

Event Gazetteers and Timelines for History and Cultural Access

Robert B. Allen
College of Information Studies
University of Maryland

Event Gazetteers and Timelines

Events are central to the way we describe our history and our culture – consider events such as “The American Civil War”, the carving of the Grand Canyon, Gandhi’s March to the Sea and the birth of Sri Krishna. While we have elaborate systems for describing places (e.g., [6]) no similar effort has been put into describing events. We are in the process of developing such an “event gazetteer”. Events come in groups – as sequences or causal stems; thus, we combine our event gazetteer with timeline interfaces.

Within a few years we could have a digital collection of historic newspaper images (e.g., [4]). Consider someone who wanted to use such a collection to study the history of his/her home town. Using a community event-and-timeline tool, that person could get descriptions of salient events entered by other people, perhaps compare local events to events on the national scene, and then add his/her own extensions of the history. Thus, we envision a collaborative event specification and viewing system. We might reuse events specified by others or develop personal versions to reflect individual interpretations of the events.

However, there are many challenges in dealing with events – Events occur at many different granularities ranging from milliseconds to eons. Events may have fuzzy boundaries and they may be spread across many locations. Indeed, their spatial and temporal coordinates may not even be known. In some cases, even the occurrence of an event may have to be hypothesized. There are many custom-designed timelines interfaces and a few projects with flexible data structures (e.g., [1, 5, 7]). But none of these have the generality, collaborative interaction, and emphasis on narratives of approach we are currently pursuing.

Causation, Narrative, and Annotation

Beyond simply generating sequences of events, users are frequently interested in how groups of events are related to each other. We allow a flexible mechanism for creating annotations about how events are related. Causation is one way that events may be related. We have extended Toulmin’s model of argumentation structures as a model for causal relationships among events [3]. Furthermore, causation is an essential component for narratives [2] and our event gazetteers might allow individuals to “tell the story” of their communities. There is probably even more disagreement between individuals about the causes of events than about the events themselves. Thus, we also allow individuals to generate personalized descriptions of causes.

Events, Timelines, Culture and History

We envision an online resource that would be used by many different people. For instance, students could use it for cultural studies and history lessons. Genealogists could use it to describe the activities of the ancestors. It would be natural to incorporate multimedia. For instance, songs and video clips from the early 20th century could be correlated with social events.

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