

## **“Active History: Reaching Past an Academic Audience”**

**Christine McLaughlin and Jay Young, on behalf of ActiveHistory.ca**

What responsibilities do academics have outside the university? How can historical research positively impact the present? In what ways can technologies facilitate this process? What are the strengths, challenges and limitations of “active” scholarship? How can feminist theory and scholarship inform these and other aspects of “Active History”?

It is questions such as these that the steering committee of ActiveHistory.ca – a website dedicated to forging links between historians, the media, policy makers and a broader public audience – have grappled with since the founding of the site in April 2009. Originally conceived as an open space for the dissemination of short, accessible scholarly articles, the site has been transformed to include a collective blog that focuses on topics such as history on the internet and historical perspectives on current issues, and a new book review section that features reviews of academic work by non-academics. In line with these developments, the website has continually increased its viewership; indeed, ActiveHistory.ca currently receives as many as 200 views a day. Our presentation will outline the challenges and successes we have faced in our attempt to not only make the work of academic historians more accessible, but also illustrate the relevancy of academic historical work to those outside the academy.

### **From Conference to Website**

The ideas for the website developed through the planning of a two-day symposium called Active History: History for the Future, held at Glendon College in

September 2008. During the winter of 2007, York University's Jim Clifford and Tom Peace joined up with fellow graduate students Victoria Freeman and Lisa Helps to organize the conference. In the year and a half that followed, they created a vision statement, circulated a call for papers, applied for funding and finally hosted the two-day symposium in September 2008. They defined active history variously as history that listens and is responsive; history that will make a tangible difference in people's lives; history that makes an intervention and is transformative to both practitioners and communities.

From the early stages, the conference organizers recognized the need to engage with the internet in order to help achieve some of these lofty goals. The hope was that the conference website would be more than a simple message board for the event. Conference presenters were encouraged to contribute blogs before the symposium. Looking back at the site, it is clear this request did not resonate with any of the active historians attending the conference and even a request for blog posts reflecting on the conference only resulted in two posts.

At the conference's end, there was a significant amount of money left to support dissemination, as per the terms of a federal SSHRC grant that partially funded the event. The initial experience with the conference blog caused the organizers to turn away from the web for the first few months after the conference. They entered into discussions with a number of more traditional academic publishing options and organized a round table for the Canadian Historical Association's May 2009 annual conference. As the months went on it became apparent that all of these publishing options had flaws. A strictly peer-reviewed journal limited participation from non-academic community historians and they

wondered how many people would read a book (and if anyone would publish it). They began considering a website, but remained reluctant because of the apparent lack of enthusiasm from the conference participants.

At this point they found an old pamphlet for a UK-based website called History & Policy ([historyandpolicy.org](http://historyandpolicy.org)). Although highly respected historians in Britain have started to publish papers on this site, they discovered that it took a few years for History & Policy to gain momentum. As our experiences with our own site also illustrates, it takes time to introduce the web into an academic community. At this point they started to rethink the purpose of a website, shifting from simple dissemination of the ideas presented at the conference to a manifestation of the Active History mission. So Jim and Tom assembled a new and expanded steering committee, and we began work to create a website for historians to engage with the public, policy makers and the media. We loosely based our new site, [ActiveHistory.ca](http://ActiveHistory.ca), on [HistoryandPolicy.org](http://HistoryandPolicy.org), and began soliciting short history papers from the Canadian history community.

### **Challenges and Transformations**

After launching, we actively began soliciting papers from contributors throughout the Canadian history community. We used such channels as the Canadian Historical Association annual conference, at which we held a lunch meeting, and H-Canada, an online discussion forum for scholars who study Canadian history. Initially, we suggested papers that concentrated on economic issues, as we were in the midst of the recession,

although we quickly broadened our view for papers on any topic that might conceivably be of interest to Canadians, our target audience.

