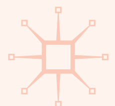
HISTORY, DISRUPTED

How Social Media and the World Wide Web Have Changed the Past

JASON STEINHAUER



History, Disrupted

Jason Steinhauer

History, Disrupted

How Social Media and the World Wide Web Have Changed the Past

palgrave
macmillan

Jason Steinhauer
Washington, DC, USA

ISBN 978-3-030-85116-3 ISBN 978-3-030-85117-0 (eBook)
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-85117-0

© The Editor(s) (if applicable) and The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2022
This work is subject to copyright. All rights are solely and exclusively licensed by the Publisher, whether the whole or part of the material is concerned, specifically the rights of translation, reprinting, reuse of illustrations, recitation, broadcasting, reproduction on microfilms or in any other physical way, and transmission or information storage and retrieval, electronic adaptation, computer software, or by similar or dissimilar methodology now known or hereafter developed.
The use of general descriptive names, registered names, trademarks, service marks, etc. in this publication does not imply, even in the absence of a specific statement, that such names are exempt from the relevant protective laws and regulations and therefore free for general use.
The publisher, the authors and the editors are safe to assume that the advice and information in this book are believed to be true and accurate at the date of publication. Neither the publisher nor the authors or the editors give a warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the material contained herein or for any errors or omissions that may have been made. The publisher remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG.
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

Acknowledgments

This book could not have been written without two libraries, the U.S. Library of Congress and Falvey Memorial Library.

The Library of Congress is, quite simply, the most inspiring place in the world to write and do research. Sitting in the Main Reading Room of the Library's Thomas Jefferson Building is like being wrapped in a warm blanket made of wisdom while having a rich cup of enlightenment in your hands. There is nowhere on Earth quite like it. I've been fortunate to experience the Library as a staff member and as a scholar. For seven years, I worked at the Library of Congress, four-and-a-half in the Library's residential scholars center, The John W. Kluge Center. It was in those offices on the north side of the Thomas Jefferson Building that the seeds for this book were planted. The first conversations I had were with two scholars-in-residence at the Kluge Center, David Grinspoon and John Bew. Apart from advice, what I gained most from them was encouragement. They recognized I was onto something and told me to keep digging. For that, I am forever grateful. The other formative influence was my boss, Carolyn Brown—herself a brilliant scholar. Dr. Brown believed in my capacity to grow into an author. She allowed me to theorize about history's place in the world when I had only an inkling of what I was talking about. She knew that by talking it out I would uncover new questions, and for many afternoons inside her office we had long, enriching conversations. She demonstrated each day what true wisdom and grace looked like.

Once I left the Library for academia, I returned often. I was fortunate to spend semester breaks as a guest of the Kluge Center to research and write. It was at the Kluge Center that the first draft of this book was

completed. I'm grateful to John Haskell, Travis Hensley, Dan Turello and Michael Stratmoen for their hospitality.

The second and third drafts of this book were researched at Falvey Memorial Library. Access to hundreds of journal articles and e-books was gained through Falvey. Special gratitude to archivist Beaudry Allen and digital scholarship librarian Erica Hayes for their guidance and patience. Their contributions made several elements of this book possible.

Since 2014 I've had numerous conversations about how history gets communicated on the Web. I've been enriched by the insights of many people, but particularly wish to acknowledge: Marla Miller, Jennifer Hart, Charisse L'Pree Corsbie-Massay, Kathryn C. Brownell, Nicole Hemmer, Rebecca Onion, Julie Golia, Cathy Stanton, Jim Grossman, Dane Kennedy, John Dichtl, Christian Ostermann, Nathaniel Comfort, Eric Olson, Glenn Hampson, Jessica Pearson, Ernesto Capello, Claire Lanier, Gregory Parker, Joshua C. Birk, Brian Rosenwald, Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff, Amanda Moniz, Paul Sturtevant, Yoni Applebaum, Ed Ayers, Stephen Robertson, Jamia Wilson, Eric Schulze, Richard Price, Vincent Brown, Lily Rothman, Carol Curiel, Shola Lynch, David Myers, Hamza Choudery, Annie Ulevitch, Pooja Sarvaiya, Javaughan Lawrence and Xiao Ling. My gratitude to the University of Massachusetts Amherst and Purdue University for their support of a "History Communication" summit in 2016.

