New Technologies and the Practice of Early Modern Global History: Studying Connection in a Connected World

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In 2018, we brought a small group of undergraduates to a lab to experience a virtual reality reconstruction of the Cambodian metropolis of Angkor at the height of the Khmer Empire's power and influence in the thirteenth century. The Virtual Angkor project, which was built from the ground up by a team of virtual history specialists, archaeologists, and historians, allows us to place students inside the Angkor Wat complex, to view the famous bas-reliefs firsthand, to sail down one of the hundreds of canals crisscrossing the city, to inspect a marketplace selling goods from across Southeast Asia and to watch as thousands of animated people and processions enter, exit, and circulate around the city. Once they slipped on the bulky virtual reality headsets, the experience was dizzying for students who jumped to move aside as processions passed, experienced vertigo as they looked down from elevated structures and became aware of the sun slowly rising in the sky above them.

The product of almost a decade of intensive 3-D modelling, the Virtual Angkor project is a particularly striking example of technologically driven interactive history that looks close to the immersive historical worlds that many of us imagined as children.[1] Other developments have been less visually arresting, building upon the promise of the internet and technology that has been widely available for decades now, but which represent no less of a sea change in the ways in which we can do research and engage with students. What follows is a personal overview of the developments and technologies that have had the greatest influence on my own practice as a teacher and student of early modern global history. It is not intended to be comprehensive or to cover the vast selection of online resources, databases, and technologies that have revolutionized the research and learning landscape in recent years. Instead, it focuses far more narrowly on three developments that have changed my own practice in the decade since I completed my PhD.

A World of Diplomacy

The opening up of the internet promised many things, only some of which have actually been delivered. For the history teacher, the internet promised a new space in which sources and materials could be placed online to be freely accessible to anyone. Teaching at a rural high school in Japan with few published resources but a good internet connection, I remember accessing the internet

[1]See www.virtualangkor.com.

History Sourcebooks Project soon after it came online under the direction of Paul Halsall in 1996.[2] The site has perhaps been used in more history classrooms than any other and it remains even now a hugely valuable resource. For the history researcher, especially those without the backing of a rich institution, the internet seemed to offer the possibility of sidestepping the long, rewarding, but often crushingly expensive research trip to archives scattered around the world. In the past decade, many archives, either working with their own resources or with commercial partners, have taken huge steps forward in making their collections accessible. For my own graduate students at a large state university in Australia, resources such as State Papers Online, 1509–1714, which offers a range of materials related to British foreign relations, have successfully removed multiple barriers to research for students with financial or family constraints that prevent them from embarking on long stays overseas.[3] Such sites offer a vast pool of resources awaiting discovery by the dedicated researcher; others transform the way we approach key topics in early modern history. One example is the Sejarah Nusantara online platform, which has provided a new way to visualize diplomatic connections across early modern Asia.

One of the distinguishing features of the early modern word was its unprecedented level of connection. For the first time, the world was bound together by maritime trade routes that encircled the globe, tying diverse states and societies together. In this connected world, the embassy and the diplomatic letter formed a key mechanism for cross-cultural contact. In recent years, scholars have started to look more closely at diplomatic encounters between Europe and Asia. Not surprisingly, much of the attention has focused on a string of large-scale embassies dispatched from Europe to rulers across Asia. Such embassies were high profile affairs; they were also frequently failures as ambassadors found themselves thrust into contact with states such as Mughal India or Tokugawa Japan that were equipped with military, economic, and often cultural resources far exceeding those wielded by the most powerful regimes in Europe. During such missions, European assertions about political rights and the proper order of international relations collided dramatically with the reality of a region dominated by Asian states. Equally important, these encounters were copiously documented. Many ambassadors such as the famous Thomas Roe who travelled to India in 1615 produced lengthy diaries describing every aspect of their interactions.

But as important as they were, such embassies were also extremely expensive, requiring months if not years of preparation. For this reason, they were only dispatched in exceptional circumstances when, for example, the accession of a

[2]See https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu.

