Teaching Historical Literacy

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Chair: Abigail Feely

Panelists: Joanna Lile, Robert Marchie, Chris Padgett, Rue Wood, and Elise Robison

In 1999, the same year that Larry Page and Sergey Brin moved their eight employees out of a garage and into Google's first office building, Neil Postman issued a prescient warning: we "need to teach students to use technology, not be used by it." Even before smartphones and streaming video and before Google became a verb, Neil Postman looked forward into the future of technology while simultaneously reaching back for the wisdom of educator John Dewey: "The best way for citizens to protect their liberty is for them to be encouraged to be skeptical, to be suspicious of authority, and to be prepared (and unafraid) to resist propaganda."[1]

Dewey and Postman's admonitions have only become more relevant in the 21st century. Teaching students to think critically has always been central to our work as history educators, and has become even more essential in the digital age. Digital forms of history create new epistemological realities and dilemmas that impact the construction of historical knowledge. Historical information in the form of websites, blogs, newsfeeds, social media posts, and other items generated in google searches greatly impacts how students come to know history in the 21st century. And in a culture of "google-knowing," what some have termed a post-fact age, student often mistakenly imbue online information with authority without first considering how to evaluate it. The superabundance of instant online content requires that students master the ability to evaluate sources.

This roundtable features a lively discussion among historians from around the nation that represent historical pedagogy across several segments: the high school, the community college, and the 4-year college. These panelists represent historians who are committed to student success and critical thinking development, as well as harnessing the advantages (and disadvantages) of the internet in creative and timely ways. A useful and relevant discussion, both philosophical and practical, covers the impact of digital information on student thinking and the use of the digital media into our classrooms.

1. Neil Postman, Building a Bridge to the 18th Century (New York: Random House, 1999): 160.

Recorded in April 2018 at the OAH Annual Meeting held in Sacramento, California as part of the Mellon-funded Amplified Initiative.

Full Session

teachinghistoricalliteracyinthefullsession.mp3

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