The Information Transfer Process:

World War II History

Matthew Upson

Emporia State University

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INTRODUCTION

The study of World War II can be incredibly convoluted. Countless efforts have been made to record and discuss every facet of this massive event. A preeminent World War II historian refers to this cataclysm as “the largest single event in human history” (Keegan, 1989, Foreword), although information professionals and historians find it necessary to break this singular “event” into cumulative occurrences in order to promote effective research.

 Appropriately, such a massive historical occurrence continues to affect many different parties. The average person might have a genealogical or personal interest in the war. Military studies are still conducted regarding various actions during the war in order to provide soldiers with educational value and historical context. Historians still have massive amounts of domestic and foreign primary sources to investigate as documents continue to be declassified more than 60 years after the conflict ended.

 Millions of people come into regular contact with information regarding the Second World War. This paper will attempt to describe, in a very general and geographically localized way, the methods by which World War II related knowledge is transferred.

CREATION

Achleitner’s (1995) citation of Nelson states that “[k]nowledge is created in a cultural context influenced by politics, economics, and technology” (p. 143). This idea conforms to the notion of working within a specific paradigm that functions as a lens through which all information is viewed. When considering historical study, the idea of
paradigms can be illustrated through viewing the historiography of a topic. Historiography is “the study of changes in the methods, interpretations, and conclusions of historians over time” (Benjamin, 2007, p. 6). Contextual parameters within historical study can be, and often are, affected by the emergence of new evidence and sources. A prime example can be seen as a result of the Soviet Union’s collapse (a cultural and social paradigm shift in itself), which instigated the eventual opening of previously classified archival materials concerning, among other things, Stalin’s role during the war. The study of these documents led to a new perspective of Soviet and world history.

So, the creation of new knowledge, which is primarily completed through the investigation and synthesis of primary and secondary sources, must be viewed as a paradigmatic act. As stated above, politics, economic factors, and technology can affect the creation of knowledge. Consider the following examples. The end of the Cold War and the genesis of the European Union provided the impetus for Tony Judt to research and write Postwar. Stephen Ambrose’s commercial success as a World War II historian promoted the continuing abundance of various media related to the study of the war. Increasingly accessible primary source documents are becoming available online for researchers to peruse and value at their own convenience. This author is currently engaged in making Senator Bob Dole’s papers more accessible through online cataloging and proposed eventual digitization of the bulk of the archives.

Based on the contextual criteria provided by the above definition, World War II historians create knowledge by researching and synthesizing; all within the framework of their current paradigm and with a view to serve a specific purpose.
DISSEMINATION

PUBLISH, PUBLISH, PUBLISH. As in most academic fields, the main
disciplinary requirement is to research and publish findings. By publishing, the
knowledge creator is disseminating their information. Scullion (2002) and Kramer &
Cole (2003) both offer source prestige and credibility as a factor when determining
effective dissemination that promotes utilization.

The source should be reputable in order for the knowledge to be considered
viable. When considering World War II history, one must take into account the
ubiquitous amount of “arm-chair general” material on the market. Many publications
(book, magazine, internet) offer dramatic descriptions of battles with little or no historical
value. Peer-reviewed journals offer the most “reputable” venue for dissemination. Some
of the more high profile and legitimate journals are the Journal of Military History,
Military Review (professional military journal), Military History Quarterly, Foreign
Affairs, and Foreign Policy. All of these journals are offered in print as well as online.

ORGANIZATION

Due to the incredibly massive amount of published information on World War II,
the organizational system is complex. The Library of Congress classification system
places the bulk of WWII info under D731-838. This is under the General World History
Subclass. However, there are additional subclasses under which one might find pertinent
information. DD256 offers World War II information regarding Germany, DL527-537
focuses on the war in northern Europe and Scandinavia. The papers of American
statesmen, such as Dwight Eisenhower fall under E742.5. The military and naval history
of the United States can be found under E181-182. Additionally, the entire subclass of U is devoted to military science, where pertinent information regarding period specific forces can be found.

The Dewey Decimal classification system compiles the vast bulk of World War II literature under the 940 heading, which is listed as European History, despite the inclusion of Pacific Theater resources.

Also, U.S. government publications that are made available in Federal Depository Libraries classify those documents under a government documents classification system. D214.14/4 offers documentation on the Marine Corps during World War II. D301.82 holds the history of the Army Air Forces in WW II. Finally, D14.7 designates the history of the U.S. Army in World War II, including the “Green Books”, an expansive multivolume assessment of seemingly every facet of the U.S. Army during the war.

DIFFUSION

Rogers (2003) identifies four elements that play a role in diffusion: the innovation, communication channels, time, and social system. The implementation and utilization of the knowledge is implied when referring to the process of diffusion. Without interplay between the knowledge creator, the knowledge (or innovation), and the potential user (within a social/cultural context) there can be no diffusion.

