

2019 SHAFR/ISD Public Engagement Workshop Report

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In the era of “post-truth,” “fake news” and disinformation, historically informed voices are needed more than ever in the public square. Fifty-two historians, academics from other disciplines, and policymakers gathered at the Institute for the Study of Diplomacy at Georgetown University on the eve of the 2019 SHAFR conference to discuss a subject from which historians of American foreign relations—and others in the field—have often shied away from: how to engage the public effectively. But which public do we aim to target? What types of engagement do we mean to practice? How can historians contribute meaningfully to debates in the public sphere? During the opening discussions, historians were quick to ask these questions and to point to the difficulties of public engagement. Following several hours of panels and rich discussions, however, there was a clear sense of new confidence going forward. As the workshop conveners reiterated, historians can acquire and hone the writing, podcasting, and presentation skills used in publications with a broad audience. An equally important theme of the workshop was that diverse public audiences, including local and national media outlets, university communities, policymakers or, lest we forget, our students—are keen to learn from and engage with historians.

Engaging publics and communities

Before we can consider the tools of public engagement, it is important to assess the ethos and practices underlying engagement and the reasons why historians choose to engage beyond the academic world. The first panel, titled “Historians as Publicly and Community-Engaged Scholars,” focused on this dilemma, and addressed the limits to reaching the publics we wish to engage, and the extent to which we construct publics as much as we find them. In her talk, Nicole Hemmer (an editor of the *Washington Post*’s “Made by History” section and the host of the podcast *Past Present*) wove together both the possibilities and the perils of writing op-eds, appearing on television, or running a history podcast.¹ She highlighted that these media can be enormously helpful ways to bring academic research to wider audiences. She also noted that economic insecurity often drives younger, mostly untenured academics to pursue additional writing and editing because they can present new income streams. Others noted that not all such media or publication outlets compensate writers for their efforts. However, there is a positive story to tell here too, as a slow shift emerges in the academy to give scholars credit for their work as editors, podcasters, or op-ed contributors. Hemmer noted that in some cases departments are willing to give course releases to faculty for editing duties.

Historians must also consider the philosophical

questions which underpin public engagement. Panelists reminded the audience that historians must also question the “epistemology of democracy” that we have internalized during our careers. It is easy to believe that academics and media provide the public with information that makes people better informed, which, in turn, helps them make better decisions. But it is just as easy to see how this often fails in practice, and this should force us to question our underlying assumptions. Indeed, discussions about the “post-truth” political climate prompted the first SHAFR public engagement workshop at the University of Virginia’s Miller Center in 2017.²

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From here the greatest areas of debate emerged, particularly regarding the ways historians can find their place in these public conversations. Panelists emphasized that historians of foreign policy must engage the public differently from the way, for example, political scientists have traditionally done so. Historians tell themselves they should not be in the business of making predictions. “It’s not what we’re trained

for,” said Jacqueline Whitt, Associate Professor of Strategy at the U.S. Army War College, but we must also try to be bolder.³ But if you agree to any media appearances, the interviewer will invariably ask you to make a prediction, so “prepare for that question,” said Erick Langer, Professor of History at Georgetown University. Ultimately, historians can provide nuance to public debates around all matter of subjects, from abortion debates, to claims of “concentration camps” on the southern border, argued Mark Jacobson, Professor of History at Amherst College. At the end of Jacobson’s panel presentation, he highlighted the role of history departments in building a more systematic approach to evaluating public engagement as part of a historian’s career progression. He encouraged participants to consider where they publish and what their audience will be, and urged universities to consider whether long-form pieces in *The Atlantic*, *The Conversation*, or think tank publications could count towards tenure. “Twitter does not equal tenure,” he concluded, but tweeting research and gathering instant feedback on writing is a great way to improve as a scholar while engaging new audiences.

Another panelist, Sarah Nelson, Ph.D. candidate in History and Comparative Media Analysis and Practice (a dual program at Vanderbilt University), noted that graduate students experience the push to engage publicly very differently from tenured faculty. If graduate students share ideas *too* widely early in their career, whether at conferences or in non-academic publications, they risk others stealing their ideas and the credit. She reminded the audience that scholars at different stages of their careers see different challenges and opportunities in engaging online, and do not necessarily benefit from this type of engagement in the same ways. In order to avoid unproductive engagement,

Sarah warned against falling into the trap of the “hot-take” culture we find online. Twitter and Facebook value bold rhetoric and extreme content, not the subtle musings of scholars. This leads to a lack of depth and nuance in online discussions. Historians, whether as early career scholars or established academics, should see their “value-added” in these discussions as providing a refined and historically-minded contribution, rather than contributing to the confrontations of online fora.

