Layers and Links: Writing Public History in a Digital Environment

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You and a couple friends of enter an exhibit space in a local historical society. You are greeted by initial wall text that announces the title of the exhibit and offers you a brief summary of the historical context and themes for the collection materials that the subsequent rooms and cases contain. This framing prose positions the exhibit in historical context pointing out the relationship of the content to both the larger trajectories of the field. At the same time it raises a few key questions to direct your attention as you move through the exhibit. These questions might focus on larger significance or perhaps on issues of perspective or multiple causation. They immediately cause you to begin evaluating your own basic understanding of the issues at hand—wondering if the collections and materials within will confirm or challenge your existing understanding.

You then move into the first cluster of materials mounted on the next wall and within an adjoining case. The materials are unified by a subheading in smaller type than the exhibit title, but sharing the same font and colors. The subheading might be thematic, but it might also include orienting signposts about time and place. Again, there is a brief segment of wall text that offers the contours of historical context that hold these materials together. The text suggests ways that a careful examination of these materials might begin to provide some provisional answers for the questions raised by the exhibit as a whole. You only have twenty minutes to explore the exhibit before you are supposed to meet other friends for lunch. You survey the room and the content clusters, picking which ones seem interesting.

You turn to examine the historical materials in a cluster: an enlarged image of newspaper article mounted on the wall, several material culture items in a display case, a focused map with key places and geographic elements highlighted, a photography of an important historical actor, etc. Each of these items has a label that includes a brief annotation and some information about provenance. Perhaps the labels direct your attention to aspects of the materials that will contribute to your ability to come to some conclusions about the larger questions raised by the exhibit.

Having taken in this information, and carefully examined the collections materials, you move on to the next cluster of content, building your historical understanding and questions as you go. Moving with the flow of traffic and your museum companions, you spend more time in some areas than others, your attention drawn by particular items that resonate with your individual interests or questions that you have about the themes of the exhibit. You discuss the content with your companions, wondering about the relationships between key historical actors that you have come to

know through the exhibit. As you exit the exhibit at the opposite side of the gallery, you comment to you friends that you will recommend that your brother come visit the exhibit based on his longstanding interest in related historical questions. You see an advertisement for the exhibit's accompanying website and make a note to check it out when you get home and to send the URL *along to your brother.*

Planning and preparing a physical museum exhibit brings a person into contact with many of the content elements and strategies that are essential to developing good writing for the internet. A review of the above narrative highlights the importance of headlines, introductory contextualizing prose, intellectually stimulating framing, logical content clustering, concise labels, variable navigation patterns, and opportunities of additional exploration. This suggests that whether they are aware or not, practicing public historians possess most of the skills that are necessary to produce high quality historical content for the web that users find compelling. This is not to suggest that there are not conditions that are particular to writing for the web, but rather to argue that good historians who are interesting in sharing their collections, their questions, and their content expertise with the public can be successful writing for the web.

Public historians come from a variety of backgrounds, but generally they share a commitment to making the study of the past accessible to members of the general public. Unlike academic historians, who might write journal articles and monographs for a very small scholarly community, public historians prize clarity and accessibility as they work to share the most up to date scholarship with others.

On the web, this commitment to accessibility can be embodied in the form that historical work takes: digital exhibits, blog posts, collections metadata, podcasts, videos, social networking posts. Several key aspects of content planning and development remain consistent across these web genres. Keeping them in mind can help public historian write for the web in a way that invites users to think about critically about the past.

1. *Content Strategy:* Thorough planning is important. Design and content development go hand in hand, and neither can be neglected at any stage of a project.
2. *Audience:* Addressing a general "user" is not specific enough to produce good history writing on the web. We need research about the people we are writing for and we must tailor content to their specific interests and needs.

3. *Good History & Good Writing:* Clear, concise writing is good writing, regardless of medium. Writing is a craft that needs to be honed and practiced, with attention to standards of usage, composition, and grammar. We must combine that approach with a commitment to communicating good history.
4. *Genre:* Writing on the web takes many forms. Choosing an approach that matches the genre helps ensure that users respond to writing in ways that further the conversation about history.

1. Content Strategy

Writing for the web requires a clear sense of mission. For public historians, adequate forethought and planning can ensure that the audience receives and experiences content that is appropriate for the format and for their interests. This planning is in most respects equal measures technical and quantitative. The two go hand in hand. Neglecting one or the other is a recipe for missing the mark.

Planning for content development should start with the institution's mission. That institutional mission should cascade down to shape all digital work. Clearly delineated goals for communicating with the public about history should guide the approach to digital projects, and in turn, to selecting materials and writing copy for the web. Each project needs to have a few central goals that help the project team narrow their focus and shape content. Similar to learning outcomes in the world of education, the project team needs to know exactly what they hope that end-users will take away from their experience. On one hand, these outcomes could be a related to specific historical content knowledge, or more ways to approach historical questions and concerns, or a blend of the two. On the other hand, outcomes might be related to reaching to a particular audience.

