

Name: _____

Honors World Studies II

Date: _____

Unit 1 – The Renaissance

Why Historical Thinking is Not About History – Part 2

By Sam Wineburg

Continuation of last class's reading...

The most extensive work on this question has been done by Eszter Hargittai and her colleagues at Northwestern University. Hargittai engaged dozens of college students - her total sample was over 100 - in a study of how young people determined the trustworthiness of information they encountered on the Web. She gave college students a series of questions and sent surfing, recording their screen shots and comments as they searched.⁸

The upshot of Hargittai's work was that students ceded to Google questions of credibility. The higher up in a Google search, the more credible the entry. Sometimes students would remark that they considered the qualifications of the author before believing what they found, but in no instance of the screen captures could the researchers find evidence that author credibility steered students' decisions.

The first thing that historical study teaches us is that there is no such thing as free-floating information. Information comes from somewhere. And if you think I'm exaggerating the gravity of the situation, let me tell you about an incident that happened in May 2014 in Rialto California, a community outside of San Bernardino. It is not an incident about students. It is about an assignment put together by their teachers.

Teachers gave their middle school students a written exam inspired by the new Common Core State Standards. Teachers went on the Internet and culled what they believed were credible documents, each one presenting a different view. The issue under debate was the Holocaust. Students were told to review a set of historical interpretations and to compose an essay arguing whether the Holocaust was real or whether it was a "propaganda tool" concocted by world Jewry for "political and monetary gain."⁹

One of the "credible" documents teachers put into children's hands claimed that the *Diary of Anne Frank* was a fake; that piles of corpses from Auschwitz were murdered Germans, not Jews; and that there are "compelling reasons why the so-called Holocaust never happened."

Dozens of eighth-graders found this document the most compelling. As one wrote, "The Holocaust is a propaganda tool. So Israel can make money for Jews. The Holocaust is a Hoax because the gas chambers in concentration [sic] camps were faulty. Another reason why this event never really happened because [sic] the Diary of Anne Frank is a hoax too. This is why no Jew has ever been gassed to death in these gas chambers."¹⁰

When an investigative reporter for *The Sun* (San Bernardino) contacted the school district, officials said that this type of essay was an exception. But through California's version of the Freedom of Information Act, the indefatigable Beau Yarbrough, who won an award from the Associated Press for his muckraking, obtained the essays that students wrote. It turns out that dozens and dozens of middle school students became Holocaust deniers through their teachers' efforts.

When the story got out, the Rialto school board held emergency meetings and decided that students and teachers should visit the Simon Wiesenthal Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles and receive sensitivity training to ensure that an incident like this never happened again. But in my humble opinion, this is a gross misdiagnosis of the problem. I don't believe these teachers were racists or prejudiced or bigoted or benighted or living in sin. I do not think that they needed mandatory sensitivity training. I think that they - like their students, like Joy Masoff, like us - are living in an age where technological changes of how information is disseminated and distributed far outpaces our ability to keep up with it. The tools we have invented are handling us - not us them.

Throw in for good measure the Common Core, and the fact that a few years ago we were telling teachers to write standards on the board and to quiz students on facts, and now we are telling them to give students multiple documents representing conflicting positions (but providing little or no professional development for new ways of teaching), and you have the recipe for a perfect storm. That's what happened in Rialto. A perfect storm with the ingredients amply supplied by the Internet.

That's where we're at. Slaves to the machines we have built. And when we pause to gather our thoughts and ask, How in the world do we get up to speed?, we can again turn to the Internet. There we can download thick PDFs packed with dozens of activities to teach Information Literacy. These materials come with extensive checklists that list rows of questions for students to ask every time they surf a website.

If we had all of the time in the world I'd applaud. Let's use these PDFs, let's do scores of classroom activities. But our situation is dire. We're the guy on the emergency room floor, hemorrhaging profusely, blood spilling on the linoleum, and the nurse comes in and instead of attending to our wound asks us to examine a booklet with thirty-seven possibilities for how to staunch the bleeding. By the time we figure it out, we're goners.

[...]

