Digital Public History

Yutaka Suga, The Institute for Advanced Studies on Asia at Tokyo University

Since the digital revolution in the 1990s, and especially due to the spread of personal computers and the emergence of the World Wide Web, a new research field called digital history has emerged in historical science. Advocates of this field of research initially used digital technology to explore new perspectives of analysis, enhance analytical accuracy, and accumulate and analyze relevant data on a larger scale. In its early days, digital history was an academically oriented movement focusing on analysis. However, in the mid-2000s, a part of digital history branched out into digital public history, involving the public in innovative ways, with the arrival of the digital age of Web 2.0 and the development of interactive technologies such as cloud sourcing.

Roy Rosenzweig contributed the most to the development of digital history and digital public history in the United States. He established the Center for History and New Media at George Mason University in 1994 (later renamed the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media [RRCHNM]) and acted as its director. The RRCHNM established and managed various public archives, including the "September 11 Digital Archive," which collected, preserved, and published over 150,000 digital voice recordings, e-mails, and digital images of the simultaneous terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001.[1] The Center is also actively engaged in developing platforms for the public application of digital history, including Omeka, an open-source system for the online management of digital collections.[2]

The RRCHNM encourages practitioners of historical science to be innovative and utilize various digital technologies. However, the Center is not merely a research hub for digital history and relevant technological development. It also embodies Rosenzweig's idea of "democratizing historical science," aiming to fundamentally transform the status of historical science by using digital technology as the basis of its activities. The goal of the RRCHNM is to democratize historical science by using digital media and computer technologies as a means to draw on multiple voices to deliver its message, to reach diverse audiences, and to promote the general public's participation in the presentation and preservation of historical knowledge.[3]

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(1) "The September 11 Digital Archive," Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media and American Social History Project/Center for Media and Learning, https://911digitalarchive.org/ (Accessed 24 January 2022).

(2) "Omeka, Open-Source Web Publishing Platforms for Sharing Digital Collections and Creating Media-Rich Online Exhibits," Corporation for Digital Scholarship, https://omeka.org/https://omeka.org/ (Accessed 24 January 2022).

(3) Robertson, Stephen, "The Future of the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media," Dr. Stephen Robertson, 18 July 2023, https://drstephenrobertson.com/blog-post/the-future-of-rrchnm/.

Rosenzweig et al. conducted an interview survey by phone in 1994–95 of approximately 1,500 Americans regarding their daily engagement with the past. The results showed that ordinary Americans were closely connected with the past through their homes, museums, and historic sites and felt that information on the past obtained through these practices was more reliable than knowledge obtained from school education or the works of historians. The survey results, which demonstrated the significance of public historical practice, were published as a book,[4] to which Rosenzweig contributed the postscript titled "Everyone a Historian." He discussed ways to make historical science accessible to ordinary people, who are popular history makers, and the issues that would arise in the process. Rosenzweig recommended that one should use the Web as a virtual space, where history experts and non-experts can meet, suggesting that digital technology would play a significant role in overcoming the differences between experts and non-experts for the sake of collaboration.[5]

Rosenzweig also co-authored a guidebook on digital history[6] that identified seven qualities of digital media and networks (capacity, accessibility, flexibility, diversity, manipulability, interactivity, and hypertextuality) and five dangers or hazards on the information superhighway (quality, durability, readability, passivity, and inaccessibility). Rosenzweig et al. argued that diversity, and the openness resulting from it that characterizes the Web, has allowed the voices of the consumers of history research and those of amateur historians to become louder and more widely heard than by any other media. The users valued the Web's contribution to historical debates through its interactivity that enables a wide range of actors to connect in various forms.[7] The Internet constitutes a new form of collaboration, a new mode of discussion, and a new mode of collecting evidence of the past; it changes the conventional one-way relationship between authors and readers, or producers and consumers. Public historians in particular have been searching for a way to "share authority" with the audience for a long time, and Rosenzweig convincingly argued that the Web is an ideal medium for sharing and collaboration.[8]

Rosenzweig's expression "share authority" reflects the fundamental idea of oral history and public history: "shared authority." Public history focuses on historical science practice based on the collaboration between historians and non-experts, instead of an approach where the former pass on their expert knowledge to the latter. The assumption is that one must share authority with various people in various settings. The concept of "shared authority" was proposed by

(4) Rosenzweig, Roy, and Thelen, David. *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

(5) Rosenzweig, Roy, "Everyone a Historian," in *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life*, eds. Rosenzweig, Roy, and Thelen, David (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), pp.177–89.