This focus on clear project goals in content strategy matches very well with the current researching on learning. The majority of research about learning focuses on formal learning situations, but these findings offer some good guidelines for more informal situations. In 1999, the National Research Council published *How People Learn* as a general overview of the latest work in cognitive science and what it could mean for teaching and learning in a whole host of disciplines.[1]

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[1] Committee on Developments in the Science of Learning with additional material from the Committee on Learning Research and Educational Practice, National Research Council, *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School: Expanded Edition* (Washington, D.C.: The National Academies Press, 2000) < http://books.nap.edu/openbook.php?record_id=9853&page=1>; M. Suzanne Donovan and John D. Bransford, editors, Committee on How People Learn: A Targeted Report for Teachers, National Research Council, *How Students*

The research offered three key findings about learning that are important for how we consider addressing audience digital public history. First, the authors found that learners come to an experience with preconceptions about how the world works and what happened in the past. If our writing and engagement fails to account for those preconceptions and to address them, we our digital projects will not be successful in sharing new ways to think about history. Second, in order to make a lasting impression with our audience we have to help them build both a foundation of factual knowledge *and* a conceptual framework to organize and process new information. Finally, learners need to have a clear sense of the overall goals for a site or activity and ways to monitor their own progress toward those goals.[2] While these three goals may seem like a burdensome expectation for doing public history on the web, given all of the contingencies and factors that impact/effect visitors' engagement with a site, we would do well to keep them in mind as we craft our materials because attention to these factors can mean the difference between content that gains significant usage in the community and content that fails to warrant real use.

Regardless of their composition, the project goals and anticipated outcomes must be considered in every stage of decision making for a project. Some goals are best served by the creation of a web exhibit; some are best served by planning for content delivery through a mobile device; some are best served by engagement through social media platforms which are casual and quickly updated such as Twitter, Tumblr, Facebook, or Pinterest; and, some goals are best served by a multi-platform approach. Each of these options will make different demands on content creators and encourage difference experiences for users. Hence, the project team needs to choose the appropriate medium and delivery to achieve those outcomes and goals.

The release of the Mosaic web browser in 1993, developed by the National Center for Supercomputing Applications at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, indelibly shaped the ways that users expected interact with content on the web.[3] The form of pages filled with text, images and hyperlinks dominated content delivery during the early years. The web was a place to receive content. Slowly, however, users developed ways to talk back and interact with the content being served on the web. Initially, chat rooms, whiteboards, and listserv accommodated the need for two-way communication. This urge for by-directional interaction has come to dominate the internet

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Learn: History in the Classroom (Washington, D.C.: The National Academies Press, 2005) < http://www.nap.edu/openbook.php?record_id=11100&page=1>.

[2] *How People Learn*, 14-19.

[3] "About NCSA Mosaic," *National Center For Supercomputing Applications*, available at <http://www.ncsa.illinois.edu/Projects/mosaic.html>.

in the age of Web 2.0, otherwise known as the "read-write" web.[4] Users now have easy-to-use content management systems and blogs that allow them to quickly publish content, using and re-using materials from all over the web. This mash-up culture has transformed the ways that content producers, and public historians, think about delivering their content. Now, we must write for use and re-use, while all the time being attentive to the ways that audiences will want to interact with us about our work and the histories we are trying to represent. As result, we have to carefully consider the demands of the web genres and content platforms that we choose to deliver that content. Not every public history venture on the web will be best served by an extended treatment in an online exhibit. Some maybe better suited to the brevity and tone of a blog post. Others might reach their desired audience through the 140 characters allotted to a tweet.

Where the internet was once viewed primarily through a web browser on a personal computer, users are now accessing content from smartphones and tablet computers, each of which place constraints on how that content is served. One approach to this variability is to develop content that is specific for each platform. In most cases, that would require at least three versions of each element of content. A more efficient approach is to develop content that reads well in a range of formats, creating content in small chunks that can be flexibly combined to adapt to the demands of the platform.[5] Clearly written and carefully developed content can work on multiple platforms, but it requires the assistance of a good user experience designer who can help you deliver that content to the smartphone applications, tablet browsers, and other emerging platforms that your users want to work with.

2. Audience

Public history is created for the public and requires a user-centered approach to design and content development. The question of audience is of paramount importance. In some cases, the mix of users for an institution's website might be vastly different than the typical range of people who make a site visit in a given month. Audience research can be difficult in virtual environments when users are more apt to close a survey pop-up window than answer the questions, or when they are likely to offer only scant personal information due to well-founded privacy concerns. Despite these

[4] Tim O'Reilly, "What is Web 2.0?" *O'Reilly Media* (September 30, 2005), available at <http://oreilly.com/web2/archive/what-is-web-20.html>.
[5] Karen McGrane, "Adaptive Content," *Content Strategy for Mobile* (New York: A Book Apart, 2012) 47-82.

obstacles, clearly identifying the audience and testing content with representatives of that audience will go a long way to ensuring successful content development.

