The "Tea" in History

Gaining and Maintaining Public Interest in Historic Preservation in a Digital Age

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Introduction:

The phrase "What's the tea?" is synonymous with gossip in the new age of social media. Though no literal tea is spilled, it indicates there is a story to be told and an audience willing to listen. The stories revolve around real people, some maybe the listener knows but many times the story revolves around an individual unknown. This is the core of history. History is the telling of countless stories, constantly adapting to new mediums and ensuring their continued relevance in an ever-changing world. The rise of digital platforms and social media are now leading the way for broader access to historical education. Accordingly, historians and academics alike must capitalize on and harness these new tools to "spill the tea", especially when connecting with audiences outside the academic world. Historians working in academia or public history institutions must engage in and actively participate in this next generation's engagement of historical topics by encouraging the public to learn and connect with the stories that shaped and will continue to shape society as a whole. By creating relevant digital content, with history at its core, "spilling the tea" of history will help ensure meaningful educational guidance for generations to come.

Research Questions:

This study plans to examine how the intersection of digital technology, social media, and modern vernaculars offers historians of all disciplines an opportunity to target a wider audience. It is imperative to embrace and generate a new way for history to be received, taught, and absorbed. However, analyzing the relationships that stem from this topic raises fundamental questions. Throughout this study, these questions will bifurcate from their generalized umbrellas to address success markers, the study's practicality, and concerns the study might face in its undertaking. These questions include, but are in no way limited to:

How can historians, academics, and the public use these new tools together?

This question is already gaining traction in various institutions, yet remains only in a pubescent stage compared to the speed of change. The push to use social media and team-created content to cultivate a presence on popular platforms such as TikTok and Instagram is underway. Thus, when examining these existing institutional programs that incorporate digital technology or have created a social media presence, the most critical follow-up question becomes:

How is the success of these endeavors determined?

Is it through data analytics such as tracking user clicks, follower counts, or a combination of numerical metrics? Or, should it be measured by the increased strength of the relationships forged between the community and the educational institutions? Maybe it's a combination of both? Although measuring the success of any program is an obvious goal, measuring success has limitations and challenges.

These problems are not unanticipated in this study nor are the pitfalls intimidating. This study aims to tackle the ubiquitous challenges with the help of a combination of academic research and practical trials to yield a relevant solution. Approaching challenges, the solution is to deal with them thoroughly. Initially, potential questions of scope split off into subcategories of six major groups. A simple pneumonic comes to mind grouping these main umbrellas for potential challenges the study might face:

Collaboration*: Who, Where, How?*

Accuracy*: How will this collaborative prioritize facts and truth?*

Relevance*: How will historians and institutions navigate relevant content?*

Efficacy*: How does examining the effectiveness of these new technologies foster an effort to marry related educational fields, maximizing the program's effectiveness?*

Security*: Who is responsible for ensuring that the information the public consumes is not abducted?*

Selection: *Are there technologies that historians should avoid if they want to promote accurate historical education and encourage public engagement?*

As stated previously, these are just some pressing questions that this study hopes to answer. More specifics are offered in the **Methodology** section of this proposal. Challenges are anticipated on the way to these answers and, when they arise, will present learning opportunities to increase the efficacy. With the right combination of academic practicality, this study's final product intends to be used as a guiding light for those looking for illumination.

Review of Existing Literature:

To begin the literature review section, the study first needs to acknowledge the newness of this field. Currently, there is a feverish interest in the boundless possibilities and connections between social media, digital technology, and historical education and the effect each will have on future research. Within the past five years, the intersectional conversation in research has centered around the diversity of these new outlets and how different institutions get on board with using them as tools for education and outreach. Though encouraging prospects abound, there are still many aspects that are only partially developed, due to the limited availability of results-based research. This study's goal is to quantify the gaps in the existing literature and to qualify the realm of intersectionality that history has in its toolbox to gain success by utilizing these new platforms. To its end, this study aims to increase academic interest and public engagement. It is a necessity that this study mature yet contort accordingly with forthcoming academic publications that arise, research adaptation in today's speed of change and relevantly establish new avenues for history to meet the modern world.

