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From the Basement Stacks to the Airwaves: The Democratization of History

“History matters. The way it is taught -- or not taught -- has shaped a tuned-out generation that can use a computer and surf the Net, but that knows almost nothing about anything of importance.”

-Jack Granatstein

“Our common cultural capital is not depleting; it is simply changing very rapidly, as our... technology change[s].”

-Michael Ignatieff

The study, formulation and format of history are all undergoing a transformative journey, one that involves ascension from dimly-lit basement stacks to free-flowing airwaves. Changing technology has sparked a shift in how history is made, perspectives are passed on, and knowledge is reviewed. Technology has complemented the study of history, democratizing access to historical information and providing the average individual with the tools for interpretation and argumentation. As such, history matters more now than ever before, as advances in technology have allowed individuals to gain easier access to knowledge and a greater personal hand in forming historical perspectives.

In their exchanges, Mr. Granatstein and Mr. Ignatieff spar on the issue of history in the classroom. Is the tone correct? Has the teaching of history been inclusive enough? Are certain ends being met? Which ends, and whose? While Mr. Granatstein laments the current form in which history is being taught, Mr Ignatieff points out that our history is more inclusive than ever before. Both focus on history as an instrument of the classroom, but neither gets to the more important changes in the field of history that are taking place outside of lecture halls.

Though not found in the main thrust of his articles, there is a subtle message behind Mr. Granatstein's texts that deserves note: technology and history do not mix. In the quotation at the

beginning of this essay, he points out that students can now ‘surf the net’, but know nothing of significance, as if technology and knowledge were somehow at odds with each other. As I will argue, few things could be further from the truth.

Mr. Ignatieff is more insightful, but only marginally so. It seems as if my point is constantly on the tip of his tongue (or keyboard, as the case may be), but he never quite says it. He is right when he says that history is now more inclusive, but I would go even further. Mr. Ignatieff talks about how the stories of the marginalized are now being told and proudly states that the narratives of “ordinary people” will now be on the record. However, history has become even more inclusive than this – ordinary people are now telling their stories AND taking part in the interpretation. Where before academics interviewed, researched and put forth historical perspectives, nowadays anyone can do this, PhD or no PhD.

As educators, Mr. Granatstein and Mr. Ignatieff view history through the confines of curricula, of classrooms, of chalkboards. But the study and formation of history must also be viewed from outside the lecture halls as well, and this is where we find one of the most important results of recent technological advances. With historical interpretation and knowledge increasingly available outside the classroom, history matters more than ever before because of technology and the democratization of history.

Technology has bestowed upon average people much wider access to forums that will allow them to create the “story of our arguments”. Thanks to the internet and various tools therein, we can all be historians now. For example, as the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks unfolded, people sent out twitter messages describing the chaos¹, blogs posted pictures taken by bystanders, and the battle over the historical interpretation of the event began on facebook

¹ Katrin Verclas, “Terror Attacks in Mumbai: Mobiles and Twitter play Key Role in 24/7 Reporting,” [MobileActive.org](http://mobileactive.org/terror-attacks-mumbai-mobiles-and-twitter-play-key-role-24-7-reporting) <<http://mobileactive.org/terror-attacks-mumbai-mobiles-and-twitter-play-key-role-24-7-reporting>> Accessed on May 14th, 2009.

groups and online discussion boards. Far from deluging people with “nothing...of importance”, technology has become a powerful force for historical facts and perspectives.

In addition to providing tools for interpretation, technologies like YouTube, Google and Wikipedia have been a profound force for increasing access to history and existing stores of knowledge. At the click of a mouse, one can pull up information on anything, and in a wide variety of formats. A summary of the 1956 Canadian parliamentary pipeline debates can be found on Wikipedia, while videos of Prime Minister Trudeau saying “fuddle duddle” can be found on YouTube. Just a decade ago, one would have had to the brave library basements and microfiche for information. Today, most existing stores of historical knowledge are available through wireless connections in the air around us.

The democratization of history has turned the field on its head. Mr. Ignatieff and Mr. Granatstein write about history as a top-down phenomenon: elites write the opinions and teach perspectives, while the rest of us are silent and unengaged observers. But the truth is that citizen-historians, in the form of twitterers, bloggers and amateur videographers, are contributing to and learning from historical discourse on an unprecedented scale. These new denizens of history have expanded the realm of the field beyond those who can write books or have the time to compose treatises. On cell phones, laptops and cameras around the globe, ordinary individuals are now taking part in the formulation of what has traditionally been the purview of scholars.

As a result, the importance of history has been magnified by the average person. It could be said that people are more interested in things that they have had a personal connection to, and technology has made history personal. Gone is the ‘Great Man Theory’, which holds that “the history of the world is but the biography of great men”², replaced by a more grassroots history that is increasingly composed and consumed by common, everyday people. History is more

² Thomas Carlyle, On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History (Chapman & Hall, 1888) 26.

important than ever before because more people have a greater stake in creating and interpreting it.

Mr. Granatstein laments that the pedagogical approach to Canadian history is too modest in telling of our triumphs and too critical of our failures. Perhaps he is right in saying that the classroom is too focused on ‘victimology’, but this sentiment is made increasingly irrelevant by the availability of alternate perspectives on the internet. The classroom may be an important conduit for transferring shared values and tradition, but it hardly has a monopoly on the ability to promote such things as patriotism and rule of law. Websites espousing the glories of Canadian bravery in Suez, Hong Kong and Kandahar are available freely on the internet, and patriotism can be proliferated by something as simple as a comment on an online news story. People take from history what they like, and those who find their history classes and textbooks too full of “sin and error” can find easily find numerous alternate perspectives elsewhere. Students are not mindless automatons to be force-fed, and if they disagree with a certain perspective, they can take it to task on their own – technology has given them the resources to do so with ease.

In addition, it is interesting that Mr. Granatstein notes that readers will take from a piece what they wish. Mr. Granatstein, on the other hand, takes from my generation what he wishes to see. He is too rigid in his view of history – too tightly bound by his concept of history as a discipline for the classroom, rather than for the living room and the sidewalk. He sees a generation overwhelmed with irrelevant facts and useless trivia, when in fact it is a generation more in tune with and more involved in the historical process than ever before. The democratization of history has been driven by those who are young and techno-savvy, many of whom are the students that Mr. Granatstein so carelessly disparages.

History matters in a technologically-oriented world. In fact, it matters more than ever before because ordinary people are having their say in how history is shaped. Interpretations are now in far greater supply, giving a whole new meaning to what Mr. Ignatieff said about how “we make [history] together”. The availability of these interpretations, among which one can find patriotic and value-based perspectives, should put to rest Mr. Granatstein’s concern about our value-free classrooms. Technology is driving a radical transformation in history that reaches out to all of us, regardless of whether we obtained a degree in social history in the sixties and seventies. History matters more because it has become personal.