The notion of a single, general user is by no means sufficient for crafting content that will promote engagement. Instead, we need to be specific in identifying the audience and understanding the needs and assumptions that they bring with them to our work. We need to outline our goals for the content, and plotting the concrete ways that our writing will support achieving our desired outcomes with the particular user group. Students, teachers, enthusiasts, seniors, young adults, and scholars all have different motivations, learning goals, and modes of engagement.

User-Profiles and Scenarios

One way to account for these differences is to craft a set of user profiles and scenarios where an idealized student, teacher, or senior citizen reacts to the content. What do they want to learn? What do they want to do to pursue that learning? What tone will make them feel comfortable? While these user profiles are helpful in the initial stages of content development, they are no substitute for actual user testing. Whether you are writing for a well-established, existing audience group or trying to capture the attention of a new segment of the population, we need to be specific.[6]

That specificity can only be aided by turning to any research that is available on who your users actually are.

- What assumptions do they bring to the content?
- Which points of view are they most comfortable with?
- Which ones will be most new to them?
- What do they want to get out engaging with your content?

Then, you can move on to users groups who you do not currently serve, but wish to.

- What types of content and questions will attract and maintain their attention?
- What needs and assumptions do they bring to the work that might align with your current users?
- Where might they differ?
- Why aren't they engaging with your existing content?

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[6] Corey Vilhauer, "Audiences, Outcomes, and Determining User Needs," *A List Apart* (February 28, 2012). Available at: <http://www.alistapart.com/articles/audiences-outcomes-and-determining-user-needs/>. Angela Colter, "Testing Content," *A List Apart* (December 10, 2010). Available at <http://www.alistapart.com/articles/testing-content/>.

Once you develop these specific user profiles, you can move on to craft user scenarios. These scenarios allow you to imagine in a step-by-step way how users will experience your content. One effective way to do this is to draft a set of narratives about how your user profiles will navigate a site from their first encounter to the point that they exit the site.[7] Some questions to consider include:

- What paths do they pursue?
- Which content do they read?
- Which sources do they look at?
- What search terms do they use?
- Where do they feel compelled to join a conversation by leaving a comment?
- What elements of the content do they share with their friends and family by email or social networks?
- What do they do with the information they have gained from their experience with the content?

Drafting these sorts of narratives is essential for good site design, but it also a fundamental necessity for drafting good content. Furthermore, you must consider how all of your potential audiences will respond to the content:

- What questions will it raise for them?
- What other avenues of information will you provide for them to pursue those questions?
- How will your content challenge a particular group of users' understandings of the history you are addressing?
- How does your content help deal with that challenge and integrate a new understanding into their perspective?

Writing with a particular user scenario in mind helps to ensure that the writing hones close to the desired outcomes for the project. On the web, where brevity is prized, these guides help to channel work in the right direction. This all goes toward creating "user-centered" content, which content strategist Erin Kissane explains, "means that instead of insistently using the client's internal mental models and vocabulary, content must adopt the cognitive frameworks of the user. That

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[7] Elizabeth McGuane and Randall Snare, "Making up Stories: Perception, Language, and the Web," *A List Apart* (August 23, 2011), available at <http://www.alistapart.com/articles/making-up-stories-perception-language-and-the-web/>.

includes everything from your users' model of the world to the ways in which they use specific terms and phrases."[8]

The next step is to test the content with actual users. While historians may consider themselves primarily concerned with crafting content materials, we have a duty to be equally concerned about the ways that our audiences navigate to our content, their ability to read and interact with that content, and the subtle changes we can make that will improve our communication with targeted user-groups. There is a wide range of other approaches to usability and user experience testing that will produce data that can be taken into consideration when doing public history work on the web.[9] This user testing can be as simple as asking representatives of an audience segment to review and react to draft copy, or as complicated as designing testing scenarios for a range of layouts and designs. One particularly useful method, called A/B testing requires gathering feedback on how well two counter-posed drafts achieve their stated goals—in the case of website testing this might be two different design aesthetics and in the case of prose content this might be two drafts that offer different tone in their delivery of the same content.[10] The outcomes of A/B testing can offer powerful data to shape design choices or editorial guidelines.

