

Public History in a Digital Context

Back to the Future or Back to Basics?

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This article concerns the dreams, practices and future for digital media for public history. Has the digital revolution changed the public history discipline? Thanks to characteristics such as flexibility, interactivity and capacity, digital media offer public historians new ways to present history and interact with the public. *Wikipedia* and the *Children of the Lodz Gettho* are two interesting public history cases that experiment with the potential of new media for public history. Looking at history online in general and the role public historians play there, some problems appear: a lack of historical narratives, a lack of self-criticism and digital illiteracy to name three. Based on some online field experience we distill some hands-on lessons concerning narratives, media and the public. Public historians have a lot of work ahead if they want to understand and use the Internet as a new arena for history.

Since the large-scale emergence of digital media at the end of the twentieth century public history, like all other historical sub-disciplines and methods, finds itself in a transitional state. Attracted to their capacity, openness, interactivity and flexibility, public historians are among the early adopters of digital media and online platforms. Digital media offer the public historian an immense arsenal of new ways to present historical knowledge and to interact with the public. The question is whether public historians make good on the potential of digital media and if they are aware of their own on-line behaviour and the challenges that a digital public brings. Is there such a thing as 'digital public history' and how does it relate to 'digital history'? How much does the digital behaviour of public historians differ from that of 'academic' historians? This article analyses the dreams and deeds of digital public history projects, formulates a number of lessons learned and casts an eye to the future of public history: will the present digital transition result in a fundamental transformation of the discipline, and if so, is that desirable?¹

Briefly put, public history is history by, for and/or with the public.² It is a pluriform discipline with diverse traditions: the term *Public History Movement* appeared in the United States in the 1970s as a utilitarian movement for historians who wanted to work outside the research institutions and use historical methods for non-academic goals.³ In 1979 the professional organisation, the National Council on Public History (NCPH), was founded and since then has published the journal *The Public Historian*, ‘the voice of the public history profession’.⁴ In Europe, public history also has its roots in the 1970s, although under a different name. The British History Workshop Movement, already founded by Raphael Samuel at the end of the 1960s, advocated *history from below* and *radical history* – using historical writing to discuss social issues. Through public workshops Samuel promoted historiography as a collaborative undertaking, ‘one in which the researcher, the archivist, the curator and the teacher, the ‘do-it-yourself’ enthusiast and the local historian, the family history societies and the individual archaeologist, should all be regarded as equally engaged’.⁵ Other European traditions that are related to public history are local history and People’s History, which prefers the history of the masses, the worker and the outsider to the traditional history of states and elites.⁶

1 The author last consulted all websites and documents in these footnotes on March 28th 2013. The author thanks the editors of *BMGN - Low Countries Historical Review*, the guest editor and anonymous reviewers for their comments on an earlier version.


2 The understanding of the term public history is internationally somewhat diverse. For an overview of definitions, see: ‘What is Public History?’, *National Council on Public History*, ncph.org/cms/what-is-public-history; J. Evans, ‘What is Public History?’, *Public History Resource Center* (September 2000), www.publhistory.org/what_is/definition.html.

3 R. Kelley, ‘Public History: It’s Origins, Nature, and Prospects’, *The Public Historian* 1:1 (1978) 16-28.

4 ‘The Public Historian’, *National Council on Public History*, ncph.org/cms/publications-resources/the-public-historian.

5 Op. cit. www.historyworkshop.org.uk/about-us. Organs of the radical history movement are *Radical History Review* and *History Workshop Online*, www.historyworkshop.org.uk/category/history-of-the-history-workshop.

6 P. Knevel, ‘Public History: The European Reception of an American Idea?’, *Levend Erfgoed. Vakblad voor public folklore & public history* 6:2 (2009) 4-8; early representatives are Georges Lefebvre and Howard Zinn. Today the People’s History Movement is expressed in all kinds of popular publications and television series in which the impact of history on the daily life of the ordinary person is the main subject.



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The 1960' History Workshop Movement has reinvented itself online in History Workshop Online: 'a forum, laboratory, and virtual coffeehouse devoted to the practice of radical history'.
www.historyworkshop.org.uk.

That public historians emerged around the start of what Pierre Nora christened ‘the age of commemoration’ was no coincidence.⁷ All kinds of commemorative initiatives, new and revitalized museums, a renewed interest in archives, a fascination with origins, the popularity of genealogical research, the interest in heritage, et cetera, are all expressions of the urge of society, social groups and individuals to remember and commemorate. These social developments together with the introduction of oral history in the 1980s and 1990s influenced the way historians regarded their own role in the interpretative process. Instead of writing history and *telling* the public about it, historians would use the interview format to *listen* to the public. Public historians acknowledge, without succumbing to postmodern relativism, the various ways in which ‘the’ public is involved in the past. They believe that historians don’t have the exclusive right to interpret the past. This conviction does not mean that historians do not have an interesting role to play in what Samuel called ‘Theatres of Memory’.⁸ In education, politics, entertainment, the arts and the heritage sector, we find historians engaging in history practices, with or without an academic mandate and from a variety of motives and starting points.

The discipline of public history deals with the role of history and historians in society, both in the past and the present. Throughout the world, every year, new curricula in public history appear to prepare young historians for the task of interpreter, curator, guide and guardian of history. Since 2008 the University of Amsterdam in the Netherlands awards a full master’s degree in Public History.⁹ In Flanders a professional master’s degree in public history was put on hold when the Flemish government decided at the end of 2012 to indefinitely postpone a number of two year master courses.¹⁰

7 P. Nora, ‘Entre mémoire et histoire: La problématique des lieux’, in: idem, *Les lieux de mémoire: La République I* (Paris 1984) i-xlii; idem, ‘The Reasons for the Current Upsurge in Memory’, *Tr@nsit online* 22 (2002), www.eurozine.com/articles/2002-04-19-nora-en.html; D. Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge 1985); P. Fritzsche, *Stranded in the Present: Modern Times and the Melancholy of History* (Cambridge 2004); W. Frijhoff, *De mist van de geschiedenis. Over herinneren, vergeten en het historisch geheugen van de samenleving* (Rotterdam 2011).

8 R. Samuel, *Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London 1994).

9 For the content of the master Public History of the University of Amsterdam, see www.uva.nl/disciplines/geschiedenis/specialisaties/

publieksgeschiedenis.html; the master Cultural History offered by the University of Utrecht includes public history in a cultural context, see www.uu.nl/university/masters/NL/cultuurgeschiedenis.

10 B. De Wever, ‘Naar een opleiding Publieksgeschiedenis in Vlaanderen. De kansen en uitdagingen van het Bolognadecreet’, *Faro. Tijdschrift over cultureel erfgoed* 3:3 (2010) 17-20; B. Moens, ‘Geen algemene tweejarige master op de universiteiten’, *De Tijd* 14 December 2012. In Flanders a research seminar public history including an internship (10 ECTS) that is dedicated to public history in the broad sense, can be followed only in the MA at the University of Ghent, see www.ipg.ugent.be/onderwijs.