Papers were not forthcoming. Christopher Moore, a popular Canadian history author and blogger, in fact, suggested that by simply *soliciting* papers on historical topics relevant to current issues we weren't being very "active." He had a good point. We had some promising prospects, but few papers materialized. We were able to get the rights to at least link to a wonderful example of 'active history', an article by Paul Axelrod originally published in *Academic Matters* that examined universities during the Great Depression and what lessons could be learnt for the relationship between post-secondary education and the current economic downturn. We also received some interest from historians studying international themes. Only in the last month have we been able to post an original Canadian history submission, a fascinating paper by Larry Glassford that traces the changing nature of history education through a survey of twentieth-century Ontario textbooks.

So, we realized we had to change directions in two ways.

First, we began expanding our scope to include global issues. This stemmed from tremendous interest that we received from the European historical community, perhaps reflecting a different conception of public intellectuals. For example, we published a paper by Gérard-François Dumont on the Berlin Wall, just in time for the twentieth anniversary of the wall's fall. Dumont's piece looks at the ways in which the legacy of the East-West division in Berlin can still be seen in the city's architecture, economy, and overall culture. Thanks to the timely nature of the paper, hundreds of web surfers were

introduced to the site through keyword searches. Continuing the international vein, we have also published a paper by French scholar Yves Montenay, in which he compares Vietnamese and Cuban development since their respective communist revolutions, and an essay by David Webster on the use of historical memory in the heated conflict in Papua New Guinea. Interestingly, we can see the specific search engine terms that direct readers to our site. Like Dumont's piece, these papers have received a fair amount of random web traffic, which helps expand our readership.

Our second shift was to move from formalized papers to blogging. The web is filled with thousands of good (and not-so-good) history blogs. History News Network ([hnn.us](http://hnn.us)) in the United States, for example, is a great site that features commentary by leading historians on contemporary issues (and usually a nice pitch for their most recent book). We hoped to find a niche as a blog that focused primarily on presenting a historical perspective to Canadian issues. ActiveHistory.ca's five-person steering committee embarked upon a formalized blogging schedule, which has slowly but steadily expanded into a circle of regular and guest contributors.

We'd like to focus on some of these posts, in order to show the various ways in which our contributors have approached historical issues in their writings, while also engaging with the present and future. One successful strategy has been to create posts that survey and analyze what historical work is already available online. In this sense, the website serves as a dissemination point that introduces readers to the growing amount of history available online.

For example, we published a post on the relationship between history and climate change, just in time for last December's climate change conference in Copenhagen. In the post, Jay Young argued that global warming is a subject to which historians can and have made a valuable contribution, because climate change revolves around the concept of change over time. His post demonstrated that there are at least two mutually-inclusive avenues through which historians study climate change: the critical analysis of historical evidence to quantitatively measure shifts in temperature throughout space and time, and the historical understanding of global warming as a socio-scientific construct and topic of public policy. Jay did so by surveying the number of historians – within and outside Canada – who have made their work accessible to a wide audience through the internet and other forms of accessible media. Because of the timely nature of the post, it led to many visits and was well-received, with the exception of a suspicious commentator named “Amelia Bedelia”, who argued that Jay presented a one-sided view on the topic because he failed to give an alternative perspective, which could be found at [ilovecarbondioxide.com](http://ilovecarbondioxide.com).

Blog contributors have also historically situated contemporary Canadian public policy. David Webster, a professor of international studies at the University of Regina, recently wrote during International Development Week that a “rhetoric-reality” gap exists between images of Canada as a humanitarian aid donor and the diminishing amount of development aid based on the country's GDP. He noted that the Canadian International Development Agency had recently eliminated funding to a number of prominent NGOs. The post reached one such group, Alternatives, a Montreal-based organization working with groups in Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq and elsewhere.

Alternatives thanked David for his post and how it presented a critical perspective on these recent policy changes. It's nice to know our writings are at least reaching some members of the wider public.

Our most successful post to date has been Tom Peace's "History for Haiti." Building on his expertise in French colonial history, Tom provided a very timely and sensitive response to the most current crisis facing Haitians. Vividly illustrating that Haiti's present simply cannot be disentangled from its past, Tom urged foreign ministers from the "Friends of Haiti Group" to consider this past, and empower Haitians in the rebuilding of their country. This post drew more visitors than any other before or since, indicating once again the importance of not limiting ourselves to national boundaries.

