

# Evernote, Zotero and other tools: understanding art historians' needs through their digital practice

*Christina Kamposiori*

Centre for Digital Humanities, University College London  
christina.kamposiori.11@ucl.ac.uk

*Claire Warwick*

Department of English Studies, University of Durham  
c.l.h.warwick@durham.ac.uk

*Simon Mahony*

Centre for Digital Humanities, University College London  
s.mahony@ucl.ac.uk

This paper examines the scholarly behaviour of researchers in art history through the use of the specific digital tools and services they employ in their work. In recent years, the proliferation of digital resources and the new capabilities offered by information technology have greatly impacted on the daily work routine of researchers, which is filled with various types of software, computer programmes and other technologies used towards the production of knowledge (also, see Antonijević 2015). However, as the practices associated with many types of digital tools and services are conducted 'behind the scenes', at scholars' personal workspaces, they can be challenging to study; thus, little is known about the role of many of these technologies in the scholarly workflow (e.g. see Borgman 2005; Beaudoin and Brady 2011).

Our paper presents the results of research conducted for the first author's PhD Thesis 'Personal Research Collections: examining research practices and user needs in art historical research' at the UCL Centre for Digital Humanities, London, UK under the supervision of Prof. Claire Warwick and Mr. Simon Mahony. This research employed an ethnographic approach to the study of scholarly practices by conducting semi-structured, in-depth interviews with twenty art historians at different career stages, as well as the observation of their physical and digital personal collections in order to identify the particular needs they have when they build them. We argue that personal collections, being at the core of art historians' workspace (also, see Palmer, Teffeau and Pirmann 2009; Long and Schonfeld 2014), are an important starting point for understanding behaviour and practices that are difficult to study otherwise, due to the private nature and the various personal criteria applied.

Regarding the technologies art historians' utilise in the context of their research and teaching practice, there are several questions that can be asked. Why do scholars choose particular tools and how do they

use them? What can we learn about art historical scholarship from examining researchers' digital habits and the different uses of various technologies? How can we apply these lessons in building better tools and services for facilitating digital scholarship in this wide ranging field? To address these questions, we shall use as examples four different types of digital services utilised by art historians in this study at different stages of the scholarly workflow; Facebook, Evernote, Zotero, and Microsoft Office Power Point. These were especially chosen to demonstrate the different uses made of some, otherwise, commonly employed digital tools and services and to showcase the needs of the art historians who used them.

To begin with, according to our findings, social media and social networks proved to be a place where art historians researching on particular topics could find information that was hard to find anywhere else. More specifically, we will look at the case of one of our participants who used Facebook as a data collection tool, since there was not much research conducted on their specific area of study (South-East Asian art) and few digital resources. Finding an online interest group on Facebook enabled them to gather necessary information for the purposes of their project. This example clearly suggests that there may be certain areas of study in the art historical discipline that face greater access problems and illustrates how scholars attempt to deal with this. Indeed, this supports previous research which has shown that the needs of scholars focusing on subjects such as non-European art have been understudied (Rose 2002).

Our second case study involves Evernote, originally notetaking software, which was preferred by many scholars for storing important material to use in the course of their research and teaching projects. Considering the reasons why scholars preferred this software, we found that low cost and flexibility in terms of the types of material that could be stored (e.g. notes, screenshots, other textual and visual material) made it a choice worth considering. Yet, it became apparent that this tool was used more as an information management tool rather than as notetaking software. As we learnt from our interviewees, their decision to choose this tool was related to very specific needs that had not been met by any other tool alone; in particular, ease of use and the ability to tag, organise and, thus, search the archived material according to personal criteria were the principal reasons for their preference.

Similarly with Zotero, it was very interesting to find that it was used for notetaking purposes, as well as for keeping and organising bibliographic references. The art historians who followed this approach had as common purpose the requirement to keep their notes together with the related material (mostly textual); based on these scholars' accounts, this proved to be a useful decision for their research. Regarding Microsoft Power Point, our findings showed that it allowed scholars, who did not use visual information management software, to keep textual information together with the visual and conduct the necessary activities for the analysis of the latter, such as comparing or focusing on specific details through zooming-in. Thus, this case highlights the need for easy to use tools that permit scholars to combine different types of material, such as textual and visual, facilitating core art historical practices such as the ones described earlier.

To conclude, in this paper, we raise certain issues around the decision making process with regards to the choice of tools by art historians for carrying out particular research activities. Our results show that,

in art history, there are still requirements that have not been met, such as access to useful digital resources or the need for digital tools and services which allow scholars to conduct core scholarly practices in a flexible manner that do not impede their creativity and research workflow. Yet, we strongly believe that only by understanding the habits of scholars when interacting with specific technologies in their daily work routine, we can really facilitate the needs of researchers in art history with efficient digital infrastructure.

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