Media Reviews

Social Media Trends in Medical History

Introduction

Each week, historians of science and medicine enter the Twittersphere. They write blogs and explore new media. They crowd-source research questions and mine tweets as primary sources. They live-tweet our conferences, more every year. Is this move toward social media a sign of the decline of traditional scholarship, or the cutting edge of a new approach to research, collaboration and the dissemination of scholarly knowledge?

Both, of course, and threshing the grain from this rock-strewn field is challenging and sometimes disheartening. But is an axiom of scholarship that discussion and reflection help us avoid the traps and reap the rewards of any complex phenomenon. And so, with jaundiced eye and callused thumbs, I tweeted a 140-character call for abstracts on the pleasures and dangers of social media for historians of science and medicine. Fortified by the sponsorship of the Committee on Research and the Profession, we presented a lunchtime roundtable at the 2013 History of Science Society meeting, in Boston. The resulting panel beautifully captured the balanced tone, mixed emotions and wide range of themes I envisioned.

Afterward, the editors at *Medical History* graciously offered to translate our presentations into traditional media. Edited versions will appear over the next four issues. We made one substitution: one participant withdrew his paper because he is an editor here; in his place Clarissa Lee, an especially thoughtful audience member from the session, will offer her reflections. Thanks go to the editors, the participants and to John Lynch, whose commentary on the papers will conclude this print mini-symposium.

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Kickstarting Scholarship: Crowdsourcing as a Historical Tool

'Crowdsourcing' history, in other words, using social media to collaboratively raise and address historical questions, is taking place across many online venues, from private Facebook pages to popular news websites. Professional scholars pose questions that attract input from amateur historians and specialists in other fields; conversely, journalists, scientists and other interested laypeople use social media to solicit the expertise of historians. As Leslie Madsen-Brooks observes, new digital platforms 'not only are democratizing historical practice, but also providing professional historians with new opportunities and modes for expanding historical literacy.'[1]

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[1] Leslie Madsen-Brooks, "'I nevertheless am a historian": Digital historical practice and malpractice around black confederate soldiers', in Jack Dougherty and Kristen Nawrotzki (eds), *Writing History in the Digital Age* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2012), http://writinghistory.trincoll.edu/crowdsourcing/madsen-brooks-2012-spring/, accessed 3 February 2014.

To examine some of the promises and perils of crowdsourcing as a historical tool, this review will examine a few examples from the blog of Ta-Nehisi Coates, a senior editor at *The Atlantic* magazine. This heavily moderated blog is notable for the number and wide-ranging expertise of the commentators it attracts, including professional scholars as well as amateur historians. Posts will often result in 300–400 comments. Coates, a journalist with deep interests in history, has used this platform to try to crowdsource historical questions in several ways, three of which I will briefly review: seeking information about a topic he is unfamiliar with, placing current events in historical context, and structuring conversations around particular primary or secondary sources.

First, Coates has posed numerous historical questions related to topics he knows little about, often prefaced with the phrase: 'talk to me like I'm stupid'. For example, in one blog post he asked his readership: 'How did Americans hunt in the era just before the shotgun?'.[2] Many of the responses were impressive. Readers offered detailed and clear explanations of smoothbore muskets and minié balls, and provided suggested additional readings and resources. Other comments, while sometimes entertaining, such as a reference to using the keyboard's spacebar key to hunt buffalo in the popular game Oregon Trail, were not exactly illuminating. In such threads, readers frequently need to sort through numerous jokes and digressive comments to locate pertinent and substantive responses.

As a second category of crowdsourcing, Coates has sought to place news events and commentary by public figures in historical context. For instance, in response to Ron Paul's comments that Abraham Lincoln could and should have averted the Civil War by buying and freeing all the slaves, Coates composed a series of posts examining why this was not feasible. Numerous readers and other authors contributed insights. One professional historian whose research focused on the relation of slavery to credit, for example, contributed a detailed analysis of why England could manage compensated emancipation, but not the United States. The comments referenced the work of a number of historians, including David Brion Davis, Stephen Deyle and Walter Johnson.[3] They also included links to illustrative primary source material, notably an article from the April 1861 edition of *The Atlantic Monthly* in which John William de Forest talked to residents of Charleston, South Carolina about their state's decision to secede.[4] Taken as a whole, the blog's comments section furnished a variety of pertinent insights contextualising the remarks of a prominent politician, although it did not tread new ground or offer a comprehensive, systematic examination of this historical question.

Third, the blog has featured numerous conversations focused on particular historical documents or books. The blog's book club has primarily focused on works related to the Civil War, such as Eric Foner's *Reconstruction* and Chandra Manning's *What This Cruel War Was Over*. These conversations were largely engaging and successful. In fact, Professor Manning chimed in to say she found the discussion of her book 'enormously

[2] Ta-Nehisi Coates, 'Talk to Me Like I'm Stupid: Hunting in the Late Antebellum Era', *The Atlantic*, 10 June 2010, http://www.theatlantic.com/personal/archive/2010/06/talk-to-me-like-im-hunting-in-the-late-antebellum-era/58005/, accessed 31 January 2014.

[3] Ta-Nehisi Coates, 'Compensation', *The Atlantic*, 23 January 2012, http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2012/01/compensation/251804/, accessed 2 February 2014.

[4] John William De Forest, 'Charleston Under Arms', *The Atlantic Monthly*, April 1861, http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1861/04/charleston-under-arms/308742/, Accessed 3 February 2014.

gratifying'.[5] The conversations almost never resulted in new research or findings, however; they simply provided a vibrant outlet for discussion.

