

Grappling with the Concept of Radical Trust

Lee Rainie, director of the Pew Internet and American Life project, has said that we live in a golden age of the flowering of amateur experts. This oxymoron is at the heart of a relatively new topic of discussion in the history community. The topic is perhaps best illustrated in the term “radical trust.”

People have more platforms than ever before to share their opinions with a wider world and an increased expectation that they should be included in the dialogue. Allowing your users to contribute content to your website requires radical trust. This concept, gaining steam with the rise of Web 2.0 and the popularity of social media tools like Flickr, Facebook, YouTube, blogs, and Twitter naturally raises concern in history organizations. It threatens authoritative voice and weakens control. Yet, it offers opportunities to reach and engage new audiences.¹

Does user-generated content fit into your mission? Should it? Is it important? I asked several colleagues in history organizations around the country one simple question: What are your thoughts on radical trust? They represent administration, curatorial, and new media perspectives. From the practical to the more philosophical, here are their responses.

❖ **ROSE SHERMAN**, *Director of Enterprise Technology, Minnesota Historical Society*

If our institutions are to be centers for civic engagement “where people gather to meet and converse and participate in collaborative problem solving...an active, visible player in civic life, a safe haven, and a trusted incubator of change,” then we must embrace radical trust in our online programs as well as our onsite programs. We need to loosen the reins of control inherent to the authoritative voice. We need to be comfortable with the contributions of all of our publics—the scholarly and the non-scholarly. By empowering our online public to share its knowledge, stories, and perspectives, we gain multiple perspectives, enriched collection information, stories from everyday folks, and passionate fans.²

Accepting user generated content

(UGC) doesn’t mean that we abandon scholarly curation of our collections and interpretation of history. Indeed, the majority of our online presence is scholarly. To help the public distinguish the difference, we identify which content is from the public. Some professionals are concerned that UGC cannot be verified. This is a tradeoff we must embrace when we engage the public to gift us with their personal stories or perspectives on historic events. Some are concerned that

Allowing your users to contribute content to your website requires radical trust.

contributions may be libel, slander, or offensive. Our Terms of Service prohibit such submissions, and we reserve the right not to publish it. Most sites have an editor who checks for violations and adds value by categorizing content to facilitate discovery. For unmediated sites, we have ways for viewers to alert us to violations. In the four years we’ve embraced UGC, we’ve had less than a handful of violations. It is a non-issue.

Our job is to provide authentic resources and programs that help our audiences discover how history is relevant to their lives. By empowering our publics to participate in the documentation of history, we acknowledge that we don’t have all the information. We create passionate fans who feel that they’ve contributed to history.

❖ **JIM GARDNER**, *Senior Scholar, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution*

I’m concerned about the blurring of the line between knowledge and opinion in a Web 2.0 world. Knowledge is at the heart of our brands as historical organizations, and, in the same way that we struggle with filio-piety, we need to resist the current impulse to welcome (and thereby validate) any and all opinions. While I believe strongly that museums

should share authority with the public, I don’t support abdicating our role and privileging the public’s voice or simply doing what the public votes for, no matter what that might be.

While some cultural institutions may not feel there is much risk in embracing radical trust, I know from firsthand experience that the subjects we explore as museums and historical societies sometimes attract individuals with problematic if not offensive opinions, and we cannot allow such individuals to use us for their own purposes—or our reputations will end up suffering collateral damage. While Wikipedia and user-generated content have their value, I think the public deserves more than that from us as museums and historical societies. Our challenge is negotiating a role that both builds on who we are and what our strengths are and also engages and challenges the public in new ways, whether in the virtual or the real world.

❖ **MIKE EDSON**, *Director, Web and New Media Strategy, Smithsonian Institution*

We developed the Smithsonian’s Web and New Media Strategy not in private, as most organizations do, but on a public wiki, out before the eyes and minds of the Internet’s 1.5 billion users.

Depending on your age and/or New Media outlook, this was either a) A banal and obvious decision to use the best tool for the job, b) A voucher to admit riff-raff to the inner sanctum, or c) An act of organizational jujitsu that broke through layers of bureaucracy, inertia, and group think. Whatever it was, the transparent public process allowed us to write a game-changing strategy on the cheap in about six weeks. And we made a lot of new friends along the way.

Something profound happens when you work transparently—when you have to summon up your courage to listen to people and shape complex ideas out in public every day. Your work becomes more about humility than about your own authority and expertise. And somehow, magically, the work product gets better and better. I know a physical therapist who says, “You get what you

practice” and that’s exactly it! Our thinking—our strategy—got better, stronger, and more focused because we were practicing it with stakeholders in a public forum all the time.

To some people, our strategy creation process was radically transparent, but to me, it just made sense. The world is changing faster every day and public collaboration was the best and fastest way to get a strategy written. If we’d used the twentieth-century corporate playbook, I’d probably be in a committee meeting right now talking about font sizes for the draft report. Now that would have been radical!

