

Historypin: A New Way to See History

Leaf Snap is simple and brilliant. The website and free mobile app (<http://leafsnap.com>) are a combination electronic field guide and crowd-sourced research project. A person takes a photo of a leaf he or she wants to identify. Using visual recognition software, the app reveals scientific information about the tree. Users become citizen-scientists because the information they collect goes to scientists who will use the stream of data to monitor the range of flora nationwide (eventually). When I heard about this project, my first thought was whether this concept could be adapted to the history world.

I stumbled upon on that possibility last summer: Historypin (www.historypin.com). Historypin is a website and mobile app that allows users to “pin” old photographs (or video or audio clips) onto a Google map, documenting the exact location where the photo was taken. Launched last July after a year of beta testing, the site continues to grow and gain attention from the greater history community. We Are What We Do, a British nonprofit that creates products and digital tools to improve society (or, as their site proclaims, “to create ways for millions of people to do more small, good things, helping address social and environmental issues”) developed Historypin. CEO Nick Stanhope told me the app is a new way to see history.

One of the cool features of Historypin is its ability to overlap a historic photo onto a current photo almost seamlessly using Google street views—the result is a now-and-then comparison. I found that the Smithsonian Archives posted a great photo of people riding a steam tricycle in front of the north entrance of the Smithsonian Castle in 1888, overlaid onto a modern photo of the Castle.

Historypin is an ambitious project that, according to Stanhope, “brings people together around historical content and helps them explore it in new ways.” Helping people is a noble goal, of course, but the obvious question is, “Why history?” The idea came directly

from Stanhope’s personal experience. He enjoyed looking at old photos with his grandmother and hearing her stories of years past. During the final years of her life, he realized the importance of preserving those stories and created a personal archive of her history.

As he reflected on that time with his grandmother, he concluded that there is a “gap in communal storytelling” today and that there was space in the digital marketplace for a tool that could help address this gap. “When people get together and share old photos,” he said, “interesting things happen.” He wanted to unlock the power of photos to increase conversations and understanding across generations and cultures. He also wanted to explore using technology to preserve stories and photographs and foster community education.

Crowdsourcing is the key to the project’s growth. Historypin must rely on contributions of both content and information about that content from people or organizations that believe in the project and want to share a photo, video, and story. The site grows more meaningful as it gains content. The Historypin staff realizes that building an online community these days requires fast movement. Currently there is a fifty/fifty split between contributions from individuals and institutions. As of March 2011, the site has 35,000 active participants, including 350 libraries and museums.

Community organization is at the core of the project, which is keenly interested in the site’s impact on community. It launched a pilot site in the town of Reading, west of London, enlisting fifty local organizations in Reading to contribute content: six schools, museums, galleries, and senior care facilities. The Reading Museum turned the digital content into an exhibition for the community. The result is a rich collection of content about Reading.

With an American office in San Francisco, the Historypin staff has begun to reach out to American history organizations. Recently the National Archives signed on and uploaded several collections including Matthew Brady

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Civil War photographs, images from the Environmental Protection Agency’s Documerica project from the 1970s, and other photographs of streets, buildings, and historic events in Washington, D.C. They also created a photo tour of Penn Quarter, the neighborhood around the Archives building (<http://j.mp/PennQuarter>).

Three special features allow contributors to organize content. A tour feature focuses content around a specific location—photos from a certain neighborhood can show how a place changed over time. The site currently includes tours of San Francisco after the 1906 earthquake, a tour of American Chinatowns, tours of Beverly Hills, New York City’s Upper East Side mansions, and Sarah Lawrence College. Historypin’s collections feature allows contributors to create collections of photographs around similar topics such as facial hair, protests, street parties, the Tournament of Roses, and women in the military. The community feature supports the involvement and collaboration of users throughout a community to combine efforts and build collections around that locality.

Explore the Historypin site and you will clearly see its potential. However, the cynic in me has a few questions. What is to prevent this site from being just another idea that never caught on? Apps and sites come and go in the current technology landscape. Why should a history organization devote scarce human resources

to contribute content to the site?

I decided to poll a few history organizations to find out if they are satisfied with their involvement with Historypin. Matt Bowling from Palo Alto (CA) History is enthusiastic about the site's ability to of-

fer then-and-now context. His organization would love to someday load more than 500 images of Palo Alto. He wants other history organizations to consider Historypin because "it is a major step towards giving history an appeal to a

younger and larger audience. Only a thin slice of the public at large is interested in looking at old, grainy photos without any context. But a big slice is interested in seeing how places they know and see every day have changed through the years. Almost everyone would be interested to see what their own neighborhood looked like 50 to 100 years ago."

Tristan Smith of the Houston Fire Museum is a recent contributor to Historypin. He, too, was attracted to the then-and-now feature. He hopes that in a small way the site can help cities like Houston gain an increased appreciation of historic preservation. His museum plans to use Historypin to show the sites of historic fire stations that no longer exist.

The Peoria (IL) Historical Society (PHS) has contributed to Historypin for more than a year. Curator Robert Killion explained that PHS had launched a new website and was exploring ways to showcase its collections, planning to experiment with social media and virtual tours. Crowdsourcing is important to PHS, and its staff wants to engage audiences and collect information from them. Historypin seemed a good partner in this effort and provided a pre-existing platform. Also reassuring was its connection to Google and a stable nonprofit. As a result, online access to PHS's collections has increased. Killion has watched it engage people as he demonstrates the street-view feature in presentations. "The moment when you fade the old picture in on street view never fails to bring a gasp from the audience and a murmur of conversation. People love it and anything we can do to excite people about history and our collection is a great thing!"

These three examples offer some insight into how history organizations are using the site. Only time will tell whether or not Historypin will successfully unlock the social power of history collections and bridge generations and cultures. I have to applaud the people who figured out how to offer this new history app and website that allows users to roll up their sleeves and contribute, discuss, and share. With a little creativity they developed a history adaptation of Leaf Snap. ●

"History Bytes" is a forum for discussing Web issues facing all types of historical institutions. Tim Grove can be reached at grovet@si.edu.

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