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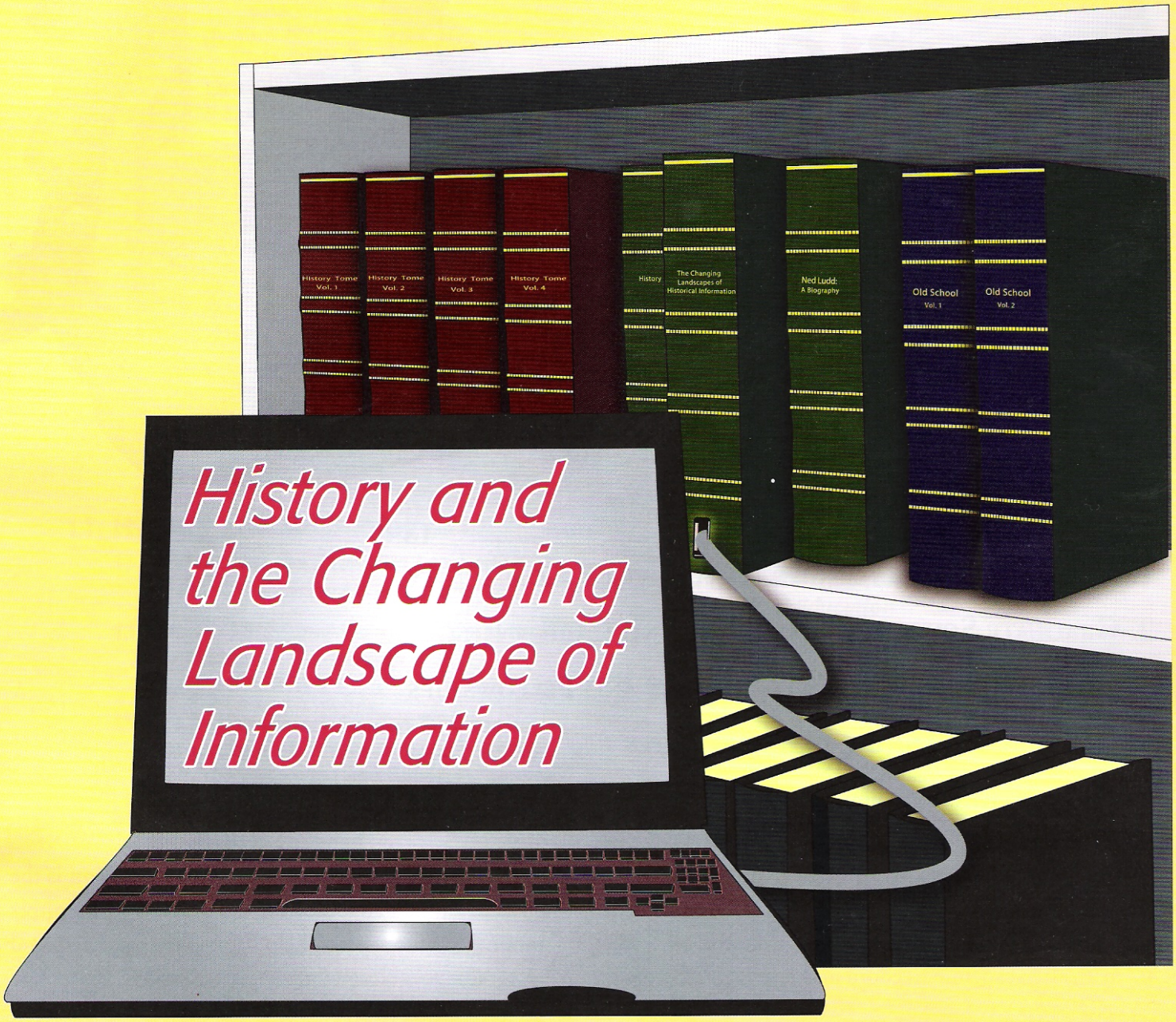

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Dr. Tom Ewing
Virginia Tech.
Dept.of Hist. 0117
Major Williams 439
Blacksburg VA 24061-0001

The Digital History Reader: Teaching Resources for United States and European History

By E. Thomas Ewing and Robert P. Stephens

Did the First World War cause the revolution in Russia? Why did Virginia colonists decide to import slaves from Africa? What was the relationship between abolitionism and the struggle for women's rights? What did the American Revolution bring to the population that was not white, Christian, male, and propertied? What were the everyday politics of dissent on campus in the 1960s? How have demographic patterns shaped social and political change in recent European history?

