Reframing History

Episode 2: The Case of the Misunderstood Historical Method

Series Description:

As the public debates around history grow louder, it seems there's a gap between how history practitioners understand their work and what the public thinks history is. We need a more productive public conversation about history. But how do we get on the same page? How do we promote an understanding of history that is inclusive and builds trust in the process of nuanced historical research? Over the course of this series, we'll be speaking to historians, history communicators, and educators from around the country about the language we use to communicate history to the public. Hosted by Christy Coleman and Jason Steinhauer, this six-part series delves deep into a new, research-backed communication framework developed by FrameWorks Institute in partnership with the American Association for State and Local History, the National Council on Public History, and the Organization for American History. *Reframing History* is produced by Better Lemon Creative Audio for AASLH.

Episode Description:

In this episode, we take a closer look at the first two recommendations in the Making History Matter Report: 1) Talk about critical thinking to shift perceptions about what history involves and 2) Compare historical interpretation to detective work to deepen understanding of historical practice. Hosts Christy Coleman and Jason Steinhauer are joined by three guests:

William Convery (Minnesota Historical Society), Stacey Watson (West Kentucky Community and Technical College, The National Quilt Museum), and Sam Wineburg (Stanford University).

Episode Transcript:

William Convery: History is detective work. And because of that, the Minnesota Historical study is very interested in making strong connections between a pop culture figure like Sherlock Holmes and the work he does, and the work that historians do in order to learn about the past and better understand the past.

Sam Wineburg: The kind of answers that we come up with when we delve into history are always in many ways a mirror image of our present. The present is always in a conversation with the past.

Stacey Watson: I like to position the students into a place where they are looking from a detective's point of view, where they can build their case. And when they find themselves in the midst of discovering and finding information, those are historical moments in the classroom they will never forget.

Sam Wineburg: I don't think that we have wrapped our mind around the fundamentally different epistemologies if you will, the theories of knowledge that govern traditional print text versus the situation that confronts us on the internet.

Christy: This is *Reframing History*: A limited series from the American Association for State and Local History.

I'm Christy Coleman, Executive Director at the Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation.

Jason: And I'm Jason Steinhauer, Global Fellow at The Wilson Center and author of *History Disrupted*.

Jason: In this six-part series, we're speaking to history practitioners from around the country about how they communicate the role and value of history to the public. To help frame this conversation, we're using a new report on history communication called "Making History Matter." This research-backed report offers specific language that communicators can use to bridge the gap between how we talk about history and how the public understands history work. You can download the report at aaslh.org./reframinghistory.

Jason: This is Episode 2: "The Case of the Misunderstood Historical Method."

Christy: Our three guests on this episode are going to help us explore the first two recommendations from the report:

1. Talk about critical thinking to shift perceptions about what history involves

And 2. Compare historical interpretation to detective work to deepen understanding of historical practice.

Jason: Coming up, we'll expand on these recommendations and hear from Professor Stacey Watson and Professor Sam Wineburg. But first, we spoke to Dr. William Convery, Director of Research at the Minnesota Historical Society, about an upcoming exhibition that seems tailor-made for this episode.

William Convery: Yeah, so the Minnesota Historical Society's bringing in a traveling exhibition called the *International Exhibition of Sherlock Holmes*, which was actually developed a number of years ago by a St. Paul exhibit company called Exhibit Development Group or EDG. It's traveled extensively all the way around the world, primarily but not exclusively to science museums. And the premise of it is that as a detective, Sherlock Holmes was interested in observation and the gathering and analysis of evidence and in forensics, in the way that made him a superior detective. And this has been an exhibit that's really promoted the scientific method, but it's also an opportunity for the Minnesota Historical Society to talk more about the

historical method, which is a parallel process of observing and gathering information and analyzing sources, and evaluating different perspectives. History is detective work. And because of that, the Minnesota Historical study is very interested in making strong connections between a pop culture figure like Sherlock Holmes and the work he does, and the work that historians do in order to learn about the past and better understand the past.

Christy: So what parallels between detective work and history work are most relevant here? Where should our focus be when using this metaphor?

