

## Fighting Bad History with Good, or, Why Historians Must Get on the Web Now

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Every so often a report comes out from some testing agency demonstrating that Americans don't know much history. Pundits issue dire warnings about the immanent collapse of the Republic under the weight of popular ignorance about the past. We historians make a show of rubbing our hands together and vowing to do a better job of educating the citizenry. Then nothing happens. The Republic lives on, the pundits stop shouting, and we go back to teaching classes and writing monographs.

This periodic tearing-of-hair is interesting for two reasons. First, it shows that we think the public should know more history because if they don't bad things will happen. Second, it suggests that we are probably wrong. By all appearances, American citizens know enough history to keep the ship of state heading in the right direction. One could certainly point to exceptions, and that would be an interesting exercise. Yet it seems reasonable to say that the Republic has never been seriously threatened as a result of popular ignorance of history. Though we don't tend to admit it, we seem to be doing a pretty good job spreading the historical word.

Our success in this regard is remarkable given that our efforts at mass historical education miss a good number of Americans. Only three in four Americans completes high school, where most of the historical heavy-lifting is done. Of those three high-school graduates, roughly two will try college. But only one of those two—or a quarter of the total adult population—will receive a college degree. And most of them will have taken very little history when they get their sheepskin. The program I teach in, for example, mandates three semester hours of history of the 120 required for graduation. Of course teaching isn't the end of our efforts at public education. We also publish articles and books. But very few people outside the profession ever read what we publish. We write for our peers, for that is what our system of advancement requires.

All this is to say that heretofore we haven't had to work very hard to educate the public. Yet the Internet may be changing that. In the world of traditional media, we enjoyed a kind of oligopoly on good historical information. We designed the curricula, wrote the textbooks, taught the classes, published the fundamental research. True, amateurs wrote history books, historical movie scripts, historical TV programs. But they were few and their work was clearly distinguishable from ours. On the Internet, however, amateur historians are neither few nor is their work easily identified as such. It cannot be said often enough: the Internet allows anyone to broadcast anything. That may sound wonderfully democratic, but it also may spell trouble. It means that our oligopoly has been broken, that "users"—uncritical, poorly informed, and with axes to grind—are now writing "our" history. Some of that history may be good. But the overwhelming majority of it is and will be bad. Google your own topic of research and review the top results. Likely you will see a Wikipedia entry and a collection of putatively educational sites all of which are selling something. Think about it: *that* is the public face of your research, *that* is what people see when they read about your topic. They will never encounter your articles or monographs because the Internet crowds them out. Google lists what is popular and your work probably isn't very popular. Naturally it's very good, and it's much better than what's on offer in cyberspace. But that's irrelevant. To Internet users, your work does not exist. All the history they see is bad history.

The old media ensured the public had some contact with good history; the new media do not. And that process of exclusion could have dire consequences. If all people see is bad history, bad history is what they will come to believe. And if they so believe, they will not be able to make the crucial decisions citizens must in a democratic society. This may sound hyperbolic, but there is already some evidence of this Internet-enabled degradation of historical wisdom. How many Americans believe that Iraq was complicit in the 9/11 attacks? How many of them believe that weapons of mass destruction were found in Iraq? How many of them think that Senator John Kerry somehow didn't deserve the medals he was awarded in Vietnam? How many of them believe president-elect Barack Obama is a Muslim? All these beliefs are bogus, yet they live on. And they are the sole property of the lunatic fringe. Millions of Americans hold them. The reason they are so widely believed has everything to do with the Internet's "democratic" capacity to allow anyone to publish anything, no matter what their qualifications or motives. Google any of these myths. You will find numerous, highly-ranked websites that attest to their truth. Many of them look very authoritative indeed, or at least as authoritative as any other website. Add the fact that a good portion of Americans do not trust the "elite" media, and you have a recipe for unprecedented disinformation. Proponents of the Internet's openness will say that it is self-correcting, that the "wisdom of crowds" will sort it all out. But what are we to do if the crowds are not wise, if they are fooled by partisan interests?

Let us hope it will not come to this. But we can and should do more than hope: we must actively engage the Internet. It is only by spreading good history that we will win the struggle against bad history. It's important to realize that this is not a war of ideas: more articles and monographs will not win the day. Rather, it is a struggle for national attention. To put it bluntly, we must try to get our work on the first page of any relevant Google search, for that first page is all people are going to see. There are many ways we can begin do this, some in the new media space and others using the traditional media. Here are some suggestions.

- **Edit Wikipedia.** It's not much of an exaggeration to say that Google is a search engine for [Wikipedia](#) because Google searches so often return Wikipedia entries on the first page. Thus it is little wonder that Wikipedia is the first and last stop when anyone—your students included—want to know something historical. It is absolutely imperative, then, that we become involved in Wikipedia in order to guarantee a certain level of accuracy. You could tell your students not to use it, but you might as well tell the moon not to follow the sun. My tact has been to monitor sites in my own field and to have my students edit the site. The former task is accomplished through what Wikipedia calls "[WikiProjects](#)." These are groups that form to manage specific topics. Anyone can start one and anyone can join. I founded one called "[WikiProject Russian History](#)," and then solicited help on academic listservs, with good results. As for student involvement, I ask my undergrads and undergraduate students to create [new entries](#) or complete "[stubs](#)" (that is, articles already started but not fully developed) related to whatever it is we are studying in the class. Since all Wikipedia entries record every saved edit made by every user, it's easy to check their work by simply reviewing the article's history. This assignment both improves Wikipedia's content and shows students how Wikipedia articles are made.

