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## **A source like any other?: including digitized newspapers into a “hybrid” research project**

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Zoé Kergomard

# A Source Like Any Other?

Including Digitised Newspapers in a “Hybrid” Research Project

**Abstract:** This contribution discusses the potentials and challenges of using digitised newspapers as a source in relation to other newspaper collections, digitised or not. The author argues that digitisation makes the pitfall of media-centrism even more visible and calls for an even more careful contextualisation of media sources. Instead of focusing too narrowly on a sample of seemingly “representative” digitised newspapers, digitisation may in fact invite us to multiply the types of sources and perspectives we include in our research. Dealing with such diverse sources, both digitized and non-digitized, requires that we highlight how we think about, construct, and analyse our corpus. Ultimately, digitisation can lead to a more exploratory and iterative research approach and thus an understanding of the research corpus as an evolving, interconnected, and reflexive collection of diverse sources.

**Keywords:** digitised newspapers, corpus creation, media history

Today, many historians engage with digital history as a mix of analogue and digital practices, not least because there are still many small-scale, individual research projects that are not formally embedded in digital history.<sup>1</sup> When looking at the still unexplored possibilities offered by digitised newspapers, dividing between “traditional”, meaning “qualitative” historians interested in small-scale research on the one side, and digital, “big data” historians working with quantitative methods on the other seems increasingly artificial (Wijffes, 2017, 6–8). Tim Hitchcock reframed the popular metaphor of the microscope in digital humanities by suggesting to take into account large and small scales, as well as everything in between (Hitchcock, 2014). “Blended reading” has been suggested as a way to reconcile distant with close reading (Stulpe and Lemke, 2016). As Julia Laite recently argued, digitization also offers myriad possibilities for a “small history”, yet “traditional” historians are left to wonder how exactly to do that (Laite). There is an agreement that digitization calls for more reflexivity and, in the context of digitised newspapers, for an attentive digital source criticism (Gibbs and Owens, 2013; Maurantonio, 2014; Rygiel, 2017). But if digital history cannot be

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank the editors and my colleagues at the German Historical Institute Paris and particularly Mareike König and Jürgen Finger for their thoughtful comments on this paper.

just a “complement” for traditional historians (Wijffes, 2017, 4), how does it change their research processes? Concretely, how do we include digitised newspapers into a diverse and hybrid (meaning digitised and non-digitised) source corpus? Are digitised newspapers a source like any other? What implications does it have on the way we conceptualise and organise our research?

In this contribution, I discuss the possibilities of using digitised newspapers as sources among others for projects that may or may not focus primarily on the media. During my previous research on Swiss post-war politics, I began using collections of Swiss digitised newspapers and wondered which place I should give to those sources and, consequently, to the press as a collective actor in my analysis. I argue that digitization makes the pitfall of media-centrism even more visible and calls for an even more attentive contextualization. Taking my current research on the changing interpretations of electoral turnout in France, Germany and Switzerland after 1945 as a starting point, I discuss how digitised newspapers can be included in a diverse corpus – and the impact this may have on how we think of such a corpus. For this contribution, I focus on the part of my research regarding Switzerland, the country for which I have access to the largest digitised newspapers collections. I discuss the challenges I face when collecting and analysing my sources and the possibilities opened by including multiple perspectives – beyond newspapers.

## 1 Newspapers in Historical Research: A Source Like Any Other?

As an historian with no formal training in digital humanities, I did not reflect much on my first encounters with digitised newspapers at the beginning of the 2010s. Sure, I was fascinated by the rapid development of digitised collections and platforms in Switzerland and the new options they offered for research and teaching.<sup>2</sup> But my approach to digitised newspapers was oftentimes merely

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<sup>2</sup> While some newspapers (i.e. the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*) launched their own digitization projects and restricted access to their subscribers, Swiss libraries and archives have been particularly active in launching digitization projects for large and small newspapers and developing platforms in the 2010s. Federalism shows here its advantages, in that it allowed smaller and larger institutions to engage in their own projects, and its drawbacks – even if they are connected and well referenced, the multiplicity of platforms makes it hard to keep up. For an overview see Digitalisierte Schweizer Zeitungen, E-Newspaper Archives, <http://www.e-newspaperarchives.ch/?a=p&p=anotherplatforms>. Accessed 18 June 2020. For a presentation and a review of two prominent

instrumental. With little effort, I could find information on a little-known personality or a political movement. Soon however, I became interested in the media *per se* in the course of my PhD research on the history of election campaigns in post-war Switzerland (Kergomard, 2020a). While I focused on the perspective of political parties, I also wanted to better understand how media coverage of election campaigns changed over time and how it affected campaigning in Switzerland, following the discussion of “mediatization” as one of the key transformations of politics throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Swanson and Mancini, 2016; Bösch and Frei, 2006).