Dr. William Convery: History is very much like detective work in that detectives investigate events in the past, they interview witnesses, they observe crime scenes, they look for evidence, they analyze that evidence to make better sense of it, and they use evidence and witness accounts to make a pattern of facts that leads them to a conclusion that you happen to commit the murder.

Historians do the same thing in a lot of different ways. We observe the historical events and context, we gather evidence through primary sources and secondary sources, letters and manuscripts, photographs, films, all kinds of different sources that we use to build a pattern of facts to make conclusions about the past. It's not just our job to gather evidence, but that's but it's to analyze that evidence and interpret its meaning, much the same way that a detective or a criminal prosecutor might use evidence in order to build a case.

And this is really what we want to get into: this idea that history is about building a case. It's about a debate, it's about a dialogue, and it’s about an interpretation of evidence. I don't think our schools have done a very good job of teaching about what history actually is. Very often we learn that history is a series of facts, that facts are indisputable. That once you know the facts, that's really all you need to know. But history is an art as much as a science, and facts are disputable. Different people have different perceptions of what happened in the past and why,

and it's our job as professionals to use a specific process, a rigorous process to make our best conclusions about the past and its meaning through the evidence that we have at hand.

Jason: Of course, the detective work metaphor has some limits, so we do have to be thoughtful about how far we extend the metaphor, as Frameworks Institute researcher Theresa Miller pointed out in the last episode and William addressed in this following clip:

Dr. William Convery: One place where Sherlock Holmes' methods depart from historical methods is that Holmes in the end usually comes up with a clear answer to what happened and why. And historians know that clarity is unattainable, ultimately, because we never have all of the evidence, we never have all of the facts, perspectives change and vary. And you can look at the same event from a different point of view and see it a different way. That's kind of true for Sherlock Holmes. He'll notice things that detectives don't notice and he'll come to a different conclusion, but at the end, his conclusions are very cut and dry. History is always subject to change, always subject to new ideas, new interpretations, new evidence, new meaning. Ours is an evolving humanity. Ours is an evolving discipline, where we're constantly changing and reevaluating and–dare I say–revising our conclusions about the past based not only on the evidence but on how we view the evidence and based on what questions we're asking of the evidence that are important to us today, right now.

Christy: This exhibition fits into a larger strategy for the Minnesota Historical Society. They've been working on making their history more diverse, inclusive, and nuanced…and part of that is now explaining to visitors why that's important.

Dr. William Convery: Would it surprise you to learn that this is brand new for us? That we, like many museums have sort of adopted in our exhibits an attitude of 'what you learn from us is the objective truth' model. A lot of museums do that, we're just as guilty as everybody else in sort of building this voice of museum authority that sounds like it's neutral when really it's not. And we're trying to be more self-conscious about that.

Going forward, we're trying to be more transparent about where we're coming from. And it's hard because people expect museums to tell a certain kind of story and we're changing expectations about that in a lot of ways. And we really learned that we needed to be doing a better job [of] explaining the historical process because when we began to change from telling a traditional story–which sometimes is a code for a white-centered story–when we tried to tell more inclusive stories, include different perspectives, we faced a surprising amount of pushback with the idea that, "But wait a minute, you're objective, how come suddenly now you're biased? And that proved to us that we need to do a better job of explaining what the historical process really is about.

[Musical transition]

Christy: So, you know, initial thoughts about this clearly are, you know, [it] raises the question, is it necessary? Right? And one would argue that it is simply because I really don't think the general public really understands the concept of historical inquiry. There's been a couple of other studies that say that visitors have this expectation that history is fairly static. It's about things that happened and that's it. The idea of perspective and how perspective can alter the way that we understand something or the culmination of data points versus a singular data point to help us understand, I really don't think visitors really get that. And so I think that this idea of playing detective, this metaphor is kind of interesting. I would be curious to see the follow-up and, knowing the Minnesota historical society, they don't, they don't do a whole lot of experimentation without evaluation, and they do a lot of that on the front end to even inform what they're going to do in the final thing. So I will be very curious to see more details about this particular approach. Jason, and what do you think?

