Introduction

This article explores the impact on research of the digitisation of collections of historic newspapers around the world since the early 2000s beginning with a short history of newspapers as a primary source for marketing history. It draws on my own experience of using newspapers for historical research, which began in the pre-digital late 1970s. This article has also been informed by the symposia and events organised by British Library Labs project since its foundation in 2013 (Mahey, 2021). They have explored in great depth every aspect of the digitisation of historic newspapers in Britain and elsewhere in the world. I would like to thank Mahendra Mahey, the manager of British Library Labs from 2013 to 2021, for introducing me to digital scholarship.

The Covid 19 virus pandemic which began in late 2019 highlighted the value of digitisation for marketing history research. The pandemic led to the closure of libraries and archives across the world for prolonged periods of time. This has presented an unprecedented challenge for marketing historians because it denied them access to primary sources which would normally form a major part of their research. Digitised historic newspapers available online have provided at least a partial alternative to the primary sources which were placed out of reach during the pandemic. However, the online subscription based digitised historic newspaper collections which are available only at a few university libraries or at national libraries mostly became inaccessible. Furthermore, digitised historic newspaper collections available from genealogical websites are only available on a subscription basis outside of selected public libraries, most which became temporarily inaccessible. This has reinforced the value of the online digitised historic newspaper collections which are available free of charge to users.

This article will focus on online digitised historic newspaper collections which are available free of charge to users after first reviewing the history of the use of historic newspapers as a primary source for marketing historians.

Historic Newspapers as a Primary Source for Marketing Historians in the Pre-Digital Era

Physical Copies

In the pre-digital era, historians generally eschewed using historic newspapers as a primary source for their research because they were very time consuming to use (Secker, 1999, p. 66, 127). Originally, back copies of newspapers were preserved in bound volumes in libraries and archives. This meant that unless your research was restricted to local history, a visit to a national collection of bound historic newspapers such as those held at the British Museum, or the Library of Congress was required. Once at the national collection, the researcher had to handle cumbersome and heavy bound volumes which required physical strength which they might lack.
A second challenge was presented by a switch during the last three decades of the nineteenth century by newspaper publishers to paper made from highly acidic wood pulp. This type of paper, especially when it is not stored in temperature-controlled environment, eventually becomes extremely brittle (Mills, pp. 466-467). Thus, as the researcher turned the pages of the bound volume they crumbled to dust in their fingers. However, it should be noted that Nicholson Baker (2002, pp. 5-8, 31) has challenged the assertions made by some senior librarians during the early 2000s that most of the bound physical copies of nineteenth and twentieth century newspapers in libraries and archives across the world were in advanced state of decay. He suggests in fact these librarians were more concerned about the space taken up by volumes of bound historic newspapers. In fact, if they were stored in temperature-controlled environments even newspapers printed on poor quality paper could be preserved for many more years. A third challenge was that only a handful of world newspapers such as the London Times and the New York Times had a published index. Furthermore, these indices indexed news reports and editorials but not advertisements.