However, as noticed in other Western European countries (Vella, 2009, 193; Bingham, 2010, 225–26; Broersma and Harbers, 2007, 1153), the historiography of 20<sup>th</sup> century, and particularly post-war Switzerland, has largely dwelt little on the press, neither as an actor nor as a type of source worthy of a specific discussion. Recent studies in political or social history often quote newspapers merely for factual evidence or anecdotes.<sup>3</sup> As Fred Gibbs and Trevor Owens suggested, traditional narrative conventions in history might be at fault here: the emphasis on narration hinders us to interrupt the story we are telling in order to discuss how we came to the document in question and how we interpret it (Gibbs and Owens, 2013, 159). As a result, while many researchers have benefited from digitization to access newspaper sources, many questions about their research process are left unanswered. Did they have access to a digitised archive, to a microfilm or to the original newspaper? Did they target specific newspaper(s), and, if yes, over which period of time? Did they use thematic press clippings, compiled by archivists or sometimes by actors themselves? How did they select the articles they quote? As Ted Underwood noted, finding and selecting any kind of digitised sources requires “algorithms to explore a big dataset, and the search process may well have shaped my way of framing the subject, or my intuitions about the representativeness of sources. The scholarly consequences of search practices are difficult to assess, since scholars tend to suppress description of their own discovery process in published work” (Underwood, 2014, 65). Furthermore, by merely quoting articles as factual evidence, we fail to analyse the representations and discourse they convey, or even to relate the newspaper in question to its

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projects, *Impresso. Media Monitoring of the Past and Enewspaper Archives*, (Ehrmann, *et al.*, 2020; Natale, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> Not surprisingly, this is the case of (otherwise excellent) reference books on 20th century Switzerland, but also of recently published dissertations. Scholars merely adapt to the constraints of (analogue) book publication. In order to save space, I choose to publish a critical review of my sources and methodology on my scientific blog rather than in my book, see (Kergomard, 2020a).

production and reception context. As a result, we tend to neglect or make invisible the role of the press as a collective actor in the processes we are studying.

Whereas general historiography neglects to historicize the press for itself, this endeavour can be found in works rooted in media history. This segmentation of research preceded newspaper digitization (Bingham, 2010, 2). In recent years, press historians in Switzerland have asked about the long-term institutionalisation of the Swiss press as a professional field, not least through concentration processes (Meier and Häussler, 2010), and approached journalists as historical actors embedded in specific trajectories, networks and professional cultures (Clavien, 2017). In Swiss media studies and political science, there is also a tradition of large projects of content analysis building on (analogue and later digitised) newspaper databases with the objective of identifying long-term transformations in politics and society. In the 1990s, a major research project in media studies reconstructed the hierarchy of “media events” over several decades in order to follow political discussions over time (Imhof *et al.*). While this project also questioned the relationship of journalists to other types of actors, such as social movement activists (Imhof, 1996; Romano, 1998), its very methodology, not least because of its labour-intensive nature, tended to restrict the research perspective to a handful of (overwhelmingly German-speaking) newspapers, supposedly representative of the press field. Furthermore, this approach also ran the risk of taking “events” in press as a proxy for transformations in other fields, for instance, by equating editorial battles between party newspapers of the 1940s with tensions between political parties – although one of the functions of party newspapers was precisely to stage and dramatise political polarisation. Paradoxically, restricting the analysis to press sources while excluding other types of sources may lead to minimising the specificities of the press.

Long before large-scale digitization, both historians and media scholars have thus struggled with the issue of media-centrism (Schudson, 1997, 463–66; Hampton, 2013, 2–3) and with it, with the challenge of contextualising newspapers as media sources. It is tempting to treat newspapers as a constant entity in order to study changes happening in other fields, although their very materiality is constantly affected by changes specific to the media field. Quantitative studies assessing the mediatization of election campaigns in post-war Switzerland, for instance, have a hard time assessing whether their increased media coverage related to their growing importance for political actors or whether it (also) resulted from changes in the media itself – with the increased dramatisation and personalization of politics on television, but also the new narrative strategies of new party-independent newspapers and magazines from the 1960s onwards (Udris, 2013, 6; see also Udris *et al.*, 2015; Kriesi, 2012). By increasingly covering campaigns, journalists also asserted their autonomy *vis-à-vis* politicians, who were in

parallel professionalising their political communication with the help of emerging experts in “public relations”. In revealing the backstage of politics, they meant to show the public that they were not falling for the increasingly shining stories served by politicians and their consultants – a circular process in political communication described in many post-war democracies (Fink and Schudson, 2014; Riutort, 2020, 56–74).