Historians have also used the blog section to inform the public about advocacy campaigns. Steven Maynard, a prominent Canadian historian of sexuality, wrote a post on a petition circulating that protests Library and Archives Canada's cancellation of a series of on-site workshops on the First World War that allowed students to access primary documents related to the conflict. Interestingly, Maynard did so by connecting the petition to his teaching of French theorist Michel Foucault's conception of a "historical present" to first-year undergraduates in his lecture on official memory and counter-memories of the First World War.

The biggest challenge that our website faces is the degree to which we have connected academic historians and their work with wider publics. Although we don't know exactly who visits our site, we assume that a majority of our audience are academics or fellow history bloggers. Indeed, one downside of our shift towards blogging is that this has in some ways moved the site away from our original goal of

accessible academic papers for a general audience to more of an internal conversation with other Canadian and international history blogs. We've recently introduced a book review section as a further means to increase traffic and engage with a broader public audience. This section features reviews of academic works by non-academics. Our first review carries with it much promise for the future success of this initiative. John Horn's rollicking review of Craig Heron's *Booze: A Distilled History* offers a refreshing deviation from the traditional academic standard. While it certainly highlights the strengths and limitations of the book, its style is accessible, engaging, and perhaps most importantly, it is truly a fun read. Perhaps, then, academics ought to be connecting with people outside the academy not only to teach and share their research, but also because of what academics themselves can learn through this process.

We have also launched a podcasting project, where we record academic talks and publish them on the site. This not only aids in our mission of streaming information through the walls of the ivory tower, but offers possibilities for transmitting information geared to diverse literacy skills and abilities. We remain interested in exploring how different forms of multimedia can help us to foster a more equitable space.

Alongside this, we've begun using social networking tools such as Facebook and Twitter. The former has helped us reinforce our internal discussions, while the latter has helped us market in a broad yet random manner. These mediums have so far been somewhat successful in attracting a relatively diverse group of people to our site.

Most of the interest we have garnered to date comes from fellow graduate students. Many professors have offered us moral support, and are very encouraging of our efforts. However, this support has not often translated into contributions to the site.

Perhaps some of this can be attributed to a “generation gap”, although our experience has also raised questions about sites of publication and accredited academic sources. We are currently soliciting papers on the topic of Active History for *Left History*, a peer reviewed journal run by graduate students in York’s history department. It is telling that the historical community – including some prominent professors - has responded much more enthusiastically to our call for papers for the journal compared to our call for papers for the website. This comparison speaks to the value that academics still place in traditional-format journals versus newer and more accessible methods of information dissemination.

### **Women, Genders and Sexualities**

In some cases, our site has also reflected a “gender gap”. We haven’t received a single paper submission from a woman, and none of our papers to date explore historical issues dealing with gender or sexualities. This has not been for lack of trying, and we will continue to actively solicit submissions. Our blog and podcasts have a much better success record in terms of gender equity. We have attracted contributors to our blog from a range identities and interests. Perhaps the less time-consuming blog offers a more equitable forum for disseminating information. An upcoming podcast will feature Marc Stein, Gil Frank and Laurel Mitchell from the Miss G Project for Equity in Education, speaking on “Beyond the Ivory Tower: Are We Changing the Way People Think About Sexuality.” The recent success of these alternate mediums in opening up our site to a more diverse body of participants has been encouraging; hopefully our trajectory is one of greater diversification and growth.

## **Conclusion**

Active History has come a long way since the idea of a conference was first conceived. But much remains to be done. Clearly, we believe that academics do hold responsibilities outside the “ivory tower”, and that history has much to tell us about the past, present and future. We also believe that new technologies hold many exciting opportunities for the free flow of information. Yet we continue to grapple with some questions daily. Do the strengths of “active scholarship” outweigh the challenges and limitations? Even if the answer for us is a resounding “yes”, how can we better convey this enthusiasm to others? Are there strategies we can employ to foster a more diverse and equitable site? How can we continue to broaden our audience? Our greatest benefit from this conference is the opportunity to hear from some active scholars. We would appreciate everyone’s thoughts on what we’re doing, what we’re not doing, and what we could be doing to create stronger links between active historians and their communities.