

# The Power of the Press: Using Newspaper Derived Materials in Historical Science Research

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## *Abstract.*

*Biographers and bio-bibliographers have always found newspaper material of value in their work. However, in the past collecting the materials from hard copy depended on the availability of the newspapers themselves. It was physically hard work searching for the few paragraphs that were relevant and then copying this information by hand. The situation was greatly improved when newspaper pages could be searched on microfilm, through this too has its difficulties. The present situation has been transformed by the databases of thousands of newspapers from all over the world. The databases allow researchers to find out more about some little known scientific writers. The paper will describe a variety of instances from the author's research where this method of searching has been useful and some difficulties that have occurred.*

## *Introduction*

It is important in writing biographical and bio-bibliographical papers about scientists to base the study factually by using a selection of sources including primary source material. Various listings of what sort of material may be considered a primary source exist. For example, The Johns Hopkins University 'History of Science and Technology' webpage (John Hopkins guide 1) gives the following as examples of primary sources.

- Diaries, journals, speeches, interviews, letters, memos, manuscripts and other papers
- Memoirs and autobiographies.
- Records of or information collected by government agencies.

- Records of organizations.
- Published materials (books, magazine and journal articles, newspaper articles) written at the time.
- Photographs, audio recordings and moving pictures or video recordings.
- Materials that document the attitudes and popular thought of a historical time period.
- Research data
- Artifacts of all kinds

### *Some Technical History*

This study is only considering newspaper articles, a subset of the published materials, in the fifth section listed above. In spite of newspaper articles being only a small part of primary source material, the author has made considerable use of them over the years and the passage of time has allowed increased use of newspapers as it has become easier to find relevant material due to technological progress.

The historical stages of progress in searching newspapers are (1) the use of the newspapers themselves, (2) the use of microform materials and (3) searching newspapers in a searchable digitized format.

Librarians write about the advantages and disadvantages of each of these systems, but the physical storage of many newspapers over several centuries becomes a storage nightmare. The decay of cheap acid newsprint adds to that nightmare and the physical handling of the old and brittle newspapers by library patrons may cause damage to the newspapers themselves. Nonetheless until the early twentieth century, there was no alternative. Various trials were made early in the twentieth century and Wikipedia (2011) states that ‘Between 1927 and 1935, the Library of Congress microfilmed more than three million pages of books and manuscripts in the British Library.’ There were then further technical improvements and different microforms became established.

Something in microform is a photographic reproduction of text or graphics, reduced in size so that it must be read with magnification. The two main types of microforms are those on transparent material, such as microfilm and microfiche, and those on opaque material, such as microcards (John Hopkins guide 2). Microfilm material and microfiche material could be photocopied, whereas the opaque microcards could not be photocopied and were thus generally less useful for researchers. In tropical third world countries, these systems were difficult to maintain and those on transparent material were liable to lose clarity through fungal growth. Nonetheless these systems provided comparatively cheap and widespread access to rare historical resources. Many doctoral and masters theses became available to researchers through microform materials often supplied by UMI.

Finally the advent of the computer led to newspapers being digitized and improved search systems allowed rapid searches to be made. This is the fortunate position in which we now find ourselves and improved historical researches can be made. Information about the digitization processes in various countries is fairly widely available, for example (Bingham, 2010, pp. 225-231) who states:

It is clear even to the most casual observer of the historical profession that research practices are being gradually transformed by the digitization of archives and primary sources. (Bingham, 2010, p. 225)

This is certainly true of newspapers, the records of which are being transformed by improved access and improved search facilities. The book, *IFLA 118: Current International Newspaper Librarianship for the 21st Century* contains information about the progress of digitization in different countries, for example about the British Library in the United Kingdom (Shaw, 2006, pp. 27- 44), about progress in Australia (Anon, 2006, pp. 59-62; Brown and Fenton, 2006, pp. 63-70) and progress in the Nordic countries (Bremer-Laamanen, 2006, pp. 45-50). In Australia, it was planned to digitize all Australian newspapers and since established in the early 1990s (Anon, 2006, p. 59) the process is presumably now largely complete.

#### *Stage 1: My Experience of Collecting Newspaper Cuttings*

My first experience of the lack of accuracy in newspaper reporting was reading an account of a university Rugby match in which I had played, whilst it was snowing. I can vividly remember my amazement at the lack of accuracy of the report. On reflection, since the match took place half a century ago, this report would now be considered a primary historical source, but the passage of time has not made the report any more accurate. It is still desirable to use triangulation as a methodology, where possible, to increase the probability of accuracy.