These are just a few of the questions featured in the new *Digital History Reader*. Created by a group of historians, secondary education specialists, and educational technologists at Virginia Tech, the *Digital History Reader* provides instructors and students with free, peer-reviewed materials designed to enhance the teaching and learning of history (see Table I for project team).[1] Researched and written by historians and tested in university classrooms, the *Digital History Reader* provides a comprehensive and engaging approach to key topics in United States and European history.

Purpose and Goals

The *Digital History Reader* attempts to deal with a specific set of problems facing larger universities in recent years. Even as state legislatures have repeatedly cut funding for higher education, student populations have grown and class sizes at universities have increased. The institution of core curricula has resulted in an explosion in the number of students taking large survey classes in United States, European, and world history. This set of problems and the desire to teach the close reading of primary documents even in a large classroom setting led the team at Virginia Tech to search for ways to harness technology and adapt the goals of a small class to a larger number of students. Our goal was to push students to wrestle with the building blocks of historical interpretation rather than simply absorbing information from lectures and textbooks.

Module Design

The *Digital History Reader* adopts an inquiry-based learning model in which each module is based around a question that can be answered with the body of primary sources provided. The 18 modules in the *Digital History Reader* address critical questions appropriate for introductory and advanced courses in United States and European history (see table II for a list of modules). An introductory module, "How to Use the *Digital History Reader*," provides instructors and students with an overview of module structure as well as suggestions in how to approach each section. The individual modules all follow a standard structure. A short **Introduction** defines the historical question for the students to consider throughout the module. The **Context** section contains an approximately 2,000-word narrative that provides the historical background necessary for the students to understand the central question and place the primary documents within a larger framework. The **Evidence** section is the heart of the module; it includes a broad range of primary source materials, including texts, photographs, political cartoons, posters, songs, video clips, and recorded speeches, that allow the student to

The Digital History Project Team

Tom Ewing (History, Project Director)

Robert Stephens (History)

Marian Mollin (History)

David Hicks (School of Education)

Amy Nelson (History)

Hayward "Woody" Farrar (History)

Kathleen Jones (History)

Mark Barrow (History)

Daniel Thorp (History)

C. Edward Watson (Educational Technologies)

Jane Lehr (Science and Technology Studies)

explore possible answers to the initial historical question. After students complete the evidence section, the **Assignment** section allows students to gauge their own comprehension with a self-test and offers suggestions for written and in-class exercises. The **Conclusion** returns to the central question and asks students to consider the larger historical significance of the evidence they have contemplated. Finally, the **Resource** section lists published and online sources that allow students to further explore the topic.

The *Digital History Reader* focuses on individuated, compact questions, but these questions have been carefully chosen to introduce students to a wide array of historiographical trends and historical methodologies. Students are faced not only with questions about political choices and economic trends but also with questions about environmental history, labor history, demography, and popular culture. They are asked to evaluate not just written documents, but also graphs and charts, photographs, prints, posters, and audio and video clips. At the same time, the modules introduce students to fundamental concepts of historical research and writing, such as source attribution and evaluation, demography and statistics, and causation. They seek, in other words, to teach the kind of skills that are fundamental to our research and our teaching.

While many historical web sites simply reproduce the traditional printed document reader in electronic format, the *Digital History Reader* takes advantage of a multimedia environment that allows for audio and video materials as well as large numbers of images. In this age of media saturation, it is incumbent upon history teachers to teach students how to "read" non-traditional documents, such as photographs, film, and sound. The Web opens up new possibilities for integrating multimedia into the students' learning outside classroom hours. In the module on the 1917 Revolution in Russia, for example, photographs of soldiers, proclamations by political parties, maps of the front lines, pro- and anti-regime posters, and protest songs recreate in a virtual environment the kinds of materials that shaped the experiences and attitudes of people who lived through this era of change. In the module on Richard Nixon's presidency, students can listen to the audio and read the transcripts from key speeches that defined this transformative moment in American history. In these ways, the modules respond to both the expanded capacities of the Web and students' expectations of a multimedia environment without sacrificing the rigor of historical analysis or the integrity of the documentary evidence.