[3]The State Papers Online is available at https://www.gale.com/uk/primary-sources/state-papers-online/. It should be noted that such resources that are produced in conjunction with commercial partners are extremely expensive for university libraries to subscribe to. My own students are fortunate to be enrolled in a large university with a library budget to match, but many other students at institutions with smaller budgets cannot take advantage of such resources.

new ruler required an intervention from the center. The more standard mechanism for interaction was the diplomatic letter, tens of thousands of which were sent out across the early modern period. Although they were often filled with boilerplate text about the need for friendly relations, the importance of such letters should not be underestimated. They formed, in the words of one scholar, the "sinews of . . . long-distance connections," vital instruments that made this period of globalization possible by providing a mechanism to bind together a diverse array of rulers, states, and markets.[4]

My own research focuses on diplomatic connections between the Dutch East India Company, a composite body that combined the attributes of both corporation and state, and polities across East and Southeast Asia. Around the turn of the millennium, Leonard Blussé, a towering figure in the field, published a string of important articles that called for a kind of new diplomatic history that would examine the long process through which the company found a place in wider diplomatic circuits while documenting the increasing prominence of its Asian headquarters, Batavia, as a regional center in its own right.[5] Since then a number of scholars have taken up Blussé's call, but the consistent focus has remained on individual relations, giving only a limited slice of a much wider picture.[6] This has changed, however, with the emergence of Sejarah Nusantara.[7]

On the most basic level, this groundbreaking project, which has so far resulted in the scanning of more than one million pages of original Dutch East India Company manuscript sources, makes available an array of sources housed in the Indonesian archives including previously neglected materials such as the Batavia Resolutions. It also, however, includes a series of more focused modules. At the center of the wider platform is Diplomatic Letters, 1625–1812, which collects and collates the diplomatic correspondence that flooded in and out of Batavia across close to two centuries. Its landing page provides a stunningly successful overview of company diplomacy that captures its size and diversity in a way

[4]Miles Ogborn, *Indian Ink: Script and Print in the Making of the English East India Company* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 38.

[5]Leonard Blussé, *Tussen Geveinsde Vrienden en Verklaarde Vijanden* (Amsterdam: Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen, 1999); Blussé, "Amongst Feigned Friends and Declared Enemies," in *Making Sense of Global History: The Nineteenth International Congress of the Historical Sciences Oslo 2000 Commemorative Volume*, ed. Sølvi Sogner (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2001); and Blussé, "Queen among Kings: Diplomatic Ritual at Batavia," in *Jakarta-Batavia*, ed. Kees Grijns and Peter Nas (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2000).

[6]See, for example, Carl Fredrik Feddersen, *Principled Pragmatism: VOC Interaction with Makassar 1637–68 and the Nature of Company Diplomacy* (Oslo: Nordic Open Access Scholarly Publishing, 2017).

[7]For more information on Sejarah Nusantara, see https://sejarah-nusantara.anri.go.id. The Corts Foundation (https://www.cortsfoundation.org) aims to contribute to an understanding of the Dutch presence and past in Asia by preserving records and making them freely accessible to the public and researchers. Its work focuses on Dutch East India Company materials in the National Archives of Indonesia as well as translations of the official Japanese publications of the war history series known as Senshi Sōsho.

not available to more conventional publications.[8] Browsing through the interface, one is struck first by the sheer number of letters. At time of writing, Diplomatic Letters allows you to search through a total of 8,568 missives exchanged between Batavia and an array of states ranging from tiny maritime port polities to sprawling territorial empires. In an important recent study, Jur Van Goor called the Dutch company a "mixed Asian-European state" that occupied a place alongside other Asian states in regional networks of diplomacy.[9] Diplomatic Letters shows this, revealing just how integral diplomacy was to the functioning of the Dutch empire and the full extent of the sprawling diplomatic network that radiated out from the walls of Castle Batavia.

At the same time, the search function allows researchers to impose more limited frames, thereby revealing new aspects of the company's engagement with Asia. Isolating the search to a single year provides a cross-section of diplomatic activity as the boundaries of the company's influence swelled or contracted. A search for 1680, for example, produces more than a hundred letters transiting in and out of Castle Batavia with two or three missives usually arriving or being dispatched every week. Isolating the search to a single state presents a pool of documents that shows the evolution of individual relations. Batavia, for example, exchanged close to four hundred letters with the powerful state of Ayutthaya (Siam). Equally important, Sejarah Nusantara provides a blueprint for how these sources can be used in the form of transcriptions, translations, and detailed open-access analyses of key letters by leading scholars. As one example, Bhawan Ruangsilp, a pioneering historian of the company's relations with Ayutthaya, discusses a letter sent on behalf of King Narai (r. 1656–88) to Batavia in 1683 that touches upon a wide range of issues from the conflict over the lucrative trade in deerskins to competing vassalage demands directed toward smaller polities that positioned themselves in defensive subordination to both Batavia and Ayutthaya.[10]

The result is both an unprecedented array of sources but also a model for how to use them. It is difficult to exaggerate the potential benefit of a resource that has contained within it dozens of student projects, dissertations, and, I have no doubt, future books. The field owes a great debt to the institutional participants of the project and to everyone who contributed to the vast task of sorting, copying, and analyzing these documents.

