

Digital Tools in Media History: Benefits of Interrelated Databases in Research on Magic Lantern Slides

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In this presentation, I will show in which way the interrelated web database LUCERNA (www.slides.uni-trier.de) served as a tool in my PhD research on popular images of the Netherlands and the Dutch in the long nineteenth century. A relevant medium in my research are magic lantern slides.

The magic lantern was the most popular visual mass medium in western societies in the nineteenth century; it is similar to modern slide projectors. Richard Crangle, researcher, collector of lantern slide catalogs and programmer of LUCERNA, estimates that the British production between 1880 and 1914 alone consisted of at least 9.000 lantern slide sets with about 250.000 different images. In spite of its cultural and economic significance, academic studies on the magic lantern are surprisingly scarce and the state of documentation and preservation is poor. Although many museums, university collections and archives hold lantern slides in their collections this material is generally not systematically collected or well inventoried. Lantern slides, apparatuses, and other related material (e.g. manuals and catalogues) are mostly held by private collectors.

The fact that the material is scattered, largely inaccessible and, to begin with, largely unknown to researchers hinders its inclusion in fields where it could be relevant, e.g. cultural history, visual culture, media history or Victorian studies.

In my research, I was confronted with the fact that no inventory of Dutch subjects in lantern slide sets existed (let alone a catalog with lantern slides, information on manufactures, year of first publication, number of slides per set or sales figures), I needed first to identify the slides I saw in private collections. Next to slides, I have gathered information from catalogs, advertisings, trade press, and newspaper articles. Working with heterogeneous sources created the need to relate the information in a way that rendered justice to the material's complexity.

In this paper, I will especially address the advantages of digital, interrelated databases over non-digital tools for the identification of material. The possibility to connect new data from archival research with existing data in LUCERNA enables a comparison of data, which is a precondition to verify information from different sources and get reliable data.

After demonstrating how I used LUCERNA to identify the slide sets *Picturesque Holland* and *Picturesque Holland/A Visit to Holland*, I will discuss the advantages and limitations of working with LUCERNA and suggest criteria from a user's perspective for other database projects on complex and interrelated material. I will end with an outlook on possible theoretical approaches in media history that benefit from documentation of lantern slide sets (about the Netherlands or other) and summarize how tools of the digital humanities can be helpful in 'classical', qualitative research designs. The skills of interpretation and source critique, so my conclusion, are not rendered superfluous by new, digital tools.