

3 IPUP Conference 2010: Packaging the Past for the Media

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The Institute for the Public Understanding of the Past held a conference entitled “Packaging the Past for the Media: Communicating across Museums, Television, Radio and the Internet in a Multi-Platform Era” at the University of York on Wednesday, 18 May 2010. The conference brought together people from a wide range of careers, from archaeology academics to media professionals. The purpose? To discuss how the past could be effectively wrapped and distributed to the general public.

The overall theme of the afternoon seemed to be story-telling: the best method to get non-academics interested in the vast realm of the past, whether it be prehistory or recent history, is to tell a story. This story, in order to be effective, must gain the empathy or sympathy of the audience. Discussions over cups of apple juice after the conference about whether this is the right method for archaeologists to disseminate their knowledge will be expounded later. For now, I will introduce the keynotes and their presentations about how the past, over the last century but especially the last decade, has been rewrapped in the different media outlets and presented to the public.

The Keynotes and Panel Discussions.

The first of our keynote speakers was Martin Davidson, BBC Commissioner for TV History, and he divulged the secret behind what sells and what does not. He traced the origins of the present public obsession with the past, especially on television programming, talking about a massive shift in interest and the way historical programs were produced.

He began with a clip of Alan Taylor’s 30-minute presentation on ITV in the late-1950s, where the producers could not believe that the general public would find a talk about history to be interesting. However, not only was the speaker engaging, the audience was entranced. This was a sample of the power the past held, and 40 years later, the public began desiring more programs that gave them a glimpse into other lives. However, this audience is very diverse and has different interests, the reflection of which can be seen in the variety of history-related shows produced in the last decade. Davidson attributes this partially to the millennium event, as well as the related, nearly simultaneous shift in publishing, where historians were writing grand narratives for the public’s consumption. Much to everyone’s surprise, these new books and programs were generating massive amounts of revenue. People desired these supposedly boring subjects of decades long research, condensed into academic novels. The media followed suit and took advantage of this new avenue of consumption, and the period of past-obsessed audiences began.

Davidson went on to tell the conference audience that the past is most sellable via empathy-engaging stories. His talk neatly segued into Chief Curator Lucy Worsley’s presentation on her responsibilities with the Historic Royal Palaces, and the celebration of Henry VIII’s 500th birthday at the palaces he built and inhabited. She discussed the increase in visitor numbers due to the effect of media focus on particular subjects, as well as a reconstruction of these

heritage sites as leisure family destinations. She discussed the transformation of Hampton Court Palace's displays, from the typical linear, mainly information-drowning board journeys to an engaging and enjoyable experience, complete with actors and novel but factual storylines. Worsley discussed the part played by the literature and TV shows in attracting visitors to these sites that usually languish with small numbers of elderly visitors.

The afternoon continued on with a more obvious archaeologically relevant panel discussion about the BBC and British Museums' "A History of the World in 100 Objects". Representing the British Museum (BM) was J.D. Hill (Research Manager) and Frances Carey (Senior Consultant for Public Engagement), and together with BBC Online's Head of Interactive for Nations and English Regions Daniel Dodd. Each had a chance to speak for 15 minutes about their roles in planning this massive project together and presenting it on many platforms: the radio, Internet and in museums. The sheer amount of collaboration and networking was gargantuan and intense but had significant outcomes, bringing together neighboring museums as well as setting up firm connections to their local radio stations.

Daniel Dodd talked about this collaboration and tracked its progression through the planning stages. There were different agendas and priorities, as well as varying ways and timescales of working. All of these had to be integrated and changed in order to make the program successful. Dodd continued on with a discussion of whether the project encouraged audiences to use multiple platforms; for example, after hearing about an object on BBC Radio 4, would a listener then go online to look at an object and follow links to local events at museums? Would the listener attend these open events for a chance to look at some of the objects?

The online portion of this program enabled the public to upload pictures and stories of objects they felt significant in their local, national, and possibly global histories. This in turn led to some serious questions about legacy and responsibility of the academics involved. At what point was something "worth" considering as a historical object? What could be the criteria? And, at the end of the radio program, how would the BBC and BM let the project die down? All of these questions had their moment to be addressed during the conference.

Finally, the last panel of the afternoon featured Janet Barnes, Chief Executive of the York Museums, Jake Gilmore, the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) Public Affairs Officer, and Bloomsbury Academic's Managing Director Jonathan Glasspool. As it was the end of the afternoon, each presentation was cut very short and few questions could be asked. However, the "Impact of Impact" panel managed to present some key points about academia and the public. Barnes discussed the collaboration between Yorkshire Museum, the Castle Museum, and Harrogate Museum, as well as the collaboration with the local BBC radio station. Gilmore highlighted the importance of selling archaeology to the public and validating the expenses that such studies take. Glasspool shamelessly promoted the new company, but also reminded us of an important point- that is, making our research universally available. What Bloomsbury Academic hopes to do in the future is to make available those few copies of site reports and volumes of finds available online to students and other academics. It was on this point that the conference came to a close, out of time for any more questions and further discussion about Barnes' experiences

with the media, Gilmore's points about archaeological research and Glasspool's company's potential to bring such research to a large audience.

Discussion

Tell a story, and preferably one that touches on the consumer's emotions.

Generally, this was the advice we were given. A few of the fellow archaeologists present took issue with this. How could we freely create stories about the past, especially regarding prehistory where many holes in the greater picture exist? Davidson believes that an effective show about history stimulates "latent" curiosity via captivating the audience's attention by tickling their emotions and appealing to their empathy. It was no coincidence that he predominantly showed clips where the show's subject was displaying rather strong emotions.

More importantly, as one archaeologist commented, how would archaeological science fit into this storytelling? Clearly the archaeological research done in biology and chemistry labs across the U.K. has importance and should be disseminated to the public, but how would we present it as a story? Should we even bother presenting it to the laypeople if they will not find it interesting?

I believe that archaeological science provides greater insight into the past, with much more scope than the simple macroscopic analyses of past archaeologists. I also believe that while the exact scientific methods employed would bore lay people to death, I think that the results would spark "latent" curiosity and find a niche in the masses of people. Returning, then, to that last question of whether we should bother with packaging this specialized knowledge, I think we must address why such research is being conducted. Jake Gilmore briefly touched on this with his presentation about the AHRC's funding grants. Clearly our research of past material culture, whether scientific in method or not, is important, and is interesting to many people outside of archaeological academia. Many people want to understand where we come from, and what we have achieved in this past. If this was not so, then programs like "A History of the World in a 100 Objects" would not be successful.

The conference demonstrated the ways in which we should rework the formula for how we present the past to the public, using tools such as the media and collaboration with other learning outlets. Yet, it fell short of really advising archaeologists who are uncomfortable to create an emotional story out of the past. Would we be sacrificing our academic professionalism and selling our souls by sensationalizing our research? Or do we owe more to the intent of archaeology to understand our past and to disseminate such knowledge to other human beings? Is there not a middle ground where we could engage the public's interest without pretending to really know who these people of the past are? These are questions that we need to answer as our technology advances and creates more outlets for us to utilize. They are questions that are going to be grappled with in many an archaeologist's conscience. They must be dealt with soon, because the public does not seem to be slowing down in its desire to know more about the past.