

Proposing a Digital Archive of Immigrant Newspapers in NYC

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New York is home to a thriving media sector of publications that serve immigrant communities. Hundreds of media outlets in a multitude of languages currently exist in the metro area alone. While it would be fascinating to document them, we decided to take the historical route and propose a digital archive website in which the parameters are narrowed down to newspapers founded in the 19th century and that target select immigrant populations. We believe this project would showcase a sliver of immigrant history through the lens of the news media – a perspective that is not often considered. Through the newspapers that served newcomers in their native language, one can trace immigrant waves and population patterns. For example, German immigration to New York peaked in the 19th century, which can be noted through the abundance of German-language newspapers. Today, no traditional German-language newspaper exists in the city.

This project would target anyone interested in the history of New York, especially if that interest encompassed immigration and journalism, as well as members of the general public who may have gained a recent interest in immigration in light of the current political climate. By showcasing these newspapers, this effort would affirm that even in the 1800s, immigrants still relied on the familiar – and that included news in their native tongue. Contrary to the belief of some, immigrant communities – even back then – lived and thrived in their own enclaves where they spoke and interacted in their own languages.

For now, we envision the newspaper archive as including the following for each individual publication, depending on what can be found:

- Image of the front page of a select issue and/or full issues (and if the newspaper still exists, images from present day)
- Profile information: community served, language, years active, geographic reach, readership, location, facts, description, etc.
- Links to libraries, museums and other sources to view issues of the newspaper

In addition to the archive, we also want to include a series of visualizations on the website:

- Maps: newspaper locations that can be adjusted based on language and country of origin
- Animated map showing the emergence and disappearance of newspapers through the years
- Timeline and statistics that reflect the waves of immigration in relation to the number of newspapers

This project takes advantage of the existence of a media sector with a diversity of ethnicities and languages that are not commonly found elsewhere. The contents of the archive would serve as a reflection of the growth of immigrant communities – a large community would tend to mean a thriving media presence – and the eventual assimilation of those communities into American society through the descendants of the immigrants, which in turn would usually lead to the decline of the newspapers that once flourished in those enclaves.

We don't have a framework that is set in stone for the scope of the project, but here are some possibilities in terms of narrowing down the content:

- NYC-based newspapers founded prior to 1900
- English or non-English?
- Top immigrant populations of the 19th century only? Ones that [peaked](#) in the 19th century? (ex. British, Irish, German)

Through a database of these newspapers that will be compiled in the beginning stages of the project, we hope to deliver a website that contains the digital archive of newspaper profiles and a collection of visualizations that present trends and historical information found within the newspaper data and beyond.

As mentioned before, immigration is a hot-button issue in today's political environment. This project would present the reality that is conveniently forgotten by some Americans – that immigrants back then adjusted to their new country the same way immigrants do today: by speaking and reading the language they're most comfortable with. By seeing the actual newspapers that served, say, German, Irish, Jewish, and French immigrants, viewers can better understand that perhaps immigrants of the past behaved quite similarly to immigrants today in how they adapted to a new land. In a relatively small way, this site strives to combat some of the hostile rhetoric directed toward immigrants today by providing a reminder of how immigrants have been an integral part of U.S. history and especially New York City history, and whether they arrived in 1850 or 2005. They're not so different in their struggles to build a life in a new country.

Numerous databases exist that collect and document historical newspapers in NYC and the rest of the U.S., with one of the most prominent ones being [Chronicling America](#), an initiative of the National

Digital Newspaper Program (which is a joint effort between NEH and the Library of Congress). The online database lets users search for U.S.-based newspapers, both past and present, and offers digitized versions of select historical publications. Other similar databases exist such as Readex, 19th Century US Newspapers and the catalogue at the Center for Research Libraries and on ProQuest. Access to these particular sites for the most part is given through libraries. Our project would use these databases as a research source from which to compile the names and details of the immigrant newspapers in NYC.

As the website would have a far narrower focus time-, content- and geographic-wise, greater attention can be placed on seeking images and additional information, as well as ways of presenting the profiles and visualization in a visually-appealing and user-friendly manner. Given the vast amount of information in the existing databases, it can be a bit cumbersome at times to find location- or community-specific periodicals. An additional feature of this project would be a search tool that finds NYC-centric newspapers based on country of origin, time, place, etc. and also serves as a means of organizing the archival portion of the site.

We see this project as a small contribution to the field of digital humanities because it compiles information about historical newspapers, which served to inform and educate a unique group of readers: immigrants living in a new country that had unfamiliar cultures and languages, making survival all the more difficult. While not all immigrant newspapers published the same sort of stories, for many communities, their periodicals included stories from their country and became their only connection to home and at the same time, included articles that informed them about their new home and the happenings among the fellow citizens around whom they now lived. The newspapers provide a look into the culture and daily lives through the respective languages and print styles of the numerous immigrant communities. While the project is not about analyzing the papers (though that would be an interesting effort in and of itself), it can initiate conversations about immigrant newspapers from a past century, and affirm that immigrants "even" back then lived in enclaves and spoke their native languages — perhaps a fitting reminder in the current political climate.

Possible work plan:

1. Finalize criteria of what newspapers to include in the database
2. Compile database of newspaper titles and profile information using existing databases and information from libraries, museums and ethnic departments in universities

3. Find images of newspapers
4. Determine how newspaper profiles will appear
5. Determine which visualizations would be feasible given the data
6. Build archive, visualizations and website; disseminate through social media, universities, programs and other avenues of outreach
7. Other ideas to consider if there is time or for future development of the site:
 - a. As many images/files of issues as possible
 - b. Interviews with readers, staff members or others familiar with the newspaper
 - c. Add audio, video or other forms of multimedia to the profiles where possible
 - d. Additional time periods and immigrant groups, and African American newspapers
 - e. Notable coverage found in the newspapers
 - f. Characteristics, political leanings
 - g. Kinds of news and/or sections unique to a community

Staff:

- Everyone will serve as researchers in some fashion to compile the database of newspapers
- Designer/UX: design visualizations, website and archive design and implementation
- Developer: coding website and archive components (search engine, archive), design and embed visualizations
- Project manager
- Outreach: social media; connect with museums, university departments, consulates, related initiatives