◆ **KENT WHITWORTH**, *Executive Director, Kentucky Historical Society*

The radical trust conversation around here has been fascinating. We’re finally discussing pedagogy and now, to some, it may feel like we’re on the verge of throwing it out the window. We’re not! If nothing else we’re a microcosm of the wide-ranging perspectives on this topic within the profession. I find myself in the middle of this issue both philosophically and administratively. If in fact a new, younger audience is engaging with history through organizations that trust them

to do so, then I want us to participate and benefit. On the other hand, I certainly don’t want to pursue a radical trust approach until we can properly resource it. Whether we primarily monitor and occasionally intervene, or ideally interact on a regular basis, this will require staff resources—and the right staff. So much for radical trust!

The unprecedented budgetary challenges and therefore diminishing staff resources should compel us all to focus on that which directly advances our mission and our strategic goals. Easier said than done, right? At KHS, our opportunity to radically trust comes as we begin to expand our Web presence and to utilize social media. Our goal is to shift from primarily a marketing function online to include more teaching opportunities. Daunting as it seems, if we will radically trust then sometimes we’ll be the teacher and at other times the student. Like it or not, it is a whole new day.

Actually, the genealogical community has been managing the issue of unvetted content for years. People post family history content on the Internet all of the time and yet there is a basic understand-

ing among most genealogists that this is not a substitute for the primary source documentation that is essential to sound research. I’m not sure how they accomplished that, but I applaud them for doing so. Perhaps organizations need to recognize the unvetted content for what it is and to focus on better equipping traditional and new audiences to engage in the historical process. The best news of all is that people want to engage with history!

What do you think about radical trust? You have three opportunities to join a discussion about it: in person at a roundtable session during the upcoming AASLH annual meeting; virtually in an online session broadcast live during the annual meeting; and now in a new discussion forum on AASLH’s website, www.aaslh.org. Whatever your opinion of the topic, I hope you will feel you are welcome to share it in one of these venues. ●

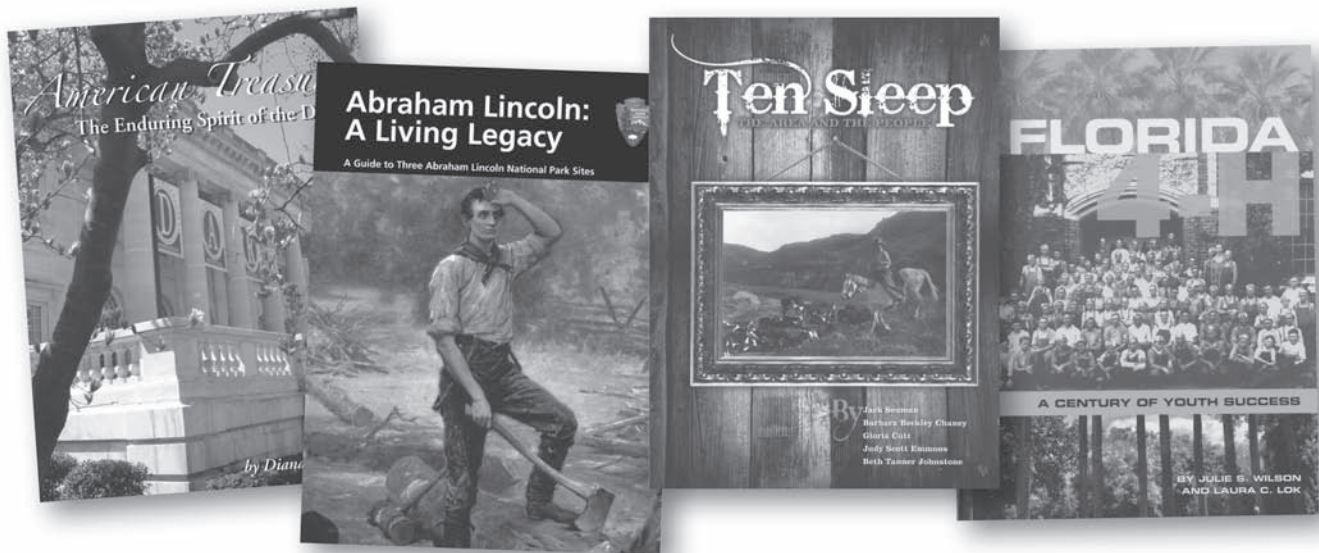
“History Bytes” is a forum for discussing Web issues facing all types of historical institutions. Tim Grove can be reached at grovet@si.edu.

¹ Lee Rainie in presentation at the Smithsonian Institution, 11 December 2009.

² *Mastering Civic Engagement: A Challenge to Museums*, American Association of Museums, 2002.

THE DONNING COMPANY PUBLISHERS

An award-winning, full-service publisher



For a sample book call us at 1-800-369-2646, ext. 3278

www.donning.com • info@donning.com