The utilitarian and ideological movements of public historians of the 1970s developed into a full historical sub-discipline, researching the broad spectrum of historical practices outside the traditional research institutions.¹¹ However, the emancipation of public history as a sub-discipline wasn't accompanied by a unification of its practitioners and practices. The tasks and the particular interests of public historians vary with the sector in which they work, the traditions in which they were raised and the specific (national) context in which they operate.

With the foundation of the International Federation for Public History (IFPH) in 2012, which aims to encourage world-wide cooperation and research among public historians, public history has reached its latest milestone. It is remarkable that IFPH-members mainly come from Europe and Anglo-Saxon countries. Up to now the emancipatory movement and organisation of public history has not spread to Africa, Asia or South America. The IFPH is committed to actively seeking historians and organisations in these continents who are public historians in practice, if not in name. It will be interesting to see the origins of the participants in the IFPH's first world conference on public history in Amsterdam in 2014.¹² For now public history is really a Western affair, also in the context of this article.

Shared authority

A basic principle of public history is that historians, as experts on the past, do not have the exclusive right to that past, but (want to) enter into dialogue with the experiences and interpretations of the public. This can be done explicitly through conversation but also implicitly by choosing historical themes, research approaches or presentations in accordance with the public interest. It is a starting point that the historian Michael Frisch fully elaborated on in his standard work *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (1990).¹³ In this Frisch stated that sharing historical authority is inherent to oral and public history. He repeated this point in a recent article:

11 Knevel, 'Public History', 4-8. For an introduction to public history see K. Ribbens, *Een eigentijds verleden. Alledaagse cultuur in Nederland 1945-2000* (Hilversum 2002). For public history in Flanders see G. Deneckere and B. De Wever, 'Publieksgeschiedenis in Vlaanderen. Tussen erfgoed, herinnering en media', in: A. Van Nieuwenhuyse and S. De Schampheleire (eds.), *Geschiedenis: zijn werk, zijn leven. Huldeboek René De Herdt* (Ghent 2010) 59-72.

12 International Federation for Public History, www.publichistoryint.org.

13 M. Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany 1990).

[...] the interpretive and meaning-making process is in fact shared by definition – it is inherent in the dialogic nature of an interview, and in how audiences receive and respond to exhibitions and public history interchanges in general.¹⁴

To his frustration his statement on shared authority has been misinterpreted time and time again by historians and museum curators as an enquiry and invitation to involve the public. However, it is not about giving up authority, or willingness to do so, but an acknowledgement of the dialogic dimension of public history:

[...] we need to recognize the already shared authority in the documents we generate and in the processes of public history engagement – a dialogic dimension, however implicit, through which ‘authorship’ is shared by definition, and hence interpretive ‘authority’ as well.¹⁵

Frisch does not undervalue the authority of historians, but rightly points out that (good) public history aims for a dialogue between expertise and experience. That the traditional authority of museums would be undermined by the new digital technology, because the user has lots of tools and sources ‘to do’ history himself, is not the issue at stake. The ‘active’ user, the user who makes his voice heard or is acknowledged as an influence, is not new to public historians. Which doesn’t mean that it is self-evident or easy for the public historian to use the rapidly evolving (digital) communication channels for the dialogue between expert and public. Breaking the one-way communication between the experts and the lay public requires efforts. Not all projects are as successful as intended.¹⁶

The promises of digital media for public historians

The appearance of new media and digital technology made the work of public historians a lot more interesting. Digital media have a number of attractive properties for those who want to collect, keep and present the past for a broad public – the traditional tasks of public historians. Dan Cohen and the late Roy Rosenzweig, pioneers of digital history and the founders of the leading Centre for History and New Media (CHNM) at George Mason University, mention some

14 Idem, ‘From A Shared Authority to the Digital Kitchen, and Back’, in: B. Adair, B. Filene and L. Koloski (eds.), *Letting go?: Sharing Historical Authority in a User-Generated World* (Philadelphia 2011) 127.

15 *Ibid.*

16 K. McLean, ‘Whose Questions, Whose Conversations?’, in: B. Adair et al., *Letting go?*, 70–79.

quantitative and qualitative properties in the introduction to the standard work *Digital History*.¹⁷ We will enumerate the most important ones and elaborate on them.

Digital media are *easy and cheap* to use. Therefore, the threshold for in presenting and sharing history online is very low. Everyone can develop a website, write a blog or share data. Cohen and Rosenzweig remark that ‘the number of authors of history web pages is likely greater than the number of authors of history books’.¹⁸ The traditional roles of experts – historians and scholars in general – and the public which acknowledges them and (can) consult them, is not reflected online:

[...] the even more dramatic contrast is in the social composition of the two sets of authors – web history authors are significantly more diverse and significantly less likely to have formal credentials. Their strong presence online unsettles existing hierarchies.¹⁹

Amateurs jumped on the digital bandwagon much earlier than professional historians. However, the massive public presence on the Internet should not mislead us about who is represented online. Pippa Norris pointed out the digital divide, the economic inequality between groups in terms of access to ICT.²⁰

The fact that digital media are relatively cheap has a great deal to do with what has become their virtually unlimited *capacity*. The amount of digital information that can be stored in a small area for very low cost – in comparison to physical storage – brought about a real revolution in the world of libraries and archives. Historians and archivists have long been dreaming of storing information without being hampered by physical limits. Today it is clear that unlimited storage capacity brings new problems. The information overload can trip us up and archives must take more care than ever to make good choices in the selection and categorisation of their collections, if they want them to be useable in the future.²¹ Keeping everything just because it is technically

17 D. Cohen and R. Rosenzweig, *Digital History: A Guide to Gathering, Preserving, and Presenting the Past on the Web* (Philadelphia 2006), chnm.gmu.edu/digitalhistory/; L. Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge 2001).

18 *Ibid.*

19 *Ibid.*

20 P. Norris, *Digital divide: Civic Engagement, Information Poverty, and the Internet Worldwide* (Cambridge 2001); M. Warschauer, *Technology and Social Inclusion: Rethinking the Digital divide* (Cambridge 2005).

21 See: Charles Jeurgens' contribution to this issue, 30–54.

possible does not seem to be a sustainable option.²² On the other hand, it is clear that the largely digitized daily and public life forms a great challenge for archives. Although no legal distinction is made between a paper and a digital archive, the digital data of governments, businesses and individuals run a greater risk of virtual dust gathering and vanishing instead of being safely deposited in archives. The permanence of born-digital material such as websites, games, metadata and databanks is precarious and governments and archives are concerned as to how to store this information well and systematically.²³

Closely related to the digital media's capacity is their *accessibility*. Online history – in theory – is available to everybody, anytime, anywhere. Digital access saves both professional researchers and amateurs an incredible amount of time and money in their search for sources and information. Objects and documents that were – due to their fragility – only taken out of their climate-controlled safes for consultation in the most exceptional circumstances, are both protected and accessible thanks to their digitisation.