Contextualising newspapers by historicizing the relationships between journalists and politicians is therefore always a complex endeavour, not least because we oftentimes struggle with the usual linear narrative of a profession becoming gradually autonomous and objective (Curran, 2009; Broersma and Harbers, 2019, 1154). In post-war Switzerland, the parallel decline of party newspapers and rise of independent newspapers in the first post-war decades are never as clear-cut as is usually assumed (Blum, 2005; Ladner, 2005; Donges, 2005). From one region to another and from one newspaper to another, change occurred in a myriad of ways, if only because whereas some newspapers survived with a completely different line, others tried to adapt but were ultimately closed or merged with other newspapers. Newspapers that remained could also take different ways to distance themselves from the party to which they stood close. Looking at publication and advertising policies is revealing in this regard: the reference Swiss-German newspaper *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, for instance, was still circulating (unpaid) content on behalf of the Radical Party throughout the 1970s, slowly opening up to ads coming from other parties – but foremost from other right-wing parties. Yet this highly regarded newspaper engaged in a distanced commentary of Swiss and international politics, and could therefore be understood neither as a classical “party newspaper” nor as an “independent newspaper”. Beyond older publications that kept track of these changes in real time (Hosang, 1974; Gruner, 1977, 226–34), we lack studies exploring these complex transformations in detail, although it is not only of interest for media scholars, but also essential background information for anyone exploring digitised newspapers. Especially when they distinguish articles from ads, digitised newspapers collections could be a tremendous basis to ask about structural newspaper transformations by looking at advertisement policies, as well as style, form and genres (Broersma, 2007; Broersma and Harbers, 2018; for an overview Wijfjes, 2017, 11). With or without digitization, working with newspaper articles thus requires to relate them to their production and reception context – just as “any other” source.

## 2 The Temptations of Digitization, or Media-Centrism 2.0

While digitization opens new possibilities to study newspapers for themselves, it also raises the issue of media-centrism in new ways. Not only is it tempting to develop projects based entirely on digitised newspapers (see the chapter in this volume by C-L. Gaillard), but collectively we create a new bias of its own if everyone focuses on the same sample of already digitised newspapers (Hobbs, 2013; Milligan, 2013; Wijfjes, 2017, 16–17). In my current research project, I have struggled with how much space to give to newspapers, and particularly, to digitised newspapers. I ask about the changing interpretations of electoral turnout in France, Germany and Switzerland after 1945, with the aim to uncover the changing political and social meanings of voting in a period which is often understood as the golden age and then the demise of electoral democracy (Conway, 2020; Müller, 2013). I draw inspiration from the concept of frame in media studies, meaning the “interpretative packages” that media coverage attaches to a specific issue (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989, see also D’Angelo, 2002). In my research, this means asking about the understandings and normative evaluations of voting, participation, and democracy that the press put forward when reporting over electoral participation. I am particularly interested in frames that present non-voting and its rise (from the 1960s onwards in Switzerland, from the 1980–1990s onwards in Germany and France) as a “social problem” requiring political action (Spector and Kitsuse, 2017). This additional step towards possible institutional reforms supposed to curb abstention (such as postal voting) can then be studied with the concept of agenda-setting, by asking if abstention was set at the institutional agenda (and for how long), whether possible solutions against it have been discussed, and whether political actors joined forces to enact and implement them.<sup>4</sup>

Clearly, my research questions would have been much more difficult to address in the world of analogue archives. With digitization, a straightforward approach could be to rely on digitised newspapers as a proxy of the public sphere. Thanks to Optical Character Recognition (OCR), a full-text keyword search would lead me to articles that would have been much more difficult to find otherwise. However, my transnational approach makes the above-mentioned bias all the more problematic. For Switzerland, I could access a wide range of digitised newspapers in all three languages, but missed out on several key Swiss-German newspapers that have not been digitised (such as the *Tages-Anzeiger* or the *Basler*

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<sup>4</sup> For recent discussions, see Hassenteufel, 2010; Princen, 2018.

*Zeitung*). There are much fewer French and German newspapers that have been digitised for the post-war era.<sup>5</sup> I would face a quantitative imbalance between the three countries that I could only solve by choosing one or two newspapers per country – with the tricky issue of pluralism and representativeness. As Andrew Hobbs has argued regarding the “deleterious dominance” of *The Times* in British historiography, there is a risk of mistaking prestige and centrality for representativeness, at the expense of other (particularly regional or local) newspapers (Hobbs, 2013). While Lev Manovich has advanced that with digitization “we no longer have to choose between data size and data depth” (Manovich, 2012, 466), in such cases we actually choose a restricted media pluralism when we limit ourselves to digitised newspapers – certainly at the expense of data scope.