I'll make it a bit more concrete. We're doing a webquest with our students, researching Adolph Hitler. We put "Hitler" in the search bar and up comes the "The Adolf Hitler Historical Museum." Since we know that students assess credibility by how far up an entry is on a Google search, we see that this one is way up there. Moreover, the URL is not a dot-com site - which our guidebooks say is bad - but a more respectable dot-org site. Our students press on the link and find this explanation of Hitler Museum.

"The teaching of history should convey only facts and be free from political motives, personal opinions, biases, propaganda and other common tactics of distortion. Every claim that is made about history should also be accompanied by documentation proving its basis."¹¹

Not a bad start, I'd say.

I recently showed this site to a group of college students in a U.S. History survey class. It was in one of those old-style amphitheater lecture halls, where the professor stands in the orchestra pit and looks up at rows of students. I saw a sea of baseball hats turned three quarters to the side and laptops open at nearly every seat.

I showed the students the site of the Hitler Museum. "How many of you use the Internet for research?" I asked. All hands went up. "Keep your hands up if you can come down here and in one click, one, show me who owns this site." Like the wave at a sporting event, the hands collapsed (including those of the faculty in attendance). My crooked baseball hat-wearing college students, all with laptops open - probably grazing Facebook, Twitter and ESPN as I was talking - were rendered click-less.

The answer is not a mystery. "Whois," which can be reached by circumventing your browser and using your computer's terminal (or can be accessed via a variety of sites, like whois.net), provide a quick answer. In this particular instance, whois leads you to not some big organization, but to a Gmail account and a post office box in a strip mall. In other words, a fly-by-night operation.

That's my hammer. What about a saw? The next question I asked students was the same question my mother asked me when I was seventeen and going out on weekends. Mom, "Where are you going?" Me, "Out." Mom, "Out with whom?" Me, "People." Mom (about to scream), "Which people?!"

My mother wanted to know "which people" because we are known by our associates. In a digital world, we're known by our digital pack: who links to our site. I asked the students to tell me how I would find out who links to the Adolph Hitler Historical Museum? I waited. For Godot. (A simple Google query,

www.website.com, solves the problem. In this case, the digital pack includes sites associated with Aryan hate groups.)

Simple questions. Who owns a site? Who links to it? Forget about power drills and pneumatic nail guns. Can we start with a hammer and a saw?

Back in the analog stone-age we could rely on factchecked newspapers to stay well-informed. Watching the news at night, we could rely on the major outlets and their anchors to save us from error. Peter Jennings. Tom Brokaw. Brian Williams. (Okay, maybe not Brian Williams.)

What once fell on the shoulders of editors, fact-checkers, and subject matter experts now falls on the shoulders of each and every one of us. But there's a problem with this new reality. As the journalist John H. McManus reminds us, in a democracy the ill-informed hold just as much power in the ballot box as the well-informed. The future of the republic hangs in the balance.¹²

Reliable information is to civic intelligence what clean air and clean water are to public health. Long before the Internet, long before blogs, before Instagram, before Twitter and Yik Yak, James Madison understood what was at stake when people cannot tell the difference between credible information and shameless bluff. "A popular government," Madison wrote, "without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a Prologue to a Farce or a Tragedy; or, perhaps both. Knowledge will forever govern ignorance: And a people who mean to be their own Governors, must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives."¹³

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8 Eszter Hargittai, Lindsay Fullerton, Ericka Menchen-Trevino, and Kristin Yates Thomas. "Trust online: Young Adults' Evaluation of Web Content," *International Journal of Communication*, 4: 468-494.

9 Beau Yarbrough, "Rialto Unified Defends Writing Assignment on Confirming or Denying Holocaust," *San Bernardino Sun*, 4 May 2014.

10 See s3.documentcloud.org/documents/1274350/rialto-usd-document-prod-4-of-4.pdf.

11 I am indebted to T. Mills Kelly for this example. See his important, *Teaching History in the Digital Age* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013).

12 John H. McManus, *Detecting Bull: How to Identify Bias and Junk Journalism in Print, Broadcast and on the Wild Web* (Sunnyvale: CA: Unvarnished Press, 2012).

13 James Madison, writing to W. T. Berry, 4 August 1822, downloaded from *The Founders Constitution*, press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/v1ch18s35.html.