A fourth property of digital media is their *flexibility*. Text, sound, (moving) image, relational data and 3D-presentations can all be traced to simple ones and noughts in the digital environment. Moreover, according to Cohen and Rosenzweig, this flexibility means that a single fact can exist in various forms – in various languages or various complementary components. When searching a database for a particular person you can find a biographical entry, pictures, publications and relatives of that person, but also studies and opinions of them.²⁴ This flexibility has consequences for how history is 'consumed' – perceived – by the user. All the various formats can also be

22 R. Rosenzweig, 'Scarcity or Abundance?: Preserving the Past in a Digital Era', *American Historical Review* 108 (2003) 735-762; K. Jeurgens, 'De selectielijst en het historisch motief in de waardering en selectie van archieven', in: E. Put and Ch. Vancoppenolle (eds.), *Archiefambacht tussen geschiedenisbedrijf en erfgoedwinkel. Een balans bij het afscheid van vijf rijksarchivarissen* (Brussels 2013) 207-226.

23 H. Abelson, K. Ledeen and H. Lewis, *Blown to Bits: Your Life, Liberty, and Happiness after the Digital Explosion* (Upper Saddle River 2008); A. Stille, *The Future of the Past* (New York 2002); M.G. Kirschenbaum, R. Ovenden, G. Redwine, *Digital Forensic and Born-Digital Content in Cultural Heritage Collections* (Washington 2010); R. Van de Walle and S. Van Peteghem (eds.), (*Meta*

datastandaarden voor digitale archieven (Ghent 2009); M. Pennock, *Web-Archiving* (Digital Preservation Coalition, 2013). In the Netherlands the *Nationale Coalitie voor Digitale Duurzaamheid* (www.ncdd.nl/documents) and *Digitaal Erfgoed Nederland* (DEN) (www.DEN.nl) are concerned with digital durability and digital heritage. In Flanders there is Faro, Flemish centre for cultural heritage (www.faronet.be/e-documenten) and Packed, expertise centre for digital heritage (www.packed.be). On their respective websites are various reports of the Dutch and Flemish cases.

24 A good visualisation of this principle can be found on www.digitalvaults.org of the National Archives (vs). The possibilities that such flexibility offers for archives is illustrated by archive management system Lias (www.lias.be).

combined and adapted in different ways. By textsearching immense amounts of text can be searched automatically. Wiki's, blogs, image banks, podcasts, YouTube, Flickr, maps and so on can be integrated in/to web platforms by mashup. Another example of this flexibility is the activation of old media by digital reproduction (re-mediation) such as graphs, timelines, maps and diagrams.²⁵ This diversity and manipulation of digital media has an impact on how history is produced.

The conceptual foundation of the Internet is the HyperText Transfer Protocol, a concept that defines the structure of digital text. The *hypertextuality* of the Internet ensures that we can criss-cross from one online item to another and in this way are liberated from a fixed linear narrative. The Internet is so constructed that there is no centre and no periphery, only the point of departure of the user. For historical representations this means we can move without any difficulty between places, events and objects, from long-term to short-term, micro to macro levels and so on. That hypertext and history are natural allies was already suggested by the inventor of the concept, Vannevar Bush in 1945.²⁶ Due to the technical and widely used concretisation that hypertextuality has acquired with the World Wide Web, in 1999 digital historian Richard Ayers repeated Bush's hope that 'hypertextual history might grow into the most sophisticated form of historical narrative'.²⁷ The conditional form in his article is crucial: up to now hypertextuality has not *en masse* transformed the representation of historical information.

Interaction is the final property of digital media we will discuss, and probably the most interesting to public historians. In contrast to publications or television, online media allow interaction and dialogue. Web 2.0, the social web, added yet another dimension to this interaction.²⁸ The Internet no longer connects merely sources and receivers: individuals and communities can share information, highlight and tag, react and give feedback. All kinds of low-threshold tools make every user a potential curator, archivist or historian. An endless series of publications, conferences and workshops focus on questions

25 J.D. Bolter and R. Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge 1999); S. Roegiers and F. Truyen, 'History is 3D: Presenting a Framework for Meaningful Historical Representations in Digital Media', in: Y.E. Kalay, T. Kvan and J. Affleck (eds.), *New Heritage: New Media and Cultural Heritage* (London, New York 2008) 67-77.

26 M. Buckland, 'Emanuel Goldberg, Electronic Document Retrieval, and Vannevar Bush's Memex' *Journal of the American Society for Information Science* 43:4 (1992) 284-294.

27 E.L. Ayers, *History in Hypertext* (1999); www.vcdh.virginia.edu/Ayers.OAH.html; Roegiers and Truyen, 'History is 3D', 70.

28 T. O'Reilly, 'What Is Web 2.0.: Design Patterns and Business Users as Co-Developers', T. O'Reilly, *Spreading the Knowledge of Innovators* (30 September 2005), oreilly.com/pub/a/web2/archive/what-is-web-20.html?page=1; For a hands on introduction see 23dingen.nl.

as to how social media can be used by institutions to make contact with the public and what role remains for the professionals.²⁹ Thanks to digital platforms and networks, historians and public are available to each other, can come together and enter into dialogue.³⁰ The active principles of social media force public historians to spend more time and attention on communication channels and methods. Public participation and sharing authority in analysing the past – a fundamental principle of public history – can take very concrete and practical forms thanks to social media.

Digital public history?

The question whether there is such a thing as ‘digital public history’ runs parallel to the question whether ‘digital history’ and ‘digital humanities’ are independent disciplines. There is much debate on the (necessity of) definition, delineation, methodology and theory forming.³¹ Some universities incorporate digital media in existing departments and curricula; others start a separate research group or curriculum. The *Manifesto of the Digital Humanities* that was issued in Paris in 2010, moved us somewhat beyond the issue by defining digital humanities as a ‘transdiscipline’, ‘embodying all the methods, systems and heuristic perspectives linked to the digital within the fields of

29 P. Andersen, *What is Web 2.0?: Ideas, Technologies and Implications for Education* (Bristol 2007); *Museumpeil – themanummer Musea en Sociale Media* 36 (2011); *Digitaal Erfgoed Nederland* [Netherlands’ Digital Heritage] offers an introductory dossier on www.den.nl/thema/121. A critical exploration is offered by the project *Unlike Us* of the Institute of Network Studies (networkcultures.org/wpmu/unlikeus).

30 A. Russo et al., ‘Participatory Communication with Social Media’, *Curator: The Museum Journal* 51:1 (2008) 21–31; J. Watkins, ‘Social Media, Participatory Design and Cultural Engagement’, *Proceedings of the 19th Australasian Conference on Computer-Human Interaction: Entertaining User Interfaces* (Adelaide, Australia 2007) 161–166.