The current research in this field begins as these possibilities with social media pique interest. A good starting point is to examine *why* social media, and media in general, has its place in the discussion about how history is currently taught. In their article "Media Literacy Education in the Social Studies"*,* published in the *Teacher Education Quarterly* journal in 2009, Laura Stein and Anita Prewett stress that "media literacy is relevant to social studies for several reasons. Media provides compelling fiction and nonfiction narratives about people, places, and events. Indeed, many young people's knowledge of cultures comes from media representations."[1] This sentiment puts the idea that the perception of *young people* hinges somewhat on the media they consume. In an age where media is at the heart of communication and discussion, this leaves the door open for history to wedge its way into those spaces. At least from a strictly *media-focused* angle the mainstream success of historical dramas such as *Bridgerton* on streaming services encourages their viewers to dive deeper into the periods or the historical figures they revolve around. Enter: social media marketing. What's to say if the goal for museums is to increase foot (digital and physical) traffic, that these same tactics are used to attract younger people to the museum's doors or pages? Is this the starting point of this study, institutional partnership? Or, is the first step to engage with the public? Social media is the new way people engage with each other so historical preservation must enter the chat.

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[1] Stein, Laura, and Anita Prewett. "Media Literacy Education in the Social Studies: Teacher Perceptions and Curricular Challenges." *Teacher Education Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (2009): 131–48. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23479205.

Writing in his 2017 article "Toward a Public Media Archaeology: Museums, Media, and Historiography" Philipp Kiedl said that "historians and archaeologists have a long history of marginalizing public engagements with the past and often see them as superficial, nostalgic, commercial, and ultimately inferior to their own work."[2] Referring to a study done by *The Journal of Contemporary Archaeology* in 2015 this observation presents a major issue that social media's integration has for academia as well as public institutions. Understandably, these reservations exist and the issues social media heralds in studying and engaging with history are complex. Although this 'status quo' is not the only issue of the social media boom concerning history education it's a significant one that leads into others that go hand in hand.

One of those is the preservation of history as it happened. As social media grabs the limelight, there is a call for research to preserve truth in an age of misinformation. The speed of misinformation and revisionist history is something academics must be prepared to combat. Beata Biely, in her 2017 article for *The Cyber Defense Review,* states that a prominent issue in this social media age is that the "social media landscape is far from stable. For the last few years, companies like *Facebook, Twitter,* and *Google* have been massively investing in new platforms. Big acquisitions have taken place… The social media landscape has been evolving from relatively small local services… to powerful companies with global reach."[3]

Though Biely focuses on the growth of these platforms as a business model, her point brings up a key threat that comes with this rapid growth in information access: the credibility of sources. The 'global outreach' that these platforms can hace, make it easy for misinformation of any kind to reach a screen. The question becomes, for the historians working in academia and the public, how do creators ensure that historically accurate information reaches their audience?

This question has many answers. One suggested in Richard Rogers' 2023 book, *The Propagation of Misinformation in Social Media: A Cross-platform Analysis,* is that "users can 'flag' or report content on various platforms and label it as inappropriate or misleading, etc."[4] While Rogers is correct that most of these platforms come with this option there's a lacking in

[2] Philipp Dominik Keidl. "Toward a Public Media Archaeology: Museums, Media, and Historiography." *The Moving Image: The Journal of the Association of Moving Image Archivists* 17, no. 2 (2017): 20–39. https://doi.org/10.5749/movingimage.17.2.0020.

[3] Biały, Beata. "Social Media—From Social Exchange to Battlefield." *The Cyber Defense Review* 2, no. 2 (2017): 69–90. http://www.jstor.org/stable/26267344.

[4] Rogers, Richard. "'Serious Queries' and 'Editorial Epistemologies': How Social Media Are Contending with Misinformation." In *The Propagation of Misinformation in Social Media: A Cross-Platform Analysis*, edited by Richard Rogers, 9–32. Amsterdam University Press, 2023. https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.1231864.4.

this solution when it comes to responsibility. Museums, for example, do not have the time nor resources to curate every byte of information on their niche available on the Internet. That is where the idea of leading the charge for the circulation of historically accurate information meets the need for a social media presence. Through the ability to interact with the public on these platforms, historians and social media managers stand the best chance of preserving history as it happened. Though the effectiveness of this collaboration is an area the academic literature is lacking at the moment, this study wishes to bring into focus the need to use history as a weapon against the rapid spread of misinformation and encourage this as a collective effort that anyone can get involved in.