(6) Cohen, Daniel, and Rosenzweig, Roy, *Digital History: A Guide to Gathering, Preserving, and Presenting the Past on the Web* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1st ed. 2005).

(7) Cohen and Rosenzweig, *Digital History*, p.7.

(8) Cohen and Rosenzweig, *Digital History*, pp.7–8.

Michael Frisch, a specialist of research in oral history.[9] He argued that not only the historians and experts as "listeners" but also "narrators" have a "shared authority" in oral history research, interpretation, and publication. In the past, research in oral history was unconsciously based on the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee, where the "narrative" contained in the interview was supposed to be interpreted by the "listener," who had to be a historian with relevant expertise or someone with the authority to interpret the narrative. However, the "narrator" here is not a passive presence whose "narrative" is listened to but an active being who provides the "narrative." In addition, the "narrative" talked about here is based on the interactive dialogue between the "listener" and the "narrator." Therefore, authority represented by their experiences and "narratives" are values intrinsic not only to the "listener," such as a historian, but also to the "narrator." These are the essential elements of the concept of "shared authority."[10]

This concept has become an ideal that we should always bear in mind, and a standard that should be upheld in the field of contemporary public history. It is also the basis for promoting the participation of ordinary people, who are not experts in history, in public history practice, including in history museums, art museums, and libraries, where traditionally experts have had exclusive relevant authority. "Shared authority" is the backbone of collaborative history practice. Digital public history, as the digital version of public history, follows the same principles.

Digital history in itself is not digital public history. Digital public history is a practical historical science that emerges from the fusion of digital technology and the idea of the public. It overcomes the asymmetry in history practices between history experts and non-experts to promote the democratization of historical science and the collaborative governance of historical science. In other words, digital public history can be considered a public-oriented historical science that is grounded in "practice" and involves ordinary people. However, it is not easy to fully realize the idea of digital public history in practice. Those who become equal partners in sharing authority in historical practice sometimes have a narrow-minded historical view. Moreover, the posting of historical accounts based on questionable sources by amateur historians can give rise to tensions with experts. The Web could also become a tool for historical revisionists; in this case, "shared authority" risks being used to infiltrate and manipulate historical practices online.[11] In addition, even today, many people worldwide still do not have access to digital technologies, although digital technology is being widely promoted. Sometimes, this promotion does not democratize digital technology but instead divides people by excluding the weak. What is more,

(9) Frisch, Michael, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990).

(10) Suga, Yutaka 菅豊, "Saika no paburikku hisutorii no saika" 「災禍のパブリック・ヒストリーの災禍」, in *Saika wo meguru kioku to Katari* 『災禍をめぐる記憶と語り』, ed. Ryuma Shineha (Tokyo: Nakanishiya Publisher, 2021).

(11) Suga, Yutaka 菅豊, "Paburikku hisutorii towa nanika?" 「パブリック・ヒストリーとはなにか？」, in Paburikku hisutorii nyuumon 『パブリック・ヒストリー入門』, eds. Yukata Suga and Katsutaka Hojō (Bensei Publisher, 2019), pp.3–68.

there is a risk that experts exploit voluntary participants in cloud sourcing as a free labor force by deceiving them in the name of collaboration.

Serge Noiret, the leading figure in contemporary digital public history,[12] has proposed a new type of historian, namely a digital public historian who mediates between individual and collective memories in order to overcome the various challenges in digital public history.

"In order to ensure the impartiality required for managing the past, undertaking document collection, for filtering, mediating and bringing the community and different publics together online, and for directing new knowledge about the past through the resources provided by digital technologies, a new generation of historians, whom we could call digital public historians, must transform themselves into professional intermediaries capable of providing a scientific framework for collecting documents and for critically managing new invented archives (that is, those that did not physically exist) that have been uploaded to the internet thanks to individual contributions and crowdsourcing procedures. Digital public historians share their authority with a public of 'crowd sourcers' in the same way that Michael Frisch, in the '90s, envisioned ways of applying best oral history practices to collecting memories."[13]

(12) Serge Noiret, Mark, Tebeau, Gerben Zaagsma eds. *The Handbook of Digital Public History* (Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2022), which is currently the most comprehensive reference book on digital public history, was published after the Japanese version of this paper was written.

(13) Noiret, Serge, "Digital Public History," in *A Companion to Public History*, ed. David M. Dean (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 2018), p.117.