

What is a 'Source'?

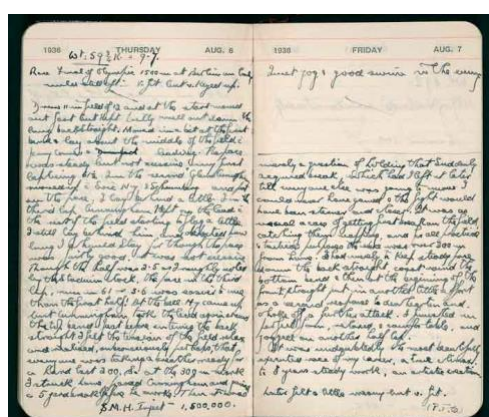
The word 'source' is used to describe the materials used to gather information. Books, journals, news articles, government documents and other written sources are commonly used, but other items such as films, videos, photographs or other images, music, broadcasts, podcasts, blogs, social media, live streaming, objects, transcripts, sculptures, conversations, the landscape and more can also provide an enormous amount of information for academics to use to understand human experience.

Sources, therefore, provide information and are used by scholars to draw conclusions and associations about life together.

It is easy to grasp how written accounts, government reports, letters and so on can be used as a window into other lives at different points in history. An account of a battle, a report about the amount of plastic in the Indian Ocean and love letter from farmer's wife to her lover in the 1800s in France can reveal tremendously rich and interesting information for academics to use. Similarly, artefacts, sculptures, images and songs or stories from both the past or present day can offer a glimpse into other worlds and ways of being. Consequently, all of these 'sources' are legitimate areas for our attention.



Sources can be classified as either 'primary' or 'secondary'



Primary	Secondary
Original work produced by people who were there. First-hand accounts.	Based on other works; uses what has been written as evidence.
Example: Diaries	Example: Textbooks

See the separate document for more info on primary and secondary sources.

The Internet as 'Source'

The internet figures in nearly all our lives with increasing importance. Research can use the internet as a 'place' to explore to understand human behaviour, as well as a tool to find information. These days there are numerous studies about digital and virtual activities and the social consequences, and there are similar numbers of studies that have used digital tools to accumulate data – typically so-called big data.

Despite, or perhaps because, most people on the planet today use the Internet in one capacity or another every day, it is not always considered to be the most reliable source to collect information from. The Internet can provide instant access to all kinds of information – such as where the nearest vegan restaurants are, the cheapest household products, and what films are playing at the cinema – but it cannot guarantee that one is accessing verified or verifiable, robust, factual analysis and discussion - as the proliferation of ‘fake news’ demonstrates. Consequently, one must use some caution when attempting to locate useful information via Google and other search engines. Before you accept or use information you find through ordinary searches on the Net (as opposed to through the university online library), you must think about the author and ask questions about their:

- Credentials
- Bias
- Beliefs
- Politics
- And who is funding them to write this stuff!

Films as ‘Source’

TV dramas and soaps can be used to think about social life, but documentaries and factual accounts will probably be more useful. As with all sources, the author or producer’s credentials need to be checked to account for any bias or lack of it. Some documentaries work hard to avoid sensationalism and opinion, but others thrive on exactly that. Look out for racist, sexist and colonialist ways of thinking that might be hidden within the film.

Watch the film the [Leviathan](#) or if you can’t devote the time watch [the trailer](#). From watching this film what do you think you now know about the reality of fishing.

Now compare that with Netflix’s [Seaspiracy](#). (this is just a trailer).

Take a minute to think about what information both films give towards debates about the oceans and fishing. Which film is more successful in raising awareness?

Objects as ‘Source’

Objects are items made by people (as opposed to the other things of the world, like trees). Objects able to tell their own stories about the time they were made in. Take, for example, a feather headdress from a tribal leader in the Amazon. What might that head gear, similar to the one in the picture, tell us about life in the group of people who made and used it? In other words, what can we know by looking at the object? What further information might we get from handling it? Is this information one could know by reading about it?



Looking at objects – in a museum or in a photograph - allows us to get an understanding of shape, colour, size, materials used. Handling the object provides more info about the weight, the texture, the smell, the craft-person's skills, the techniques and the materials used to create the item. This allows one to understand more about the culture's technical abilities and methods, and also enables one to know how it feels to wear or use such an item. From this one can get a sense of what it might be like to parade in it, or whether the average person would be able to carry it for long periods comfortably.

But what can we tell about the meaning of an object by using the methods above? Well, very little. One would have to speculate and use secondary sources to find out what others think the object was for, who used it or how it was used. Or one would need to speak directly to people who make and wear these headdresses to get a more comprehensive picture of what these items mean to the culture. From discussion you could find out how the feathers are collected, what the birds mean to the group, why those colours are used, how, when and by who it is used. Knowing this detail allows the thing to almost come to life and in so doing creates a living picture of how an item holds meanings. This [short video](#) lets you get a brief glimpse into how object analysis offers a broader understanding of what items mean in context, including the role the environment plays in how humans make things (this is a different film from the one posted on Moodle).

Images as 'Source'

There are lots of different forms of image. This section will only look at photographs and paintings to give you an idea of how images hold knowledge.

Photographs

Photographs are primary sources and offer visual insight into different times, places,



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events, and the everyday tasks of people's lives, as the images of Victorian Britain above illustrate.

Photos can be enormously helpful in helping people to imagine what experience was like for those who were there. What do you think you can know about life in Victorian times by looking at the images below?

Activity: Write down some ideas ready to discuss this in class.

Remember, photographs are limited as most only provide a snapshot view into people's worlds. They are unable to show everything because they are restricted to a certain direction, perspective, topic and size. This tends to mean that most photos are curated. They are organised images, designed to show you exactly what the photographer wants you to see. Often things that get in the way of the intended message are removed, as the example of Curtis' (1910) photo called 'In a Piegan Lodge' shows.

[Click here](#) to go to an article 'Romance vs. Reality', that explains how Curtis removed an alarm clock from his picture because he thought including it would hinder the rather romantic sentiment about native Americans he was trying to get across.



In a Piegan Lodge, by Edward S. Curtis, 1910. Note the clock via [Library of Congress](#)

In 1910 that was not expected, today we expect images to be photoshopped or edited in some way. Consequently, one needs to be vigilant to imagery and how it is manipulated for different purposes – as the pictures of Madonna easily demonstrate.



(Image: Neal, G. 2014
<https://www.allmyfriendsaremodels.com/fashion-photoshop/madonna-photoshop-airbrush/>)

Paintings

Just like photographs, paintings can be used to understand other people's worlds. However, as paintings are created by a single individual, what they offer is a personal perspective and not a historical record. Paintings are a primary source, but they are often interpretations of events as generated by the mind and the ability of the artist. Consequently, they could be even more of a partial, biased view than a photograph. They will provide an accurate representation of how the artist perceived an event but not necessarily an accurate representation of what happened.



[This Photo](#) by Unknown Author is licensed under [CC BY-SA](#)

In addition, it is worth remembering that many paintings have been commissioned at great cost by the wealthy. This means that many famous pictures of royalty or commanders are images that those individuals paid for and therefore had to feel good about if they were to be accepted. Consequently, it is not a stretch to suggest that the artists were probably 'kind' to



their subjects. These two portraits of Queen Victoria provide illustration of how a photograph and how a painting of the same person can differ.

This document has provided a short overview of a selection of sources used by academics to collect knowledge about the world.

(Dr Luci Attala, 2021)