Furthermore, by focusing only on newspapers, I would still have to be cautious not only about media-centrism, but also about diachronic comparability. Overemphasising the role of the media in defining and prioritising topics is already a well-known risk when studying agenda-setting. In this case particularly, focusing only on the interests of journalists might be particularly tricky. Discussing electoral participation and its decline as a symptom for a “democratic crisis” could very well belong to the dramatised story-telling of politics that many journalists adopted from the 1960s onwards. It might also have corresponded to their rediscovered role in Swiss democracy: contributing to citizenship education, strengthening the interest of the public for Swiss politics and thereby its inclination to vote.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, it would not be surprising if they increasingly remarked on electoral participation, particularly from the 1960s onwards, as it started to decline. Speaking about these topics in the media was also becoming detrimental for other (older or newer) professions seeking to legitimise their forms of expertise in the public sphere: communication experts, but also pollsters and pundits. As talk of a “crisis of representation” emerged in France in the 1980–1990s, political scientist Bernard Lacroix relativized this diagnosis and attributed it to the growing importance of these new experts in public debate. For Lacroix, lamenting about this crisis, the rise

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5 The handful of digitalization projects after 1945 mostly come from the newspapers themselves, so that the articles are only accessible under a paywall (for instance *Le Monde*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*). See for Germany (Blome); for France, Bibliothèques numériques de presse francophone, Bibliothèque nationale de France, [https://bnf.libguides.com/presse\\_medias/bibliotheques\\_numeriques](https://bnf.libguides.com/presse_medias/bibliotheques_numeriques). Accessed 19 June 2020.

6 The advent of television was detrimental in formalising this role. While press journalists did not have the same guidelines as in the public sector, they worked together with the public broadcasting actors to make the coverage of Swiss politics more attractive in the 1960s (Vallotton, 2006; Kergomard, 2020a).



of abstention and other forms of “problematic” electoral behaviour reinforced their legitimacy to decipher and interpret the moods of the “people” for journalists and political parties (Lacroix, 1994). While my aim is less to find out whether there actually was “a crisis” than to assess the circulation of such a diagnosis in the public sphere, Lacroix’s provocative analysis points out the risk of looking only at a sort of media and expert bubble. Focusing only on a handful of digitised, often-times national and prestigious newspapers may lead to base one’s analysis on a deforming magnifying glass for broader processes within and beyond the media – a problem much older than Twitter. Consequently, I have chosen to include not only digitised and non-digitized newspapers, but also other actors and sources in my research project. Instead of focusing on one type of actor and/or sources, I aim at exploring the distribution of discourse on electoral participation in the public sphere at large. Against the pitfalls of media-centrism, this approach allows me to approach framing and agenda-setting as multi-actor, contingent and open-ended processes (Hassenteufel, 2010, 56). My corpus is hence heterogeneous, including archives from political authorities and parties (both “analogue” and digitised – i.e. parliamentary debates), publications from experts (political scientists, pollsters) on the topic (digitised or not), and newspaper articles, whether non-digitized, digitised or born-digital for more recent decades.

### 3 Rethinking the Corpus?

The process of searching and collecting these diverse sources has led me to reflect on how I approached my research corpus. As mediaeval historians in particular have discussed, the notion of “corpus” has been increasingly used in history since the 1980s, but is rarely explicitly defined (Magnani, 2017). Its popularity has been partly supported by projects in other disciplines (particularly linguistics) working on large text corpora, oftentimes with quantitative methods, and with a stronger focus on the sources themselves than on the traditional interests of historians in source criticism and source contextualization. Digitization and the development of text mining methods have only sharpened the need to discuss this notion (Treffort, 2014). Now more than ever, historians are asked to reflect on the boundaries of their corpus, its homogeneity or heterogeneity and how they justify its representativeness, while other disciplines have a much more precise (and restrictive) understanding of what a corpus should be. For instance, the linguist Damon Mayaffre working on historical political speeches approaches a corpus as a “coherent and self-sufficient whole” through the connections existing between texts. Researchers should not distinguish between “within” and “outside” the

corpus: in order to analyse all elements with the same (ideally quantitative) methodology and reduce subjectivity, Mayaffre advocates including all contextual elements (i.e., biographical information) in the corpus at the beginning of a research process (Mayaffre, 2002, 5).