31 For a collection of definitions and applications of digital humanities see the survey by *Day of the DH 2012*, dayofdh2012.artsrn.ualberta.ca/dh/.

humanities and the social sciences'.³² Digital humanists express themselves nowadays in all kinds of networks, centres and (online) journals.³³

Digital history manifests itself as a branch of the digital humanities, rooting in the quantitative history and cliometrics of the 1970s.³⁴ William G. Thomas III of the Virginia Center for Digital History formulated a working definition as 'an approach to examining and representing the past that works with the new communication technologies of the computer, the Internet network, and software systems'.³⁵ However, analogous to what the *Manifesto of the Digital Humanities* asserts for the humanities, we can state that digital history is a transdiscipline, a state of transition in expectation to the time when digital is 'the new normal' for historians.³⁶

32 M. Dacos, *Manifesto for the Digital Humanities* (26 March 2011), tcp.hypotheses.org/411.

33 P. Monier, *Une introduction aux humanités numériques* (Marseille 2012); press.openedition.org/226; 'Essays on History and New Media', Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media, chnm.gmu.edu/essays-on-history-new-media/essays. Not surprisingly digital humanists communicate mainly online by means of (collaborative) blogs, online journals and twitter (#dighum). A mindmap of the European Association for Digital Humanities attempted to chart the landscape world-wide (www.allc.org/publications/mind-map-digital-humanities). The Centre for History and New Media of the George Mason University is the base for three influential digital initiatives – the blog *Digital Humanities Now* (digitalhumanitiesnow.org), the online publication *Hacking the Academy*, a Book crowdsourced in One Week, May 21–28, 2010 (hackingtheacademy.org) and the open access *Journal of Digital Humanities* (www.journalofdigitalhumanities.org). The most prominent journals are *Digital Humanities Quarterly* (digitalhumanities.org), *HASTAC – Humanities, Arts, Science, and Technology Advanced Collaboratory* (hastac.org) and *LLC: The Journal of Digital Scholarship in the Humanities*. At a European level DARIAH functions as an umbrella organisation for the facilitation of digital data from/for researchers (www.dariah.eu).

34 S. Noiret, 'The Historian's New Workshop', in: I. Porciani and L. Raphael (eds.), *Atlas of European Historiography: The Making of a Profession 1800–2005* (Basingstoke 2010) 69.

35 S.n., 'Interchange': The Promise of Digital History', *The Journal of American History* 95:2 (2008), www.journalofamericanhistory.org/issues/952/interchange/.

36 P. Hinssen, *Digitaal is het nieuwe normaal. De revolutie is begonnen* (Tielt 2010). Digital historians are far less explicitly organised than digital humanists. Blogs on digital history are generally individual initiatives, sometimes linked to a course, and not organisations' channels. Exceptions are *hist.net* en *Global Perspectives on Digital History* (gpdh.org). In connection with the various aspects of digital history see the vision and state of the field respectively offered by E.L. Ayers, 'The Past and Futures of Digital History' (1999), www.vcdh.virginia.edu/PastFutures.html; K.D. Nawrotzki and J. Dougherty (eds.), *Writing History in the Digital Age: A Born-Digital, Open-Review Volume* (Michigan Spring 2012), writinghistory.trincoll.edu.

It is remarkable that among the first generation of ‘digital’ historians there are many public historians.³⁷ ‘Public historians have been leading the way in embracing the possibilities of new technology’, noted a satisfied David Walsh after the 2012 annual meeting of the NCPH.³⁸ This is not surprising considering how attractive it is for public historians to use the communication channels of the Internet and web 2.0 to interact with the public. The digital involvement of public historians contrasts with the digital behaviour of academic historians. The divide between both schools is so great that Serge Noiret posed the rhetorical question whether the difference between digital and academic history writing is simply the means of communication and the intended audience:

Existerait-il alors une histoire numérique 2.0., pour un plus vaste public et une histoire faite en usant de médias traditionnels pour le seul public universitaire? Faut-il ainsi différencier l’usage des médias pour transmettre l’histoire en fonction du public auquel elle s’adresse?³⁹

Is all online history then public history? One can argue that all historical information on the Internet – including academic articles, research infrastructures, data visualisation – is public history, because it exists in the public domain and is thus available to everyone. Apart from the fact that open access is a democratic principle for which every historian should stand up, it is naïve to think that the public *en masse* makes use of open professional historical platforms.⁴⁰ The communication and publication means nor the availability of the information are usable criteria in defining either digital or public history.

A definition for digital public history in relation to *all* digital history could be ‘digital projects that primarily aim to communicate and interact with the public’. However, within public history there never was a theoretical distinction between digital and ‘other’ public history. ‘Public historians already exist in the now co-existing public and digital spheres’.⁴¹ From now on

37 See for example the biographical introductions on the partners in dialogue s.n. ‘Interchange’.

38 D.A. Walsh, ‘Public History’s Great Showing at the 2012 NCPH/OAH Annual Meeting’, *History News Network*. 30 April 2012. hnn.us/articles/public-history-had-great-showing-2012-ncphoah-annual-meeting.

39 S. Noiret, ‘La Digital History: Histoire et mémoire à la portée de tous’, *Ricerche Storiche* 41:1 (2011) 137-138. [Is there then a history 2.0 for the general

public on the one hand and a history made with traditional means just for the academic public on the other? Is transmitting history according to the public addressed thus a matter of differentiation in the use of media?]

40 Concerning the Open Access Movement see www.openaccessweek.org. All registered open access journals can be found in the *Directory of Open Access Journals* (www.doaj.org).

41 Walsh, ‘Public History’s Great Showing’.

we will refer to (aspects of) public history practices that manifest themselves specifically in the digital area as ‘digital public projects’, in contrast to public history practices that do not find expression online, which we will call ‘analogue public projects’.

Public history – two case studies

The aforementioned properties and principles of digital media hold great promise for public history. We will analyse two cases that make optimal use of the new media and seem to make good on this promise.

Wikipedia

Ironically the most successful form of digital public history does not have a single professional historian on the payroll. ‘Wikipedia is a free multi-lingual internet encyclopaedia written by a number of authors on a voluntary basis’.⁴² While *Wikipedia* is, indeed, more than a ‘public history project’, it is still an exceptionally interesting case study for public historians, since it is the largest and best-known supplier of historical information. At the moment *Wikipedia* counts 100,000 active authors and 23 million entries in 25 languages. Anyone who respects the carefully drawn up guidelines can make or alter an entry. *Wikipedia* is completely transparent about its methods and allocation of duties. The origins of an entry can be reconstructed at any time by anybody.

A study by *Nature* in 2005 suggests that the accuracy of *Wikipedia* can rival that of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.⁴³ This is remarkable since *Wikipedia* does not have the financial resources or the experts of the *Britannica*. The results are consonant with recent research by Wolff, who studied the process by which the authors develop and discuss entries about the past.⁴⁴ He concluded that the *Wikipedia* community is self-regulating, ‘perfectly capable to gauge basic historical knowledge and can exclude claims that lack a factual basis’ – despite the fact that the *Wikipedia* community consists chiefly of (white male) people without any training in history!

In theory, experts and academics are welcome to contribute, but they are warned that they do not have a privileged position in the *Wikipedia* community. They are also not allowed to introduce original research. This is

42 nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia.

