

Communicating about History: Challenges, Opportunities, and Emerging Recommendations

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**FRAME
WORKS**

**A Strategic Brief in partnership with the American Association
for State and Local History, the National Council on Public
History, and the Organization of American Historians**

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Introduction

It is easy for messages to get lost in translation when talking about history. There are several barriers to being heard and understood, and a few opportunities to seize.

Members of the American public don't have a clear sense of who historians are and what they do. They reason that historians are like "journalists of the past" who should be reporting on past events "exactly as they happened." They assume that, for most people, history is a non-essential hobby. At the same time, the public is able to see that a shared understanding of the past can build a sense of belonging within communities and society. They are able to sometimes see that learning about the past can help society learn from its mistakes. People also recognize that museums and historical sites are valuable, though they struggle to identify exactly why that is.

While this research was conducted before George Floyd's death and the nationwide protests against racial injustice and police brutality, some of the findings also prove highly relevant to think about the current fight against white privilege and institutional racism in the country. The brief notably uncovers the implicit connections that exist between privilege, power, and historical knowledge in US public thinking. It shows how mainstream historical narratives are often considered the default, while narratives of historically oppressed peoples are seen as "optional" for many in the US public; and how people in positions of privilege tend to use their comfort level to determine what to learn and what to ignore about past injustices and trauma.

These are just some of the patterns of public thinking that emerged from research the FrameWorks Institute conducted into public perceptions of history.* This research is part of a broader project—conducted in partnership with the American Association of State and Local History, the National Council on Public History, and the Organization of American Historians—to develop strategies to communicate about and build support for public engagement with history.

This brief describes the challenges and opportunities for communication that result from the public's existing understandings of and assumptions about history. It also offers preliminary recommendations for responding to these challenges and opportunities, although further research will be needed to build on these findings and to develop the most effective ways of framing history.

* A fuller description of the data and methods behind this research is available as a supplement to this brief.

What Are We Trying to Communicate?

To develop an effective strategy for communicating about history and public engagement with history, it's necessary to identify a set of key ideas to get across. To do this, FrameWorks researchers conducted interviews and a feedback session with professional historians and reviewed relevant literature on the issue. Below, we summarize the key ideas that emerged from this process, which represent the core points that need to be effectively communicated and the solutions that the field wants to build support for through communications.

What is history?

- History is an ongoing process of describing, analyzing, evaluating, and interpreting past events that is continually revisited as new evidence comes to light.
- Public history is a collaborative approach through which historians research and interpret the past *for* and *with* the public.
- Historical thinking involves critically examining multiple accounts and perspectives of past events.

Why is history important to society?

- History is relevant to the present and the future, because it helps us understand how the society we live in came to be.
- History can lead to social change by guiding decision-making and empowering people to think critically about and address present-day challenges in society.
- History supports a healthy democracy and civic engagement, by allowing people to use their knowledge of past policies to participate in the current democratic process.
- History can support a more tolerant, diverse, and inclusive society, by generating understanding of the diversity of human experience across time and place.

Where do people learn about the past?

- Personal and family storytelling is one of the bases of learning about the past.
- In the US, the K-12 education system teaches the basics of history.
- Museums and historical sites inform the public about the past through exhibitions and activities.
- Pop culture, social media, and the news media play an increasingly larger role in influencing public thinking about the past.

What are the challenges to how our society engages with the past?

- Authoritarianism and neo-fascism threaten to rewrite history to legitimize racist, nationalistic, or essentialist beliefs.
- Historically oppressed groups are excluded from, or misrepresented within, mainstream historical narratives.
- The K-12 education system fails to teach the skills necessary for students to engage critically with the past, such as looking at and analyzing multiple sources of historical evidence and interpretations about the past.
- Lack of funding and devaluing of the humanities means there are fewer opportunities to study history.

What can be done to support how our society engages with the past?

