By Tim Grove

Abraham Lincoln and Social Media?

Every now and then a website jumps off the screen and really grabs my attention. One is www.21stcenturyabe.org (Abe), a bold attempt to reach eighteen- to twenty-five-year-olds, to experiment with user-generated content, and to explore the integration of art and history. I heard about the site at the 2009 AASLH annual meeting in a session about using technology to connect with new audiences. Produced by the Rosenbach Museum and Library in Philadelphia, Abe goes where few history websites have gone before.

Located in downtown Philadelphia, the Rosenbach contains one of the nation's great collections of rare books and manuscripts. According to Kathy Haas, the site's content manager, Abe was inspired by the museum's wish to expand its audience combined with a desire to experiment with Web 2.0 social media. With a number of Lincoln documents in their collection and the bicentennial of his birth looming, the Rosenbach staff decided that Lincoln held great potential as a rich topic for artistic interpretation, especially since Lincoln is so firmly embedded in the American memory. They decided to explore the process of adapting what would normally be onsite programming to an online format.

The goal was to develop a Web presence that would appeal to eighteen- to twenty-five-year-olds, an audience that the museum had not successfully engaged onsite. Abe includes quirky artistic material commissioned by artists and a variety of user-generated opportunities—features that would attract the attention of this age cohort. To inform the development process, they set up an advisory group of ten people in the target age range who were paid a modest amount to provide feedback at various points during the project. This group tracked progress mostly online through a blog, with a few face-to-face meetings. (In retrospect, project managers think that more in-person meetings would have been better, since the diverse group dynamics could have generated even richer ideas.)

From the beginning, the developers thought of the site as a temporary exhibition with a finite time of activity—users could contribute to the site for six months. This decision was made partly because the museum does not have the human resources required to maintain the site. Accordingly, the site debuted on Lincoln's birthday, February 12, 2009, and went inactive August 30, 2009. (It is still online, but users cannot contribute to it.) An unintentional consequence of this decision, says Haas, is that it represents a

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sort of "snapshot of bicentennial mentality—people's thoughts about Lincoln two hundred years after his birth."

The site was funded with $220,000 from the Heritage Philadelphia Program (HPP), part of the Pew Center for Arts and Heritage. According to Laura Koloski, senior program specialist, the project, which received both planning and implementation grants, was attractive for several reasons:
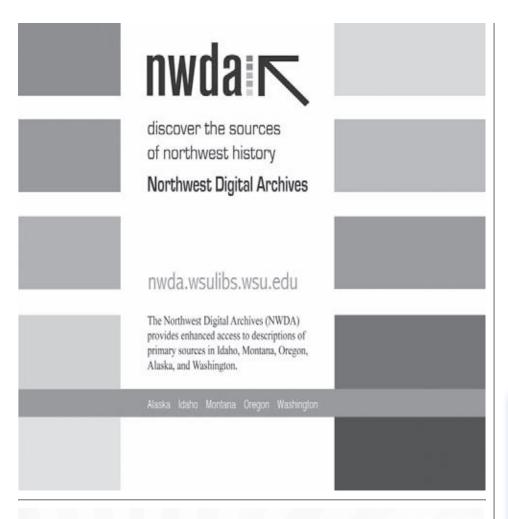
- It encouraged the user to look at history in new ways.
- It combined disciplines.
- It gathered an impressive group of advisors from both the scholarly and artistic communities.
- It targeted an age group not well served by cultural institutions.
- It has the possibility of serving as a model for other projects.

The Rosenbach commissioned several artists, both local and out of town, to contribute to the site. A local theater company produced a four-part mockumentary on how Lincoln would have used twenty-first-century technology, including a radio show and a podcast. A nationally known designer and illustrator created a story through panels about her personal search for Lincoln. A musician composed a series of short songs inspired by the music of the Civil War era.

The nine-month development period with the artists proved a learning experience in many ways. The Rosenbach gave the artists a lot of creative freedom, but ultimately realized that the artists required some structure and needed to better understand various formatting requirements associated with the Web environment. While the museum will definitely work with artists in the future, it will most likely make some changes in its approach.

Overall, the staff was pleased with the quality of user-generated content. Staff reviewed all contributions and they rejected no submissions due to inappropriate content. In fact, the site's managers had hoped for controversial content that would reflect the varying views on Lincoln. To their regret, they did not receive any. Though the quantity of user-generated content was somewhat less than the developers had hoped for, evidence shows that the site was successful in reaching a different demographic. The audience ended up skewing slightly above the target age of eighteen to twenty-five (the average age of users submitting content was thirty). Despite this, they reached a younger demographic online than their traditional in-house audience and that was significant. The site successfully reached into the social media world and attracted new people to the Rosenbach. Users from 126 countries viewed the site, along with increased traffic from the Midwest and West.

The Rosenbach staff specifically did not want the site to be tied into traditional academic venues—it was supposed to be for private exploring, not classroom use. But according to Haas, "that, in turn,

cut us off from a major avenue of getting publicity and eyeballs in the high school/college bracket. When we did talk to teachers about the site, they seemed to want very specific 'how-to' instructions on using it in a classroom setting, rather than just passing it on to their students to explore. Maybe there is some way to strike a balance so that a site has some of the structure that teachers like/need so that they'll tell people about it while still being fun and self-directed."

Every Web project is a learning experience, and if they could make some changes, the staff would streamline the content on the site to make it less overwhelming. While they did conduct usability testing, navigation between the activities and user contributions remained a challenge.

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History organizations should continue to look not only to our innovative colleagues, but to others beyond our history world. The Rosenbach staff looked at a number of sites with customizable consumer products such as www.reebok.com/US/#/YourReebok, which allows you to design custom sneakers. Ultimately, like the Rosenbach, if we want to attract a younger audience, we have to think outside of the box. That means cultivating a culture of experimenting and pondering interesting questions about history or historical figures, questions such as, "How might Lincoln have interacted with social media?" or "What would Lincoln put on his Facebook page?" ◉

"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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