43 J. Giles, ‘Internet Encyclopaedias go Head to Head’, *Nature* 15 December 2005, www.nature.com/nature/journal/v438/n7070/full/438900a.html.

44 R.S. Wolff, ‘The Historian’s Craft, Popular Memory, and Wikipedia’, in: K. Nawrotzki and J. Dougherty (eds.), *Writing History in the Digital Age* (Spring 2012), writinghistory.trincoll.edu/crowdsourcing/wolff-2012-spring/.

the reason why *Wikipedia* cannot be seen as an imperfect version of scientific knowledge. Rosenzweig called it ‘a living repository, a people’s museum of knowledge’.⁴⁵ This said, *Wikipedia* does have its limitations.

There are many long and well-written articles on obscure characters in science fiction/fantasy and very specialised issues in computer science, physics and math; there are stubs, or bot [machine-generated] articles, or nothing, for vast areas of art, history, literature, film, geography.⁴⁶

Like any other encyclopaedia, *Wikipedia* cannot easily deal with entries that require an analytical and interpretive description. This criticism is not voiced by a sceptical academic, but comes from within the *Wikipedia* community itself and is formulated in one of the entries in which it considers its own position.

Taking all these aspects into consideration, historians can do nothing but humbly admit that the *Wikipedia* community is capable of constructing historical narratives and being self-critical without their help. And even though entries are descriptive, they still provide a carefully constructed and deliberated historical narrative. Moreover, it is ‘good’ public history since a large group of people collectively discuss, interpret and describe the past.

Citizen history

The second case goes to extremes in terms of sharing historical authority. *Citizen history* aspires to co-create historical knowledge with the public instead of allowing visitors to simply receive it.⁴⁷ Museum staff member and expert Frankle describes it as

[...] an experiment in finding out what happens if we trust our visitors enough to allow them to bring their diverse perspectives and boundless enthusiasm into the research work of the museum and share our authority.

45 R. Rosenzweig, ‘Can History be Open Source?: Wikipedia and the Future of the Past’, *The Journal of American History* 93 (2006) 117–146, jah.oxfordjournals.org/content/93/1/117.extract.

46 ‘Why Wikipedia is Not So Great’, *Wikipedia*, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Why_Wikipedia_is_not_so_great.

47 E. Frankle, ‘More Crowdsourced Scholarship: Citizen History’, *Centre for the Future of Museums*, 28 April 2011, futureofmuseums.blogspot.be/2011/07/more-crowdsourced-scholarship-citizen.html; A.G. Sikarskie, ‘Citizen Scholars: Facebook and the Co-Creation of Knowledge’, in: K. Nawrotzki and J. Dougherty (eds.), *Writing History in the Digital Age* (Spring 2012), writinghistory.trincoll.edu/public-history/sikarskie-2012-spring.

US HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM **Children of the Lodz Ghetto**
A MEMORIAL RESEARCH PROJECT

Home | Student List | Community Center | My Research Search a Name

PROJECT STATUS

20
Students known to have survived

93
Students known to have perished

8477
Students with currently unknown fate

INTRODUCTION

Help the museum reconstruct the lives of school children who fell victim to the Holocaust. By sharing together information from online databases and scanned records, you will enable the museum and other researchers to understand more fully the experiences of young people from the Lodz ghetto during the Holocaust.

On September 25, 1941, Chaim Rumkowski, chairman of the Lodz Ghetto's Jewish Council, received an album full of handwritten greetings for the Jewish New Year from over 13,000 students living in the ghetto. Within a year, many of these children were deported and murdered in gas vans at the Chelmno killing center, but some remained in the ghetto and even after the ghetto's liquidation and their evacuation through numerous camps, some of the students survived.

We know the names of these children; can you help us tell their stories?

GET STARTED

LATEST RESEARCH

8590
Number of student names available for research

STUDENT LIST
Over 13,000 students signed the Lodz ghetto schools album. A partial list of their names is available for research here. Over time, we will add all of their names to this list.



The historians of the 'memorial research project' *Children of the Lodz Ghetto* make good use of digital media to convey historical awareness and methodology to their audience, <http://www.ushmm.org/online/lodzchildren>.

Derived from *citizen science*, the practice of collecting and processing scientific data by volunteers is not really a new concept, but thanks to digital technology it is now better applicable for historical purposes.⁴⁸

A classical example of *citizen history* is the ‘memorial research project’ *The Children of the Lodz Ghetto* of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM).⁴⁹ The museum asks online visitors to reconstruct the lives and fates of 8,590 school children from the Lodz ghetto in Poland. They can do so by searching for information in online databases and digitised documents. In constructing their project the initiators took into account the lessons learned from other crowdsourcing projects: a collective aim is defined (learning the fate of 8,590 children), the results of the work are published (20 children survived World War II, 77 died), the most productive contributors are rewarded with honourable mention, remarkable histories are spotlighted and the relevance of the collective effort is clear. The project has various built-in response mechanisms and both historians from USHMM and other users verify the data. By reading and checking the work of others, users learn from each other about methodology and important considerations.

The quality of the user research of the trial version in 2008–2009 was not very high: only one third of the material submitted by the test group was ultimately validated by historians. In spite of the fact that members of the museum staff could do the work more quickly and accurately, USHMM decided to continue the project because of its social and educational value. Project leader David Klevan explained this decision:

I hesitate to refer to any data as ‘bad’ data because each time a learner submits ‘bad’ data, they receive feedback about the submitted data that hopefully helps them to learn more about the history and become a better researcher.⁵⁰

In the *Children of the Lodz Ghetto* historians share, not relinquish, authority in a digital setting. Experts – historians – have a clear role guiding the volunteers in historical criticism and verifying the research results before publication. But the eventual publication consists of the research findings of the volunteers. The case demonstrates the senselessness of measuring the success of a multi-level project simply on the basis of quantitative parameters.

48 R. Bonney et al., ‘Citizen Science: A Developing Tool for Expanding Science Knowledge and Scientific Literacy’, *BioScience* 59 (2009) 977–984.

49 United States Holocaust Museum, *Children of the Lodz Ghetto*, online.ushmm.org/lodzchildren/.

50 Op. cit. Nina Simon, ‘Participatory Design and the Future of Museums’, in: Adair et al., *Letting go?*, 30.

Obstacles

Wikipedia and *citizen history* illustrate the innovative properties of the new media for public historians. However, from the viewpoint of professional (public) historians, the prevailing digital public projects give pause for thought. The divide between innovative best practices that are discussed at conferences and in journals on the one hand and the average public history project on the other is wide. Whether digital media encourage an interpretative presentation of history or a dialogue with the public has actually little to do with the (financial) resources invested in the project.⁵¹ Too often, public historians chase digital modalities blindly and jubilantly. But social media do not automatically attract young people, a forum without a public misses its mark, not every archaeological site profits from a 3-D presentation, and so on. Too seldom public historians experiment with content or the methodological properties of digital media, or wonder if the public even cares to be involved. After looking at the promise and potential of digital media for public history, this section looks at a number of fundamental obstacles.