Jason: I am very curious about the parallels between the sciences and history. And this is something we have talked a lot about in the history communication community because history communication was inspired by science communication. Part of the challenge for the history

profession in the 21st century is to demonstrate the value of what is considered to be an intrinsically valuable process. In other words, the process of doing history is considered by historians and its advocates to be intrinsically valuable, something that should be supported regardless of the time and place. And the sciences are trying to make that same argument, that scientific inquiry should be supported at all costs because something about science is intrinsically valuable. And the challenge that I write about in my book is that in this current day and age, it's getting increasingly more difficult to make that argument when everything revolves around extrinsic measures of values, whether it be clicks, shares, followers, views, et cetera. So history and science both now have this humongous challenge where they have to find creative ways to communicate to their stakeholders, that the process of doing both of these disciplines is intrinsically valuable to society in a way that merits continued support. And I think both can learn from each other about best practices for doing so.

Jason: The Making History Matter report goes into a lot more detail on how to deploy this detective work metaphor for history communication, but I want to pull out two specific points for us before we hear from our next guest.

First: The report suggests focusing on the process of historical interpretation rather than the goal of interpretation. The idea of “solving a case” can queue unproductive thinking about quote-unquote “finding the truth” about the past. So process over goals.

Second: Use the metaphor to explain how historical interpretation engages with multiple perspectives and sources of evidence. The research shows that people tend to think “what really happened” in the past is plain to see and can be found in eyewitness accounts. We can counter the misconception of plain-to-see-history by talking about how history–like detective work–requires grappling with different accounts and sources

Christy: These ideas are illustrated well by our next guest, who's used the detective work metaphor to make history relevant and accessible to her undergraduate students.

Stacey Watson: My name is Stacey Watson, I am a professor at West Kentucky Community Technical College. I also serve as the Director of Equitable partnerships at the National Quilt Museum right here in Paducah, Kentucky.

Stacey: When I think about history and what fuels me to teach history the way that I do, it is thinking about the people that are left out of history. And I really sit with that passion to teach my students to find out what may be hidden and to use the detective technique to be critical about what they're discovering. Because ultimately, they can change history with new evidence. They can change history with the things that they discover. And they are the people who ultimately are our changemakers.

So when it comes to detective work, there is an introduction to my students. Usually, on the first day of class, I will walk them through "what makes up a story? Let's talk about a story." And they will share characters, a plot, a climax, a beginning, sometimes a moral protagonist or antagonist. Just going back to the simple basic fundamentals of how to write a story in what goes into a story. Then when I start talking about history, I will link history to the story. But instead of saying now let's consider history, let's switch history and switch it to a mystery. So, what makes up a mystery? And they'll say, "Oh, you have suspects, victims, bystanders, a crime scene, a motive." But I usually wait for them to get to the motive part because I build to that. Because when I'm talking about history as a mystery and teaching them to switch from being a student to a detective, I always tell them that in math you are always solving for *x*, which is usually the unknown. But when you are trying to solve a mystery, you're usually solving for the *y*, which will give you some type of motive. So instead of trying to find the *y* out initially in making that your sole focus, you have to build the mystery, which is really the historical event. I

like to position the students into a place where they are looking from a detective's point of view, where they can build their case.

Jason: Christy, in the last episode, you talked about how you use 9/11 to show why historical research demands multiple perspectives and interpretations. And, interestingly, Stacey brought up how she used the 20th anniversary of the attacks to teach her students the same thing.

Stacey: What was interesting that I did this year was teaching about 9/11. I had to recreate 9/11 for my students because a lot of them were not born during this time. So I had to really think about how to recreate, have them be interested in learning about–not necessarily terrorism–but the cause and effect of what happened and then finding a way to make it relate to them so that they could better understand how people felt, be empathetic, and be ready to deal with the media when the anniversary of 9/11 happened this year. Because a lot of them were saying, "Oh, well it's 20 years later. What's the big deal? And why did the World Trade Center mean that much to us?"

What I tried to do was one: teach the historical context. I had to go back in time to teach the historical context first. And then we analyzed the 9/ 11 Memorial Museum interactive map, or the timeline, which actually allowed us to analyze the artifacts within the museum. And they were able to look at surveillance footage, they were able to look at the crime scene, they were able to listen to the telephone calls of 9/11 of real people and the calls from the plane.