Currently I am writing a paper for the 2011 ANZCIES conference about a traumatic event (a student riot, inspectorial misconduct, staff complaints, administrative error and the Papua New Guinea (PNG) Ombudsman's report) in 1981 at Kerevat National High School, PNG. Recently, I found the 56 cuttings from local newspapers that I had filed over an 18 month period with a photocopy of the Ombudsman's report. I have also found an excellent recent book (Short, 2009) which includes an account of events from the school. It is comparatively rarely that data can be triangulated with such varied sources. I have long had the habit of keeping files of newspaper articles on subjects that interest me. Modern technology would appear to make this unnecessary.

I have put another paper (Palmer, 1996) concerning safety issues in PNG on the Education Resources Information Center site (ERIC); this paper contains ten newspaper references, articles that appeared in the newspaper, *Post Courier*, relating to instances where the health and safety of the general public had been put at risk, for example 'Gramoxone deaths in the Highlands'. In the 1980s the use of newspapers themselves, particularly in developing countries was normal practice. 'Newspapers are an important and major source of data on educational developments in Papua New Guinea often providing the sole public record of these developments' (Cleverly & Wescombe, 1979, p. 53).

#### *Stage 2: My Experience of Using Microform Materials*

I was working on a paper about James Rennie, a British textbook writer, who moved to Australia in 1840 near the end of his career (Palmer, 2007). In 2006, I

needed to find out more about Rennie's life in Australia as the United Kingdom reference from the sixty volume, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Hodge, 2004) stated 'In 1840, he [James Rennie] emigrated to Australia, but nothing is known of his life there except that he died in Adelaide on 25 August 1867.' I spent several afternoons in the Northern Territory central public library looking at their microfiche materials and slowly gathering information about James Rennie's life in Sydney as a school teacher and lecturer from the microfiche copies of the *Sydney Morning Herald* available. However the technology had problems and most information was recorded by hand. Checking more recently, I could have found additional information using digitized searches.

### *Stage 3: My Experience of Using Digitised Searches*

The use of digitized searches has generally replaced microfiche and microfilm searches and searching through newspapers themselves in hard copy is seldom carried out now. Bingham states:

One of the most useful of these developments for modern British historians is the digitization of a number of significant newspaper archives. Although there was once widespread scepticism about using newspapers because of their doubtful accuracy and their ephemeral nature, ever since the 'cultural turn' and the increasing scholarly interest in language, representation and meaning, there are few who deny the value of newspaper content for understanding politics, culture and society (Bingham, 2010, p. 225).

I have used newspaper searches in many of my recent papers, noting that repeating searches a year or so later often improves results, showing the constant improvement of the technology. In carrying out research on Frederick Accum (1769-1838) (see Palmer, 2011, pp. 554-558), I used *The Times* archive and *Regional British newspaper* archive available through the State Library of Victoria. Nineteen references to Accum from newspaper sources were used in writing this article.

Frederick Accum was a chemist who made a living, partly from lecturing, tutoring and as an expert witness in legal cases and partly from his business selling apparatus, books, and pamphlets, many of which he wrote (Browne, 1925). He also carried out pure research with articles in academic journals. Up to 1820, he was a star scientist, popular and influential, but he then warned the British public of the dangers of poisons present in commonly available foods (Wilson, 2008) and naming the culprits. A short time after this he was accused of tearing pages out of books in the Royal Institution Library and publicly disgraced, so he fled back to Germany.

When researching Frederick Accum's life through the newspaper archives I found that all these diverse interests were reported. I was lucky with the name; few people have the name Accum, though there was considerable interference with the words *accumulate*, *accumulation*, etc. The vast majority of the results of the search were for advertisements; some were by the Surrey Institute, who advertised his lectures at the Institute; some were by his publishers for the books and pamphlets that he had written; some were for the items that his business was selling. Also his name was used in advertising for a medicine, indicating that Accum had analysed the medicine and recommended it. Immediately after his disgrace, the product was no longer

advertised using his name. Was anything new discovered about Accum's life as a result of these newspaper searches? Probably little new of major importance was established as a result of these newspaper searches, but I felt I could see Accum's life in a truer perspective, noting the very few references to him early in his career, with Accum gradually building up a good reputation as a chemist and becoming influential through appearances at parliamentary committees and contacts with important people. Then suddenly, his career was finished with letters of condemnation from his enemies and support from his loyal friends. I did come across a witty poem of six verses (two verses quoted) in *The Morning Post* with which I will end this presentation.

The lecturer Fred  
Took it into his head  
To make war on butchers and cooks  
But he happened to pass  
Over one knavish class  
The rogues who deteriorate books.

But Fred coolly replied  
"You ought not to chide  
Tho' Directors may give themselves airs,  
You who join to defame  
My works, cannot blame  
Me, for taking a leaf out of theirs.  
(The Morning Post, 1820)

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