When gathering information on the ways that our sites are working for a range of user groups, we cannot forget that our work must be accessible to users with disabilities. This means making choices about platforms and technologies that conform to the Federal Section 508 guidelines, including making text available to screen readers, offering alternative text descriptions of images, and transcriptions for audio-visual materials.[11] These considerations are part of a larger attention to usability that should always be part of our planning process. Steven Krug offers an excellent introduction to web usability for beginners in his classic book, *Don't Make Me Think: A Common sense Approach to Web Usability*.[12]

Finally, unlike traditional print-publishing venues, the web offers us an opportunity to do real-time evaluation on our work, checking on how successfully we are achieving our goals for the project and whether or not we are reaching our target audience. Interactions with users through

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[8] Erin Kissane, *The Elements of Content Strategy* (New York: A Book Apart, 2011) 8.
[9] Cameron Chapman, "Comprehensive Review of Usability and User Experience Testing Tools," *Smashing Magazine* (October 20, 2011), available at <http://uxdesign.smashingmagazine.com/2011/10/20/comprehensive-review-usability-user-experience-testing-tools/>.
[10] Lara Swanson, "A Primer on A/B Testing," *A List Apart* (August 23, 2011), available at <http://www.alistapart.com/articles/a-primer-on-a-b-testing/>. Paras Chopra, "The Ultimate Guide to A/B Testing," *Smashing Magazine* (June 24, 2010), available at <http://www.smashingmagazine.com/2010/06/24/the-ultimate-guide-to-a-b-testing/>.
[11] *Section 508*, available at <http://www.section508.gov>.
[12] Steve Krug, *Don't Make Me Think: A Common Sense Approach to Web Usability*, 2nd edition, (New Riders, 2005).

comments and social media can combine with site analytics to give us a picture of how well we are communicating our message to our audience. With the possibility of taking the pulse of whether or not our content is reaching users and encouraging them to engage comes the opportunity to shift our approach and reframe our content in ways that might be more effective, iterating until we find the right balance for our topics and our visitors.

3. Good History & Good Writing

Despite the particularities of reading on the web, public historians must maintain their commitment to planning and producing good history for their audiences. So, once the historian has acclimated herself to the formatting styles that work best for the web, she must return to the issues of complexity that characterize the profession. These aspects of historical complexity are central to drawing users in and convincing them to stay with content in a meaningful way. Thus, sites that raise issues of multiple causality, issues of multiple perspectives, the influence of context in a particular time and space, questions contingency, questions of historical significance, and the role of changing interpretation have the greatest possibility of communicating the rich landscape of history to users.

Moreover, creating public history for the web requires that we take advantage of the medium to deliver content that honors the complexity and contingency of history. Using the web to publish a journal article is possible, but it grossly under-uses the affordances of the medium by ignoring the web's capacity to integrate multiple forms of media and to allow visitors to explore many routes of investigation. Much of this capacity is deeply baked into initial sit design and information architecture decisions. As a consequence, historians who are primarily responsible for content development need to work closely with designers and developers to insure that the eventual site reflects the intellectual questions and outcomes that emerge from the historical sources that are at the heart of the work. Web technologies offer excellent ways to represent complexity, and as such they should be a boon to public historians working to move beyond the unilinear narratives that can dominate the popular understanding of history.

Writing Well

The web environment and users' reading habits demand that we focus on writing clear, concise, and consistent prose. Nonetheless, the goals of clarity and brevity cannot obviate the need to treat complex historical problems with the nuance that they deserve. The key to achieving writing that works well on the web and deals with historical complexity is to consider the ways that the

internet allows for layering of content. Capitalizing on the non-linear reading practices that most users employ with web content, we can highlight the importance of considering multiple perspectives, change over time, and contingency in historical understanding.

The web is often considered a space for informal writing, and in some situations that can be appropriate. But, writing for the web does not mean throwing away all of the elements of style and usage that make for good writing. On the contrary, we need those elements and guidelines more, because the capacity of the medium and our audience's reading practices circumscribe our communication.

Similarly, constrained by the brevity of most web writing, we need to commit to a rigorous process of editing to tighten prose and eliminate errors. Other content providers are always a click away on the web, so we need to be sure that we deliver our visitors high quality materials that are free from errors, both of grammar and of syntax. Furthermore, the writing that we do for the web has the potential to reach thousands of users on any given day, and often we write as the representative of an institution, not as private individuals. In those cases, professionalism in presentation is of the utmost importance. Even with the highest quality content, editing errors present distractions that may turn visitors away.