- Increase the racial, ethnic, cultural, class, and gender diversity of historical professions, through, for example, college scholarships and mentorship opportunities for students from diverse backgrounds.
- Improve the quality and quantity of history education in K-12 schooling.
- Improve collaboration between museums and historical sites and local communities in the creation and presentation of exhibitions.
- Ensure that history taught in schools is relevant to those from diverse backgrounds.
- Increase the visibility and engagement of professional historians in public life through collaborating with filmmakers and journalists, and engaging with politicians at the local, state, and federal levels.

Challenges and Opportunities

To understand how the American public thinks about history and public engagement with history, FrameWorks researchers conducted 20 one-on-one, two-hour-long cognitive interviews with a diverse group of participants. These interviews were analyzed to identify the deep, implicit ways of thinking that members of the public use to think about what history *is* and what it means to learn, understand, and engage with history.

It is crucial to center power in our analysis of these shared ways of thinking. As part of our culture, these tacit, taken-for-granted patterns of thinking grow out of a history structured by systems of domination and oppression. Our analysis attends to the origins of the specific ways of thinking discussed (such as European settler colonialism and Western exceptionalism), as well as the ways in which dominant ways of thinking perpetuate existing inequities. It also shows how some available ways of thinking—more promisingly—offer a basis for problematizing and contesting unjust aspects of the existing social order.

Based on this research, we identify both challenges and opportunities that communicators face in getting across the key ideas outlined above. We offer general recommendations about how to respond to the challenges and leverage the opportunities, which communicators can start using right now, with the important caveat that further research is needed to identify specific, evidence-based framing strategies the field can use to move public thinking in the right direction.

Challenges

Challenge #1: The public thinks of history (i.e., the past) as a series of chronological events driven by the actions of key individuals.

Members of the public mainly think about history as a timeline of events directed by “important” people in Europe and the US. They see the past as a series of dates, times, and places that make up key events. Historical figures are seen as individually responsible for driving events in good or bad ways (e.g., Martin Luther King, Jr. is seen as individually responsible for the civil rights movement).

How this pattern of thinking makes it *harder* to get key points across

This surface-level “facts and figures” approach to the past makes it hard for people to see the role of critical thinking in historical analysis and interpretation. It also makes people miss out on understanding historical events that are not deemed as “important.”

In addition, when people focus on the role of individual figures, they struggle to see how systems, structures, and groups have contributed to shaping past events (e.g., the coalition of student and faith-based organizations who, along with Martin Luther King, Jr., started the civil rights movement).

How to address this challenge

Emphasize that dates and events are important because of what they *mean* in the larger societal context. Explain that history focuses not just on events but on this context. This will help people see that history is about more than just facts and figures.

Explain how systems, structures, and collective organizations enabled the actions of historical figures. For example, talk about Rosa Parks as part of a large group of activists who together organized the Montgomery bus boycott.

Challenge #2: The public believes that history (i.e., providing an account of the past) is about recording and documenting “just the facts.”

Members of the public think that the work of history involves reporting on information about key events in the past exactly “as they happened.” People are unaware of what exactly historians do, so they rely on what they know about journalism and reporting on the news to make sense of what it means to record and talk about the past. They reason that historians should stick to documenting and reporting “just the facts,” in the same way that journalists document and report on current events. This analogy between historians and journalists leads the public to value eyewitness accounts of past events as the most reliable source of historical evidence, because they are assumed to provide unmediated information on events “as they happened.”

Additionally, the parallel between journalists and historians makes concerns about media bias, partisanship, and “fake news” top-of-mind for people in discussions of history. People talk about how polarization and “media bias” have negatively affected journalism, and they apply these ideas to historians as well.

How this pattern of thinking makes it *harder* to get key points across

This understanding of history as journalism about the past narrows people’s thinking about what historical work involves. It makes it difficult for the public to see the need to rely on multiple sources of historical evidence (e.g., written documents, oral accounts, artifacts) to make sense of and interpret the past. In addition, the focus on providing “just the facts” makes it hard for people to see history as a way of making meaning of the full complexity of what happened.

Given people’s current concerns about media bias, the parallel between journalists and historians can also make them worry about bias in the way history is presented to the public.