These modules are not designed to be the single cure for teaching history in the digital age but rather are meant to inspire innovative approaches that can be adapted to a range of classroom situations and needs. While each module is perhaps longer and more complex than required for simply "covering" materials in a standards-based curriculum, these materials are perfectly suited for a teacher seeking to provide a model of how students can and should engage on a deeper level with the complexities of historical analysis. These materials are primarily designed for university faculty accustomed to dealing with large lecture classes, where the logistics of managing large numbers in combination with students' diminished expectations of workload requirements, present particular challenges. The focus on primary documents

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and synthesis also makes these modules valuable for faculty teaching historical methods to undergraduates. For high school teachers, these materials are well-suited for courses, such as the Advanced Placement curriculum, which require students to practice "Document Based Questions," as the modules contain a wide variety of historical sources that promote understanding of a significant historical question.

Student Reaction and Feedback

Students' evaluations of the *Digital History Reader* confirm the efficacy of this approach. During the past two academic years, hundreds of Virginia Tech undergraduates have used these modules in their European and United States history courses. The survey responses of students enrolled in European history courses taught by Heather Gumbert suggest that the modules are achieving their purpose of promoting historical knowledge in an easily accessible and intellectually sound way. In an online survey, completed by over 300 respondents, 90 percent agreed that the Introduction section provided a clear and well-defined historical question, 83 percent agreed that the Evidence section provided clear and comprehensible historical materials, 87 percent agreed that the Context section provided adequate information to understand the historical question, and 72 percent agreed that the Assignment section provided activities that focused understanding of the historical question.

In their written evaluations as well as during classroom discussion, students responded positively to the range and quality of the primary sources. One student wrote: "I enjoy looking over the primary sources and attempting to draw conclusions from them. It is something that historians get to do and I found it interesting from a historical perspective." Another student opined: "The evidence section was interesting, because it gave you a chance to read what people were saying at the time." Referring to the Assignment section of the module, another student claimed: "I did like the quiz; it helped me to read carefully and retain information." Asked which section of the module they found "most interesting," several students praised the use of cartoons in the Evidence section of the module on women's suffrage. "It was interesting to look at some views instead of read about them," one student wrote. Another student "found the evidence section of the module to be the most interesting. After reading the writings and political cartoons of those on both sides of issue, I had a much better understanding of the topic." Evaluating all components of the module on the generational revolt of 1968, another student concluded: "I liked the evidence portion of the module because it provided the user with support for what was previously discussed in the context part, and was an additional tool for understanding the topic." Responding to the module

List of Modules

United States History

Introduction: How to Use the *Digital History Reader*

Demographic Catastrophe: What Happened to the Native Population After 1492

Unthinking Decision: Why Did Slavery Emerge in Virginia?

A Revolution for Whom?

How did Abolitionism Lead to the Struggle for Women's Rights?

Industrialization and Its Discontents: The Great Strike of 1877

"Which Side are You On?" The Flint Sit Down Strike of 1936–1937

Did World War II Advance Minorities, Women, and the Poor?

Jackie Robinson, Civil Rights Leader?

The 1960s: Who Won? The Politics of Dissent on Campus

How Will Historians Treat Richard Nixon?

European History

Introduction: How to Use the *Digital History Reader*

Can Humans Control the Natural World? Urban Landscapes and Perceptions of Nature

Should Women Vote? The Politics of Suffrage

1917: Did the War Cause a Revolution?

The End of Optimism? The Great Depression in Europe

1968: A Generation in Revolt?

A European Crisis? Demographics and Immigration

on European urbanization and perceptions of nature, a student remarked: "I really like using the module. The information is presented in several ways, texts, maps, literary examples, and cartoon examples, which help students to learn the material more easily." These evaluations suggest that the *Digital History Reader* works because it encourages students to evaluate primary documents and to think synthetically about significant historical questions.[2]