Therefore, each web content operation or public history institution needs to create an in-house style guide that will serve as reference point for the individuals charged with content creation. For those who are new to this work, trusted reference materials are essential. Every public historian should be familiar with the conventions articulated in *The Chicago Manual of Style*. Joseph Williams' *Style: The Basics of Clarity and Grace* and William Strunk, Jr. and E. B. White's *The Elements of Style* make excellent additions to a working reference desk. Finally, you might consult the decisions included in style guides from popular media entities, such as *The Associated Press Stylebook*, which undergoes frequent revisions to keep pace with new publishing platforms and innovations. These guides offer straight-forward advice on matters of style and usage that can ease decision-making about standards when putting together a style guide for your web writing.[13]

With these basic decisions and guides in hand, a web content team can then move on to design an editorial workflow. Web publishing places many jobs that used to be outsourced to publishers in the hands of content creators (curators, educators, outreach specialists). A good editor,

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[13] Staff, University of Chicago Press, ed. *The Chicago Manual of Style, 16th Edition*. 16th ed. (University Of Chicago Press, 2010), Williams, Joseph M., and Gregory G. Colomb. *Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace*. 10th ed. (Longman, 2010), Strunk, William, and E. B. White. *The Elements of Style*. 4th ed. (Longman, 1999), and Goldstein, Norm. *The Associated Press Stylebook*. Revised. (Basic Books, 2004).

focusing on developmental issues and copy, can serve as an organizational lead for web publishing, overseeing the workflow of writing, review, revision, copyediting, and final publication. Clear direction from a good editor is essential, but authors can do much on their own to diligently improve their craft of writing. Again, we have access to both classic sources and more recent ones. Stephen King's *On Writing: a Memoir of the Craft* is at the same time insightful and entertaining. Targeting non-fiction writing, William Zinsser's *On Writing Well* has served as an excellent resource for more than thirty years. For more regularly updated features on developing material for the web, *Contents Magazine* offers consistently good work from professionals who work at the intersection of content strategy and web design.[14]

Short, Direct, and Non-linear Content Access

Since the mid-1990s, the most basic way to deliver content on the web has been through the use of pages rendered in a browser. Although the range of possible design and interactive elements within those pages has become much more complex in the twenty years, the basic building blocks of a webpage have remained the same. Blocks of content are connected and navigable through hypertext links. These links make it possible for a user to jump from one page to another through an ever-expanding "web" of content. This notion of blocks of content linked through some common association goes back to Vannevar Bush's 1945 formulation of the "memex" as a machine that would allow for the rapid access to information selected by association, rather than a static and artificial system of indexing. Bush's vision is clearly visible in the current operational infrastructure of the web.[15]

The ability to pursue one's own interests and ideas through this vast web is one of the main attractions of the internet. We are so used to this methods of interacting with the web now that we may not notice any longer how disruptive it is of the traditional reading habits encouraged by the technology of the book. This vast flexibility almost guarantees that visitors to a website will not approach their experience in a linear way. They may enter a site not only from the homepage, but at any point, brought to a particular location by a keyword search using the powerful algorithm of a

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[14] King, Stephen. *On Writing: 10th Anniversary Edition: A Memoir of the Craft*. 10 Anv. (Scribner, 2010), Zinsser, William. *On Writing Well, 30th Anniversary Edition: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction*. 30 Anv. (Harper Perennial, 2006), and *Contents Magazine | a New Magazine for New-school Editorial*, available at <http://contentsmagazine.com/>.

[15] Bush, Vannevar. "As We May Think." *The Atlantic* (July 1945), available at <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1945/07/as-we-may-think/303881/?single_page=true>. For more on the basics of how the web works, see Cohen, Daniel, and Roy Rosenzweig. "Getting Started," *Digital History: A Guide to Gathering, Preserving, and Presenting the Past on the Web* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), available at <http://chnm.gmu.edu/digitalhistory/starting/>.

search engine such as Google or Bing. They may jump from topic to topic, content element to content element, page to page. At any point, they can go back, choose another area to visit, or leave the websites altogether. Thus, content developers have to be conscious of the fact that their users are not being funneled down a fixed path with a beginning, middle, and end, where they will definitely accumulated content and knowledge along the way.

Some information architecture and site structure may increase the chances that a visitor will move through your site in a way that you think is ideal, but even with a strongly supportive design, there is no way to guarantee that path. The notion that interaction with content in the computer age is variable, non-linear, and can depend on conditions set by the user is nicely articulated in Lev Manovich's 1998 article, "Database as Symbolic Form."[16] The practical outcome of this distinction between computer media and other types such as the novel or cinema is that content creators have less direct control over the path that users take through content. As a result, we need to write with some repetition of key themes and points, and we need to offer users an abundance of illustrations so that we increase their chances of encountering the perspectives and evidence that we believe is essential to engaging with the historical questions that we are raising. To achieve these ends, public historians have to have a good working relationship with web designers and developers. Together the team needs to have clear conversations about content priorities so that the website's information architecture supports the delivery of well-crafted content.

All of this unpredictability in user navigation means that it is not practical to think about websites in the same way as one would think about a conference paper or a journal article. It is not sufficient to deliver a thesis, or important content and themes once at the beginning of website and not return to them again until the conclusion. As a result, writing for the web demands some level of repetition. Historians writing for the web will have to find ways to return to key themes in their work over and over again throughout a site. Expressing important ideas in many ways and in many places helps to ensure that users will have a chance of getting the good stuff even if they have a limited interaction with the site.