In addition to this, The National Quilt Museum had an exhibit *Never Forget*. So I gave them or actually created a field trip for them to come to The National Quilt Museum, to then analyze the quilts that were created during this time so they could physically see what people were feeling and what people were trying to capture and express through the art of quilting, and creating a memorial.

Christy: You get a sense here that she's showing* her students how to interpret historical evidence so they can see history as more than something that just happened in the past, end of story, no further investigation needed.

Stacey: Interpretation really matters. It is about emotion, it is about expression, and the one thing that I like to incorporate into my classroom is having my students relate and make the connection of history to the present. Sometimes it's very hard to make a connection with students who are not aware of the events or feel that the events that we're speaking of in class are so far away and so far in the past that they cannot connect to it. So it's important for me to find a way to make history connect. And when they find themselves in the midst of discovering and finding information, those are historical moments in the classroom they will never forget. And my objective is to not only educate my students, it is to have my students educate others. Teaching others to teach others is something that I'm extremely passionate about. And it's easier for students to teach other people about what they have learned firsthand. That's another reason why I have the detective metaphor or use it in that way because it's allowing me to teach on a bigger platform without being present.

[Musical transition

Christy: What Stacy has done here–and what she's doing with her college students–is really what should be happening, I think, in academia. It should be the idea of exploring and understanding that there are gonna be different sources of data and different documentation that give us a fuller and richer picture. So for that, I applaud her. And regardless of whatever the topic area is, I think that that use of critical thinking skills and, and that sort of research that she sent them out there to find is really useful, I think is extraordinarily useful. And I can only imagine the conversations that take place in the classrooms when the students get back and are sharing the particular rabbit hole that they went down.

Jason: So here's a line from the report that I think might be relevant here: "Our research found that the metaphor of detective work gives people readily accessible language for talking about the iterative, sometimes messy process of investigation and interpretation." I think accessible language for people is critical to opening the door for inquiry and understanding, and maybe the detective work, or maybe other metaphors offer that type of language that can be used as an entry point.

Christy: And that's really what we're talking about here, right? It's entry points, getting visitors to be fully engaged with our work and to trust our work even more. And when we show them how the work comes to bear, I think that helps them even more and they feel more active with it. And that, and then frankly, it also brings about a sense of expertise.

Christy: "In an age when no one regulates the information we consume, the task of separating truth from falsehood can no longer be for extra credit."

Jason: That's a quote from *Why Learn History When It's Already on Your Phone* by our next guest, Professor Sam Wineburg. Professor Wineburg is known for his research and writing on historical thinking and how we evaluate information in the internet age. We asked him about history as "a way of thinking" and what value that way of thinking has to society.

Sam Wineburg: Okay, my name is Sam Wineburg and I am a professor at Stanford University. My official title is the Margaret Jacks Professor of Education and History at Stanford University.

Well, in the popular imagination and in the popular consciousness, history is often seen–and I think this is a consequence of some poor instruction–it's often seen as an endless list or rendition of names and dates and events. And I think that that fundamentally disfigures the nature of thinking that is embedded in the historical process. To plumb any kind of historical event in any kind of depth means an encounter with different voices that often don't line up.

They don't line up in a neat row to tell a very tidy story. Because historical events of significance are between peoples and among peoples and that means that they, by definition, have different perspectives.

So any kind of historical inquiry that's worth its name is going to reveal places where evidence either contradicts or doesn't line up or doesn't come all from the same direction. And the act of [historical] thinking is an act of reconciling these contradictions and trying to build some type of coherence out of a pile of evidence that in many ways is not coherent. That is very different from memorizing a list or memorizing a series of dates. That doesn't mean that facts and dates aren't important, dates are absolutely crucial in historical understanding because chronology is crucial to historical understanding. But to reduce history to a single coherent narrative without any of the inherent contradictions in the nature of evidence upon which historical accounts are based is a disfigurement.