Many assumptions, little research

The biggest weakness of digital public history is that there is very little user research, comparative or meta-research, either about digital public practices or based on digital public practices.⁵² The problem is partly caused by the nature of public history projects. Public history projects attempt to ‘produce’ as much as possible with the time and means available (yet another interview, yet another education package, yet another workshop...). There is little time for reflection or positioning public history projects in a larger context. Before you know it, the collaborator is already gone or busy with another project.

When something *is* published about a (digital) public project, it is usually written by involved parties and generally only highlights the successful aspects of the project. The line-up of contributions in journals and at conferences is the herald of a good news show. Even in a journal such as *The Public Historian* the articles are reports rather than enquiries or reviews.⁵³ This results in a lack of sources, figures, directories, quantitative and qualitative

51 For innovative online history see EdTechTeacher Resource, *Best of History Websites* (www.besthistorysites.net).

52 An exception was the conference ‘Websites as Sources’ that the CVCE and the Université de Luxembourg organised in 2012 (www.digitalhumanities.lu), see among others the research of T. Cauvin and J. Peter on the historical discourse on websites.

53 The NCPH understands its tradition as a professional publication and is considering the future of the journal. In 2012 it carried out a survey among readers and universities to gauge their expectations of the journal (publichistorycommons.org/speaking-of-the-survey-part-2-what-role-for-the-ncp-h-journal).

reporting that hinders comparative and meta-research into the practices of contemporary public history projects.

Public historians therefore are more or less flying blind with their digital public projects. For example, is the public really interested in digital participation? How are digital products received? How does a user interpret a virtual construction? Do visualisations help the pedagogical process, and under what conditions? What is the impetus to share – or not share – content in social media? Is digital curation any more democratic? Can you apply user research from Canada or Italy to Flanders or the Netherlands? Why are some features and tools less successful than others? These are universal questions that have little to do with the scale and location of a project. Therefore, every historian should consider them at the start of a project.

Many collections, little history

A second problem concerning digital public history is the dominance of the image bank or online collection, the most common genre world-wide. An image or heritage bank contains a digitised collection, provided both by amateurs and collectors and by official institutions and curators. In Flanders and Brussels *Heemkunde Vlaanderen* [Flemish Local History Society] has registered at the present time 36 regional image banks. The project databank of *Digitaal Erfgoed Nederland* [Digital Heritage of the Netherlands] (DEN) has registered 52 image banks and 114 digitising projects.⁵⁴ The apotheosis of the image and heritage bank is *Europeana*: a single online access point to more than 22 million digital objects – images, films, books, museum and archival objects – from the collections of more than 2,000 heritage institutions, supplied by 131 dataproviders.⁵⁵ It is ‘the most visible representation of European cultural heritage online’.

The principle behind the collection database is a noble one: heritage institutions make their rich collections accessible to the community. A number of tools are offered, so users can ‘get to work with the collection’: one can comment on an item, rank or tag it, share it in social media and even have an account in which to keep a personal selection. The question of how users (researchers, amateurs and professionals working in heritage) can or would like to use the thousands of very similar or specific sources has scarcely been considered in the past.⁵⁶ Too many of the digitising undertakings were an end in themselves, as Terras called them, ‘scan & dump’-projects:

54 www.heemkunde-vlaanderen.be/regionale-beeldbanken; www.den.nl/projecten.

55 On *Europeana*: pro.europeana.eu/about and www.europeana.eu/portal/europeana-providers.html; *Europeana, Factsheet Europeana 2011*, pro.

europeana.eu/documents/858566/24340811-2960-468c-8a5a-2e3235a34f22.

56 W. Duff, B. Craig and J. Cherry, ‘Historians’ Use of Archival Sources: Promises and Pitfalls of the Digital Age’, *The Public Historian* 26:2 (2004) 7-22.

[...] once an institutional website is created, it is often left to its own devices, with little sustainability funding made available to allow the regular upkeep and maintenance, and lack of the type of interaction with user communities necessary to attract and keep visitors.⁵⁷

In addition to the somewhat faltering relation with users, the average collection website lacks historical narratives. If there are 'exhibitions' they are generally limited to a thematic group of items with a short promotional introduction. But what is the relevance of hundreds of multimedia objects without context or any methodological help, how can users derive any significance from them? What is the purpose of the collection once it is digitised and on the Internet? Noiret summed it up as

[...] la perte de contact entre les nouvelles technologies avancées du web, la présence d'une quantité énorme de sources premières multi-médiales en ligne, les archives inventés et participatifs et, d'autre part, l'absence de lien avec un discours historique scientifique qui caractériserait la profession.⁵⁸

The enormous amount of sources online has lost contact with an historical discourse, and therefore also with scientific historiography.

That a collection of objects is not meaningful in itself, notwithstanding its impressive quantity, is an insight museums reached in the 1960s and 1970s.⁵⁹ In order to generate and transmit knowledge to the public you need a curator – somebody who makes a selection, puts objects into a context and seeks points of reference with the world in which museum visitors live. Population and visitor research strongly suggests the public has an interest in the past⁶⁰, they even expect to be able to satisfy this need in a heritage institution. Usherwood, Wilson and Bryson conclude from their 2005 user research:

57 M. Terras, 'Digital Curiosities: Resource Creation via Amateur Digitization', *Literary & Linguistic Computing* 25:4 (2010) 425-438; P. Gooding, 'Mass Digitization and the Garbage Dump: The Conflicting Needs of Quantitative and Qualitative Methods', *Literary & Linguistic Computing* (23 December 2012), llc.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2012/12/22/llc.fqso54.abstract.

58 Noiret, 'La Digital History', 133 [the lack of contact between the new technologies of the web, the presence of an enormous quantity of multi-media primary sources online, the participatory and constructed archives and on the other hand the absence of a link with the scientific historical discourse that characterises the historical profession].

59 Steven Conn, *Do Museums still need Objects?* (Philadelphia 2010).

60 See for example, A. Vander Stichelen, 'Vlamingen en het verleden. Een bevolkingsonderzoek naar erfgoedbeleving in Vlaanderen', *Faro* 3 (2011) 17-35.

[...] whilst the immediacy of newspapers, radio and the internet can keep people abreast of news stories and relatively 'up to date', museums, libraries and archives serve a community role by providing historical context, offering alternative viewpoints, artistic interpretation and a mediated service which caters to a variety of learning styles and information needs.⁶¹

A more recent informal questionnaire by the National Museum of American History showed that 72 per cent of visitors believe that the role of museums as trustworthy sources of online information becomes more important in the digital era.⁶²

Institutions that limit their online presence to offering a collection do not take into account the needs and expectations of their public. This sort of thoughtless one-way traffic of institutions with a social responsibility is opposed to the shared authority principle in public history. This applies not only to local heritage sites and museums that by definition are expected to present an historical narrative. Archives and libraries must also ask themselves why they want to put their collection online, how they should do it and for whom. Where is the historical context of the digital items? Where are the historians (both within as outside the heritage institutions) who construct an historical narrative and clarify the relation between source and history? Where are the manuals of methodology for those 'who want to get to work' with the source material?