Along with growing curiosity, there is often equal resistance. In a 2012 reflection piece in the journal *Acadiensis*, Corey Slumkoski reflects upon his previous research and speaks towards this pushback from the overall academic institution. He found that "one of the greatest transformations concerns the general acceptance of digital humanities among the members of the academy."[5] As an overall assessment, this is a summation of one of the greatest challenges the relationship between history and digital technology face. This idea finds itself as a focal point for this study. How do we as historians first encourage the union between the old ways and the new? There needs to be room for both if historians hope to bring their work to a larger audience outside of academia. This is the area where this study aims to assert its importance. There is a need to move academia into an age where technology is not in competition with the ways of old, but more akin to a parallel universe for studies. A place where history is at the center of a collective effort compounded by the involvement of other related fields to yield optimal results. But the first step here is to promote the good that this new medium brings to those who staunchly adhere to the ways of the old. With gaps in how best to achieve this goal, this study's focus opens the door by demonstrating that the solution must be rational at its base. Once the relationship between old and new academia is understood, the full potential of the relationship between technology, history, and outreach can be advanced. Correlating this model with that of the pyramids, there are definitive building blocks, laid out steps on how to achieve desired outcomes and of course, limitations on taking liberties of a new design.

Literature on this topic is ever-evolving and the varying attitudes of excitement and concern in research align well with the target of this project. This study will gain its voice once the dissertation is completed. Some of the questions brought up at current have answers

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[5] Slumkoski, Corey. "History on the Internet 2.0: The Rise of Social Media." *Acadiensis* 41, no. 2 (2012): 153–62. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41803356.

acknowledged hereto, with individualistic ideas being structured and curated accordingly. This study, in line with that ideal, proposes the approach to integration of social media into the fold. Since there is no 'one size fits all' solution, these questions of methodology do not need to be confined or limited. Through careful collaborative work, an individualized plan will be curated and created.

With the abundant resources Trinity has to offer in the way of both faculty and institutional support, Trinity, Dublin and Ireland as a whole, are the perfect home for this study to take shape. Under the supervision of advisors like Dr. Holohan and Dr. Dolan, the scope of this study has the potential to traverse various historical avenues and events while highlighting its success. With this study being housed and nurtured at Trinity, it will allow a proper lens on a broader idea, the chance to frame an Irish niche. A chance for social media to inspire public remembrance of the struggles of Irish history. Though the scope seems broad in this abstract, this is by design so that a 'fill in the blank' is created for the institutions interested in making it their own vision. The study will use the proposed four-year schedule to achieve as much interest outside the academic sphere as possible. Targeted partnerships with places of historical relevance and varied public participation are core to relevant success. Through the demonstration that this is a study of "work in progress", the theory behind its core competency must assume trials and results-driven metrics, discernible by the completion of the dissertation.

Methodology:

The vision for this study is to show how this social media engagement model works in the everyday world. The study will consist of a synthesis of existing research in this field and a practical element working with public institutions like local museums. Ideally, this will be done in two parts. With a practical component at its crux while the existing literature is the foundation, the study will illustrate the need for both of these elements to work together to move historical education and public engagement into the new age. With the understanding of how these elements work together, the study hopes to likewise not confine itself to one sphere, academic or public, but rather pull elements that are transferable and relate to a more diverse audience.

Firstly the study will examine, through a review of the current literature, the theory behind integrating historical education with social media and using digital technology. With so many academics interested in the possibilities of this newfound area of research, the study has a base to build upon. It is anticipated that throughout the study, more academic research will

surface as more institutions take to using social media platforms. In a rapidly modernizing world, this study will have continuing relevance to the academic interests of historians and incur interdisciplinary interest as other fields of study collaborate to weigh in with the academic aspect. Academically speaking, the study has the potential to cross over into other humanities, such as English Literature and the Arts being top contenders. Albeit the academic goal of this study is to track the development of the relationship between history education, outreach, and the public interests, the study has its best chance for completion with an academic institution surrounded by all of these key elements and much more. Trinity.