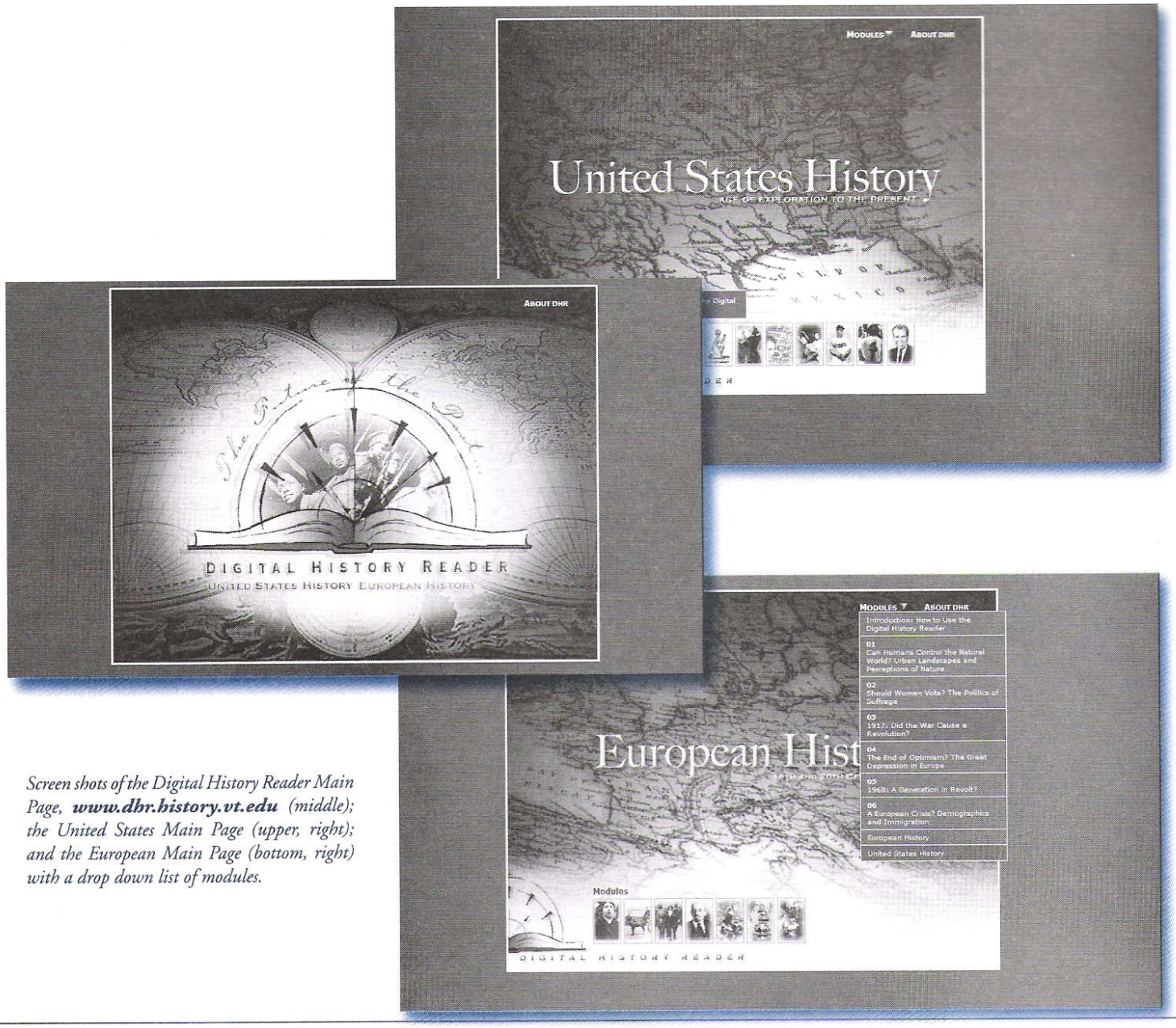
The *Digital History Reader* teaches students that history is the product of complex analysis and narrative invention. By approaching a topic in terms of historical inquiry, students learn that history is a creative process, made by people, shaped by their actions and decisions. While the online format allows for innovative uses of multimedia source materials, the real contribution of this project is the focus on the questions that historians ask about the past and the effort to guide students to engage in their own processes of historical inquiry. Rather than allowing history to become a fixed topic taught by rote methods, this approach encourages students to grapple with the challenges and problems that people encountered as they made history through their actions and ideas.

E. Thomas Ewing is an associate professor in the Department of History at Virginia Tech. His publications include The Teachers of Stalinism *(2002); his current research is on gender and education in modern Russian history. Robert P. Stephens is an assistant professor in the Department of History at Virginia Tech. He is author of Germans on Drugs: The Complications of Modernization in Hamburg (2007); his current research is on cinematic narratives of addiction.*

Notes

1. The Digital History Reader has received financial support from the National Endowment for the Humanities, from the College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences, the Department of History, and the School of Education at Virginia Tech, and from Michael and Kristi Snyder and Ken Noe. The web site for the DHR is: www.dhr.history.vt.edu. Questions about the project may be directed to the project director: dhr@vt.edu.

2. In addition to the online surveys, modules have also been evaluated by a panel of historians and teacher educators from other universities. The surveys are available in the Assignment section of each module, and the project team continues to collect feedback from educators and students.



Screen shots of the Digital History Reader Main Page, ***www.dhr.history.vt.edu*** *(middle); the United States Main Page (upper, right); and the European Main Page (bottom, right) with a drop down list of modules.*