Microfilms

During the 1930s, librarians at Harvard and Yale Universities, the New York Public Library, and the Library of Congress began to adopt a new technological solution to the challenge of preserving historic newspapers, the microfilm (Terry, 2009, p. 55). University of Kentucky librarian Kopana Terry (2009, p. 55) has observed that “polyester-based silverhalide microfilm is a proven preservation medium that can last up to 500 years under the right conditions.” Libraries and later commercial publishers began to microfilm historic newspapers especially nationally important newspapers such as the London Times, the New York Times, and the Washington Post. By the early 1950s the American Newspapers on Microfilm directory listed several thousand newspaper titles which had been microfilmed. The list included many important American newspapers of national importance such as the New York Times, the Chicago Daily News and the New Orleans Times-Picayune (Burlie Brown, 1953, p. 515). During the same period major libraries outside the United States followed in the footsteps of the American pioneers. For example, the British Museum’s Newspaper Library at Colindale in North London began microfilming historic newspapers in the 1950s. In 1971, a dedicated microfilm unit was established. Sandy Ryan (2014) of the British Library has observed that “without the large-scale microfilming programmes undertaken in the 1970s and onwards, a significant portion of our content would simply be unavailable today in any form.” Meanwhile in the United States a growing number of universities acquired microfilm collections of historic newspapers, a good example being the University of Virginia.
While microfilming historic newspapers provided at least a temporary solution to preserving fragile historic artefacts, for historians, microfilms created new challenges. First, the quality of filming was extremely variable. In some cases, the images were immaculate copies of the originals. At the opposite extreme, the images were over-exposed and barely legible, and in some cases unreadable. Poor quality reproductions were especially problematic if the library which held the original bound volumes of the newspapers destroyed them to save space after they were microfilmed. Baker (2002, pp. 11-13, 19-21) has observed that libraries have generally either destroyed physical copies of newspapers after they been microfilmed or sold them to newspaper dealers who break up bound volumes to sell them as individual issues in a vinyl sleeve to private collectors. Second, most of the microfilming was in black and white. This meant colour inserts such as magazines were reproduced in black and white. This means marketing historians are usually unable to view colour advertising in colour if they are using microfilmed historic newspapers. Baker (2002, p. 210a) provides an example of an original colour page from a February 1912 issue of the New York *World* and the illegible black and white New York Public Library microfilm image of the same page. Third, microfilms were extremely time consuming to use. Unlike with bound volumes there is no practical method of fast forwarding if you are searching for historic advertising. As a doctoral student during the early 1980s it took me two weeks to search through two decades of the microfilmed *San Francisco Chronicle*. Aside from being time consuming to use, using microfilms is very hard on the researcher’s eyes. Microfilm readers often do not produce images of broadsheet newspapers at a high enough resolution. This is especially an issue if you are searching for small advertisements for specific businesses from the period before the adoption of larger illustrated display advertisements. I really struggled in the late 1990s when I was searching for small advertisements placed by Swabian immigrant businesses using microfilms of mid-nineteenth newspapers published in Lynchburg, Virginia (Hawkins, 2000). Fourth, Baker (2002, pp. 41-6) observes that newspaper microfilms degrade over time. If the microfilm of the newspaper is the only surviving copy, this means the information embodied in the film will eventually be completely lost for posterity.

**The Digitisation of Historic Newspapers**

1. **Introduction of Technology**

The development of technology in the late twentieth century that allowed the creation of high-quality scanned images of printed artefacts has transformed the preservation and accessibility of historic newspapers (Terras, 2011, 3-14). Furthermore, optical character recognition (OCR) software allows researchers to undertake key word searches. Unlike the printed indices to newspapers of record such as the *New York Times*, search engines
employing OCR can be used to search for advertisements. However, OCR has some limitations. When historic
bound volumes of newspapers are being digitised, there is a trade-off between the quantity of newspaper pages
digitised and the quality of the OCR applied. It is likely that commercial publishers such as ProQuest have
sought to maximise the quality of the OCR applied to newspapers such as the New York Times. However, OCR
is unlikely to ever find every instance of a search term. This is especially an issue with advertising which
employs non-standard typescript. Furthermore, the newspaper copy is imperfect as is sometimes the case,
especially before the late nineteenth century, it will result in OCR failing to identify the search term. There is
also another issue with historic German language newspapers, especially ones published in the nineteenth
century and earlier centuries printed with Gothic German typescript. Keyword searches where OCR software
has been applied to newspapers printed using Gothic typescript probably only has a success rate of fifty per cent
or less.

2. Free vs. Subscription Based Digitised Newspapers

The London Times and the New York Times were probably the first newspapers in the world to digitise their
historic archive of back issues. The Times Digital Archive was the first online digitised newspaper collection of
British newspapers. It was created by Gale (then known as Thomson Gale Publishers), which launched it in
2002. By the end of that year all the issues of the newspaper published between 1785 and 1985 had been
digitised. By the end of the following year all the remaining issues had also been digitised (Oceanic Exchanges,
2021). Meanwhile in January 2001 publisher Bell & Howell had made a licensing agreement with the New York
Times to digitise all its back issues. The project was completed by the company the following year, which in the
meantime had been renamed ProQuest. ProQuest sold the completed product by annual subscription to libraries
also subsequently made a separate agreement with Amazon Web Services to make all the digitised historic news
stories available to viewers of its website. This project was completed in 2006. From 2008 news stories from its
foundation in 1858 to 1922 were available free of charge online for many years to everyone anywhere in the
world with access to the internet (Gottfrid, 2008; Pérez-Peña, 2008). However, the search engine only accesses
news stories and editorials. It does not access advertisements. Since June 2021, the New York Times has
restricted content available via its website to subscribers to the various editions of the digital version of its daily
newspaper.