Moving into the sphere of public acceptance, the study must turn its focus to the practicality behind user interface and the promotion of history to education. Illustrating how museums and other public institutions craft a social media presence on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter/X, the study's foundational ideas are already active. However, this study seeks to promote this connection between institutions and the public by increasing engagement through everyday relatable content. This requires an examination of the content behind the social media presence of these institutions. While many public history institutions, i.e. museums, have a social media presence this study hopes to bridge a generational gap through the use of common vernacular and creativity, increasing digital foot traffic as well as a physical attraction toward what that institution has to offer. Locating and collaborating with interested institutions, this study hopes to accelerate the interest of history enthusiasts, tourists and even the everyday local citizen curious to learn about "what happened here". The ideas behind this study don't limit themselves to a singular section of history, so in there lies a genuine hope that various museums and heritage sites alike will gravitate to this new visibility, the virtual eye.

Thus, with these proposed methodologies for both aspects of this study, potential challenges are anticipated. The first challenges arise in the study's conceptual stages. The fact is that this is a novel academic interest, and as such, questions come up about the availability of material to complete a literature review necessary for this level of study. With what's available now trending towards encouraging, as noted above in the **Review of Existing Literature**, the outlook is positive and promising. Fortunately, the interest in interdisciplinary studies is on the rise and will be tracked in the forthcoming research. As it stands, the limited availability of academic research is an asset for this study, mandating its very existence to be a unique application of all academic studies under its umbrella.

However, in a scenario where this is *not* the case, the study must acquire the skill to make itself a virtual contortionist. Looking through the academic lens, the study will need to monitor itself to ensure that its core can be supported and the research questions are still answerable

given an inevitable yet unanticipated shift. It must not become stagnant or rigid. Though solutions to problems are always available, recognizing problems can become singular. The study demands the consideration of others. However, the challenges of the practical part of the study are the most individual to solve. These situations find themselves grouped under yet another pneumonic for the sake of ease. The solutions to these problems aim to make the project an acme in so much that these challenges will steer the project to the best version of itself. These challenges could include:

Appeal: *How does a digital content study appeal to those without a social media presence?*

Consumption: *What resources will be consumed and what return on investment might be anticipated?*

Monitoring: *How do institutions monitor the use of social media to keep up with evolving trends?*

Engagement: *How do institutions engage with visitors in a perceived "limited time frame"?*

Encouragement: *How can an institution encourage visitors to maintain a social media presence?*

Although these groups of challenges have one extra letter than the word acme does, the point holds that these challenges only push the project to become the best version of itself in the process of its resolution. The extra letter (i.e. group of challenges) emphasizes that the practical part of the study faces these questions among others. Understanding that public engagement is not a 'one size fits all' part of promoting history education and engagement to the public, this is where things get exciting. The study hopes that it can use its foundational ideas to build relationships with these institutions and create unique ways tailored to solve all these questions and more. However, just like running these institutions, a team is needed to offer their perspectives and individual ideas. Working with multiple areas behind the face of a public institution, such as education, social media, and marketing, the scope involves more than just the history a museum centers around. This is where the interdisciplinary aspects become practical and can foster real-world solutions. The ultimate hope and goal is that answering these questions is more of a fun and creative collaborative task rather than an additional stressor on top of those required to keep such institutions up and running.

Proposed Study Timeline:

Now that the methodology is laid out, this is how the study anticipates coming to fruition within four years. This time frame should give the study the ability to focus on both areas in its scope and demonstrate why a relationship between research and practical application is the basis for the speed and magnetism of learning in the digital age. At the end of four years, a two-part dissertation will present how this came together over time and where it might project for the future.

To begin, the academic study and literature review is anticipated to take the first two years of this proposed timeline. This is the time to examine, firstly, the research currently available. Suppose the quantity or quality of research becomes an issue, as hypothetically addressed in the methodology section. In that case, it is hopeful that at this stage of the study, the study itself will be competent enough to mature and logically fill in the gaps. The study understands and anticipates that points of adjustment will be mandatory. This is where the feedback of the study advisors will be imperative, especially as the study moves into an initial outlining and drafting of the dissertation's academic component. Though this is also important in the practical component of the dissertation as well, spotting issues in their infancy will allow the study time to adapt and grow. It is anticipated that these issues, and their resolution, will forge the most successful version of the study. Hopefully, in the proposed two-year academic centric timeframe the study will have the necessary research to support itself as it is shopped around to the public. The academic base for this study must be strong because, without it, a practical application will be of less interest in the public sphere, losing supporting research to advance the study. The study must come across as clear and concise, supported by evidence-based academia, or it will have no chance of support outside the academic world. This study is for the people and must reach the people.