How to address this challenge

Explain who historians are and where they work. Talk about historians working in museums, historical sites, and other public places, in addition to colleges and universities. This can help people understand what historians do and how it is distinct from journalism.

Give examples of the different types of evidence historians use besides interviews and eyewitness statements to broaden understanding of what historical work involves.

Challenge #3: People can't tell the difference between rigorous analysis and personal opinion.

People are unable to tell the difference between opinions about the past and rigorous analysis of the past. They are skeptical of every view of the past that seems to go beyond documenting “facts and figures.” This is because they assume there is one “truth” about the past that is fixed and exists “out there” in the world, waiting to be found. In this view, the truth about the past doesn't need to be constructed, it simply needs to be found and shared “as it is.” This leads people to think that historians' interpretations of the past are based on personal opinion rather than rigorous analysis.

How this pattern of thinking makes it *harder* to get key points across

As people don't understand why rigorous analysis is different from personal opinion, they struggle to see that reliable historical knowledge is not simply “found,” but constructed through analysis and interpretation of historical evidence. They believe that all analyses and interpretations of past events are “biased” and untrustworthy, because they mean that someone's personal opinion has tampered with “the truth.” This way of thinking is further reinforced by people's concern with “media bias,” which is applied to historians in the same way it is applied to journalists.

One particular danger of this way of thinking is that if people can't differentiate between rigorous analysis and personal bias, they will also have a hard time figuring out who and what *not* to trust. They could be easily manipulated by those who pose as historians but are actually distorting the past to fit a given ideology.

How to address this challenge

Focus on historical evidence and understanding rather than on the “truth” about the past. Talking about the “truth” will likely activate concern about “bias.”

Describe the *process* of doing historical analysis and interpretation. Tell the story of *how* historians reach their conclusions, rather than just focusing on the conclusions themselves. Describing the basis of historical analysis can help distinguish it from personal opinion.

Be explicit about how new or new uses of evidence have led to new interpretations of the past. This will show that new interpretations are not simply the result of differences in personal perspective but are grounded in an evolving body of historical knowledge.

Challenge #4: People think that learning about the past means absorbing facts and figures.

The public believes that learning history simply involves memorizing straightforward facts and figures, and that this can be achieved through absorbing information, rather than thinking about how learning history involves developing a critical perspective on multiple sources of past events. People think that understanding history will just “come” to those who seek it out through exposure to information about the past (e.g., through travel, visits to museums) and through consuming information about the past (e.g., through media and entertainment), rather than it being a skill that someone has to develop.

How this pattern of thinking makes it *harder* to get key points across

Since the public assumes that history is learned by absorbing information, they do not see the need for critical thinking skills to understand and make sense of the past. They do not see that learning about history is as much about building skills as it is about memorizing—or absorbing—content. People are also unlikely to see that critical thinking skills developed to learn about the past can be useful and valuable in other areas of their lives.

In turn, this way of thinking makes it difficult for people to see the need for initiatives to refine or improve *how* history is taught in schools or *how* history is presented in museums and historical sites, instead of focusing on how much information is provided about the past in these contexts.

How to address this challenge

Talk about learning about the past as a *process* and emphasize skills over content. Stress that learning about history involves developing the skills necessary to take a critical perspective on past events, not just memorizing information.

Explain what critical thinking skills involve (e.g., knowing how and where to seek out information and how to make sense of it) and how they are developed and used when learning about history.

Give examples of how the critical thinking skills developed through learning history can be used in other areas of people’s lives (e.g., informing civic participation). This will help build understanding that history is valuable to society.

Challenge #5: There is a belief among the public that mainstream (i.e., white male) historical narratives are the default that everyone has to learn, while narratives of historically oppressed peoples are “extras” that are, in principle or practice, unnecessary for everyone to learn.