Robin Colucci, Becky Sweren, Laura Tillman, Seven McDonald, Claire Atkin, Kent Holland, Adam Lederer and Sean Griffith offered invaluable feedback at various stages of the writing process. My editor Andy Kifer worked diligently to refine my ideas and concepts until they rang true on the page. Molly Beck and Lucy Kidwell at Palgrave Macmillan stood behind this project every step of the way. This book could also not have been written without Clubhouse. Thank you to Paul Davison, Rohan Seth, Harsh and the Pals, Testflighters and the tens of thousands of people in the History Club.

Finally, I wish to thank my gorgeous soulmate. She has changed me in so many ways that I've already lost count. I love you forever.

Contents

1 Introduction 1

2 *e*-History: Not Quite History and Not Quite the Past 9

3 The Crowd-Sourced Past 19

4 Nostalgia on Demand 33

5 The Viral Past 43

6 The Visual Past 57

7 The Newsworthy Past 73

8 The Storytelling Past 87

9 History.AI 99

10 Does History Have a Future? 107

Notes 119

Index 155

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

In August 2015, Ty Seidule went viral. Wearing his U.S. Army uniform decorated with epaulets on each shoulder, the former Professor and Head of the Department of History at West Point starred in a five-minute video for PragerU about why slavery was the single most important cause of the U.S. Civil War. The video had 34.4 million views on the PragerU website, 12 million views on Facebook and 2.6 million views on YouTube.[1] It was, at the time, one of the most-viewed history videos ever recorded.[2]

Seidule's video was an example of what I call ***e*-history**, discrete media products that package an element, or elements, of the past for consumption on the social Web and which try to leverage the social Web in order to gain visibility. Examples of *e*-history include history YouTube videos, history Twitter threads, history Instagram posts, podcasts and history Wikipedia pages. Different types of *e*-history rely on different mechanisms to reach our eyes: Wikipedia entries rely on the "crowd-sourced past"; Instagram posts rely on "the visual past"; and history-themed news articles rely on the "newsworthy past." The PragerU video was an example of what I call the "viral past," a type of *e*-history that purposefully seeks to spark contagion through social networks by provoking rapid sharing within a short period of time. Achieving virality helped to grant it influence, credibility and authoritativeness, as well as advance an agenda.

For PragerU, that agenda is to counteract a purported "liberal orthodoxy" inside American universities, particularly within history departments.[3] Created by Conservative radio host Dennis Prager, PragerU is a

© The Author(s), under exclusive license to Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2022
J. Steinhauer, *History, Disrupted*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-85117-0_1

multi-million-dollar media company that distributes content across the Web and on college campuses. A viral *e*-history video about the U.S. Civil War served to validate PragerU as an authoritative source, remind viewers that it was a Republican president, Abraham Lincoln, who issued the Emancipation Proclamation, and reassert American exceptionalism by arguing that it was to "America's everlasting credit" that it fought a war to abolish slavery.[4] Progressive activists, journalists and academics have criticized PragerU's videos as indoctrination and incorrect with their facts.[5] But the social Web does not privilege facts; it privileges getting noticed and signals of attention. The virality of PragerU's *e*-history video resulted, in part, from it being a cleverly crafted piece of media and, in part, from it being part of a broader political battle between Conservatives and Progressives on how to define the American past—a struggle that predates YouTube by nearly 100 years.[6]

Why does this matter? Because today there are millions of history videos, history blogs, history memes, history podcasts, history social media accounts and historically informed news articles on the Web competing for our attention, advancing political and commercial agendas, and actively re-shaping what we know about the past. Some content goes viral; others do not. Some amass millions of views; others are barely seen. Some are accurate; some are not. Some are created by professional historians and informed by scholarship; others are made by journalists, history enthusiasts, teenagers, hobbyists, white supremacists, conspiracy theorists and foreign disinformation agents. It can often be difficult to determine which *e*-history is created by whom.