On an element-by-element basis, content creators need to consider the ways that users interact with prose on the web. Longstanding research based on user testing suggests that internet read differently on the web than they do when they read in other media. We need to make

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[16] Lev Manovich, "Database as Symbolic Form" (1998), available at <http://manovich.net/DOCS/DATABASE.RTF>.

allowances for these practices as we develop content. The result will be significantly different than writing for a print journal or than writing label text for a physical exhibit.

As early as 1997, web usability guru Jakob Neilsen published an *Alertbox* column summarizing the results of his research on how users read on the web. "They don't," he proclaimed. 79% of his testers scanned the web pages they encountered, and only 16% read word by word from top to bottom.[17] The column drew on the more extensive findings reported in "Concise, SCANNABLE, and Objective: How to Write for the Web." Nielsen recommended that content creators create "scannable" text using strategies such as:

- highlighting keywords,
- using subheaders and bullet pointed lists,
- offering only one idea per paragraph,
- and, dramatically reducing the word count.[18]

For the last fifteen years, content creators continue to receive guidance and advise that is rooted in Nielsen's initial findings. The advice is not complex, but it is essential to producing web content that users will actually read. For instance, Dave Copeland at *ReadWriteWeb* recently offered writers his shorthand 3-2-1 formula, suggesting that for every 1,000 words of prose, a webpage should include three subheads, two links, and one image.[19]

To some extent, modes of reading on the web can suggest that it is not possible to do work with significant depth. Thankfully, this is not true. The rising popularity of mid-range prose pieces through sites like *Byliner* and *Longreads* point to a different conclusion: readers have to be ready to invest the time and attention in a piece, but they will do it.[20] For public historians, this suggests that layering of content is key to successful delivery. While visitors may not be wiling to sit down and read the equivalent of a 6,000 word essay in one sitting, they will be more likely to navigate their way through an equivalent amount of material if it is divided into logical, interrelated sections, illustrated with engaging primary evidence and if the key points highlighted using style and formatting conventions including bullet points, pull-quotes, and subheadings.

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[17] Jakob Nielsen, *Alertbox: Current Issues on Web Usability* [a bi-weekly column], "How Users Read on the Web," (October 1, 1997), available at <http://www.useit.com/alertbox/9710a.html>.
[18] John Morkes and Jakob Nielsen, "Concise, SCANNABLE, and Objective: How to Write for the Web," (1997), available at <http://www.useit.com/papers/webwriting/writing.html>.
[19] Dave Copeland, "Best Practices for Writing for Online Readers," *Read Write Web* (March 16, 2012), available at <http://www.readwriteweb.com/archives/best_practices_for_writing_for_online_readers.php>.
[20] *Byliner*, available at <http://byliner.com>, and *Longreads: The Best Long-Form Stories on the Web*, available at <http://longreads.com/>.

4. Genre

Exhibit Narrative

One common form of digital public history is the long form exhibit. The earliest version of this work frequently replicated a physical exhibit on the web, using images of exhibit materials and reproducing wall and label text. While these digital exhibits allowed visitors who were unable to visit the physical exhibit an opportunity to see the materials. Ranging in complexity from a short series of linked HTML pages to very polished Flash sites, these early digital exhibits failed, for the most part, to take advantage of the web.

The web allows for us to engage in sophisticated storytelling. However, the reluctance of visitors to read large blocks of text online means that we had to carefully hook and funnel our visitor's curiosity and attention so that they are drawn into our material and look to explore more deeply. This means setting an intellectual hook, whether it is a striking question for investigation, or an opening story that encourages further investigation. Once this hook has been set, we need to offer visitors pathways to indulge their own curiosity that progressively layer content and detail as delve deeper into the site and the material. The result is a content distribution that resembles a pyramid with complexity and detail increasing as users get further into the site. For example, a homepage for a digital exhibit might lay out the basic context and historical question or problem for a site, offering users several thematic or perspectival avenues to explore in working with that problem. Then, upon selecting one theme to pursue, users could dive into both historical narrative and primary sources, such as docents, images, and multimedia elements that center on that particular aspect of the question. Each element of the site offers the creators an opportunity to convey meaning and context through site elements that offer users important clues about information hierarchy, including headline writing, image captioning, and the creation of detailed metadata to accompany primary sources. Furthermore, each element needs to offer accessible prose, including short sentences with active verbs and vocabulary that will be familiar to a generally educated reader.

While the crafting of the basic narrative text is very important, these additional elements deserve the writer's careful attention. Titles, section headings, and taglines offer users vital clues about content and navigation. They help readers to prioritize their attention. Since on the web, visitors rarely read every word, these elements are even more important than they would be in traditional print publications. As with all web writing, every word counts, and it is essential that these

headings be well crafted. While clever word play might be attractive to some, clarity is preeminent. Anything that will confuse a segment of the user population should be avoided, and headings should be rigorously tested and reviewed along with all of the other elements of the content.