While historians share this interest for corpus as a formalisation of intertextuality (Treffort, 2014), asking to constitute one's corpus once and for all seems to go against the usual (but rarely formalised) archival research process, marked by the very limitations of archives: historians search and collect sources in an iterative manner, go back and forth between different possible trails, incidentally discover an interesting source where they had not initially looked ... Does (and/or should) archival research remain an iterative process when it includes digitised sources? On the one hand, many aspects of digitised newspaper collection lead to a rather explorative search process. Digitised sources can be searched again and again, which helps to deal with the (diminishing but still unavoidable) limitations of digitised collections: missing pages, faulty article segmentation, and above all, the varying conditions of digitization and OCR processing between newspapers.<sup>7</sup> Precisely because of these issues, digitised sources may also evolve, which can require new search iterations – OCRization can be improved; automatic topic assignment can change. And even while topic modelling itself implies a closed corpus, historians are encouraged to use the discovered topics precisely to allow an explorative, open-ended research process (Underwood, 2014). On the other side, there can be an ambiguity in the status of the “article collections” that can now be directly exported out of some newspaper platforms (as in Switzerland *impresso*, and for general overview, see Ehrmann, *et al.*, 2019). This sophisticated feature helps scholars to quickly gather multiple articles and their metadata and easily export them for analysis. But when I started extracting my own collections, I realised it led me to think of them as a closed entity, which seemed at odds with the way I otherwise conducted my research. I was also at risk of idealising the coherence and exhaustiveness of such a collection and “freezing” it at a given time, instead of improving it and letting it grow with time.

This is where it helps me not to think of my digitised newspaper articles as a closed, “frozen”, and ideally “representative” sub-corpus, but, rather, as just another part of my whole corpus understood as an evolving collection of diverse sources that gains its coherence through my reflecting on the iterative search process and through the connections I make between them. Of course, iteration has long been formalised as an integral part of qualitative research in social sciences

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<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of these boundaries and of current projects to reduce them, Broersma and Harbers, 2018, 1151; Ehrmann, *et al.*, 2020, 2.

(Lejeune, 2014), and many historians have also pointed to the advantages of going back and forth between various sources and, hence, points of views as a way to destabilise and decenter one's own assumptions and standpoint. This approach is for instance central in the “toolbox” of *histoire croisée* developed by Bénédicte Zimmermann and Michael Werner (Werner and Zimmermann, 2004). For my project, embracing (and constantly questioning) an iterative research process thus allows me to go back and forth between the different political and cultural contexts I am looking at.

Indeed, digitization might actually enhance the possibilities to engage in iterative research processes, since it facilitates exploration. As Lara Putnam puts it, “for the first time, historians can find without knowing where to look” (Putnam, 2016, 377). We are able to follow “faint trails of breadcrumbs” from digitised sources to physical archives (and vice-versa) with “substantially more chance of finding something” (Laite, 2020, 10). Tim Underwood advocates reflecting on the search process itself as a “hermeneutic spiral”, since search strategies often encode “assumptions about the patterns we expect to find” (Underwood, 2014). Instead of seeing them only as limitations, the different biases of each search process could complement each other: just as “no single collection of volumes is perfectly representative of print culture, in practice, the best way to address questions of representativeness is often to pose the same question in multiple collections that have been selected in different ways” (Underwood, 2014). We may thereby jungle between traditional archival search, which is more constrained by fixed archival labels and categories (Laite, 2020), and the sort of “screwing around” made possible by digitization (Ramsay, 2014). This type of research process gains in scientificity by being well documented, constantly reflected and made explicit in our writing, which is why Owen and Gibbs suggest deemphasizing the importance of narrative when we write (Gibbs and Owens, 2013). While digitization certainly gives room to historical research projects based on closed, “frozen” corpora, it can therefore also be an incentive to rethink how we understand a corpus in the framework of a qualitative and iterative research process, namely as an evolving, interconnected and reflexive collection of diverse sources.

## 4 Digitization as an Incentive for Multi-Perspective, Iterative Research Processes

In order to explore the media coverage of electoral turnout in post-war Switzerland, I found that switching between different search processes and sources provides me with multiple points of entry that complemented each other. A first

door into Swiss politics of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century can be the *Année politique suisse*, a political yearly chronicle published by the Institute of Political Science at the University of Bern since 1966 and now available in a digitised form.<sup>8</sup> Every year, its collaborators chronicled political discussions and decision-making processes on the basis of press reviews. Going through the *Année politique suisse* enables me to identify topics that were discussed in relation to electoral turnout, such as postal voting. Clearly, such chronicles document topics and events that were deemed relevant to the chroniclers at the end of the year – in all likelihood because they remained discussed throughout the year or eventually led to political measures. I approach it foremost as a retrospective chronicle of successful agenda-setting. To go beyond the limited amount of newspaper articles that the *Année* sources, I also consult the press clipping at the Swiss Federal Archives on which it is based.<sup>9</sup>