No other daily newspaper publisher has copied the model adopted by the pioneer, the New York Times,
making a substantial proportion of its digitised historic archive available to readers of the digital version of their
publication. Instead, a significant number of the surviving prominent national newspapers around the world, especially in Britain, the United States and Canada, have sought to monetise their historic archives in partnership with the companies that previously microfilmed them, in particular ProQuest, Gale, NewsBank, Digitorial, Ancestry, and DC Thomson. It is worth noting that only ProQuest’s version of the digitised New York Times historic archive of back issues provides access to advertisements. The other version is of less use to marketing historians because the search engine only provides access to news reports and editorials. There is no doubt that the digitisation by commercial organisations of prominent national newspapers has been extremely beneficial for marketing historians. However, there is a downside. These digitised newspapers can only be accessed at subscribing libraries. Furthermore, even national libraries such as the Library of Congress and the British Library do not have subscriptions to every digitised newspaper title. This means in the pre-pandemic era researchers often had to visit several libraries to access all the titles required for their research. There is a further downside. British university libraries which hold subscriptions generally for contractual reasons restrict access to students and staff of their institution. I am only able to access the digitised historic newspapers titles subscribed to by the London School of Economics Library because I am an alumnus. In the United States when I visited the University of Cincinnati Library in late summer 2019, I was able to access the digitised New York Times, but only on one of two ancient computer terminals made available to visitors. The librarian observed I was not permitted to use the other terminals because they had been paid for with student fees.

3. Examples of Digitised Newspaper Collections from Around the World

Most historic newspaper titles around the world are no longer still in publication. So, there is no publisher available to monetise the archive. So, public institutions with collections of historic newspapers who wish to digitise their archives of back copies have to find the funds from some other source. Since the digitisation of historic newspaper archives became feasible American publicly funded libraries have taken the position since these archives were acquired using taxpayer dollars, after they have been digitised, they too have to be made free of charge to every taxpayer. Hence the Brooklyn Public Library -- which was probably the first public library to digitise a historic newspaper archive, the Brooklyn Eagle -- created a website, Brooklyn Newsstand (2021), for the digitised back issues accessible to everyone free of charge. For practical reasons, it was not feasible to restrict access to the New York City taxpayers. Thus, the archive is available free of charge to users with access to the internet everywhere in the world. The Library of Congress also decided from the very beginning that the website for its Chronicling America (2021) historic newspaper digitisation project would be accessible to every American free of charge. It is also available free of charge to users with access to the

Other national libraries around the world have adopted the American model of access to everyone free of charge where the copyright has expired. Notable examples include Australia’s *TROVE* (2021), New Zealand’s *Papers Past* (2021), Singapore’s *NEWSPAPERSG* (2021), a collection of historic Singaporean and Malayan newspapers, Wales’s *Welsh Newspapers* (2021), France’s *Gallica* (2021), the Netherlands’s *Delpher* (2021), Austria’s *ANNO* (2021), Denmark’s *Mediestream* (2021), the city of Berlin’s *ZEFYS* (2021), Switzerland’s *E-NEWSPAPERARCHIVES.CH* (2021), Belgium’s *BelgicaPress* (2021), and Spain’s *HEMEROTECA DIGITAL* (2021). Israel’s National Library Newspaper Collection (2021) includes digitised historic Jewish newspapers from countries around the world. It also includes digitised Jewish and Arabic publications published in Palestine before the foundation of the state of Israel in 1948. The University of Florida’s *Cuban Newspapers & Periodicals* (2021) provides access to a collection of digitised historic Cuban newspapers. In addition, the European Union has created a portal, *europeana* (2021), to an aggregated collection of digitised newspapers collections from libraries across Europe. Some collections, such as that of the Hamburg State Library, are only accessible through the *europeana* portal.