Item Metadata

In addition to headings and narrative text, writers for the web have a chance to offer users significant contextual and interpretive information through the careful crafting of metadata. Many individuals in cultural heritage institutions work together to compile the data that comprises an object record, from registrars to conservationists. All of this data is of potential use and interest to visitors, in part because no matter how carefully we craft our user scenarios, we cannot fully account for the kinds of things that users will want to do with our resources. Hence, exhibit sites that use primary sources and collection objects also need to include rich metadata to accompany those items. Additionally, it is possible to offer collection level metadata that can provide additional context for historical materials and their relationship to one another.

There are a variety of opinions on the ideal descriptive standards for this work, but one approach is to use the Dublin Core Metadata standard, which is interoperable with many other standards.[21] This route offers content creators fourteen core fields through which communicate important information about their items, including description, subject, creator, format, item type, and rights. Cumulatively, these fields orient the visitor and help to shape how they understand an item in and of itself, the conditions of its creation, and its relationship to other items and a larger exhibit. In her class book, *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach,* Beverly Serrell offers important guidance about the ways that labels work to tell interpretive stories that are central to supporting the overall goal of a major exhibition.[22] The work of crafting item descriptions for the web is similar. The item description is a chance for a content expert to deliver a concise and engaging statement about the significance of the item in a larger framework. Here we can ask what kinds of information do visitors need to situate this item in its historical context and to begin to understand its significance? For some fields such as subject, content creator may want to employ a controlled vocabulary to provide some order and standardization to a site. Whether a content team decides to implement an existing authority control or to devise their own, the careful and consistent application

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[21] *Dublin Core Metadata Initiative*, available at <http://dcmi.org/>.

[22] Beverly Serrell, *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach* (AltaMira Press, 1996).

of the vocabulary can assist users in building mental models for a wide range of content based on the way that it is categorized. Also, content creators need to work with site designers and developers to present item metadata in an order than is useful to visitors, listing the fields from most essential to least so that users who spend little time with a particular source have a higher chance of getting the key message.

Once all of these decisions have been made and standards have been set, it will be helpful to create a "data dictionary" for each item type that clearly explains the way that content should be created for each field. Data dictionaries should include not only details about the key information for each element, but also technical details about data formatting and word count. Careful adherence to the parameters of the data dictionary will allow many people to work together to produce a website with clear and consistent item type and collection level metadata.

Blogs

Unlike digital exhibits, where content can be carefully crafted and reviewed so that it can stand the test of time on the web, writing for a blog requires a willingness to write quickly and frequently. Driven by users' desire for fresh content and organized by the logic of the calendar, blog content is perceived as being much more spontaneous, relaxed, and casual. Given this push for frequent content creation, blog posts are by necessity shorter—often less than 500 words—and more singularly focused than digital exhibit narratives. This short-form writing presents a number of advantages for public historians, if they do engage in some strategic planning to put a system in place that satisfies visitors' need for frequent new content. Over time the individual, short posts build a network of material in the archive of the blog that can represent a significant repository of individual and institutional knowledge both about collections and about the practices of different kinds of public history work.

One key advantage is that the form is that it allows a cultural heritage instituti8on to showcase its content experts. Blogging calls for a personal voice, rather than the formal address of scholarship. As such, it offers a way for visitors to get to know curators, archivists, educators, registrars, conservators, and outreach coordinators in ways. Inviting members of the staff from all divisions of an institution to blog about some "behind the scenes" aspects of their jobs is an excellent way to attract user interest and grow their appreciation for the varied and difficult work that goes into doing public history. This type of personal writing is an important counter to exhibit narratives that very rarely include the personal perspectives of the historians who work on them.

In a related way, blog posts are a good venue for highlighting the stars of an institution's collection. Posts can focus on one item or artifact at a time, letting a writer do a quick close reading of an object with which readers might not be familiar. Or, a post might highlight an item that is related to current events in a way that encourages readers to explore a collection further. Finally, these short posts might report on important developments in the institution's holdings, including new acquisitions and discoveries.

Finally a blog, like other interactive digital platforms, creates an opportunity for public historians to solicit input and perspectives from the public through comments. This open forum can be challenging for institutions that are concerned about authority and the ways that members of the public can challenge that authority with interpretations that may differ from the perspective being presented by the library, museum, or historical society that hosts the blog. We can, however, through careful attention and well-designed experiences, mitigate confusion that might arise between the expertise being shared by public historians and the perspectives of the larger public. This requires a clear commenting policy that reserves the right of the hosts to delete comments that contravene the bounds of civility. Sometimes comments will contain information and perspectives that are simply wrong. These comments provide an opportunity for learning when content experts address their authors directly and courteously. By their nature, these exchanges require a significant amount of time and attention from writers, but they can result in a dramatic increase in institutional investment from a public that feels valued and respected.