The innovation “is an idea, practice, or object that is perceived as new by and individual or other unit” (Rogers, 2003, p. 11). So, for example, when previously unutilized evidence is found and implemented as knowledge within disseminated findings, it must first be recognized. World War II historians take this first step in the
diffusion process by offering it up to peers through publication or presentation at professional conferences. According to Rogers (2003), the “innovation” can be characterized by its relative advantage over previous ideas/theories, its compatibility with existing values, the complexity and usability of the idea, the degree to which it can be used experimentally, and the observability of the results of its implementation (p. 15-16). Therefore an innovative historical assertion will enable historians to grasp new concepts while fitting within the existing and comfortable structure of the existing context. The idea will also be easily utilized in multiple situations with observable and verifiable results. In other words, the idea will provide new, yet legitimate viewpoints of historical situations that promote continued investigation and utilization of the idea.

Rogers (2003) then identifies the characteristic of communication channels. This involves the “means by which messages get from one individual to another” (p. 18). He goes on to state that the flow of knowledge is most easily achieved between homophilous, or like individuals (p. 18-19). Hence the purpose of professional conferences. Gathering persons of similar educational backgrounds and schools of thought theoretically promotes the transmission of knowledge, without social or cultural apprehensions. If a military historian was giving a public lecture, their attitude and language toward their audience would necessarily have to be adjusted or they would risk losing the crowd in a sea of historical and technical jargon and assumptions.

The notion of time as a determining factor of the diffusion process simply measures how quickly an innovation is accepted or rejected based on various characteristics of the adopter(s) (Rogers, 2003, p. 20-23). The adopter will attempt to
utilize the information and then base their decision on whether or not the innovation conforms to their ideas of usefulness.

The *Social System* is referred to as “a set of interrelated units that are engaged in joint problem-solving to accomplish a common goal” (Rogers, 2003, p. 23). An idea will be accepted or discarded within a system, in this case World War II historians. Granted, the topic is so huge, that decisions for implementation may very well be made in a more localized fashion. European Theater historians may not concern themselves with a new view on the Battle of Guadalcanal, and therefore abstain from any discernable decision making. Rogers (2003) also refers to *opinion leaders* as persons of highly visible status who “exemplify and express the [social] system’s structure” (p. 27). Respected authorities on World War II history may have the persuasive power to implement or reject an idea for the system. Russell Weigley, whose work *Eisenhower’s Lieutenants* set the standard for recent study of American forces in the war, is cited frequently in the footnotes of many academic tomes. Accordingly, his name is also frequently seen on the cover of various histories, lending his validity to the volume. Additionally, by writing reviews or commentary, opinion leaders can quickly lend credibility to a budding, innovative author or just as easily snatch it away.

Opinion leaders and the rank and file members of the World War II social system regularly attend academic conferences such as the annual Society for Military History conference in order to present and assess new research. It is this interaction of people and ideas, leading up to utilization that is characteristic of diffusion.
UTILIZATION

Kramer & Cole (2003) emphasize the importance of knowledge utilization in creating a viable and competitive workplace. The same holds true for the academic study of the Second World War. Historian John Lewis Gaddis (2002) claims that the purpose of historians is to “interpret the past for the purposes of the present with a view to managing the future” (p.10). This statement succinctly phrases the point of utilization. By examining the events of World War II, historians can hopefully provide politicians and leaders of the present with a richer understanding of current situations that had their genesis in those dark years. Decisions can be made with a greater appreciation of cultural and social paradigms that still linger as a result of the war. Military students can study the successes and mistakes of past battles in order to develop new theories on how war (or avoidance of war) can be conducted. Or, the more mundane approach allows a student to write a paper for class or visit a museum for personal pleasure. Machlup (1993) speaks of both “practical” and “intellectual” knowledge (p. 453-454). As we can see, both aspects of knowledge utilization can be fulfilled by the study of World War II.

PRESERVATION

World War II literature is widespread in public and academic libraries. Many towns and universities have special collections that focus on topics of local relevance during the war. The Spencer Research Library at the University of Kansas possesses a collection of correspondence by local residents during the war. Abilene, Kansas is the home of the Eisenhower Presidential Library, which houses an abundance of official primary sources. The Army’s Command and General Staff College is located at Fort
Leavenworth, Kansas and the Combined Arms Research Library provides professional soldiers and researchers with primary sources and secondary studies. The Army War College at Carlisle, Pennsylvania possesses the Army Heritage and Education Center. These libraries are only a few that provide access to mountains of unique resources that are invaluable to researchers. General archival preservation techniques such as environmental control and limited access to the materials delays their inevitable deterioration. However, as digitization processes become less expensive and easier to use, access will increase. Although digitization is not yet considered preservation *per se* (Teper, 2005, p. 33), it effectively provides the means to perform new research and create knowledge that would otherwise go undeveloped.

**CONCLUSION**

The study of World War II presents a daunting array of material to draw from. The massive amount of primary and secondary source information stored within the many public, academic, special, and archival libraries provide the basis from which new knowledge is created. By publishing innovative research in journals and presenting at professional conferences, knowledge creators can disseminate and diffuse their work. Once diffused, the knowledge can be utilized in a variety of ways, including increasing awareness of the war’s effect on current geo-political situations, developing military strategy and tactics, as well as for general use.
References


