

HISTORY EXTENSION I

Historiography – The Communication of History

This article “annotating history” invites the reader to assess differing forms of historical communication while presenting the post-modernist ideals prevalent within contemporary society. While the key perspective of the source, that of ANU deputy-Vice Chancellor, Marnie Hughes-Warrington is generally supportive of the post-modern mediums of historical communication, she also alludes to notions of historical debates, including that of the Holocaust denial and the history wars as well as historiographical debates like those of the opposing 20th century historians E.H. Carr and G.R Elton.

The post-modernism sentiments of the source clearly demonstrate that the days of Thomas Macaulay’s famous “trust me, I’m an historian” or the public recitations of Herodotus’ Histories and Thucydides History of the Peloponnesian War are long gone, with new and varying methods of historical communication. In the words of Keith Jenkins, it is clear that this articles ascribed “letters to text messages... youtube to... art galleries... written, drawn, filmed, and described” are evident that “it is true there is no single truth.” Jenkin’s paradoxical statement in the late 20th century, as part of the movement, has revolutionised the communication of history, broadening notions of who writes history and giving value to all perspectives, due to the lack of , or the unattainable nature of an absolute truth or interpretation, as Jenkin’s again states “the past is no more, history then is only what the history make of it”. These notions of what Marney Hughes-Warrington describes as not being placed into “simple, restricted, defined spaces” has led to, through post-modernist, annal school and interdisciplinary history, the communication of many new or revised history. In the various communicable forms outlined by the article, this breadth of communicative mediums has led to post-colonialist, feminist and ‘total’ histories (that include sociology, geography, anthropology and other disciplines) to empower the “unheard voices” of history or as “history told from below”.

Ultimately, this article assesses the post-modernist sentiments prevalent in the breadth of contemporary communication of history to have many benefits, in broadening the scope and nature of the history that is communicated to the public.

Despite these positive assertions, the article also alludes to the dangers and unreliability that an all-inclusive, all mediums, history provides. While MHW is “happy to consider [it an]... artefact of history” this article acknowledges the “ethnic conflict to the religious hate” in the communication of such interpretations as that of “Holocaust denier” David Irving. The highly communicated and publicised nature of Irving’s proposed “radical” notions of the Holocaust never occurring have brought questions to the historical discipline. Under post-modernist notions, as evidenced in its publication and promotions, many have questioned the authority of the term “historian” with an Austrian newspaper article naming Irving a “heretic...liar” and “a disgrace to the historical profession”. Equally this open forum of historical communication lead to the involvement of international justice systems, many countries banning Irving from entry due to his chosen historical perspective. As such, professor Richard Evans, while disagreeing with Irving’s views stated “it does not constitute legal action”. In essence, the Holocaust denial debates, as alluded to in this article, can stand as points of contention, bringing into question the very open historical communication forum that exists in the modern world with TV, Radio, youtube, social media, as well as the conventional books and scholarly articles.

A similar sentiment and challenge to the post-modernist nature of modern communicative media stands in the History Wars, concerning the British colonisation of Australia and the treatment of the Aboriginal people, as alluded to in the article as “debate over indigenous custodianship”. Due to the nature of modern media and communication, the opposing historical standpoints of the “black armband” against the “white halo/three cheers history” very soon became a political debate, with the

involvement of Prime Ministers, Paul Keating and John Howard. While stemming initially from debate over the truth of the Risdon Cove Massacre and notions of “frontier warfare” between historians Henry Reynolds (Black Armband) and Keith Windschuttle (White Halo) the historical nature of these debates were soon compromised by the high political involvement. Soon, where you use words like “settlement” or “invasion” became the extent of the debate, which like in the case of Irving, led to the dilution of history through resultant legal battle which have continued to as recently as last year with Sydney Council changing the wording of its founding statement. Ultimate, as the article by M. Pierce alludes, these “hotspots” for history can challenge the nature of history itself, in its politicisation or legalisation due to the open forum mediums presented by TV, you-tube, radio and social media; wherein the clashing opinions of two historians (in this case, Reynolds and Windschuttle) evolve into the conflict of whole political movements and understandings.

This article also makes explicit mention of “quite extreme debates” which can be inferred to the question of forms of historical communication and “what constitutes authentic historical record” as evident in the opposing views of 20th century historians, E.H. Carr and G.R. Elton. For, as their expositions on the nature of history explore, the content and method of history has significant effect on its communicated value. Elton’s view, where “evidence is King” and in echoing the scientific empiricist methods of Von Ranke, Elton presents disregard for “unscholarly” and “biased” presentations and communications of history, which, in the context of Pierce’s article, rules out the worth of many blogs, diaries and amateur writers from the historical discourse. In contrast, Carr places emphasis on the role of the historian, stating “the facts do not speak for themselves... it is the historian that gives meaning”, using the example that a historian decides that Caesar crossing a certain stream is a historical fact, as opposed to the millions of others who had crossed it. As such, if it has been written, then the author has deemed it worthy, in their given right and so Carr, as opposed to Elton, in their great implied historical debates, sees the value of broader communicative mediums as outlined in this article.

In conclusion, the given source raises as many questions as it answers. It present current post-modernist notions in historical mediums and communication, giving a new breadth to history and empowering previously lost voices of history. Equally, this breadth, as the article alludes, also diminishes history in its politicisation and legalisations through the publicity of famous debates as the History Wars and Irving’s holocaust denial. As the Carr/Elton debate implies, there is no overarching assessment that can be given on the modern forms of historical communication, for it raises as many problems as it solves, while in providing greater resources and breath we must return to the age old questions of “what is history”, “what is the role of the historian” and as this article explores “how should history be communicated”.