- **Join Citizendium.** Wikipedia's more serious cousin is called [Citizendium](#). It has rules that most academics will appreciate: you must be lightly vetted to join; only members can edit; everyone edits under their real names; articles are subject to review of various sorts; civil discourse must be maintained throughout. Not surprisingly, Citizendium is smaller but more trustworthy than Wikipedia. My own experience is that it's a good place to do collaborative work. You will be welcome there, as will your graduate students and advanced undergraduates.
- **Put up a decent webpage.** You probably already have a webpage on your department's site, but chances are it's neither very nifty nor can you edit it yourself. This is unfortunate, because your personal webpage is your public face on the Internet. If it looks bad, you look bad. Happily, this problem is not difficult to remedy anymore. A [website designer](#) will charge you several hundred dollars to put up a state-of-the-art site. Or you can make your own site with the help of a [free HTML editor](#).
- **Get on a social networking site.** We all know that contacts are valuable even in history. It's odd, then, that most historians make no effort to maintain and build them in the modern way, that is, through social networking sites. Think of these services as rolodexes that update and expand themselves. If you use them correctly (and it's not hard), you will never lose another contact and your circle will grow. I would recommend two, depending on your taste. [FaceBook](#) is popular though not very "serious." You'll find all your students there. [LinkedIn](#) is specifically designed for professionals looking to do business together.
- **Start a blog.** The Internet is the greatest forum for self-publication ever imagined. That is often a bad thing, but in the right hands it can be a good thing indeed. If you write on matters historical, it's probably to the good as you are an expert. You can also take heart in the fact that you will not be alone: [many historians](#) already have blogs. Read some of them to get ideas. Then set one up, it's [dead simple](#).
- **Contribute to online communities.** Most of us are on one or another H-Net listserv. These tend to be rather narrowly focused and full of academics. If you want to discuss matters historical with non-professionals, you need to go to an online community and weigh in. Three of the best are [Metafilter](#), [The Fray](#), and [The Well](#). Historical questions come up all the time in the discussions, so you'll have something to say.
- **Help the History News Network.** The best way to get academic work into the news is to send brief, well-written, compelling press releases to editors, preferably by email. Scientists know this and have created [Eureka Alert](#), a press-release service, for just this purpose. Historians are a bit behind the curve in terms of publicity, but that is changing thanks to the [History News Network](#). The HNN is a gathering point for all historians interested in making history relevant to lives of Americans. The HNN does a lot of things: analyses current affairs, hosts blogs and discussions, indexes historians in the news, and a multiplicity of other things. Doubtless there is some way for you to contribute to this praiseworthy initiative.

- **Start a podcast.** I worked in publishing for a time and learned this: people would rather watch or listen than read. That's bad for print publishers but good for you, particularly in the age of podcasts. For well under a hundred dollars, you can create what is in effect a radio show on the topic of your choice. [It's not hard](#). Again, you will not be alone: there are [many history podcasts](#). I host one in which I interview [historians with new books](#).
- **Make a web-ready video.** Everyone has seen Ken Burn's historical documentaries. Think you can do better? Well, you can try for under fifty dollars. All you need is an application called [Photo-to-Movie](#), some free recording software like [Audacity](#), and a good idea. The first of these items applies the "[Ken Burns Effect](#)" to any photo or series of photos you like and the second enables you to add a voice-over and music. Once you're done, you can release your masterpiece on [YouTube](#) and see what happens.
- **Teach a "New Media and History Class."** We have long recognized that writing and history are inextricably linked. Until recently, we used the former almost exclusively to present the latter. Now, however, "we" need to know how to use new media for presentation as well, and so we must teach it to our undergraduate and graduate students. Creating such course may seem like a daunting class, but you don't have to start from scratch—such classes all ready exist ([1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#)).
- **Put your preprint publications online.** In disciplines like math and physics, scholars have long placed their preprint publications in online databases ("[preprint servers](#)") so that their peers can easily have a look before their work appears in vetted, referred journals. History has no preprint server, but there is nothing stopping you from putting your preprint publications on your own website. The best practice is to clearly note on the preprints themselves that they are not for citation and to point readers to the website of the journal that published the article. If you like, you can protect the preprint itself by adding a [Creative Commons](#) copyright license.
- **Publish in online journals.** Making preprints available is good, but publishing in online journals is better. History rather lags in this department, as most of our journals reside online behind some firewall. That means the public can't get to them. There are, however, good online journals in which you might publish ([1](#), [2](#)).
- **Write in popular online forums.** Want a broader readership? Well there are hundreds of serious yet popular print and online publications to which you can submit short think-pieces or book reviews. Getting into the biggest of them is very hard, but there are so many that you can simply shop your articles around until someone takes it. When you are considering what to write and where to send it, the listing of high-brow publications at [Arts & Letters Daily](#) is a good place to start.
- **Make online work count.** One of the drawbacks of doing anything online in history is that it doesn't really count toward hiring, tenure and promotion. That simply has to change, but it won't unless you lobby to have it changed. The key argument in any such campaign is one that should appeal to historians: we know from the experience of other disciplines—notably math and physics—that making online work count improves the discipline rather than diminishing it.

**DRAFT: NOT FOR CITATION**

Please cite the published version: *Historically Speaking* 10:2 (2009), 22-23.

Publishing online is second nature for our colleagues in the sciences, so there is no good reason why we shouldn't embrace it as well. Book publishers and journals will have to adapt and they will.

This "fight-fire-with-fire" approach may be a bit uncomfortable for many of us, but it's really the only strategy available if we want to stem the tide of bad history on the Web. Hunkering down in our offices and seminar rooms until the storm passes will not do the trick, for the storm will not pass. The Internet is here to stay, and we need to be on it.

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