

modern challenges for public history

How Strategic Planning Can Help Overcome Technological Advances in the Distribution of History



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Tim Grove opens a 2009 article on the American Historical Association’s website stating that “even in these days of instant communication and seemingly unlimited information at one’s fingertips, it is becoming increasingly difficult to keep pace with new technology and to think critically about how we can use it to educate the public about history.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Public history stands in at a unique precipice in the ever advancing technically modern world, one which asks: how does a discipline focused on preserving and understanding the past make way for the new methods and innovations of the future?

Public history venues from museums, historic sites, archives, and others organizations expectedly were resistant to the technical turn of modernity. History thrives by drawing in visitors to these sites and venues, so it is only natural that thoughts of online information and images were conceived as threats to producing history as the world had always known it. This is where strategic planning comes into play for public history venues and organizations. Without the means to adapt to the changing atmosphere of the world toward technology, historical sites, museums, writers, and others would never have been able to ride through the rough waves that initially were wrought upon the discipline of history when technology and the internet first began to emerge as a dominating force. John M. Bryson states in *The Jossey-Bass Handbook of Nonprofit Leadership and Management* that “we can use strategic planning to help us think, act, and learn strategically – to figure out what we should want, why, and how to get it. Think of strategic planning as hope…”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Today it is not surprising to see history museums, historic sites, and history-oriented organizations to have online support systems whether in the form of websites, digital archives, etc. As the twenty-first century has evolved, so has the state of public history in the modern dominant society. “Various tools now allow users to manipulate the images to research, inspect, and share with friends. Several magnification tools allow users to zoom in on an image, getting a closer look at a map, document, or painting, often closer than they can get in a physical exhibition.”[[3]](#footnote-3) For researchers and students, the internet has become a treasure trove of online databases such as JSTOR and even Google Books, where hundreds of thousands of historical books, documents, and articles are available at the click of a button or the push of a few keys on the keyboard. It seems, however, upon reflection, that providing these resources must be somewhat of a challenge for universities, historical organizations, museums, and the like. First off, they need to find out what is already on the internet and how well it is being distributed. Then, there are things like copyright guidelines and determining whether a website lets users alter the information on a webpage, such as on Wikipedia. The conclusion, then, seems to support a notion that the most significant challenge that modern technology and media have imposed on the discipline of public history is how to preserve its integrity.

History is a tool that is used by everyone, in every part of the world, at every age. It is how we learn from past mistakes and also past glories. Constantly, there are new discoveries being made about our ancestors and the places and times in which they lived. History is monumental, which means that managing it is something that takes an extraordinary amount of effort, planning, and time. The skills learned through mediums such as nonprofit leadership and organizational management will thus serve to help organizations put together processes through which they can outline the most important goals and steps to which the integrity of organization’s mission and values rely on most. There will always be challenges in the discipline of public history as technology continues to advance and more new methods of research and preservation are discovered. The most important thing to remember in the face of these challenges, therefore, is that as long as an organization has adequate strategies in place to overcome these challenges, then the soundness of an organization’s values and productivity should not be compromised as a consequence of those challenges. As stated by Bryson, “thinking strategically about implementation and developing an effective implementation plan are important tasks on the road to realizing the strategies developed in formulating and planning…successfully implemented and institutionalized strategies result in the establishment of a new regime, a set of implicit or explicit principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures around which actors’ expectations converge in a given area. Regime building is necessary to preserve gains in the face of competing demands.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

Just as there is a process and methodology that must be used when researching and writing history, so must there be a process for displaying and protecting it so that it can be distributed to the public as widely and effectively as possible. As concluded by Tim Grove in his 2009 article, “the best advice I can offer is to watch what others are doing, stay connected and engaged in the ongoing dialogue about technology, don’t fear experimentation, and always look for creative partners who can share costs.”[[5]](#footnote-5) History has become a team sport, far different than in the days of the Enlightenment and ancient philosophers who individually created such profound impacts on society. Today, while history may still be researched and written individually by many, it is of utmost important to keep in mind that the orientation of today’s society revolves around community and teamwork. As the most successful and influential foundations and nonprofit organization’s of today will no doubt attest, those with the most heartened and dedicated team, who face challenges with determination instead of fear and frustration, will find ways to weather the continually changing technological atmosphere of academia and, for our case, the cause of the public history sector: to spread knowledge, thinking, and learning.

References:

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Grove, Tim. “New Media and the Challenges for Public History.” (2009, American Historical Association).

1. Tim Grove. “New Media and the Challenges for Public History.” (2009, American Historical Association). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. John M. Bryson. “Strategic Planning and the Strategy Change Cycle.” In: *The Jossey-Bass Handbook of Nonprofit Leadership and Management.* (John Wiley & Sons, 2016): 242. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Grove. “New Media and the Challenges for Public History.” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. John M. Bryson. “The Strategy Change Cycle.” (2016): 261. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Grove. “New Media and the Challenges for Public History.” [↑](#footnote-ref-5)