In sum, blog posts represent a way for public historians and their constituencies to enter into a rich conversation about cultural heritage. The typical blog format allows users to leave comments on posts, in effect offering a way for users to talk with content creators about their writing, the collections, and their work. Writing that is anchored in people's lives, that of the writer and that of the reader, works best to encourage these exchanges.

Social Media

Whereas online exhibits and blogs require users to visit a cultural heritage institution's own website, social media allows us to reach audiences out on the internet where they already are. This type of public history writing requires a knack for creating attention grabbing leads and willingness to enter into exchanges with followers from all over the world. Social media offers public historians a venue to highlight and amplify access to their content by pointing to key objects in a collection, important historical moments, or particular elements of a digital exhibit. The dialogic nature of the

platforms also makes social media the perfect venue for engaging with the public in an exchange about a point of controversy or debate. More so than other areas of the internet, social media platforms come and go in public favor, but a handful seem have achieved some sticking power by generating a significant volume of user traffic, such as Twitter and Facebook. Others that have current traction like Tumblr and Pinterest also draw major numbers of users and offer good venue for public historians to connect with their audiences. Regardless of the social media venue, frequent content-centered posts form the foundation for reaching followers.

The key to successful writing for all of these platforms is frequency and engagement. Unlike other venues for public history, a successful social media strategy is driven by a commitment to timely updates. Through web interfaces and mobile applications, Twitter and Facebook both allow users to receive updates in real time, providing a constant stream of posts and alerts from the individuals and organizations that they follow. For some, this ongoing torrent of news and commentary is the primary attraction of the platforms. Public historians wading into this stream need to offer compelling material to attract attention and followers.

Twitter posts that reflect on a current event or mark an anniversary and link back to an item in an institution's collection, all within the 140 character constraint of the platform, might catch the eye of followers. However, Twitter offers a number of other possibilities for use by public historians. For example, it provides a way for an organization to offer a real time account of event for individuals who could not be there. This kind of reporting can dramatically widen the reach of in-person activities, enabling a host of followers on the web to monitor the event and engage from afar. Moreover, the use of hashtags (a keyword preceded by a # that links a stream of posts) enables historians to participate in dedicated conversations. Social Studies teachers from around the world come together to share resources under the hashtag #sschat. By contributing to these conversations, historians can share their content with much larger audiences.

Facebook allows a little more freedom in its platform. Posts can be of any length and can include text, images, embedded audio-visual material, and links. In this way Facebook almost doubles as a blogging platform. The primary difference between posting to Facebook and posting to an institutional blog is that millions of people check their Facebook timeline on a regular basis. Thus, people who have "liked" an organization's Facebook page will encounter its posts amongst their other updates from family and friends. This is the advantage of using social media to go where users already are. The audience is pre-assembled in a way that is not true for stand-alone institution web venues. Furthermore, users who "like" an organization's Facebook page implicitly share that

activity with their friends, increasing the potential of reaching more and more people. This snowballing of followers can draw people to an organization very quickly.

In all cases, tone is important. Social media is by its nature more spontaneous than other venues for writing. The result is that thinking about and crafting posts is much more like headline writing. Punchy, bright, and provocative is much more the order of the realm than staid. For historians concerned about sensationalism and nuance, this can be a difficult adjustment, but they can take comfort in the fact that most social media posts point to existing web content that most likely reflects a more considered approach to historical questions.

Openness is equally important. For many constituents, social media offers the primary point of internet access to cultural heritage organizations. Visitors may use Twitter and Facebook to offer feedback about content, the technical specifics of a website or a mobile application, or to ask questions about events, both current and past. So, in some ways, social media can be like a hotline to an historian for some followers. A timely and helpful response to these engagements builds connection and community with followers.

As with every other kind of public history writing on the web, effective social media use requires a strategy. The demands of not only offering frequent content-centered posts, but also engaging with followers who respond to those posts by commenting can be quite a burden for a team that is working on other projects. Few institutions have the luxury of a dedicated social media specialist, so monitoring the accounts on various platforms and engaging with follows frequently becomes a shared responsibility. And, as with any shared task, some scheduling and clarity about obligations will make work go more smoothly. A museum or historic house might commit to offering two collections focused posts a week that are assigned to particular members of the team on a rotating basis. Some other member of the team might take responsibility for updating the accounts with frequent announcements of events and live programming from the organization. At the same time, members of the staff might claim individual days of the week to monitor the accounts and to interact with followers who ask questions or otherwise engage with the organization. This shared approach will lighten the burden of working with social media, but it will also result in a less distinctive voice for the organization's social media presence than would be possible with a single dedicated staff person.