Historians must consider whether our primary aim is to target and converse further with audiences who already engage with historical narratives and debates (through “Made by History,” for example), or whether we want to reach entirely new groups and engage with local news or syndicated publications to help historical writing reach entirely new groups of people. If we are to succeed as publicly *and* community engaged scholars, we must look beyond the echo chambers of academic Twitter to other more widely-used platforms (including Instagram), and to the communities where history is not a regular feature of people’s media diet. We must be intentional in the publics we try to reach, and the ways in which we reach them.

In deciding which publics to focus attention on, historians must also consider our own students, as Mills Kelly, Director of the Center for History and New Media at George Mason University, explained in his lunchtime talk. He is an expert on teaching history in the digital age, and gave a number of fascinating insights into the need to think carefully about the tools we use to engage students from diverse backgrounds. This may be as simple as using black and white text on PowerPoint slides to aide accessibility for students with visual impairments, or as comprehensive as reconsidering the ways in which universities structure teaching around large survey courses in students’ first and second years. Citing a survey from the early 1900s, Kelly argued that smaller groups are much more effective in the early part of a student’s career, whereas large survey courses work better after the student has gained a grounding in specific topics and has had a chance to discuss them with their peers. Such an approach would mean reconsidering the way most universities teach history, but it is the professor’s task to think critically about the pedagogical approaches used to engage students.

Above all, he emphasized the importance of active learning for students of all ages and the need to give them the opportunity to learn by experimenting using different forms of projects, whether through the creation of digital archives, websites or podcast projects. Kelly’s own project, Appalachian Trail Histories, created alongside undergraduate students, is an excellent example.⁴ By engaging students through practical experiences, they learn more from each other, and by focusing on primary source materials they develop the historian’s craft.

Engaging the media

Understanding the assumptions underpinning public engagement is not enough, however. To engage successfully, particularly in the media, there are a number of concrete steps to follow. The second panel “Historians and the Media” addressed engagement strategies. Faiza Ahmed from the TV network TRT World, which is based in Istanbul, pointed again to social media, but as a way for television and radio producers to find historians and invite them to give expert commentary on their shows. “Add more information to your Twitter bio,” she reminded participants, respond to direct messages as quickly as possible, and do not be too skeptical of honest TV broadcasters, because they want their experts to look good on the air! Kyla Sommers, editor of History News Network (HNN) reminded us that sites like HNN are a good platform to send pieces that historians have published in other places, because they aggregate

research and articles.

Carly Goodman asserted that we should reject the notion of the “general” public altogether, and instead segment our audiences. This forces us to consider the forms of engagement which can reach the intended public and have the most impact. Goodman represented a significant success story in terms of media engagement since the 2017 workshop, in which she was also a panelist: she has published twelve op-ed pieces since then, and became an editor of “Made by History.”⁵ Moreover, in the weeks after the 2019 SHAFR Conference, workshop participant Todd Bennett, Associate Professor of History at East Carolina University, published in that column, and Harvard Belfer Center’s Applied History Project featured his piece as an “Article of the Week.”⁶

In order to write effectively, Goodman and Vanessa Lide, from the editorial team at *Washington Post’s* political science analysis section, the “Monkey Cage,” provided some tips for writers looking to succeed on these platforms:

- Read the instructions and submission guidelines carefully, and work with the editor, not against them, throughout the process.
- Your pitch should contain a clear introduction of who you are, and your main argument, accompanied by two or three main points.
- Do not try to make multiple arguments. A simple, clear argument is best, because you only have ten seconds to grab someone’s attention.
- Focus on 3-5 key takeaways.
- Do not use the same linguistic framing of an argument you are trying to counter. For example, if you want to dispel myths about the dangers of immigration, for example, do not use the language of ‘floods’ or ‘waves’ of migrants, as that simply repeats the myth you want to dispel.
- Use punchy phrasing and avoid cliches.
- Use active voice, short sentences, and cut out technical jargon.
- Give context for your arguments and embed hyperlinks in your work (using Ctrl/Command-K) rather than using footnotes.
- Not everything you publish needs to be an “op-ed”.

Consider when and why you are trying to publish a piece. Are you trying to respond directly to an evolving story from an academic perspective? Or are you writing a timely piece based on an ongoing issue or an anniversary?

Engaging policymakers

A particularly rich element to the conversation came from hosting the workshop in Washington, D.C., and the conversations this facilitated with experienced policymakers. Former foreign affairs practitioners shared their expertise as both consumers of historical analysis and historical thinkers themselves. Historians cannot take a purely academic approach when trying to engage a busy policy-maker with only a short time to digest materials and reach a decision, noted a former U.S. ambassador. He argued that in situations such as the recent debates around the anniversary and commemorations of the Armenia genocide, for example, a historian’s perspective, worded in the correct way, can be invaluable for diplomats. In the spirit of bringing historians and policymakers closer together, Christian Ostermann, Director of the History and Public Policy Program at the Wilson Center, highlighted the role of fellowship programs such as those at the Center in bringing historians close to decision-makers in Washington.