The sum effect has been the creation of a vast and expansive *e*-history universe over the past two decades that it is now as large—or larger—as any category of content on the Web. The social Web plays an enormous role in shaping the histories we encounter. A 2020 study by the Frameworks Institute found that pop culture, social media and the news media are playing an increasingly larger role in how the public thinks about the past.[7] High school teachers repeatedly tell me their students form their ideas about history from what they see on social media. A college student told me that she and her peers get their history from Twitter threads, op-eds, news stories and Wikipedia and that her younger brother gets his history from 15-minute videos on YouTube.[8] Another student told me that on any given day she watches five history videos on YouTube just while making dinner.[9] A journalist told me she gets her history primarily from Instagram,[10] while a high school student in California told me she gets her

history primarily from TikTok.[11] How we understand, learn and communicate history has been completely disrupted by technology, historical information now a fragmented and atomized part of the news feed, intertwined with the onslaught of information that re-shapes our perceptions of reality each day.

This proliferation of information about the past online does not equate to a better understanding of history, however. The fragmentary nature of *e*-history of widely varying quality and agendas, with no uniform ethics or standards, compels individuals to try and derive meaning from simplistic, controversial, pseudo-academic and conspiratorial sources intermixed with scholarly and journalistic ones. The results can be confounding. One college student told me the amount of historical information she saw online was so overwhelming that it was nearly impossible to find what was useful. Exploring the past online from hyperlink to hyperlink "sucks you in," she said, "but you don't learn anything."[12] A friend in Silicon Valley lamented there was so much history content on the Web that it was increasingly difficult to decipher what deserved serious consideration.[13] A tech policy analyst in New York confessed that even though he engaged with online history content regularly, he forgot it shortly afterward.[14] And a journalist confided that even despite the plethora of *e*-history available, searching and discovering historical information remained time-consuming and challenging.[15] More historical information online does not translate to greater ease in finding, learning or understanding that information. It may, in fact, have the opposite effect.[16]

This book, then, seeks to chart this vast universe of *e*-history in order to better understand how the social Web has changed our understanding of the past. It digs below the surface of *e*-history to reveal what agendas are at work, what tactics are used to achieve visibility, how the platforms dictate what pasts we encounter and which we never see, and how Web users can be better consumers of historical information online. This book argues that *e*-history has grown so pervasive and omnipresent that it has come to represent what we expect *all* history to be. Its values and mores—intimately shaped by the values and mores of Silicon Valley—have changed the definition of history right before our very eyes.

Returning to the Ty Seidule video, then, what caused it to become a highly visible form of *e*-history? Timing mattered. Less than two months earlier, a 21-year-old named Dylann Roof entered the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, and murdered nine people. Photographs of Roof showed him brandishing the

Confederate flag, reigniting a debate online and offline about the flag's significance and presence in American life. Media outlets reached out to historians for their perspectives, including Seidule. His video resonated with the news cycle and ongoing political debates.

Framing also mattered. The cause of the war was framed as a question not a settled conclusion, the alleged controversy around the question foregrounded within the video's first ten seconds. A question and a controversy served as a useful hook to grab the viewer's attention. The video also presented a symbolic juxtaposition: a white U.S. Army Officer, his chest decorated with medals, speaking about the enslavement of African Americans and the war fought to end it. The video was short—slightly over five minutes long—and professionally edited, making it attractive and easily shareable. It was posted to YouTube and Facebook, leveraging those platforms' algorithms and recommendations. Finally, the producer of the video mattered; PragerU's financial resources enabled it to distribute the video across the social Web. One analysis found PragerU ranked among the ten biggest political spenders on Facebook.[17]