[8]See https://sejarah-nusantara.anri.go.id/diplomatic-letters/.

[9]Jur van Goor, *Jan Pieterszoon Coen, 1587–1629: Koopman-Koning in Azië* (Amsterdam: Boom Publishers, 2015), 522.

[10]Bhawan Ruangsilp, "Letter from the Phrakhlang on behalf of the King of Siam Narai (r. 1656–1688) to the Supreme Government, 27 January 1683," in *Harta Karun: Hidden Treasures on Indonesian and Asian-European History from the VOC-archives in Jakarta* (Jakarta: Arsip Nasional Republik Indonesia, 2014), document 18.

Classroom Crowdsourcing

It is a much-repeated truism in academic circles that the second book is more difficult to complete than the first. It is also a point that I never properly grasped until I embarked on a sprawling project without the apparatus of support that is built into the dissertation process. For historians across the world, the vision of the solitary researcher working alone and undisturbed in the archives until they emerge clutching both their findings and a manuscript wrapped around them remains a powerful image. What this misses is the fact that technology combined with a group of highly motivated students can provide a momentum capable of accelerating traditional research trajectories.

For years now, I have been working on a book focused on a controversial early modern legal case, the Amboina conspiracy trial that took place on a remote island in eastern Indonesia. The case was one of the first of its kind, involving a combination of Asian and European protagonists all operating far from their home states. In 1623, a Japanese mercenary called Shichizō was arrested for asking suspicious questions about a Dutch East India Company castle on Amboina. He was tortured until he confessed that he had joined a plot orchestrated by a group of English merchants based nearby to seize control of the fortification and ultimately to rip the spice-rich island from the company's grasp. Two weeks later, Dutch authorities executed twenty-one alleged conspirators, sparking immediate outrage from English authorities and a dispute that would endure for centuries to come. Because of this long controversy, the Amboina trial generated a massive archive of legal documents including multiple depositions and witness statements.

For centuries now, scholarly writing on Amboina has been dominated by a long and frequently heated debate as to whether there was actually a plot to seize control of the fort and hence if the charges leveled against the English and the Japanese were justified. Stepping gingerly at first, I quickly found my own research pulled into this familiar debate and with it into the morass of the Amboina archive, which is filled with hundreds of clashing documents produced by warring groups of witnesses. By 2014, with no real end in sight, I decided I had to try something different. One inspiration came from an unlikely place. In the minutes before one of my classes started, I noticed that many of my students were talking about a long-concluded trial in a distant part of the world. What I was witnessing was the remarkable worldwide response to the first season of the podcast *Serial*, which focused on a 1999 murder case in Baltimore. I watched in wonder as students painstakingly dissected new pieces of evidence, often devoting hour after hour of discussion to the details of a decades-old case. This was not unique to my university. The average *Serial* episode was downloaded more than three million times, and it generated a tremendous response as the public logged vast numbers of hours working through key pieces of evidence.

Struggling with my own contested case, I wondered if I could not do something similar albeit on a much smaller scale. Working with the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media at George Mason University, we built a website designed to lead students through the Amboina conspiracy trial.[11] At its center we placed an interactive trial engine called What's Your Verdict that presented the most compelling evidence offered by the Dutch, which we dubbed the prosecution, and their English opponents, the defense. Breaking down a complex case into constituent parts, we arrived at six key questions that have to be answered in order to come to a verdict. For each, the site presents the arguments mobilized by both sides in conjunction with the most important pieces of evidence. To tap into a different kind of expertise with trials and testimony, we asked a distinguished London-based barrister to work through all the materials. Generously agreeing to waive his fees, he ploughed his way through a huge stack of Amboina files and then sat through hour after hour of filmed interviews designed to guide students through the materials and the challenges of weighing up divergent testimony. Finally, we created a large repository of additional material and documents related to the case.

