

Completing the picture: electronic theses and postgraduate research in American history

Dr Craig Turnbull

Learning and Teaching Unit, University of New South Wales, Sydney

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Having access to electronic theses significantly improved the quality of the PhD dissertation that I successfully completed in 2004. I have no doubts that I could have submitted a passable dissertation without access to electronic theses. On the other hand, if it were possible to subtract the contribution that electronic theses made to my dissertation, I am sure that praise for my research from examiners and peers would have been less favourable. Let me briefly outline why this is the case.

There were numerous constraints to overcome to complete a PhD in American history at the University of New South Wales, particularly in relation to research. To use a popular euphemism, I negotiated various personal and professional “issues” with my supervisor during the course of my candidature, as many of you probably did or might do in future. However, the constraints I refer to had nothing to do with my supervisor; on the contrary, it was his standing and performance as an internationally renowned American historian that drew me to UNSW.

Unlike my supervisor, who completed his PhD at a university in the United States during the 1970s, I chose to undertake a research degree in American history at an Australian university. I made this decision for a variety of reasons, though among these was my belief that the increasing prevalence of online resources made the successful completion of an American history PhD at UNSW a viable proposition.

Traditional fieldwork research formed the basis for my thesis, though under the circumstances this approach possessed limitations, some of which were addressed by online resources. Even though the research plan for my PhD was well-developed when I visited Chicago on two Faculty-funded research trips in 1996 and 1998, I anticipated that there would inevitably be gaps to cover later. Indeed, the combination of having to make an original and significant contribution to knowledge and the length of time required to complete a PhD means that access to new research is imperative throughout the process.

Obtaining supplementary research during the latter stages of my PhD was made easier by the accessibility of a vast array of digital resources now available online to American historians. This was particularly the case for primary research material hosted by institutions such as the Library of Congress. It was exciting to witness the rapid expansion of freely available online resources during the course of my PhD candidature.

The availability of electronic theses via the Digital Dissertations database proved particularly helpful during the final stages of my PhD. The primary research material and scholarship contained in the theses I obtained from Digital Dissertations significantly enhanced chapters two and six of my dissertation. Without the material contained in four key theses produced after 2000 at Columbia University and the Universities of Illinois and New Mexico, these two chapters would have remained underdeveloped and possibly unacceptable. The material from these four works helped cover gaps that could not be addressed by either primary material available online elsewhere or published secondary material.

There were numerous benefits and advantages gained from using the electronic theses accessible via Digital Dissertations. As a UNSW research student the four key works I utilised were available to me in their entirety free of charge. The theses included cutting

edge scholarship on topics that were directly related to my own research. For PhD candidates pursuing original research, this type of highly relevant, recent scholarship is most commonly found in unpublished, rather than published work. I should point out that these key works were important because of their quality. I know that at least one of them has since been published as a monograph. In addition to being able to respond to the arguments put forward in each of these theses, they also included excerpts from primary sources that I could draw on to complete the research for chapters two and six. The unusual nature of this primary material meant that the only other method for accessing it would have been to make another trip to Chicago, an option that was financially untenable under the circumstances.

Without knowing much about the broad landscape of postgraduate research and the role of online resources, I cannot conclude that the experience I have outlined here is typical of that of other PhD candidates in other disciplines. However, my experience does confirm that there is a need for electronic theses to be readily available to postgraduates researching topics that are geographically remote from their own institution.