The kind of answers that we come up with when we delve into history are always in many ways a mirror image of our present, you know, that the present is always in a conversation with the past. We're in a moment right now where I would say history is at a high watermark in terms of the public consciousness. You've got very contentious bills and a whole variety of American states that proscribe the kind of history that can be taught, you have a major effort that was sponsored by The New York Times–The 1619 Project–that has thrust questions of what is the dominant narrative in front of Americans eyes? And so no, I think that what you're seeing at this moment in the ways that we've seen before in America's past, a whole series of controversies about history that do force us to ask ourselves, "Wait a second, do we choose our history based on our political commitments? Is that what should determine the kind of historical understanding that we embrace? Or is there something about history that demands us to anchor our claims with an evidentiary basis?" Those are deep questions and they're questions that people argue about.

Jason: So I actually wrote a book called *History Disrupted: How Social Media and the World Wide Web Have Changed the Past*. And in that book, I talk about how the values that underpin the social web and the values that underpin the professional discipline of history are actually starkly at odds with each other. So as a result, there, there now has to be new forms of history, communication that are best adapted and best leveraging the mechanisms of the social web in order to make historical information rise to the top of the feed and become visible on our phones and on screens and all the other devices on which we consume information Professor Wineburg's *Why Learn History* was published in 2018 to address history on the internet in the age of digital misinformation. And in this next clip, he explains what a large shift this actually has been.

Sam Wineburg: In the past when we've taught students to engage in critical reading–think of the ubiquitous AP exams and the document-based question in high school classrooms–those materials are vetted by a whole series of gatekeepers before a student ever looks at the eight to twelve different documents on a typical DBQ. They're vetted by not only the people at ETS and the College Board who put them together, but by high school teachers, by professional historians, by publishers, by people who upload them to websites; a whole series–a phalanx–of different gatekeepers review those materials and are there to catch any kind of egregious error before those materials ever end up in a little booklet that's given to a 16 or 17-year old taking an AP examination, or presented online when it's presented online. All of those features, the idea of reading carefully texts that have been vetted, are issues that do not obtain on the unregulated internet. And so in many ways, if you are not an expert in the topic–and few high school students and few college students are experts on the historical topics that they're investigating–if you are not already an expert and you are somewhat of a novice or a neophyte and you come to a website that is talking about a historical issue–let's take the most explosive one, let's take the Holocaust– and you see a kind of question that is often on these kinds of websites of, "What is the evidence that Elie Wiesel, the Nobel Prize-winning author and

Holocaust survivor, what is the evidence that he was actually in the Holocaust? Where is the evidence, for instance, that he is tattooed from his time in a concentration camp?" You can see a lot of pseudo footnotes, you can see a lot of evidence. By reading it closely, in many ways, you are falling right into the hands if you are not already an expert. You are falling right into the hands of the scoundrels that design these sites. And so, it is a very different situation to go to a website that you do not know who produced it and you do not know whether the kinds of footnotes that they are educing actually lead to an archive. That is very different from picking up a book in a college seminar that was published by Oxford University Press and been peer-reviewed, and you can look up and find that the author holds a professorship at the University of Pennsylvania. So, again, they're very different, and I don't think that we have wrapped our minds around the fundamentally different epistemologies if you will, the theories of knowledge that govern traditional print text versus the situation that confronts us on the internet.

Christy: The very nature of information on the Internet requires a shift in the way we evaluate the credibility and worthiness of the information we encounter.

Professor Sam Wineburg: Let's start with a very basic difference between an analog world and a digital world. When I go to a library–and let's stay with the example since we started with it of Elie Wiesel–and I go and I find that print book on a shelf, and I look at the books next to it, the books that are going to be next to it in the dank archives of the library, the stacks of the library, the reason that they're connected is by a kind of antiquated Dewey Decimal Classification scheme. What they share is maybe some shared dust and maybe a certain kind of topical relation. But that is fundamentally different from what happens on the internet where documents are electronically connected in a vast network.