Members of the public see mainstream historical narratives (in which white men are prominently featured) as the default. They take for granted that everyone learns about these narratives, particularly in history classes in school. On the other hand, historical narratives focused on historically oppressed groups, especially people of color and women, are seen as “extras” that are neither of interest nor accessible to everyone. Interview participants from historically privileged groups (e.g., white people, men) tended to reason that only individuals from historically oppressed groups would *want* to learn and be *capable* of learning about the past experiences of the group with which they identify. They assumed their identity was “neutral” and that they are incapable of ever truly learning about experiences they or people like them haven’t had, especially experiences of discrimination and trauma. In this view, there was a belief that only Black people are both interested in and able to ever “really” know about slavery, and that only women want to learn and are capable of “really” knowing about the women’s suffragette movement. Interview participants from historically oppressed groups more frequently recognized that this unequal double standard about learning history is the status quo but were unsure how or if it could change.

How this pattern of thinking makes it *harder* to get key points across

This deterministic relationship between history and identity makes it difficult for people from historically privileged groups (e.g., white people, men) to see that it is both possible and valuable to learn and know about different aspects of the past that are not connected to their own experience and identity. For people from historically oppressed groups (e.g., people of color, women), the recognition of this double standard can lead to fatalism if no solutions to address this imbalance in how history is learned and understood are presented.

This way of thinking also makes it hard for people to see why society needs a shared understanding of history that includes the experiences and perspectives of people from diverse backgrounds and identities.

How to address this challenge

Explain that getting the full picture of the past requires taking into account the perspectives of those whose voices and narratives have been left out of mainstream narratives.

Emphasize that demonstrating the interrelatedness among these different experiences and perspectives on the past is an important part of historians' role in society.

Challenge #6: Many members of the public are reluctant to learn or talk about painful or troubling things that happened in the past, particularly to historically oppressed groups.

There is prevalent thinking among the public that it is a “human universal” to want to hear “happy endings” about the past, and that topics that make people sad or uncomfortable should be avoided. There was a tendency among white interview participants to suggest that negative aspects of the past, especially atrocities such as slavery and genocide, don't need to be learned or talked about because they are “unpleasant” or “upsetting” and are “in the past.” Meanwhile, interview participants of color sometimes said they avoid these topics because they don't want to make “other people” (white people) uncomfortable.

How this pattern of thinking makes it *harder* to get key points across

When the comfort level of people in positions of privilege is used to evaluate the relevance of past events, it reinforces those privileges. In the case of race, the burden of learning, thinking, and talking about past oppression is placed on people of color, while white people can choose to remain ignorant of past injustices and trauma, which reinforces white privilege. This thinking makes it difficult for people in positions of privilege to see that erasing and silencing perspectives of historically oppressed groups is a problem that needs to be addressed.

How to address this challenge

Frame consideration of past injustice as about learning from our mistakes. Be explicit that one key condition for a better *future* is for society to understand and take responsibility for past injustices.

Emphasize that the work of historians aims to give communities a voice and work towards more justice and equity in society.

Challenge #7: The public sees history as a non-essential hobby.

People think history is a “nice to have” hobby for individuals who are interested but is not essential for everyone to learn about. History is seen as an entertaining activity for “history buffs” who are passionate about a specific historical period or event, in the same way as people who are passionate about sports or other hobbies (e.g., knitting). People think that those who pursue history as a hobby have an inclination for self-improvement and are more intellectually curious than others. In this view, learning about history is a leisure activity for certain individuals, not everyone. While people acknowledge that there are history classes in school, they don’t see it as an essential topic like math or English and think that only those who are personally interested in history as a hobby will pursue it outside of school.

How this pattern of thinking makes it *harder* to get key points across

Thinking about history as a mere pastime makes people think that history isn’t important or necessary for everyone to learn and know about. It can also make it hard for people to understand the value of public history, including how or why they would engage with history more directly in collaborations with public historians to record, interpret, and/or present the past.

How to address this challenge

Give examples of times when historical knowledge and skills were instrumental to understanding or solving a current issue and be explicit that these examples show why history is essential to everyone in society.

Talk about “historians working with the public” instead of “public history,” as people don’t know what this term means.

Explain how public historians work with the public. Point to specific examples of successful collaborations between public historians and the public (e.g., the HistoryMiami Museum’s collaboration with the LGBTQ community to create the “[Queer Miami](#)” exhibit*). This will help build understanding of the value of public engagement with history.

