The Webarchive in the Age of Abundance? A source critique

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In parallel to the ongoing digitization of existing archival records, historical scholarship and archival practice are increasingly confronted with digital-born sources, among whose certainly most striking manifestations are multimodal compounds and hypertext on the World Wide Web (Brügger 2018). The resultant sudden ubiquity of sources for a wide variety of research questions as well as the high everyday relevance of digital forms of communication, have already led some researchers to coining the notion of a dawning "Age of Abundance" for digital history research (Milligan 2019). Such optimism was accompanied by the promise of new technologies, such as the creation of user-generated, standardized web archives, to democratize the process of archiving itself. In our paper, we ask how web archiving can be a possible solution to the overabundance of digitally born sources in an "Age of Abundance" on the one hand, and critically question the epistemological and methodological challenges this approach poses to research on the other. We argue that the archiving of digital mass sources must go hand in hand with the increased use of well-scaled digital methods such as distant or scalable reading, which themselves have to be critically assessed from a methodological point of view.

 In particular, we show that archiving tools - often accessible in an egalitarian, low-threshold way - are regularly confronted with highly complex data extraction and processing procedures. We also problematize the notion of abundance itself by asking about the limits of what can be archived, for example through the digital fences of content providers and communication platforms or between the open and dark web. This also includes the source-critical question of how selection processes in the creation of web archives as well as preservation processes of web archives as repositories can contribute to the formation of new canons and which online knowledge orders they reflect.

Brügger, Niels (2018): „Understanding the Archived Web as a Historical Source". In: idem and Ian Milligan (Eds.): The SAGE Handbook of Web History. Los Angeles, Calif. e.a.: SAGE, pp. 16–29.

 Milligan, Ian (2019): History in the Age of Abundance? How the Web Is Transforming Historical Research. Montreal & Kingston / London / Chicago: McGill-Queeen's University Press.