Thematic press clippings allow a different entry: they were usually constituted on a real-time basis and are more likely to include topics that did not remain long in the media and/or did not make it to the institutional agenda. In the era of digitised newspapers, they will remain useful, since they allow a thematic entry into a wide range of newspapers, including those that have not been digitised. Institutions like the Swiss Economic Archives in Basel are therefore in the process of digitising their press clipping collections.<sup>10</sup> For archivists and scholars alike, digitization is a new incentive to reflect (retrospectively) on the constitution of these collections and hence on their inherent biases, parallel to the query criticism we exercise for digitised newspapers. Even if archivists have rarely explicated their selection criteria, they have usually kept the same topical categories over decades. At the Swiss Social Archives, for instance, the collection on “electoral participation” led me to a wide range of articles (including from larger and smaller newspapers linked to the Social Democratic Party) providing explanations and/or moral evaluations of non-voting. While the collection becomes larger in the 1970–80s, it would be hasty to conclude from there that the topic itself gained in importance – archivists could also have interpreted the topical category in a broader way than they used to.<sup>11</sup>

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**8** Institut für Politikwissenschaft an der Universität Bern; <https://anneepolitique.swiss/>.

**9** Swiss Federal Archives, J2.300–01\*, Institut für Politikwissenschaft der Universität Bern: Dokumentation zur schweizerischen Politik (1965-).

**10** ‘Wirtschaftsdokumentation – Elektronische Zeitungsausschnittsammlung’. Schweizerisches Wirtschaftsarchiv, <https://ub-easyweb.ub.unibas.ch/de/historische-bestaende/wirtschaftsdokumentation/>. Accessed 19 June 2020.

**11** Swiss Social Archives, Zeitungsartikel 37.0, Abstimmungen und Wahlen, Stimm- und Wahlbeteiligung, 1943–1993; 1993–2006.

Parallel to exploring the *Année politique suisse* and press clippings, I dig into digitised collections, starting with *impresso* and *E-newspaper-Archives.ch*. These search processes complement each other, sometimes in very practical ways: articles in press clippings are separated from their reading environment and digitised newspaper platforms can actually help to link them to illustrations or related articles of the same issue. This parallel search allows me to think critically about the biases of each option. Since I dropped the ambition to constitute a large corpus that would be fixed for the rest of my research project, I have decided to start with restrictive search criteria, which I can then gradually expand. On the platform *impresso* for instance, I begin by restricting my query to Swiss newspapers and choosing locations in Switzerland.

Keyword search has proved to be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it allows to go much further than with the topical categories of press clipping. On the other hand, as David Deacon has noted, “keyword searching is best suited for identifying tangible ‘things’ (i.e. people, places, events and policies) rather than ‘themes’ (i.e. more abstract, subtler and multifaceted concepts)” (Deacon, 2017, 8).<sup>12</sup> While archivists could collect varied articles on the topic of “electoral participation” for their press clippings, using this phrase as a keyword on digitised platforms is too broad: I land on almost any short press dispatch written about elections and/or votes in parliaments. While I am not interested in the latter context, it is nevertheless semantically very close to my research topic, to the point that it would be too restrictive to exclude it from my search using Boolean operators. Using topic modelling, *Impresso* has identified semantic topics that were integrated as search facets. This option seems more interesting to explore topic distribution over an entire collection (Jacobi *et al.*, 2015; Ehrmann, *et al.*, 2020, 964), but it was not fruitful in my case, again because of this semantic proximity (i.e. articles about elections and votes in parliaments were assigned the same topic). I also tried to restrict my search to articles on the front page and/or displaying the search keyword in their title, which is a very useful feature of recent platforms. Yet, I found that incidental remarks on electoral participation were equally interesting and that, in any case, many articles centring on election participation had a completely different title.

Looking for the right balance between quantity (or “recall”) and precision, I therefore experimented with more specific keywords directing the search to the context of mass elections and referenda, using fuzzy search options when possible to include possible OCR errors. In essence, while asking about “electoral

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<sup>12</sup> The first type of search is therefore also favoured by users, see the discussion of user behaviour studies and interface reviews in Ehrmann, *et al.*, 2019, 3–4.