There are enough examples to show it is possible. The CHNM developed the open source platform *Omeka* as a structural answer to the diffusion between source and history.⁶³ It allows a source collection to be managed and presented and to put together proper exhibitions or educational packages based on the collection.⁶⁴ There are experiments in alternative collection database models in other areas. For example, the Great War Archive Initiative

61 B. Usherwood, K. Wilson and J. Bryson, 'Relevant Repositories of Public Knowledge?: Libraries, Museums and Archives in "the Information Age"', *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science* 37 (2005) 88.

62 Op. cit. M. MacArthur, 'Get Real!: The Role of Objects in the Digital Age', in: Adair et al., *Letting go?*, 61.

63 Omeka.org; D. Cohen, 'Introducing Omeka', *Dan Cohen's Digital Humanities Blog* (20 February 2008), digilib.gmu.edu:8080/xmlui/handle/1920/6089.

64 A list of websites made with Omeka can be found on omeka.org/codex/View_Sites_Powered_by_Omeka.

of Oxford University inspired Europeana for its 1914-1918 Family History Roadshows.⁶⁵ Everywhere in Europe digital reproductions of personal memorabilia and family histories about the First World War are collected with the purpose of creating 'a unique pan-European virtual archive' of the Great War.⁶⁶ Experts offer the public historical context and educational tools at the collection points. War historian Peter Englund used this community collection to create a virtual exhibition that unites the heritage, the memories and the history of the First World War.⁶⁷

Compartmentalisation

The reason for the absence of historical narratives, methodological manuals, the less than inspiring users' tools and public impact should perhaps be sought in the far-reaching division of labour. Heritage institutions often have different departments for educational staff, collection experts and webmasters, which hinders collaboration. To bring about an innovative public project a symbiosis between the technical design, the tools of participation, the educational aims and knowledge of the collection must be established.⁶⁸ Collection experts can no longer afford to be digitally indifferent and incompetent. There is talk of a new kind of expert – the 'digital' curator who combines other competences then are seen in an 'ordinary' curator.⁶⁹

The compartmentalisation manifests itself also among historians, who work in various sectors. Science, culture, education and media all have their own financial sources, interest groups and network. The current situation in the universities is anything but favourable for the transmission of historical methodology and narratives to the outside world: due to the pressure to publish and the teaching load there is scarcely room for any public services, let alone that those would be valorized by the academy. Innovative historical

65 In 2009 The Great War Archive was 'a groundbreaking digitization project, focused on getting members of the public to digitally capture, submit, catalogue, and assign usage rights to material they personally held to do with the First World War'. S.D. Lee and K. Lindsay, 'If You build it, They will scan: Oxford University's Exploration of Community Collections', *Educause Review Online* (30 July 2009), www.educause.edu/ero/article/if-you-build-it-they-will-scan-oxford-university%E2%80%99s-exploration-community-collections.

66 www.europeana1914-1918.eu; 'Background Europeana 1914-1918', *Europeana professional* (s.a.), pro.europeana.eu/web/europeana-1914-1918.

67 Anna, 'New Virtual Exhibition: Untold Stories of WW1', *Europeana Blog* 10 May 2012. blog.europeana.eu/2012/05/new-virtual-exhibition-untold-stories-of-ww1/.

68 P.F. Marty, 'Finding the Skills for Tomorrow: Information Literacy and Museum Information Professionals', *Museum Management and Curatorship* 21:4 (2006) 317-335; P.F. Marty and K.B. Jones, *Museum Informatics: People, Information, and Technology in Museums* (New York 2008); O. Van Oost, 'Musea 2020', *Faro* 4:3 (2011) 44-52.

69 N. Beagrie, 'Digital Curation for Science, Digital Libraries, and Individuals', *International Journal of Digital Curation* 1:1 (2008) 3-16.

research written down in international journals is out of reach for the outside world, literally and figuratively. The transition of scientific journals to open access publications only partially deals with this problem, because the articles are written in academic (English language) jargon. The training programmes in public history are too recent to have had much influence on the field. Before expressing their scepticism about the quality of digital public projects, it seems appropriate if academic historians acknowledge the shortcomings of their own profession.

In Flanders the division of labour between heritage staff and historians has recently come to a head due to a policy document from the *Agentschap Kunsten en Erfgoed* [Art and Heritage Agency] about the relation between heritage and history writing.⁷⁰ The guideline formulated in this document states that history writing in an acknowledged heritage institution ‘should always be placed in a context that contributes to the care and/or accessibility of the cultural heritage’ [authors translation].⁷¹ It is a mystery how public activities can be developed without investing in historical narratives or how a collection can have significance if the past that lies within it is ignored. The heritage institution as a mausoleum, as Witcomb put it, in which the collection is separated from its historical context and thus from the community in which it originated, is lurking behind the corner.⁷²

Lesson learned

Notwithstanding all the elusive promises and hindrances, public historians experience in this digital age an exciting quest for new expertise, behavioural standards, narrative structures, visualisations and cooperation. Since 2008 the *Instituut voor Publieksgeschiedenis* [Institute for Public History] (IPG)⁷³ has carried out a number of modest – in size and set-up – digital public and educational

70 Art and Heritage, *Toelichting bij de verhouding tussen cultureel-erfgoedwerking en geschiedschrijving* (2 December 2011), www.kunstenerfgoed.be/ake/download/nl/5617012/file/111201_toelichting_verhouding_cultureel-erfgoedwerking_-_geschiedschrijving.pdf.

71 *Ibid.*, 21.

72 A. Witcomb, *Re-Imagining the Museum: Beyond the Mausoleum* (London, New York 2003).

73 The author is affiliated with various projects of the interuniversity *Instituut voor Publieksgeschiedenis* (IPG) as a public historian. The IPG organises education, research and public services concerning all forms of relations with history in society, in the past as well as the present. The public projects initiated or executed by IPG have a facilitating or research function, function as a trial area for its scientific collaborators and public history students or have a clear link with the research activities of ‘Onderzoeksgroep Sociale Geschiedenis na 1750’ of Ghent University from which the IPG sprang.



The website www.Gent1913Virtueel.be makes use of the *Omeka*-platform to present its collection and history.

projects to experiment with digital techniques and the online presence of historians.⁷⁴ This last section gives a brief overview of a number of IPG projects and will try to answer the question to what extent digital practices have fundamentally altered the activities of the public historian.

UGentMemorie is the longest running project of the IPG. Its theme is the history and memories of the University of Ghent in preparation for its bicentennial in 2017.⁷⁵ The website www.UGentMemorie.be (2011) functions as a hub and flywheel for the public project. The history, the heritage and the memories of the university and city, of science and society are revealed in all kinds of entries and dossiers. Debates, exhibitions, publications, interviews and film assignments for students are a few of the analogue projects surrounding the website. The walk *UGentPassage* and the biographical databank *UGentMemorialis* are digital spin-offs.