Framing, is, of course, an enormous part of historians’ approach to public engagement. Historians must think

carefully about the different cultures of each public they are targeting, and the differing approaches this might entail, noted Ostermann. If your goal is to sell books on your existing research, you might take a different approach to someone trying to influence foreign policy decision makers, for example. Ostermann reminded us not to forget to “write good books,” because those in the policy sphere are more likely to read an accessible book than search for a journal article on a subject of interest.

The policy discussions culminated in a keynote conversation between workshop co-chair Kelly McFarland and Derek Chollet, senior advisor for security and defense policy at The German Marshall Fund of the United States and former senior Obama administration official. Given his experience in various parts of the federal government, and as a student of history himself, he emphasized the role of historical mindedness in problem solving. An important takeaway from Chollet’s and others’ observations was the unique ways in which historians are trained to ask questions and conduct research. Historians can and should do more than simply make analogies to past events, but there are ways to draw effective historical parallels which enable decision makers to be more effective, Chollet argued.

As Chollet explained, his career began assisting statesmen like former Secretary of State James Baker with their memoirs. This raised a crucial point about the difference between history and memory, especially when the statesmen involved had experienced momentous events themselves during their careers. These men often understood historical moments, such as the Vietnam War, differently from historians, who had a broader sense of the facts and viewed events with some historical distance. Richard Holbrooke, for example, whose final post was as special envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan under Barack Obama, was a good example of this tendency within the State Department. According to Chollet, Holbrooke viewed Afghanistan through the lens of his Vietnam experience, but this worldview simply did not resonate with Obama. The generational shift and different conceptions of history and memory mean that more formal attempts to frame problems historically can better serve policymakers than the personal recollections of statesmen and diplomats. Such decisions are never easy, as the debates in the Obama administration over whether to intervene in the Syrian Civil War demonstrated. The ghosts of history and the question over which analogies to draw on plagued the decision-making process. Was Bosnia, Iraq, or Libya the correct model to turn to? Ultimately, in these discussions, historically-minded policymakers are best placed to ask the correct questions, find connectivity between different events, and see the big picture. This is especially important in Washington, said Chollet, where the foreign policy establishment is not especially historically-attuned.

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Moving forward

A number of shared conclusions emerged from the discussions. In the realm of public policy and media discourse, historians can do more than simply draw historical comparisons. In terms of framing, the ways in which historians might engage differently from political scientists or economists and approach was a common theme. But historians’ voices need to be represented in ongoing political and policy debates, and we should feel that the media outlets dominated by other academics are also the right place for historians to enter the discussion and provide much needed perspectives. However, educational institutions and the broader historical profession must continue to consider the ethos and practices underpinning all forms of public engagement, and work to ensure that the work of younger scholars and other non-tenured historians receives recognition.

From the need for more historians to become Wikipedia editors (especially women!) to developing a more public facing personal social media persona, participants’ conclusions included a number of practical steps that historians can put into practice straight away.

During and immediately following the workshop, participants shared outlets through which historians can engage the public through their writing. Historians interested in publishing more widely may wish to consult the list of publication outlets compiled based on the workshop’s findings.⁷

In the spirit of public engagement, *Passport* readers can join the conversation on Twitter using the hashtags #twitterstorians and #historiansengage.

Notes:

1. Since the workshop, Hemmer has joined the Obama Presidency Oral History Project at Columbia University, a project which shows the ways historians can shape debates around contemporary issues. <https://obamaoralhistory.columbia.edu/>
2. Stefanie Georgakis Abbott, “A Report on the SHAFR-Miller Center Workshop of Public Engagement,” January 2018, <https://shifr.org/sites/default/files/passport-01-2018.pdf>
3. ‘Twitterstorians’ (historians who use Twitter) can read Jacqueline’s thread of the whole workshop here: <https://twitter.com/notabattlechick/status/1141363560347385856>
4. Appalachian Trail Histories, 2019, <http://appalachiantrailhistory.org/>
5. See, for example: Carly Goodman, “Want democratic accountability? Look to Ricky Martin, not Robert Mueller.” July 2019. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/07/28/want-democratic-accountability-look-ricky-martin-not-robert-mueller/>
6. Todd Bennett, “How the U.S. and Iran can avoid war,” June 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/06/25/how-us-iran-can-avoid-war/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.8eb044f748d8
7. Institute for the Study of Diplomacy, “Where can I publish my work as a historian?,” <https://georgetown.app.box.com/s/qr2hx-6vt6i9ddnhq15rdoh20wzd0lzm>