Sweden, Italy, and Canada are among a small number of major world economies without a national digitised collection of historic newspapers. However, most of the Canadian provinces have some publicly digitised historic newspaper collections accessible free of charge including the University of Calgary’s *Early Alberta Newspapers* (2021), the University of British Columbia’s *BC Historical Newspapers* (2021), the Provincial Archives of Saskatchewan’s *Saskatchewan Historic Newspapers Online* (2021), the *University of Manitoba Libraries: Newspapers* (2021), the Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec’s *Revues et journaux québécois numérisés par BAnQ* (2021), the University of New Brunswick’s *Newspapers @ UNB Libraries* (2021), Libraries, Archives and Museums Nova Scotia’s *Reading These Digitized Newspapers* (2021),
the University of Prince Edward Island’s *Island Newspapers* (2021), and Memorial University of Newfoundland’s *Newfoundland Newspapers* (2021). Ontario, historically Canada’s most populous province, Nunavut, the Yukon Territory, and the Northwest Territories lack publicly funded provincial-wide digitised newspaper collections. However, the publicly funded provincial collections only represent a small part of what is available free of charge in Canada. Several years ago, Carol Singer, a librarian at Bowling Green State University, created a webpage *Historical Canadian Newspapers Online* (2021) which provided a complete list of the digitised Canadian historic newspapers accessible free of charge. It includes numerous newspapers from across Canada digitised by American hobbyist Tom Tryniski, Google News, the Internet Archive, provincial public libraries and other organisations. It shows that there are many freely accessible digitised historic Ontarian newspapers as well ones from the Yukon Territory. Sadly, since 1 July 2019, this nationally and internationally significant gateway is no longer being updated because Carol Singer has retired (William T. Jerome Library, 2021). Already some of the links to the newspaper collections are broken. There is a very strong case for Library and Archives Canada to take over or replicate this website.

The American model requires taxpayer funding and/or donations from philanthropists. Britain was one of the few major world economies to reject this model for the digitisation of its national collection of historic newspapers. During the 1990s, the British government adopted a public-private partnership funding model in an endeavour to try to achieve a combination of an American level of taxation and a Scandinavian level of public goods. Both of Britain’s two principal political parties have embraced this policy. Thus, the British Library was required to adopt this model for the digitisation of the historic newspapers in its archives by forming a partnership with the publisher, DC Thomson. As a result, the *British Newspaper Archive* (2021), is only available to researchers on a subscription basis. A smaller collection of titles mostly for the period before the twentieth century has been available to university academics and students. While this public-private partnership has been very beneficial to genealogists, in my opinion it has severely hindered unfunded academic research using historic British newspapers. As already noted, Britain’s devolved Welsh national government has adopted the enlightened American model pioneered by the Brooklyn Public Library and the Library of Congress for the digitisation of its collection of historic national newspapers.

Since the beginning of the *Chronicling America* project many American State governments have created State digitised historic newspaper websites. In addition to content funded by grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities to digitize newspapers for the National Digital Newspaper Program which is also available at *Chronicling America*, these sites also have additional digitised historic newspaper titles.
Notable examples of State digitised historic newspaper collections are the *California Digital Newspaper Collection* (2021), Indiana’s *Hoosier State Chronicles* (2021), *Georgia Historic Newspapers* (2021), the *Florida Digital Newspaper Library* (2021), *Library Virginia Chronicle* (2021) and New York’s *NYS Historic Newspapers* (2021). In addition to the digitised State collections, there have also been some American ethnic newspaper titles which have been digitised as a standalone project: *The Pittsburgh Jewish Newspaper Project* (2021).

One of the most important collections of North American digitised newspapers is Fulton History (2021) which is the creation of Syracuse, New York, hobbyist Tom Tryniski. It includes many newspapers from across New York State and elsewhere in the United States and Canada which are not available anywhere else including a newspaper published by William Randolph Hearst, the *Syracuse Journal*. Notwithstanding the fact Hearst was one of the leading publishers of newspapers in the United States for several decades, as few as two of his titles have been digitised. Hearst’s *San Francisco Examiner* is also available at Newspapers.com as part of a paid subscription. Tryniski’s research engine requires familiarity to maximise the full potential of his incomparable “Aladdin’s Cave” of digitised newspapers. The pdfs of each page of each digitised newspaper are also available in a separate archive. This is an ongoing project. Tryniski has been constantly adding new content since the turn of the twenty-first century. As of 2018 he had digitised nearly 50 million newspaper pages which at the time was a much larger collection than that of *Chronicling America* which in 2019 encompassed less than 16 million pages (Neason, 2018; Library of Congress, 2020, p. 22).