Think about it this way, think about the internet like a spider's web. Think about if I were to come and present to you a single strand from a spider's web and ask you, "What's going on

here?" If I were to just hold up that single thread, you would have no idea what it is you're looking at. The only way that you understand that strand is by understanding its relationship to other strands in a configured pattern, which is what the definition of a network is. We understand what a single node in a network is by understanding its relationship to other nodes. Now, what does that mean on a practical level when we try to investigate a claim on the internet? It means that when we go to a certain website, let's call it a node, and we go deep, deep, deep into it, it's really hard to tell what it is. I mean, we know it's about history, we know that there's evidence, we know that there's footnotes, but are they reliable? Is the organization behind it reliable? Rather than spending hours on their site which if you think about it, if it turns out to be unreliable, is a colossal waste of time. Rather than doing that, we have at our disposal this incredible tool that allows us to see this node in context; that when we look at that node and it is a website from IHR (I don't even want to say the name, ihr.org. It stands for the Institute for Historical Review) when you initially open it up it looks like an aggregate site that aggregates news sources from a variety of different places, many of them about World War Two, but they claim to be a legitimate historical site. And in two seconds, if you put the name of the organization into your browser and allow the network to do its job, within three or four seconds you will realize that you are on one of the chief Holocaust denial sites. And so that is a fundamentally different approach to reading a text from reading a print document that's put in front of you and telling you to engage in close reading.

Christy: So, how do we equip students–and our adult audiences–to navigate this new information landscape. Well, first we have vertical reading versus lateral reading; and then we have critical thinking vs. critical *ignoring.*

Sam Wineburg: Vertical reading is exactly what it sounds like. You read a text in the way that we've all been trained to read a text. We start at the beginning, we go to the bottom, we try to be thorough. If we engage in sourcing we can look at maybe at the bottom and look at who it comes from. But it's sort of an act of dilettantism to simply judge a text from its source. I mean,

the source provides a kind of framework for who wrote it and when and what's the historical context, but to then say, "Well, I know everything about the document by just looking at the sources," is a dilettantism and the kind of thing that is unworthy of a serious student or scholar. And so we back to the top and proceed in a kind of stepwise fashion through the document being thorough, stopping, raising critical questions.

Lateral reading is a term that we coined to describe what professional fact-checkers do when they come to a site on the internet that they're unfamiliar with. Rather than spending a whole bunch of time reading it up and down doing the kinds of things that you would do with a print text, they open up multiple tabs across the horizontal access of their screen and they put the original site into context by seeing where it falls in a network, whether it is worthy of their time. Now, whether it's worthy of their time is a question that befits the kind of avalanche of information that threatens to suffocate us in an information age. That brings me to the second question you asked about what's the difference between critical thinking and critical ignoring?

A professor of law at Columbia, Timothy Wu, wrote a book called *The Attention Economy*. Well, you know, this is what the platforms that regulate our life are all about, right? They're all about keeping our eyeballs on a site in order to show us ads. Now, the important thing to realize is anytime that there is an abundance of something, it leads to a scarcity of something else. Now, what happens when there is an abundance of information? What does information consume? Information consumes attention. So what is critical thinking and critical ignoring? Well, critical ignoring is an antidote to having our attention robbed from us. It is learning how to figure out where to invest our attention on the internet. It's something that it's not taught in school. We don't teach people how to critically ignore. When you come up with a list of results from Google, there are strategies. Before clicking on any result, before engaging in what we think of as “promiscuous clicking,” we have a term that's called “click restraint.” It's the opposite of promiscuously clicking. It is learning how to decode the results that Google provides to us–these little results that are called snippets–and how to make a judicious first choice about what to

click on, rather than doing so in a capricious or whimsical way. That's what critical ignoring is all about. It is the intelligent act of ignoring things that are unworthy of our attention.

Jason: When it comes to the challenge of teaching the public how to evaluate information in this way, the good news is that museums, history organizations, and history communicators are in a great position to provide solutions.

Sam Wineburg: Absolutely, I think that museum educators have an incredible opportunity. There is leeway and a space for creativity that is often precluded from people following a set syllabus or a curriculum in either the secondary school or the college classroom. So first of all, to recognize the advantage and freedom that the informal learning environment provides. Second of all, I think that the recognition that our patrons, the people who come to visit us, are in many ways living their life online. And so how does a physical space, if we're talking about an actual post-pandemic return to physical spaces, how does that play into people's lives online? And rather than creating museums as safe spaces from the internet, how might we essentially engage in the educative vision of museum education to recognize what are the educational challenges that people are dealing with? You choose a historical topic and I'll tell you what the historical dilemmas are that are exploited by bad actors on the internet. And so if the chief intellectual problem that is accompanying the pandemic is an infodemic–a time of profound confusion about what to believe–then that implicates all of the tools of historical understanding that have to merge with how people make judicious decisions in a digital age.