Seidule is not the first historian to argue that slavery caused the U.S. Civil War, an assessment shared by nearly all in the profession. How *e*-history comes to our attention, then, has little to do with the accuracy of the information. The prevailing factors that bring *e*-history content to our attention are algorithms, social networks, how the content is framed, its relevance to the news cycle, politics, commercial motivations, power dynamics, misinformation and disinformation campaigns, and our own perceptions of history and its role in society. Subject matters rise to the top of the news feed due to political agendas or commercial interests, not because of their scholarly or factual merits. The social Web privileges the *attributes* of a piece of content more than its *veracity* or *accuracy*. The social Web has evolved into a competing marketplace of symbols, predicated on the delivery of information quickly and efficiently. *e*-history has evolved along with it. The more potent *e*-history operates as a symbol, the more likely it is to appear on our screens. Much of what *e*-history does is to flatten historical understanding into a competing war of symbols, deployed on a fast-moving Web in order to win arguments about the present. *e*-history promises quick and satisfying answers to complex questions and phenomena, providing the source material from which opinions can be formed and soundbites can be created. Its "good enough" historical understanding becomes the foundation for participation in whatever online debate may be happening at the moment—regardless of whether

the information comes from a professional historian, Google, Wikipedia, Twitter, Instagram, *The New York Times*, Hardcore History, Crash Course or Russia Today. *e*-history provides continual reassurances that we know enough about the past—and can learn enough history on our own—simply because we see so much of it. Its principal outcome has not been education, but rather to embed the values of the social Web deeper into our lives. The history we privilege becomes not what deciphers the complexity of the past with rigor and fidelity, but what best succeeds at best capturing our attention in a given moment.

The explosion of *e*-history has occurred simultaneously with a series of crises in the history profession. History enrollments have plummeted at four-year colleges and universities;[18] history departments and history museums face severe budget cuts;[19] and scholarly books and articles by academics are read in smaller numbers.[20] Technology has not only disrupted how we learn history; it has disrupted the entire history profession. The Web and social media have birthed new forms of communicating history that, over time, have made the classroom lecture, the scholarly monograph and the journal article feel increasingly antiquated and impenetrable as new forms of history communication better accommodate the sensibilities of digital consumers. The prevalence and popularity of *e*-history have created difficult conditions to communicate history in other ways. *e*-history is so pervasive that, for many Web users, it has superseded the need for history classes, history lectures, history books or professional historians.

For these reasons, I and others have worked for the past several years to create the subfield of History Communication, which explores the implications of history being communicated across the Web and social media and prepares historians, journalists and content creators for how to communicate historical scholarship effectively and ethically in a twenty-first-century media environment. While this book is not a *cri de coeur* for the field of History Communication, it is part of the journey of forming such a field and articulating its function. The values of Silicon Valley and Internet capitalism have affected history's place in American society in more ways than have been previously articulated. The Web and social media reward and incentivize the production of *e*-history that is best aligned with their values and mores. The Web's incentive structures have dictated patterns in *e*-history creation that are, in many ways, antithetical to professional history—at times purposefully so. As *e*-history proliferates at astonishing rates—and as we celebrate what *e*-history achieves as opposed to how well it educates—it may lead to the demise of professional

history as we know it. The tail of online success may wag the dog of discerning what might have actually occurred in the past with honesty, integrity, deep research and critical thinking.

How did this happen? The first chapter of this book will explain how *e*-history emerged out of a clash of values between professional history and Web 2.0. Professional history is a time-consuming, intellectual endeavor that privileges expertise and is believed by its practitioners and supporters to have an intrinsic value to society. This stands in sharp contrast to how the social Web has evolved, which is largely a user-centric, data-driven, commercial enterprise predicated on scale, speed and efficiency, and that rewards extrinsic measures of valuation. The transposition of professional history into this milieu has birthed new forms of communicating history that, taken together, now comprise the dizzying universe of *e*-history.

The next chapters will retrace how different parts of the *e*-history universe came into being, while also revealing what mechanisms make some history online visible while obscuring others. All *e*-history wants to be seen, for being visible on the social Web is the pathway to online and offline influence. But different genres of *e*-history get seen in different ways, namely: (1) by being crowd-sourced; (2) by exploiting digital nostalgia; (3) by going viral; (4) by being visually arresting; (5) by being newsworthy; (6) through storytelling; and (7) via AI. The development of these mechanisms forms a loose chronology with the rise in popularity of different platforms. In other words, as new platforms or trends emerged, generating online enthusiasm and funding, new forms of *e*-history emerged along with them that sought to leverage the new technologies in order to gain visibility and influence. Piece-by-piece we will assemble this *e*-history universe—from Wikipedia to social networks to artificial intelligence—charting how it grew and unpacking its ramifications. In the short span of 20 years, our collective understanding of the past has evolved from crowd-sourced Wikipedia entries to history content generated by machines. Two decades into the new century, we are saddled with a sprawling and chaotic *e*-history universe we were not intentional about creating. Such a universe cannot be unmade, its consequences destined to shape our relationship with history for decades to come.