Once a thorough academic study has been completed an analysis must be crafted for practicum application. The time to complete this application of the research should be around two years. In that time frame, foundations for this study can be put in place at as many institutions as possible. This step involves engaging the local public institution of history (i.e. museums, historical societies, libraries, etc) with the benefits of outreach through a social media and digital presence. Once an interest is established, the study then partners with the various institutions to begin a deep dive into their goals and mandates. This is tailored more individually based on feedback from the institution and subsequent content will be drawn accordingly.

For example, a museum might have more niche content ideas for a sixty-second TikTok video based on a specific historical figure or event than a library might have if its goal is the promotion of a new book about said topic. Certain institutions might have an advantage in the diversity of the content they create, more so than others, and this is why assessing their individual goals is at the base of the practical application of the study. From there, the study will teach the institutions about the tools available to them and help them figure out who their target audience is and how to access that specific market. Ensuring collaboration between not only the study itself but also the different departments within the partnered institution is a necessity as the study monitors the progress of the partnered institutions. By the end of the initial evaluation, there must be an acceptance of the platforms and tools available to the partnering institution, content geared toward a social media audience, and a relevant trial run for the institutions to consider. With the completion of the practical part of the study, the hope is that there will be an understanding of how the community is the protector of historical education and that through the usage of digital media, they possess the tools to share the past with the future.

Contribution to the Field:

There is one last vital question to address. *Why is this study relevant?* The answer is simple yet layered. The speed of technology-based media developments is rapidly advancing all aspects of daily life. Capitalizing on the developments to connect or reconnect within our communities is at our fingertips. For the first time, we as a society have access to information in the palm of our hands. As such, this study's implementation into public awareness is necessary to ensure that access is prioritized alongside the preservation of these stories that must continue to mold themselves to these newer formats to ensure continuing relevance.

This study's public impact is to create new windows to peer through and doors to open, by bringing together a collaborative effort by academics and institutions alike with the shared goal and common interest in preserving historical education and sparking passion in the topic with the outside world. This study's finished product will consolidate the important pieces of the social media puzzle with relevant content, creating viewer curiosity, and act as a springboard for further study into this multifaceted yet relatively uncharted territory. This proposed study, at its core, is an effort of collaboration and team developed content, utilizing social media as an educational tool. However, as these opportunities avail themselves, so will the responsibility of the content provider to decide how they can responsibly achieve and maintain their goals.

Just like the twofold plan for this study, the roots begin in academia. Next, it falls to outside institutions to actively collaborate for relevant content. Each party must see the merit of their work as an avenue to advance community knowledge through utilizing social media. Though this is not a task without challenges by any stretch of the imagination, it's the most relevant piece of the puzzle that hinges on the study's foundation, presented through research and practical application.

This study hopes that new standards for *actively* preserving history are promoted, consumed, and passed down. Without studies like this, communities risk devaluing their collective consciousness and the importance of their history.

Emphatically, the heart of this study is to give back to the community accurate information on social media platforms, quickly, with relevance, and let the user, in turn, discern the value, if any at all. Or, to use the current Gen Z-approved vernacular, to *give them the tea* and see if they drink it.

Conclusion:

So that's the "tea" for now, or at least the first cup. However, a whole kettle is sitting on this metaphorical stove. This proposal knows the kettle and tea are ready to be poured and seeped. Thus, the only thing missing now are people to sip the tea. Just like how *spilling the tea* hinges on the relationship between server and consumer or in this case speaker and listener, history mandates such a relationship. History is best learned, taught, and remembered in communities. The digital age, now very much a part of every community, affords us a new opportunity to build and expand for generations to come. The age of the textbook is merging into the age of digital content and this study hopes to encourage communities to remember from whence they came and excite those who want to know more.

Let us spill the tea together!