**Using Digitised Newspapers for Marketing History Research**

Digitised newspapers are an important source for the history of print advertising from early small advertisements to the larger illustrated display advertisements which emerged in the late nineteenth century. For example, the *Brooklyn Newsstand’s* digitised copies of the *Brooklyn Eagle* contain a wealth of retail advertising which allows one to follow the history of the marketing of groceries and from the 1920s new consumer durables powered by electricity. This section provides some examples drawn from my own research on the potential digitised historic newspapers provide for the advancement of marketing history.

1. **Non-English Speaking Country Marketing History Case Studies**

The digitisation of newspapers published in languages other than English should help counter the over-representation of British and American case studies in the academic literature. My case study of an Austrian retailer Paprika Schlesinger (Hawkins, 2017a) which drew upon several European digitised historic newspaper collections, in particular ANNO, provides an example of marketing history outside the Anglosphere. Google
Translate and Microsoft Bing Translator were used to provide translations from the various continental European languages into English. While machine translation is usually not perfect, it is generally sufficiently good to provide a satisfactory understanding of the original text.

2. Transnational Marketing History Case Studies

Digitised historic newspapers also further transnational marketing history research. They have enhanced my research on several occasions. First, I was commissioned to write a biographical essay on Eliza Tinsley a Victorian female nail and chain manufacturer in Britain’s Black Country. The British newspaper press had very few reports on her business. However, TROVE shows she advertised her products in the Australian press from 1868 to 1877. In 1870 she sued her Australian agent in Victoria who had defrauded her. The press reports on the court case provided further evidence of her business’s marketing practice. Papers Past show that Tinsley also advertised her products in New Zealand during the same period. Second, I was commissioned to write a biographical essay on the British retailer and manufacturer William George Watson. Among his achievements was the establishment of a large market in Britain for Danish butter. There was relatively little about Watson’s associations with Denmark in the British press. However, a Mediestream search produced a series of Danish newspaper reports, including a 1913 interview with Watson (Aarhuus Stifts-Tidende, 1913), which added significantly to what was known about Watson’s business career. Third, I was commissioned to write a biographical essay on the German American mariner, factor and entrepreneur, Heinrich Hackfeld (Hawkins, 2017b). He was born in north-west Germany. After several years as a mariner, he advanced to become a ship’s captain. The ships he served on shipped goods around Europe as well to the Americas and the Far East. He then emigrated to the Polynesian Kingdom of Hawaii where he became a factor and subsequently a wealthy entrepreneur. europeana provided a lot of information about his career including his early days as a mariner. Digitised newspapers from the Hamburg State Library produced items referencing Hackfeld which included advertising for some of the voyages he undertook as a ship’s captain (Hamburger Nachrichten, 1842; 1844). Chronicling America provided similar material about Hackfeld’s voyages in the Pacific. It also allowed me to follow Hackfeld’s career after he temporarily settled in Hawaii.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that digitised historic newspapers provide great potential for the advancement of marketing history research as the examples drawn from own research suggest. While this article has focussed on the collections that are accessible free of charge to researchers, the digitised collections created by commercial organisations also offer great promise too. Graham Harding (2021) has recently demonstrated the potential of
commercially digitised historic newspapers in a conference paper of the history of brands in Victorian Britain which is based on a statistical and textual analysis of content accessed using the British Newspaper Archive.

To date only a small proportion of the surviving historic newspapers held in libraries, archives, and newspaper offices have been digitised. The ongoing Chronicling America project is representative of both public and commercial endeavours around the world which over the next few years will digitise significant additional numbers of historic newspapers. So, marketing historians can look forward to digitised runs of additional historic newspaper titles in the near future.

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1 In 1973 most of the British Museum’s library collections were merged with several other organisations to create the British Library.