

THE FUTURE OF HISTORY: REVIVING PRIMARY SOURCES IN THE AGE OF WIKIPEDIA

by Adam Soclof

The 1995 remake of the film “The Computer Wore Tennis Shoes” stars Kirk Cameron as Dexter Riley, a so-so college student who is struck by lightning while browsing his computer online, effectively downloading the contents of the Internet to his brain. As Dexter’s self-confidence as an information warehouse inflates his ego, a sagely teacher warns him that the information on the Internet isn’t always accurate, and shouldn’t be accepted at face value. Sure enough, while hustling the quiz show circuit with his new superpowers, Dexter calls up a website of information about ancient Greece only to discover that this information was recorded incorrectly online. More than 15 years later, the premise of this film offers a prescient message about the importance of managing the relationship between students and educators in a world where a wealth of information is freely available to all.

Today, teachers still rely heavily on textbooks to teach material. With students increasingly capable of searching for information online -- not to mention increasingly dependent on procuring this information (e.g., turning to Wikipedia for quick answers for papers and exam-preparation) -- it is increasingly difficult for these students to accept the authority of assigned secondary sources at face value. Rather than place limitations on students’ independent exploration for information, educators and digital information specialists should partner to help students develop the critical faculties necessary in order to assess the quality of the information they discover outside of the classroom.

Ultimately, students should feel comfortable retrieving and interpreting primary sources in conjunction with their classroom learning. A growing number of online Jewish archives present several possibilities to help educators guide their students through this process.¹

Released on May 3, 2011, the JTA Jewish News Archive is a free online database featuring more than 200,000 articles from around the globe dating back to 1923, searchable by keyword and date. This new resource presents teachers with an opportunity to incorporate primary sources from twentieth century -- one of the most momentous in Jewish history -- into their lesson plans. The archive offers a wealth of reporting on significant events through a Jewish lens; its “Browse by Topic” section offers a good starting point for topics such as Israel, the Holocaust, Sports and Women’s Issues. Through this lens, teachers can ask students to research the history of their local Jewish community or assess the validity of historical claims (e.g., the claim that Americans were unaware about the events of Holocaust.)

You are encouraged to share this article with colleagues. We ask only that you let people know that this article originally appeared in NewCAJE's online journal, *The Jewish Educator*. Other articles on this topic may be found on the NewCAJE website, www.newcaje.org.

The value of primary sources as a tool for intellectual development has been given significant attention over the last decade.²³ Use of the archive promotes “inquiry based learning,” which encourages students to analyze historical events based on the information that was available at the time. For high school students, exploration of primary sources in the JTA Archive can serve as effective training for the reading comprehension component of standardized tests, such as the SAT, ACT and the document-based questions (DBQ) that are a staple of AP history exams.

In addition to promoting critical thinking, primary sources also are an inspiration for creative project-based learning. One educational product that realized this potential early on was *Chronicles*, a publication from the 1950s and 1960s that recreated Biblical events in the form of a fictional newspaper. The publisher described the purpose of this project as follows:

By lending new life, new color and new dimension to the men and women who populate the Books of the Bible, the editors of this unique, publishing venture have contributed immeasurably to the public's understanding, appreciation and love of the Bible, throughout the world.⁴

In other words, *Chronicles* sought to provide a new model of engagement with Jewish history by bringing historical events to life through an “in the moment” retelling that incorporated key people and places. A key feature of this proposed “new dimension” was an “in the moment” retelling of a historical narrative, aided by visuals and design. More recently, Jewish educators and other lay leaders already have demonstrated clever application of this principle, as evinced by Jewish internet memes like Facebook Haggadah⁵ and Google Exodus.⁶ Imagine how educators, students, and online Jewish archives could mutually benefit from a project-based partnership that incorporates primary sources -- articles, archival footage on YouTube and recently-filmed interviews⁷ -- into a creative and historically accurate digital retelling of events of the modern Jewish era, such as the Holocaust or the establishment of the State of Israel.

Whereas the *Chronicles* had to reconstruct the ancient experience in a manner that resembles historical fiction, the JTA Archive offers the news as it was delivered to policymakers, newsrooms and other leaders each day. With the benefit of both a paper of record and historical hindsight, teachers can present JTA articles to students and ask them to put themselves in the shoes of decision-makers at the time the events were unfolding. Students can role-play policy decisions based on the identical set of information that was available to leaders on any given date in history.

As students grow more comfortable with their ability to seek and assess information online, educators and information specialists associated with these respective archives should help students feel capable taking the next step: becoming editors. Dr. Brenna Gray, a professor at a university in British Columbia, found that her first-year history students were more motivated to learn and fact-check when told that their work would be posted to Wikipedia:

You are encouraged to share this article with colleagues. We ask only that you let people know that this article originally appeared in NewCAJE's online journal, *The Jewish Educator*. Other articles on this topic may be found on the NewCAJE website, www.newcaje.org.

“They were way more careful about citations and about information being correct,” she said. “The fact that Wikipedia is a public space where the information that they have researched is going to be read by other people ... that made them take the assignment much more seriously.”⁸

Given more opportunities to engage with and familiarize themselves with primary sources, students of Jewish history would feel more at ease representing a Jewish perspective of history beyond high school -- whether as Wikipedia editors or college campus activists.

As more Jewish articles and multimedia are digitized and distributed online, more potential partnerships between archives, schools, and other Jewish educational institutions will present themselves. If realized, these partnerships will go a long way towards ensuring that an informed Jewish perspective of history will endure for generations to come.

ENDNOTES:

1. Examples include: the BJPA Berman Jewish Policy Archive, the Jewish Women's Archive and the Spielberg Jewish Film Archive, all great educational resources in their own right.
2. Sample of scholarly articles related to the integration of digital archives and education- <http://j.mp/iUiXe9>
3. http://www.urimpublications.com/Merchant2/merchant.mv?Screen=PROD&Store_Code=U&Product_Code=ch
4. <http://www.cdelkin.com/haggadah/5770.htm>
5. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BlxToZmJwdI>
6. For example, initiatives like [Toldot Yisrael](#) and the [Jewish Partisan Educational Foundation](#)
7. <http://news.nationalpost.com/2011/05/30/can-wikipedia-improve-students-work/#more-67693>

Adam Soclof is the Editorial Assistant and Marketing Associate for JTA who blogs for the JTA Archive. A University of Michigan alum, Adam was a two-year Schusterman Insight Fellow in New York and a PresentTense Fellow. He has taught at the Nesiya Institute, Camp Stone and the Hebrew Day School of Ann Arbor. Adam is currently an advisor to Bible Raps. The views expressed in this essay belong to him, and do not necessarily reflect those of his employer.
asoclof@ita.org