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Public History Weekly - A Review

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Abstract:

As with any other scholarship, public history has its academic journals. The two main journals are *The Public Historian* (USA, 1978-) and *The Public History Review* (Australia, 1992-). As a new-comer in the field, *International Public History* – the journal of the International Federation for Public History (IFPH) – symbolizes the wish to move away from a predominantly Anglo-Saxon and English-speaking public history. The creation of *Public History Weekly* (PHW) in 2013 was another early and significant step in this process of internationalization. PHW has published (by March 2018) 260 articles from 74 authors and 479 comments – in 13 languages. All articles – published every Thursday morning – and comments are open access. Open peer-reviewed (OPR), PHW belongs to a new format of publishing in the digital age. In September 2017, Seth Denbo was wondering “Can history accommodate modes of review and publication that would provide greater flexibility and enable non-traditional research outputs to flourish?” With 27,600 visits and 400,000 page-views per month, PHW provides some preliminary answers on what digital and international public history publishing can be.

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1 Public history weekly: not just another journal

– Breaking Barriers

What does PHW bring than others do not? In many respects, PHW is not just another journal. Launched in September 2013, PHW stems from a collaboration between 12 historians from Austria, Switzerland, and Germany. This collaboration received the support from FHNW University of Applied Sciences and Arts (Basel, Switzerland), and De Gruyter Oldenbourg Publishing House (Germany). Since September 2016, PHW extended the collaboration to the University of Wrocław (Poland), the University of Vienna (Austria), and the University of Education in Lucerne (Switzerland). In doing so, PHW is both an international project and a bridge between academics and publishing houses.

The real novelty comes from the publishing format. Founding member and current managing director of PHW, Marko Demantowsky remembers that “the initial question was: how should a journal in our field, today, be designed, in order to reach as many readers as possible?” Because, according to him “it is very difficult to initiate a lively and controversial discussion on the key problems of history and civics education via these [academic] journals.” Therefore, the initial objective was to build bridges “between research and practice, politics and academia, as well as schools and universities.” At the core of public history, building bridges between scholars, practitioners, and wider audiences directly informed the format: an open peer reviewed BlogJournal.

– Open peer review: Publishing in the digital age

Public History Weekly was created to follow academic standards while broadening public discussion. Articles mostly come from core authors – who submit proposals twice a year – or guest authors – invited by the executive board to write on certain issues. Both types are open peer reviewed. Not to be mistaken with peer-reviewed journals available in open access, open peer review (OPR) is a new format of digital publishing. Defined by the Roy Rosenzweig Center for New Media as the future of digital publishing, OPR fosters public discussion through the mutual disclosure of the names of the writer and the referees. Applied by some journals like the *Public Philosophy Journal* (“Scholarship Shaped by the Public”), OPR is based on formative peer review in which the public is an active participant. Reviews are published with the main piece whose author may also answer his/her reviews. For instance, Peter Seixas’s article “Culture, civilization and historical consciousness” (2017) in PHW was accompanied by Jörn Rüsen and Matthias Krämer’s reviews as well as Seixas’s response. This model has resulted in PHW’s publication of 479 reviews and comments since 2013.

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The OPR process has several benefits for public history. OPR publishes and gives public recognition to reviews. PHW schedules, announces, and publishes the reviews. Reviews also fuel public discussion as exemplified by Rösen and Krämer whose reviews of Seixas' article developed further the links between culture and civilization. Likewise, the limited length of PHW articles (6,000 characters maximum) as well as the quasi instant reviews are wonderful opportunities to propose work-in-progress. Nevertheless, PHW – and OPR at large – are not devoid of challenges. The limited length of the articles and the absence of blind peer review make it difficult for scholars to use their publication for academic evaluation. What is more problematic is the absence of designated reviewers in the last couple of articles. Indeed, Seixas' article in December 2017 was, by the time of writing this review in March 2018, the last one to have been assigned dedicated peer reviewers, although more than a dozen have been published since then. Public comments are still episodically published – such as Marino Ferri's recent commentary on Peter Gautschi's article – but they do not seem to be requested as part of the editorial process. This is mainly, as confessed by Demantowsky, because it has become increasingly difficult to find people who can review articles with very short notice (and even more so since PHW is now publishing two contributions every week). Finding two to four new reviewers every week is a daunting task for the board of editors. Ideally, in OPR, reviews should now come from the public such as Joanna Wojdon's recent article which, after one week, already had seven replies. However, by April 2018 only four out of the 18 articles had received public comments. Even though each submission is examined by the four editorial teams, this demonstrates the challenges of creating an OPR weekly journal.

