various theories (e.g.: Barrack Obama elected in 2008 because of democratic bankers creating the financial crisis or climate change denial movements suggesting that climate change is a hoax). Douglas and Van Prooijen (2017) [14]. These theories "can become part of lay representations of history and are transmitted to new generations as coherent narratives." Douglas and van Prooijen (2017) pp 330. Yet most conspiracy theories directly contradict mainstream explanations for historical events, which poses the question, why is this phenomenon more prevalent in the digital age? The Trump presidency and his obsession with the use of Twitter saw Trump quote conspiracy theories which distorted history; for example, his claims to Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau that Canada burned down the white house and congratulating Fredrick Douglass, a 19th century American abolitionist for doing amazing things although Douglass died in 1896. [15] Trump's large media profile and influence on historical information resulted in distorted perspectives of events.

By spreading information easily, social media facilitates conspiracy theories to reach a wider audience, allowing the creation of online communities that reinforce and validate these beliefs. Nancy L. Rosenblum (2019), a political theorist and co-author of the book 'A Lot of People Are Saying: The New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy' [9], examines the role of technology in the rise of conspiracy theories. QAnon, a far-right American political conspiracy group, has used platforms such as Twitter and 4chan to spread their conspiracy rhetoric, targeting Trump's opponents in 2017. Rosenblum further argues that the internet and social media platforms have provided a fertile ground for the spread of conspiracy thinking. She suggests the speed and reach of information distribution on these platforms, combined with algorithmic amplification and the formation of online echo chambers, has contributed to conspiracy theories thriving in the Modern Age.

Richard Hofstadter, American historian, is known for his work on conspiracy theories. In his title essay from the book 'The Paranoid Style in American Politics (Hofstadter 1965)', [10] Hofstadter examines the historical development and prevalence of conspiracy thinking in American society. While his work predates the widespread use of technology and the internet, his analysis of the psychological and cultural factors that contribute to conspiracy theories provides insights into the broader debate on their proliferation in the modern era. Robert A Goldberg's review of Kathryn Olmsted's conspiracy theory book, 'Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I to 9/11'Olmsted (2009) [22], states that the rise of mass media in the 20th century has contributed to the dissemination and popularisation of conspiracy theories. He further states that the mass media's ability to quickly transmit information, coupled with the American public's growing scepticisms of government institutions, created a productive ground for the spread of conspiracy narratives. Goldberg (2010) [21] The 1969 moon landing, which was once the subject of conspiracy theories in printed media, books, and movies, is now reaching millions more through TIKTOK.[23] Arising out of crisis, conspiracy theories, assisted by social media, can become reasonable narratives that shape people's version of history.

Technology has both advanced and posed challenges to the recording of history in the digital age. Historians such as Roy Rosenzweig and Daniel J. Cohen argue in their book 'Digital History: A Guide to Gathering, Preserving, and Presenting the Past on the Web,' Rosenzweig and Cohen [3] that digital tools have revolutionised historical research and presentation. For instance, the digitisation of primary sources, such as archives and manuscripts, has made them more accessible to researchers worldwide. Online databases like the Digital Public Library of America and Europeana have expanded access to historical materials.

Additionally, digital technologies have enabled historians to engage with new methodologies. Ian Milligan's (Milligan 2023) [11] work on web archiving demonstrates how technology allows historians to study web-based sources and trace the evolution of digital content. These advancements have broadened the scope of historical inquiry and facilitated the exploration of

previously untapped sources. Darnton (2005) used archived police records from Paris in his investigations. Other sources such as archives, museums, oral history, cinema, and television are recognised as potentially untapped reservoirs of historical data. History by its nature is vulnerable to distortion whether it be abuse by denial of historical facts, by falsification, by fixation on a particular event, by omission, out of laziness or even ignorance. Iggers (1999) [16]. Milligan highlights the importance of web archiving in preserving digital materials that are constantly changing and disappearing. Not only has this expanded the scope of historical investigation but also enables scholars to trace the evolution of digital content, providing valuable insights into the transformations of society, culture, and information dissemination in the digital age.

Concerns about the preservation and authenticity of digital records are prevalent in the digital age. Trevor Owens in his book 'The Theory and Craft of Digital Preservation' (Owens, 2019) [12], highlights the need for effective digital preservation strategies to ensure the long-term accessibility of historical materials. The advent of social media and the proliferation of user-generated content also raise questions about the credibility and preservation of digital records. Technology has hindered the approaches to the recording of history, allowing public historians to easily spread false narratives in an age where modern society heavily relies on the use of digitalised information and social media platforms; for example when conspiracy theorist Alex Jones published fabricated historical details via his social media channels implying the Sandyhook School shooting was fake. Technology also played a significant role in shaping the course of events in the Syrian Civil War (2011) and documenting the atrocities committed. Social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube became historical tools for activists, journalists, and citizen reporters to share updates, images, and videos of the conflict. This established complexities with information verification, preservation and the ethical concerns with the dissemination of war footage.

The impact of technology and the digital age on the construction of history has been profound and far-reaching. The democratisation of historical knowledge through online archives and digitised sources has allowed for broader access and engagement with primary materials. However, this digital revolution also presents challenges, such as source authenticity, reliability, and the potential for bias in digital sources. Historians have emphasised the importance of critical evaluation and collaboration between historians and technologists in navigating these challenges.

The internet provides instant access to vast amounts of historic information, but also highlights the use of the cyberspace for historical revisionism and other forms of misinformation. Visual story telling engages audiences and fosters a curiosity of the past, but this means of recording can simplify and distort more complex historical events. Conspiracy theories, although not a new phenomenon, appear to thrive today.

Major catastrophes often initiate the storyline, but the internet is the tool that spreads it rapidly. Historical material is more readily available with the emergence of online databases and historians can now engage with new material and broaden the scope of their inquiry. But information can be distorted, falsified, lost or omitted, advocating the importance of effective digital preservation.

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