Finally, we'll examine the consequences of *e*-history for our understanding of the past. In conversation-after-conversation with students, journalists, friends and relatives, increasingly people expect to encounter—and deem valuable—historical information that adheres to *e*-history's conventions, often without realizing it. *e*-history has re-wired our brains

and reconfigured which histories we feel are worth our attention and which are not: a remedy for boredom, a shortcut to understanding, in service of a brand or agenda, formulaic, emotional, symbolic, user-centric, novel, surprising and a relief from the history classroom. Quality of evidence, strength of argument and soundness of interpretation matter less to *e*-history's visibility than its conformity to a set of conditions. With so much content to sift through, it becomes increasingly onerous for Web users to expend the effort to search beyond what is immediately accessible. Once *e*-history has captured our attention as a good-enough source of historical information, the effort to dig deeper becomes inhibiting. One tech analyst admitted that *e*-history can be a gateway to further exploration of a subject, but that exploration will always be online, not in a book.[21] A podcast producer told me that when something historical piques his interest, he will not search for a book but rather go to YouTube to find something "bite-sized" to learn more.[22] An entrepreneur noted that even when he does try to read a scholarly journal article, he loses interest after the first two pages.[23] One study found that people who watched a television show about history were not likely to further research the topic.[24] In their book *Going Viral*, Karine Nahon and Jeff Hemsley argue that in a world of information overload, people regularly engage in "satisficing" on the Web. When faced with time and attention constraints, people will not seek perfect solutions but rather solutions that are good enough.[25] *e*-history produces a "satisficing" effect on users, a feeling that the user has a good-enough grasp of history in order to participate in whatever debate may be happening at the moment—whether it be about Donald Trump, Brexit, Confederate monuments or Black Lives Matter. Amid terabytes of historical information, and in an era of constant demands on people's time and attention, *e*-history becomes a proxy for all history.

In the end, debates over *e*-history are, at their core, debates over values, applicable to history as they are to journalism, science and other ways of knowing things about the world. If professional history continues to be disrupted by *e*-history, does that mean we will lose any grip on the past we may once have had? Do disciplines such as professional history have an intrinsic value to society, or does their value depend on extrinsic factors such as views, clicks and shares? Who should be entrusted to speak about certain topics, and what role do the platforms play in determining which voices get heard? These are arguments about power as much as they are about content: the power to set agendas, the power to shape society in one's image, the power to determine what we know and what we do not,

and the power to profit from the massive expansion of the Web into every aspect of our lives. History on the social Web is linked to these complex power struggles, which emerge and re-emerge in different contexts. That tangled complexity informs the history we see on our phones, computers and tablets each day, even if we do not realize it.

Prior to the social Web, history (for some) may have been a retreat from the outside world, a quiet escape into a book, museum or classroom where knowledge was curated in an orderly and chronological fashion. That, in itself, is a form of nostalgia; history has long been sharply political and fiercely contested, any tidiness a product of linear gate-keeping forms of media such as books, newspapers and documentary films. Today, we are constantly surrounded by competing pasts clamoring for our attention, a scattered and messy array of stars and planets, each of varying sizes and brightness, the sheer multitude making it harder, not easier, to know which are the most significant and what the contours are of the broader universe may be. Chronology becomes nearly impossible as information gets flattened and communicated on the Web all-at-once. We catch tidbits of historical information as they fly by, clutching onto familiar patterns and premises that deliver a satisfying jolt of emotion or self-affirmation, that offer a "good enough" understanding in order to make a comment about a trending topic. As is clear from the PragerU video, *e*-history that adheres to, and aligns with, the values of the social Web stand a greater chance at visibility than the *e*-history that do not. To know why, we must better articulate what *e*-history is and where it came from.