

Researcher finds diary entries are akin to tweets

June 4 2010, By George Lowery

(PhysOrg.com) -- Lee Humphreys, assistant professor of communication, is studying the stunning similarities between 18th- and 19th-century diary entries and Twitter tweets.

The day after Lee Humphreys, Cornell assistant professor of communication, presented her paper on the remarkable similarities between [Twitter](#) tweets and diary entries of the late 18th and early 19th centuries at a conference in Atlanta, a story about her work appeared on a Wall Street Journal blog. Two days later, the New Yorker magazine took note of her work.

The Twittersphere had scooped the story.

"We tend to think of new media as entirely new and different," said Humphreys, who has studied social media for five years. "But often we see people using new media for old problems that people have always had to think about and engage with."

In reviewing volumes of diaries, mostly written by women, Humphreys found many terse records about what was happening in daily life in the same style demanded by Twitter's 140-character limit. Many diary entries ranged, for example, from what was for dinner to reports of deaths, births, marriages and travel, such as "April 7. Mr. Fiske Buried. April 27. Made Mead. At the assembly," from the 1770 diary of Mary Vial Holyoke of Salem, Mass.

Diarists wrote under the constraints of small notebooks that allotted only a few lines per date entry, and some historians argue that diary writers -- who lived busy, stressful lives in a time when leisure existed only for the rich -- found such constraints freeing. Diaries of the era were intended to be semi-public documents to be shared with others, Humphreys said. The modern notion of confessional, reflective entries hadn't come into play.

"Our whole notion of privacy is a relatively modern phenomenon," she added. "You really don't get a sense of personal, individual self until the end of the 19th century, so it makes perfect sense that diaries or journals prior to that time were much more social in nature."

During the weeklong Computer Human Interaction conference where Humphreys presented her findings, the Library of Congress announced April 14 -- via Twitter -- that it would archive all public tweets tweeted since March 2006. This will include tweets from organizations and corporations that produce "a really interesting slice of cultural products ranging from the individual mom who's tweeting about her kids not going down for a nap to Starbucks or GM, who are using Twitter to promote their products and services and engage their customers."

"Tweets capture a moment in history in a really interesting way," Humphreys said. "You have everything from reports from the Iranian election to what people had for breakfast to Haiti relief. The whole spectrum of events is being chronicled through this technology, and the fact that it's public already represents a unique opportunity for the Library of Congress to include in its archive."

In researching Twitter messages for 18 months, Humphreys has been coding tweets, with the help of undergraduate research assistants, by content in such areas as work, health, home and religion, and will analyze the results over the summer.

"I'm in the process of getting a grant to study the privacy implications of Twitter as well as people's motivations, intentions and practices," Humphreys said. "We know Twitter tends to be used by urban, younger populations, so it's not representing everybody, and no culture can be reduced to the texts that it produces. So as great as it is to have these diaries and these [tweets](#), we recognize them as incomplete representations of society. It's easy to see that with the diaries but it's just as important to see that with Twitter."

Provided by Cornell University

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