* HistoryMiami Museum. (2019, Mar 16). *Queer Miami: A History of LGBTQ Communities*. Retrieved from www.historymiami.org/exhibition/queer-miami

Challenge #8: People are fatalistic about the possibility of improving how history is taught in schools.

The public thinks that history classes in K-12 schools are inadequate, but they assume this won't get better. This stems from a broader view that public schools in the US are failing, and that there aren't any obvious solutions to this problem. People apply this way of thinking to historical education, and reason that nothing *can* change to improve how history is taught in schools. They think that since students will inevitably not learn "enough" history in school, it is ultimately up to parents and individual students to do more to learn about the past if they want to.

How this pattern of thinking makes it *harder* to get key points across

People's fatalism makes it hard for them to see the specific ways in which historical education can be improved, through both increased quantity of history classes in every grade level and improved quality of historical education.

How to address this challenge

Avoid talking about how schools, teachers, or classes are "failing" students. This will likely reinforce the public's existing fatalism about the US education system.

Provide examples of effective, systemic solutions that can be implemented to improve the quality and quantity of history education in the US, to increase people's sense that something *can* be done to improve how our country teaches history.

Opportunities

Opportunity #1: There is some understanding among the public that knowing history helps society learn from past mistakes.

People believe that it is possible and necessary to learn from mistakes that were made in the past to improve as a society. The public believes that, if left unchecked, mistakes from the past can repeat themselves, yet that this can be prevented by learning about the past and making conscious decisions to behave differently in the future. In this view, societal progress is an empirical process of learning from past mistakes through trial and error, to ultimately

do better over time. People point to past oppressions that no longer exist (e.g., slavery) and injustices that are only recently ending (e.g., discrimination against LGBTQ people) to explain how society is continually learning not to repeat past errors.

How this pattern of thinking makes it easier to get key points across

The idea that society can learn from past mistakes can make it easier for people to understand why critical engagement with the past matters. It could also potentially be leveraged to build support for policies and programs to improve public learning and more direct forms of public engagement with history.

However, if people focus solely on the idea that the past is bound to repeat itself, they can become fatalistic about the possibility of learning from past mistakes.

How to take advantage of this opportunity

Use concrete examples of society learning from past mistakes to start conversations about the relevance of historians' work to the present and the future. This can help deepen and expand people's sense of the importance of learning about the past to progress as a society.

Be explicit that societal progress takes time and involves the participation of everyone in society. Vary your examples to include the experiences of everyone, including historically oppressed communities. This will likely help avoid fatalistic thinking and help people see that historians *can* help society change for the better.

Couple talk about the danger of repeating our mistakes with the possibility of learning from them. Pivoting from what could go wrong to what can go right is important to avoid fatalism.

Opportunity #2: The public can sometimes see how a shared understanding of the past creates a sense of belonging to a community and to society.

There is some recognition among members of the public that common history binds group identity. When communities and society have a shared understanding of the past, the thinking goes, people are more likely to take an active role in and feel responsible for their community, be it small (local, state-level) or large (regional, national). While this thinking is not that common, it is present among some members of the public.

How this pattern of thinking makes it *easier* to get key points across

This understanding of the role of history can potentially help people see how a shared history of the US that is more inclusive—including immigrants, people of color, women, and LGBTQ people, among others—can create a more inclusive and equitable society. In addition, it can help people see the value of investing in history programs in universities or in museums across the country.

However, this notion of shared belonging could also lead to more exclusivist and nationalistic ideas of history and identity. People could focus on what is shared only within an exclusive “in-group” with a particular identity and classify everyone else with different identities as belonging to an “out-group.”

How to take advantage of this opportunity

Explain how learning about a shared history can bring people together. Give examples of how this has happened through the work of historians. This will make people more likely to see that it is important for US society to have a more inclusive, shared history.

Talk about what is shared by society as a whole and be as inclusive as possible. For example, talk about the past of the “people living in the US” rather than “American citizens,” to include the experiences of immigrants. This will help avoid nationalistic and xenophobic “us vs. them” thinking about what it means to have a shared sense of belonging.