Once it was ready, the site was trialed with multiple classes at Monash University, then at Brandeis University in the United States, and later at Leiden University in the Netherlands. In the first iteration, students worked through the site and then came to class prepared to debate their conclusions. In the second, we restaged the trial with students taking on different roles either researching the case or making their arguments directly before a panel of undergraduate judges. The experience was the highlight of my teaching career so far while also upending some basic assumptions I had carried for years.

First, the Amboina experiment turned an ubiquitous presence in the classroom from a bitter foe into a reliable ally. Virtually every student who comes into a history classroom today has access to a smartphone, a versatile piece of technology with significant computing power and reliable internet access. In history classes with their focus on close analysis and discussion, the phone is frequently seen as the enemy of the instructor, a source of distraction and diversion from the material at hand. But it can also be turned into a key educational tool. In my Amboina classes, having a pool of archival sources online in a mobile-friendly platform made the phone an indispensable resource that could be used to dig more deeply into material as students struggled to find any advantage in their competing presentations.

Second, having dozens of pairs of new eyes examining familiar material proved a revelation for me. Crucially, my starting point for the class was not (as we are so often trained) that of a credentialed academic prepared to deliver an authoritative lecture but rather a frank presentation of myself as a fellow researcher struggling to work their way through a mass of material. Students

[11]https://amboyna.org.

responded accordingly. Although some tossed off a verdict after racing through the materials, many others confided to me that they had become engrossed by the details of the trial, trawling through the material and coming back again and again to key points. By homing in on points that I had dismissed too quickly and forcing me to defend lazy assumptions in class, these students helped me think more deliberately through the mass of Amboina evidence.

Even more striking was the fact that this feedback came not only from my own students but (thanks to the generosity of colleagues overseas) from a committed cohort of undergraduates at other institutions where the exercise was trialed. The result was a significant burst of momentum that carried me forward when I might have considered abandoning the project for something smaller. By relinquishing control of some of my materials and placing them online, I gained dozens of fellow researchers who helped me pick my way through a case that I had struggled with for years while fueling me with an enthusiasm that brought me back to the manuscript with fresh vigor.[12]

Connecting Undergraduate Research

We exist in a remarkably connected world in which it is possible to have a video chat with almost anyone via the push of a single button on a device. And yet most student research seldom pushes beyond the boundaries of a single institution. The International Conference for Undergraduate Research (ICUR) represents a dramatic change that harnesses the power of technology to do something that would not have been possible just a few years earlier.[13] The great innovation of ICUR is to gather together hundreds of students across five continents and multiple institutions to present their work in real time before a global audience. A typical session might have panelists in two countries combined with an audience in the third all connected via video streaming which enables the free exchange of ideas. At the time of writing, the original pairing of Monash University and the University of Warwick has expanded to encompass nine institutions, including Kyushu University in Japan, Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, and the University of Brawijaya in Indonesia. Students from each of these universities participate in a simultaneous conference, creating a monumental twenty-four-hour live event bringing together researchers across multiple time zones.

Early modern history is a vibrant, exciting but also generally smaller field in which it is difficult to create a sense of collegiality particularly among undergraduates who might only take a limited number of classes in this area. ICUR provides a way to use technology to build community. In 2017, I watched in delight as students in Session11A from Monash in Australia and Baruch College in New

[12]Adam Clulow, *Amboina, 1623: Fear and Conspiracy on the Edge of Empire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).

[13]For more information on ICUR, see their website www.icurportal.com.

York presented a world-class panel of papers with an early modern focus. Such events enable students to share research while also connecting them to similarly engaged researchers without requiring long flights or expensive stays overseas. The result is a reimagining of what the conference can do that shows the power of student research.

Final Thoughts

For all its many joys, the world of universities can look gloomy in 2018. Tenure-track positions seem to be drying up, and there is a relentless downward pressure on university funding. But in other ways, this is a particularly exciting time, both for students and faculty, who confront new challenges but also myriad opportunities as technology shifts the contours of what is possible in unprecedented ways. The way ahead will doubtless not always be smooth, but looking back to when I first made that leap to graduate school, I see that the possibilities for research and pedagogy have expanded in ways that make me more than a little optimistic for the field of early modern studies in 2018. ❧