[Musical transition]

Jason: So Christy, what are your thoughts on this conversation with Sam Wineburg?

Christy: Well, I mean, first of all, I just find it really fascinating because we've been talking about this for a minute too, you know, that we're in this age of self-curated content. We have visitors who come to us sometimes and say, well, you know, I read on the internet or I saw on such and such website and they're not credible sites at all, but they are confirmation by sites or worse.

And so we're, we're often working at a deficit sometimes in space like that. So I've been thinking a lot about this idea of vertical reading versus lateral reading and the need to fact check as we're going through something that we…you know, how do you do that? How do you become more thorough?

And I don't know about you, Jason, but one of the things that drives me absolutely insane sometimes is the person who says, “Well, I've done my own research.” I was like, really? And what exactly informed that research? What sources did you use? And you start, you know, breaking it. Well, I found this one obscure reference that says, and so, therefore…No! That is not how historical work goes. And, and I think that Professor Winburg is, is addressing this and, and is giving it names and coining phrases to help us really process this. And, and so I think it's, again, I think it's really important for us to do that. Because you know, it's on us now, historical literacy is at an all time low. And we say this every few years and it just keeps getting lower and lower and lower. And this, what he's addressing here is part of the reason why we're having such a hard time.

Jason: One of the great frustrations of the internet age is the fact that people who have humanities and historical expertise are frustrated by the fact that the web does not privilege their expertise. And that's because the web was not set up to privilege their expertise. The web is not expert centric. It is user-centric. History, education, and historical institutions have to become more user-centric and lean into the fact that users and visitors want to do their own research lean into the fact that people are curious and want to look into things that they want to find a variety of sources to learn, to explore, to corroborate their views, whatever the case may be. I don't think this is something to fight against. I think this is something to lean into and it provides an opportunity for museums and academics and others to evolve and do things differently than the way they've been done before to cater to new tastes, new technologies, and new generations.

So I applaud Wineburg for the writing and the work that he's done. And I think that we need more people researching and writing in this history communication space so that we can all begin to adapt different approaches that are best leveraged and best suited for the web that we currently have. And the web that is currently evolving over the next decade and a half, two decades.

I also wanna address the critical thinking component from this interview. The report says that "centering the conversation on critical thinking opens space for people to see the complexity of historical interpretation and the importance of considering different perspectives and accounts." Christy, what do you think?

Christy: By centering the conversation on critical thinking, you're also centering it on the individual, right? There isn't this distance between past and present that is often, that the visitor often brings to the table. So, you know, if you're centering it on thinking critically about these stories in the past and the documents and all of that, you're ultimately centering the individual that you're interacting with. You're making them a part of the conversation in a very different way that we have before. And it's kind of like, um, crowdsourcing right at the end of the day, that's kind of what this is. And I think it's definitely worthwhile. My concern continues to be, we can guide them through this process, but my concern now is that are we too late?

Jason: Well with that, I think we should wrap up on a hopeful note:

Sam Wineburg: I certainly want to hope that an honest encounter with the past is mind-opening rather than mind closing. It's because if we don't embrace in an encounter with the past both our side of light and our side of darkness, we will never evolve as a species. If we disown things that are human, which is a kind of recoiling in the face of strangeness and things that are different from our own culture, we will never be able to overcome that recoiling in

order to embrace a much fuller view of humanity. And so I can't countenance the alternative, which is a kind of retreat into parochialism and ethnocentrism. History is the only legitimate form of time travel that the human species has come up with, and when we engage it with a full and questioning heart, it is mind and heart expansive

[Music plays through end of episode]

Jason: *Reframing History* is brought to you by the American Association for State and Local History. It is made possible through support from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. To learn more about the project and read the report, please visit AASLH.org/research

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Again, I'm Jason Steinhauer…

Christy: And I'm Christy Coleman.

If you enjoyed this episode or learned something you'll apply to your history communication toolkit, please let your friends and colleagues know so that this research gets shared as widely as possible.

On the next episode of Reframing History:

[Teaser clips from Ep 3 interviews]


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