Opportunity #3: People sometimes recognize that the more perspectives on the past are available, the better it will be understood.

At times, the public assumes that the way to get a full picture of a past event is to combine as many different views on it as possible. In this view, people need to learn about as many perspectives as possible to understand what “really” happened.

How this pattern of thinking makes it *easier* to get key points across

When people assume that accumulating different perspectives on the past can help paint a more accurate picture, it creates an opening for them to see that it’s not just about *how many* perspectives, but about *what types* of perspectives are included. People can begin to see the value of studying and including the perspectives of historically oppressed people (e.g., women, people of color, immigrants, LGBTQ people) in historical narratives more consistently. This way of thinking can also provide an opening to talk about the need for more diversity in the history profession, as a way to get a fuller picture of the past.

However, if people believe that all perspectives are “equal” and deserve the same amount of attention, there is a risk that this approach could lead to “both sides-ism”—that is, a tendency to equate the perspectives of historically oppressed people with that of their oppressors.

How to take advantage of this opportunity

Provide examples of how historians have come to more accurate understandings of the past by combining diverse sources of evidence. This will likely reinforce people’s existing—albeit vague—sense that multiple perspectives on the past can help understand it better.

Explain that historians critically evaluate different perspectives in developing a full picture. Emphasizing the need to evaluate the different perspectives considered can help keep “both sides-ism” at bay.

Opportunity #4: The public has some understanding of the power dynamics involved in discourses about the past.

Some members of the public, particularly people of color, notice that the powerful (historically, white men) are disproportionately featured in accounts of the past. In this view, people understand that certain perspectives, such as those of people of color and women, have been ignored or “forgotten” when talking about the past. They believe this makes the historical record less accurate or truthful.

How this pattern of thinking makes it easier to get key points across

This recognition of power dynamics can help some people see the need to include more diverse perspectives in the historical record. But if people aren’t provided with actionable ways of making history more inclusive, this way of thinking could also easily lead to fatalism about how the powerful *always* make history.

How to take advantage of this opportunity

Be explicit that the role of historians is to help ensure that the voices and perspectives of historically oppressed groups are heard across society.

Focus on *solutions* for correcting the power imbalance in the historical record, rather than solely on the imbalance itself (e.g., policies and programs ensuring that more people from historically oppressed groups can become professional historians).

Opportunity #5: The public has a surface-level understanding of the importance of museums and historical sites.

People have some understanding that museums and historical sites are places where people can go to learn about and engage with history. There is also some agreement that museums and historical sites are doing a “good job” telling stories about the past to the public, through activities such as historical reenactments of past events.

How this pattern of thinking makes it easier to get key points across

If expanded, this surface-level understanding can help build support for increased funding for museums and historical sites. However, people need a deeper understanding of how these institutions support public learning and more direct forms of engagement with history. Otherwise, this way of thinking can cue a consumerist approach to history as something those who are interested can passively “absorb.”

How to take advantage of this opportunity

Emphasize that museums and historical sites offer new ways of thinking about and making sense of the past, rather than just presenting artifacts and information about the past.

Be careful to avoid presenting museums and historical sites as “entertainment” venues. This will likely trigger unproductive thinking about history as something to be passively consumed.

About FrameWorks

The FrameWorks Institute is a nonprofit think tank that advances the mission-driven sector's capacity to frame the public discourse about social and scientific issues. The organization's signature approach, Strategic Frame Analysis[®], offers empirical guidance on what to say, how to say it, and what to leave unsaid. FrameWorks designs, conducts, and publishes multi-method, multi-disciplinary framing research to prepare experts and advocates to expand their constituencies, to build public will, and to further public understanding. To make sure this research drives social change, FrameWorks supports partners in reframing, through strategic consultation, campaign design, FrameChecks[®], toolkits, online courses, and in-depth learning engagements known as FrameLabs. In 2015, FrameWorks was named one of nine organizations worldwide to receive the MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions.

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