– Writing for large audiences

Open peer-reviewed, PHW is also open access and user-friendly. Users can search contents – both articles and comments – by issues, keywords, or dates. With 6,000 characters maximum for the text (roughly 1,100 words), 3,000 for the footnotes, one to three bibliographic references and one picture, articles are definitely shorter and more reader-friendly than those in academic journals. Although articles are slightly longer than the standard length of blogs for journalists and newspapers, it is still quite a challenge for most scholars to present their arguments in such a format. Demantowsky is convinced that PHW can help blogging to become more academically acceptable. Writing digital public history indeed requires to learn how to produce short pieces, using hyperlinks rather than footnotes, and sharing sources to reach broader audiences and create public discussion.

2 From didactics to international public history

– Didactics and Public History

Core authors have complete freedom of choice for their contribution. This explains the variety of topics such as food, monuments, education, or politics. However, the initial approach focused on history and the didactics of history. Demantowsky argued in 2015 that:

we feel that including what happens in schools in the critical debate on historical culture is important [...] and is—at least in the Anglo-Saxon community—new. [...] Similarly, we won't be able to understand the recipients of material and conceptions offered by museums or the mass media if we ignore the fact that the teaching of history at school is an instance of historical socialization. We want to merge both discourses at PHW.

For instance, in March 2017, David Dean and Joanna Wojdon wrote an article on public history and didactics, using museums as examples of common space for school education and public history. By March 2018, PHW index indicates that 32 articles deal with “curriculum,” 25 with “history teaching,” and 24 with “civic education.” Other issues that have received similar attention are “history politics” (31 articles) and “theory” (22 articles), although some of them also touch upon history education. This focus on didactics and public history is indeed quite specific to PHW, and perhaps, to German speaking countries. As a point of comparison, history@work – the blog of the National Council on Public History – hardly explores school history education.

Since 2016 PHW has yet moved to a broader approach towards public uses of history. On Wikipedia, didactics are no longer part of the main definition: “The International BlogJournal is a peer-reviewed academic journal on all aspects of public history.” PHW published five articles on monuments in 2017, reflecting recent public debates. Digital public history – Serge Noiret's articles for instance – represent another recent innovation in PHW. Although public history practitioners do need to work on the nexus with school education, PHW's continued focus on didactics and theory contrasts with other approaches to public history. Public history practitioners who focus on practices, skills, and applications of history, for example, may be puzzled by the fact that the index only proposes seven articles about museums since 2016, or only three about archives and only

one about architecture. This looks somehow at odds with the fact that heritage management, museums and archives are some of the main issues discussed in the field of public history.

– A tool for international public history

PHW's format fits perfectly well the internationalization of public history, even if, at first, PHW was mostly designed for German-speakers. International public history – so far dominated by English-speaking resources – needs to include a variety of languages and communities. The initial authors and partners were from Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, but in 2014, PHW expanded its team to other languages. The Advisory Board (four) includes two North-Americans (Mills Kelly and Jasmine Alinder). In April 2018, PHW is certainly one of the most international publishing adventures with 31 core authors from 22 countries (including Argentina, Brazil, China, Greece, Italy, Mexico, New Zealand, Russia, Spain, Turkey, the UK, and the USA). Articles are published in two (English and German), sometimes three (author's mother tongue) – languages. In addition to languages, some articles interrogate the idea of international public history or bring an international perspective to their topics as did a recent article on the role of public history within the European Union. As a result, with 27,600 visits and 400,000 page-views per month, PHW is a digital publishing success. While still mainly accessed from German speaking countries – 1,8 million page-views from Germany in 2017 – the variety of users – from North America (500,000 and 315,000 respectively for the US and Canada), to Italy with 137,000 page-views or Tonga – shows to what extent the changing role of history and historians has become a global issue.