participation” was too neutral, I could try to reverse the search and ask about “non-voting”. For the French-speaking newspapers, the word “abstention” also gave too many results in a variety of contexts, again regarding votes in parliament but also in foreign policy. I then tried “abstentionnisme”, a now dated term with a latent negative coloration of non-voting.<sup>13</sup> For the Swiss-German newspapers, I tried the older words “Wahlabstinenz” and “Stimmabstinenz” as well as the more neutral “Wahlenthaltung” and “Stimmhaltung” (abstention at elections resp. referenda). While these keywords have helped me explore the discussion around non-voting, their moral connotation (or at least the implication that non-voting is a problem) is certainly a bias in itself, so that I should not assess the importance of this discussion in the Swiss post-war public debate based exclusively on these searches. Instead, I can study the different contexts in which non-voting was discussed and the various frames that were conveyed. Via the keyword search on *impresso*, I stumbled upon articles discussing electoral participation in contexts that I had not thought of: for instance, at national or cantonal holidays, politicians warned citizens of the “danger” it represented for Swiss democracy and insisted on voting as a civic duty.<sup>14</sup> Such serendipity effects help not only to “find without knowing where to look” (Putnam, 2016, 377) but also to avoid trapping the search in what I already know. Press clippings have led me to the traces of citizenship ceremonies (“Jungbürgerfeier”): designed to stress the importance of political responsibilities upon youngsters, they were regularly disrupted by activists of the 1968s and early 1980s movements and thus became a space where politicians and youngsters renegotiated the norms of citizenship.<sup>15</sup> I also look for specific concepts or diagnoses expressed parallel to non-voting, such as “political disenchantment” (“politische Verdrossenheit” in German). Because of their semantic precision, concepts can work well in a traditional keyword search and digitised newspapers are thus a goldmine to follow their emergence and circulation in the public sphere (Rennes and Kessel, 2016).

Along my searches, query criticism both for digitised and non-digitized sources is an inherent part of my workflow and allows me to redirect my further research steps. I go back and forth between the selections operated by generations of archivists in press clippings, my own queries but also my discoveries in traditional archives. For instance, when looking for early statistical studies about non-voting, I

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<sup>13</sup> See in the French context Barbet, 2007.

<sup>14</sup> For instance s.n. ‘Ce fut samedi soir le traditionnel banquet de la restauration. M. Casaiï dénonce les méfaits de l’abstentionnisme’. *Journal de Genève*, 14 January 1952, <https://impresso-project.ch/app/issue/JDG-1952-01-14-a/page/JDG-1952-01-14-a-p0004/article/JDG-1952-01-14-a-i0054>. Accessed on 23 May 2020.

<sup>15</sup> Swiss Social Archives, Zeitungsartikel 14.3, Staatsbürgerliche Erziehung, 1945–1996.

noticed that many did not refer to “non-voting”, but instead to “the non-voter” in their titles.<sup>16</sup> I then included the German term “Nichtwähler” to my queries,<sup>17</sup> which directly led me to articles trying to sketch out the profile of the “non-voter”. It helped me identify a specific interest of journalists for establishing a profile of this peculiar citizen, which they quelled by discussing scientific studies.<sup>18</sup> Such connections between sources are, in the end, what “glues” my corpus together and are hence essential to document. I compile and enrich such information in a Zotero library with the aim of eventually making it available online. Thanks to the growing amount of metadata provided by platforms and the possibility to export them, I focus particularly on metadata categories such as author, named entities, article genre, and text reuse, since they also help me to better identify the specific discourse configurations in which electoral turnout is a topic. I can identify journalists writing frequently on the topic (particularly in editorials) as well as individuals or collective actors asked to intervene on it in the media. I then read the transcription of articles, correct the main OCR mistakes that hinder my understanding, all the while keeping the digitised collection open so that I can look at the facsimile and replace the article in the context of the newspaper. A last step is then to annotate my articles with keywords and comments and to connect them to related sources. This is already possible in reference management softwares like Zotero. CAQDAS (Computer-Assisted/Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software) like Atlas.ti are a step above as they allow to annotate directly in the source material and help to organise a reflexive coding system.

For my analysis, quantification comes as an option among others to explore my sources. I cannot use it as a means of evidence, since my corpus is not designed to be representative of a larger entity and is not preprocessed for text mining (with the variety of sources I look at, that would be a project in itself). Even considering these flaws, quantification can yet be a way to ask new questions. The *impresso* platform has a useful n-gram option, which indicated rising occurrences for “abstentionnisme” from the 1960s onwards for all Swiss newspapers in question, and a steady decline from the 1980s onwards. But instead of concluding to a successful agenda-setting on the part of the media between the 1960s and the

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**16** One of the first German studies on the topic already used the phrase “Party of non-voters” as its title, Würzburger, Eugen. ‘Die „Partei der Nichtwähler“’. *Jahrbücher für Nationalökonomie und Statistik*, vol. 33 (88), no. 3, 1907, pp. 381–89.

**17** Other terms for “non-voter” such as *Wahlabstinentzler*, *Stimmabstinentzler*, *abstentionniste* were already included in my previous search thanks to fuzzy search options.

