

Interview with Lee Rainie

I met Lee Rainie, Director of the Pew Internet and American Life Project, at Smithsonian 2.0, a conference organized to inform the Smithsonian Institution's strategic planning efforts. Rainie graciously agreed to answer questions for this column. Following is an excerpt from the full interview, which is available at www.aaslh.org/historynews.

What are the Project's main research areas? Initiated in December 1999, the Project has two main focal points. First is studying the social impact of the Internet on children, families, communities, schools, health care, civic/political life, and the workplace. Second is monitoring trends and developments in the way people use the Internet and cell phones, including the adoption of broadband and mobile access, the rise of Web 2.0 applications such as social network sites, video-sharing websites, and blogging, the changing patterns of how people obtain general and political news, and the nature of digital divides. This means that we try to benchmark basic trends in online use and we also check to see what new applications are gaining adherents.

Have you done any studies specific to culture—history/museum websites? No, but we have accumulated a decent amount of circumstantial data that would support a conclusion that the Internet is increasingly important to those who are interested in state and local history. First, we've seen a gradual increase in the number of people using the Web to do genealogical research. When we last asked the question in 2006, we found that twenty-five percent of Internet users had done such research and my guess is that the number now might come to one-third. When people have questions about the past, they think of the Internet as a vast treasure trove of information that has just recently become available to them.¹

Second, on every subject we study there is data suggesting that the Internet is the default starting point for many people doing research, particularly when they have problems to solve—health or medical questions, financial issues, hassles

with the government, and civic problems. Another example of how the Internet has grown in importance. It now outranks newspapers as the place where people get national and international news.²

Third, when people have specialized queries about subjects (like science), they often start by using the Internet.³

We would be really interested in doing work related to people's use of the Internet to get historical information if we could secure funding. The findings would help us study something that matters a

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great deal to the wider world: How do people find and assess information on subjects? What are the guideposts they use to establish the credibility of information?

Can you offer any advice on what history organizations with limited resources should be working towards regarding their websites? We are sworn to non-partisanship and don't give direct advice to anyone about how to survive in the digital age. But here is what I see other organizations doing. Many are working to figure out what their core mission and their value proposition is in a world with exploding sources of information. They then adopt a strategy that focuses on their unique qualities. For some that is curating a collection, for others it is special expertise, and for others it is the experiences they provide.

The presence of that material on the Web will help draw an audience of the passionate, curious, and passers-by. And if the magic happens, a portion will bond with the artifact and bond with the insti-

tutions providing them. As Clay Shirky argued in his keynote at the Smithsonian 2.0 conference, every artifact can be the basis for its own community.⁴

Another thing that some organizations are trying to do is outsource some treasures to see what kinds of information might reside with the audience. That is the key insight that the Flickr Commons project with the Library of Congress provided. This does not cost anything.⁵

A third thing that organizations are trying is free Web 2.0 tools like blogging, photo sharing, social networking sites, and video uploading to places like YouTube. This makes their material more "findable" in the world of search engines and potentially broadens their audience.

Finally, some, but not all, are searching for allies to promote them. That might mean establishing closer relationships with the local library, newspaper, community social groups, or like-minded historical organizations in other parts of the country. The Internet is all about the links. There is a smart encapsulation of this notion in Jeff Jarvis's new book *What Would Google Do?* that goes like this, "Do what you do best and link to the rest."

Is there any way to identify trends vs. long-term changes? For example—is social media a trend or permanent? This is the \$1 million question. Our data show that core activities that tap into fundamental human needs and behaviors are not fads, but that websites come and go. For instance, social networking is deeply embedded in the human experience and it has been a core part of the Internet from the earliest days. People like tools that help them connect to others. But that doesn't mean that a specific social networking website is forever.

One of the best things about this new technological age is that people can experiment, get feedback, adjust, and, if need be, move on. An organization that devotes some staff time to tending Facebook or Twitter can figure out if this has a payoff pretty easily. Look at the traffic. Look at the other feedback and see if the strategy is working. If it isn't, try something different. There is no playbook on this stuff.



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Every organization I know is wrestling with these questions and there is no fool-proof strategy for moving forward.

Should history organizations be worried about allowing users to generate content and contribute to their sites? Is a museum's authoritative voice in danger? AASLH members face the same issue that lots of groups do and it centers on your second question: Is our authoritative voice in danger? To a degree, the answer is yes, because if you invite the general public to contribute material there is a chance some contributions will be wrong or incomplete. At the same time, the rise of user-created content provides opportunities for new engagement with your audience. In many cases we see evidence that organizations that open up their archives or invite consumers into their tent gain new, passionate, and engaged fans. Those fans then become evangelists.

One new sensibility that permeates the tech community and those who are avid creators of content is this. The old media world had an ethic that organizations should work hard to seek out credentialed experts and permissions to allow those expert voices to be displayed. The ethic of the new media world is that it is often good just to experiment and allow user engagement and if that leads to mistakes or problems, then apologize, seek forgiveness, and fix them. This shifts the burden of proof towards more openness and engagement and technologists believe this is usually a payoff that outweighs the problems it invites.

Does the Project have an end date? We're currently funded into 2010. While there is no certainty about our future beyond that, we can pretty easily make the case that technology is changing so fast that there is still a freshness to the kind of research we do. It can be helpful to our case that there are no other organizations that are researching the mix of subjects we do. ©

¹ See www.pewinternet.org/trends/Internet_Activities_7.22.08.htm.

² See people-press.org/report/479/internet-overtakes-newspapers-as-news-source.

³ See www.pewinternet.org/report_display.asp?r=191.

⁴ See smithsonian20.si.edu/schedule_webcast4.html.

⁵ See smithsonian20.si.edu/schedule_webcast3.html.

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