The thematic site www.familiegeschiedenis.be (2012) arose out of a partnership with *Familiekunde Vlaanderen* [Flemish Family History] (FV). It brought together existing but scattered methodological and historical knowledge on writing family history. The intended public is both 'experts', such as members of FV, and 'beginners' such as students who are taking the course in Family History. The thematic website offers instructions in five steps, a list of sources with methodological guidelines, and all kinds of tools and links. A web editorial panel takes care of adding sources and tools and preparing thematic dossiers. The coming organisation website of FV and a forum will form a triptych with www.familiegeschiedenis.be.

As part of a faculty education innovation project the IPG is currently examining the educational possibilities of interactive timelines as an instrument for constructing an historical frame of reference. The subsequent application www.tijdlijn.ugent.be is being tested by students of the teacher training course and by first year students of the History bachelor during the academic year 2012-2013.⁷⁶

The most recent IPG project is www.Gent1913Virtueel.be [Ghent 1913 Virtual]⁷⁷, a platform that unites diverse research and digitising initiatives of six city and university services in connection with the commemoration of the Ghent World Fair, in the conviction that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Through an image bank, timeline, thematic exhibitions and an interactive 3D model all the facets of the World Fair of 1913 are shown. The

74 These were public history projects lasting from a few months up to four years that never had more than two staff members. For a complete overview, see www.ipg.ugent.be/projecten.

75 www.UGentMemorie.be; F. Danniau, R. Mantels and C. Verbruggen, 'Towards a Renewed University History: UGentMemorie and the

Merits of Public History, Academic Heritage and Digital History in Commemorating the University', *Studium* 5 (2012) 179-192; www.UGentPassage.be; www.UGentMemorialis.be.

76 www.ipg.ugent.be/projecten/digitale-tijdlijnen; www.tijdlijn.ugent.be.

77 www.Gent1913Virtueel.be.

project is an experiment in intensive and many-faceted collaboration between heritage partners and researchers, and at the same time is a test-run for the *Omeka* platform.

The projects mentioned here are by themselves not greatly innovative or spectacular in either subject or scale, but the experience does give insight into the manner in which digital media influence the practice and fundamentals of public history. The impact is enormous in the sense that the variety of participation and presentation forms has greatly increased and continues to grow at a rapid tempo. It concerns far more than websites with text and image collections: podcasts, tools, apps, forums, newsletters, social media campaigns, tutorials. Before these functionalities can be adapted and put into use in a public history project, one needs time to experiment with them. Staying abreast of the latest innovations turns out to be a labour intensive and continuous effort.

Digital projects have a use-by-date and a price ticket: unless they can be incorporated into the daily operation of an organisation prepared to invest in them permanently, they soon appear to be and feel outdated. Reflection on the concept and the content of digital projects is therefore crucial: what determines the 'usability' of form and content for the user and thus the sustainability of a digital project? It is a wonderful idea that each digital product is open ended and can continue indefinitely, but it fails to consider the limited duration of the average public history project. On the other hand, the limited duration of a public project should not be used as an excuse for not developing a digital or online window. 'Closed' and momentary digital forms of publication should be negotiable.

The relatively limited duration and the price tag force the public historian to think carefully about the relevance of his project. Broadening the goals of the project and in this way disseminate its importance can be helpful. For example, the *lieux-de-mémoire* films made by students for *UGentMemorie* are not all suitable for online publication due to technical shortcomings or superficial content. Nevertheless, the exercise was valuable because of the conversations between generations that took place and the hands-on initiation the students had in making a documentary film. The aim of a public history project can be an exquisite exhibition (digital or analogue), but it can also include experimentation with media and participation, putting together a blueprint for cataloguing with volunteers, setting up a web editing board, encouraging digital literacy among the youth, finding witnesses to a forgotten past and debating with stake-holders. Public history is a process.

There is no public history without a historical narrative. A project must *be* about something. Content should never give way to technology just because it is 'hot' and expected. However, how one constructs and presents the historical narratives is a matter of careful consideration. In contrast to the written discourse the digital world is visual and hypertextual. One of the revelations for the 'analogue' historians of the IPG was to find out

that a hypertextual context, as Vannevar Bush predicted, does not demand compromises to the historical narrative. On the contrary: the built-in contextualising links grant the various items their historical significance.

Finally, we must mention the issue of the public. Although virtual visitors are not visible, the public historian should never lose sight of the fact that there are indeed real persons behind the figures. Someone with his own history, areas of interest and incentives that possibly differs from those of the 'traditional' museum or archive visitor. Particularly those online projects that do not have forum-like conversations or direct participation – nothing wrong with that, – run the risk of focussing too much on the perfect digital product according to the sender and not enough on the perception by the receiver. Steve Cohen said about this in a recent issue of *The Oral History Review*:

[...] the burden of rendering access to an audio or video stream is one thing; conveying history and cultural heritage to an audience as complex and varied as nature itself is another. [...] Nearly instant access to digital archives and archival materials on the World Wide Web is changing the primary function of oral history archives from storage, preservation, and access by sophisticated users to vehicles that present history to users from nearly every corner of the globe.⁷⁸

Due to the difference in composition of the analogue and the digital public, there can be no such thing as a digital copy of the analogue workings.

Back to the future or back to basics?

Is there such a thing as 'digital public history'? Digital projects that are valued as interesting and innovative in terms of concept and execution – both in the international field as the IPG context – are in fact 'hybrid' projects with various digital and analogue components functionally applied. The fundamental questions that public historians ask themselves at the start of a project – What? Why? With or for whom? How? – are no different today than they were twenty years ago. In that sense it makes no difference that digital media have been added to the toolbox of the public historian. The starting point of public history – contact and dialogue with the public – and the ultimate goal – to spread and develop historical thinking – has not changed either. Therefore, digital public history is not a sub-discipline in either theory or practice, and does not require a separate label. It is more appropriate to talk of public history in a digital era. The digital evolution does ensure that these basic

78 S. Cohen, 'Shifting Questions: New Paradigms for Oral History in a Digital World', *Oral History Review* 40:1 (2013) 154-167.

starting points and goals are more explicitly manifested, and the technological developments force public historians to consider more explicitly what they want to achieve and how to do so – which is a good thing.

Digital media might not fundamentally change public history, but the public historian is by no means done with the Internet as a new field for history. The prevalent compartmentalisation of tasks and the digital illiteracy of historians in general has led to a lack of historical narratives online, a gulf between sources and historical interpretation and a lack of meaningful interaction with the public. This is the fault of the historian himself. Outside the academic world it is he who stands at the helm of compartmentalised digitalising projects or who rides the waves of political popularity of these projects. Within the academic world he refuses to see the need for historical context of a society that anno 2013 manifests itself chiefly online. Moreover, he is failing his duty to arm himself and the next generation of historians with digital criticism. In this way the historian not only isolates himself from what is going on but is also ill-prepared to formulate strategies that can cope with new problems caused by – for example – the enormous amount of digital material. The potential of digital media for public history is not fully realised. Perhaps we should hope that the digital transition does cause a transformation. One that brings the public historian closer to society. ◀

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