**18** S.n. ‘Zürichs schweigende Mehrheit wächst. Eine Analyse der Nichtwähler bestätigt fatale Tendenzen’. *Die Tat*, 20 January 1972, <http://www.e-newspaperarchives.ch/?a=d&d=DTT19720120-01.2.1&srpos=5>. Accessed 23 April 2020; Schwaar, Egon. ‘Die Nichtwähler bei den Gemeinderatswahlen 1970’. *Zürcher Statistische Nachrichten*, vol. 48, no. 2, 1971, pp. 75–101.

1980s, mapping the actors at stake and their discursive contexts has revealed a more contrasted picture. While journalists had regularly commented upon the decline in turnout starting in the 1960s, it was oftentimes the same politicians who raised alarm on what they saw as a lack of “civic duty” (a recurrent frame) and the “danger” it caused for Swiss democracy.<sup>19</sup> Throughout the 1970s, federal and cantonal authorities commissioned experts and working groups with the task of explaining the decline in turnout and suggesting solutions to curb it. While their reports were unsure about what could be done, this explosion of interpretations on electoral participation changed the distribution of speech in the public sphere: “ordinary” citizens themselves, who had rarely been consulted on this topic, suggested their own takes in letters to the editors. They often insisted that they were dutiful voters, so that the discussion on non-voting in newspapers still mostly took place without non-voters.<sup>20</sup> But both they and some journalists started to criticise the “citizen bashing” and “crocodile tears”, indulged by politicians, which might explain that the topic slowly started to lose attention in the public sphere.<sup>21</sup> This short-lived focalization on non-voting may have foremost crystallised the worries of political elites over the future of Swiss democracy in the age of television and new social movements (Kergomard, 2020c). Based on these first results, I can now deepen and expand my research to the other two countries in my study, in order to study the ways electoral participation was problematized in a transnational perspective. With these various entry points and tools, my analysis benefits from my going back and forth between the “frenetic fishing for information” and the “peaceful, monotonous” reading and annotating, as Claire-Lise Gaillard observed (Gaillard, 2018).

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**19** ‘Postulat Schalcher. Aktivierung der schweigenden Mehrheit’. Amtliches Bulletin der Bundesversammlung, vol. I, no. 11263, 20 March 1973, pp. 373–76.

**20** Julliard, Horace. ‘Monsieur le Rédacteur en chef ... L'affligeante médiocrité de notre personnel politique’. *Journal de Genève*, 29 October 1979, <https://impresso-project.ch/app/issue/JDG-1979-10-29-a/page/JDG-1979-10-29-a-p0002/article/JDG-1979-10-29-a-i0008>. Accessed 22 April 2020.

**21** Diezi, Cécile. ‘Regard. Le mutisme du citoyen’. *L’Impartial*, 19 January 1984, <https://impresso-project.ch/app/issue/IMP-1984-01-19-a/page/IMP-1984-01-19-a-p0017/article/IMP-1984-01-19-a-i0171>. Accessed 5 May 2020; Julliard, Olivier. ‘Monsieur le Rédacteur en chef ... Et si l’on punissait les abstentionnistes?’ *Journal de Genève*, 29 October 1979, <https://impresso-project.ch/app/issue/JDG-1979-10-29-a/page/JDG-1979-10-29-a-p0002/article/JDG-1979-10-29-a-i0009>. Accessed 22 April 2020; Amstutz, Peter. “Wählerschelte statt Parteitag,” *Basler Zeitung*, 5 September 1983. Swiss Social Archives, Zeitungsartikel 38.7, Bauern-, Gewerbe, und Bürgerpartei, 1934–1985.



## 5 Conclusion

What is the impact of including digitised newspapers in small-scale research projects? Digitization is certainly an incentive for more reflexivity that can be fruitful for all historians, regarding source criticism, but also search processes and source selection. As I discussed in this contribution, historians have struggled with the place to give to newspaper material long before digitization, as “any other” source, with specific production and reception contexts. Outside media history, they were often used for factual evidence without much contextualization, whereas media scholars reversely faced the pitfall of media-centrism. Digitization reinforces both problems, not least because it often leads us to focus on the same already digitised newspapers. Instead of focusing too narrowly on a sample of seemingly “representative” digitised newspapers, digitization can actually invite us to multiply the type of sources and perspectives we include in our research. But dealing with diverse, digitised and non-digitized sources asks that we clarify how we think of, construct and analyse our corpus. While the methodological reflection on digitised newspapers has until now mostly focused on large-scale (oftentimes quantitative) projects in media history and rather led to a “frozen” approach to corpora, digitization can also enhance a more explorative, iterative research approach and hence an understanding of corpus as an evolving, interconnected and reflexive collection of diverse sources. While these different approaches need to be clarified and reflected upon, they certainly complement each other, since all historical projects dealing with the media can shed light on its place as a collective actor mediating societal discussions and perceptions in historical processes (Schudson, 1997, 473).

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