Regarding crowdsourcing of questions related to primary source material, one of the most impressive cases resulted from a posting of an 1864 letter written by a sergeant in the 1st US Colored Troops. The author, who signed his name as GWH, described capturing a former slave owner as follows:

> While out on a foraging expedition we captured Mr. Clayton, a noted reb in this part of the country, and from his appearance, one of the F.F.V.'s; on the day before we captured several colored women that belonged to Mr C., who had given them a most unmerciful whipping previous to their departure.[6]

One knowledgeable amateur historian, Andy Hall, identified the acronym 'F.F.V.' as referring to the 'First Families of Virginia, i.e., the "old money" planter aristocracy,' adding 'I've seen F.F.V. used in a mocking way by both Northern and Southern troops – it wasn't a compliment'. Hall then searched census and service records to find more information about the letter writer 'GWH', who had been identified as George W. Hatton in the book *A Grand Army Of Black Men: Letters of African-American Soldiers in the Union Army: 1861–1865*, edited by Edwin S. Redkey.[7] Relying on these various records, Hall managed to trace numerous remarkable details about Hatton's life and composed a fascinating account he shared on the blog.[8]

To date, this is one of the most successful instances of crowdsourcing that I have observed. It required an author who had built and was willing to engage with a skilled, knowledgeable and passionate readership. It resulted in an ability to quickly and effectively trace details of this soldier's life, and to place a primary source from the Civil War in relevant historical context for many readers of *The Atlantic*.

Through his blog, Coates has initiated conversations which have enabled the formation of a diverse intellectual community, a sizable platform for disseminating and discussing primary source materials, the opportunity for knowledgeable amateurs to contribute, and the ability to more rapidly and directly engage with historical questions and debates sparked by contemporary news events. Yet contributors' backgrounds and the authority from which they speak is sometimes unclear. While exceptionally knowledgeable people may delve into archives and cite their sources, far more often commentators provide unsourced observations that must be verified. Moreover, the format demands intensive, time-consuming moderation, and discussions often exhibit an inconsistent degree of rigor and thoroughness.

Overall, crowdsourcing history on a public blog provides rich possibilities for engaging with a broader audience and involving readers in historical thinking. Such conversations require careful management, however, and they do not invariably yield productive scholarly discourse. They are more likely to be successful when they are more tightly focused, on a particular book or document for example. Any researcher who relies on

[5] Ta-Nehisi Coates, 'Effete Liberalism Bomaye', *The Atlantic*, 20 May 2011, http://www.theatlantic.com/personal/archive/2011/05/effete-liberalism-bomaye/239223/, accessed 3 February 2014.

[6] Ta-Nehisi Coates, 'The Very Spot Where the First Sons of Africa Were Landed', *The Atlantic*, 9 December 2010, http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2010/12/the-very-spot-where-the-first-sons-of-africa-were-landed/67717/, accessed 3 February 2014.

[7] Edwin S. Redkey, *A Grand Army Of Black Men: Letters of African-American Soldiers in the Union Army: 1861–65* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

[8] Ta-Nehisi Coates, 'The First Sons of Africa, Cont.', *The Atlantic*, 10 December 2010, http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2010/12/the-first-sons-of-africa-cont/67930/, accessed 2 February 2014.

crowdsourcing should be aware of the approach's significant limitations and biases, and of the need to sort through and verify large amounts of information of uneven reliability. Furthermore, crowdsourcing tends to work better when the goal is to quickly compile and share knowledge that is already available, rather than as a means to engage in original research. Crowdsourcing cannot replace more traditional historical methods, but as a means to broaden exposure to and engagement with historical questions, it is a powerful tool.

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Sounding Out Social Media

Reading an online article in *The Appendix* about the nature and use of sound by historians, I was struck by the case made for the greater integration of sound into our practice.[1] Moreover, it seemed to me that, in the form of SoundCloud (https://soundcloud.com/), there was a potential archive, and in some senses unwitting archivists, awaiting if not discovery then a more comprehensive engagement by historians that would allow us to achieve just such a goal.

New platforms such as SoundCloud provide opportunities to collect data and to experiment with sound; to ponder innovative ways of thinking about and communicating our histories. At the same time, however, we need to be mindful of SoundCloud being an active and evolving social media community, to whom we have obligations, rather than merely existing as a static repository of sonic information. It is the community behind SoundCloud, as much as the material contained within, that renders it a potentially potent tool in the historian's arsenal.

SoundCloud was launched in 2007 and, dedicated to the sharing of sound, it quickly became an incredible force on the landscape of social media. As such, it is populated primarily by amateur and professional music-makers, posting their various musings and mashups that are disseminated through both private and public networks.

While the sounds are visualised in a waveform, there are no additional accompanying images; SoundCloud is rather, although not entirely, avisual. The utility of these graphics is what differentiates SoundCloud from other forms of social media, such as YouTube, that still privilege the visual even while integrating the aural. While YouTube certainly offers many possibilities for experimentation in its own right, SoundCloud provides us with a more convenient form through which we can examine how sound alone might be used in our scholarship: as a data source, or an analytic or reconstructive tool.

Indeed, removing ourselves from the textual and the visual temporarily might be productive for re-orienting our thinking away from what has really structured our discipline since its inception. The textual is primary both within historical scholarship and, more broadly, within social media; whether we are talking about journal articles,

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[1] Michael Schmidt, "'Nancy Grows Up," the Media Age, and the Historian's Craft', *The Appendix*, created 3 September 2013, http://theappendix.net/issues/2013/7/nancy-grows-up-the-media-age-and-the-historians-craft, last accessed 31 January 2014.