The impact of social media on History education: A view from England

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It does require some little imagination to realise what the consequences will be of not educating our children to sort out the differences between essential and non-essential information, raw fact, prejudice, half-truth and untruth, so that they know when they are being manipulated, by whom, and for what purpose (Longworth, 1981:17-19).

Abstract

The paper examines recent ideas about the use of new technology in History education, contrasting the ideas of policy makers, initial teacher education curriculum specifications, and expert practitioners in the field of school history and new technology.

The paper draws on Stephen J Ball's theoretical framework which considers changes in education policy in the light of the context of influence (who were the policy makers in charge at the time), the context of text production (what were the key policy documents influencing change), and the context of practice (what were the views of practitioners). A more developed explanation of this framework can be found in Phillips, 1998:5-7).

It argues that there has been a disconnection between the views of expert practitioners and those making policy, and considers the implications of radical recent changes in the way that young people get their information about the past – and the present. This raises the question of what it means 'to be good at ICT' as a History teacher; what should our priorities be in terms of the training of History teachers?

The concluding section of the paper argues that less attention should be given to issues of general technological competence, and greater emphasis should be placed on the development of skills of information literacy, in a society that has recently been widely described as a 'post-truth' society. Although the focus of the paper is largely on developments in England, the issues explored have relevance to History education in other countries.

Keywords: History Education; New Technology; Social media; Digital Literacy; Post-Truth.

Introduction

In recent times, both in England and in many other education systems, it has been seen as increasingly important that teachers coming into the profession

are able to use new technology to improve teaching and learning in their subject teaching. It has even been argued that any teachers who are not able to make use of new technology in their teaching should be either forbidden entry to the profession, or "culled" from it (Cochrane, 1995). It is also generally accepted that forms of expertise in the deployment of new technology in the classroom will differ, to at least some extent, between one subject and another. To provide just two examples, data logging software is an important asset for science teaching, but has no relevance to the History teacher; GiS mapping software is primarily of interest to Geography teachers. This raises the question about what it means 'to be good at ICT' as a History teacher. Given that there is not enough time in a pre-service teacher education course to teach students every aspect of new technology which might be of use, there as some hard choices about what should be prioritised (Haydn, 2012). Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that although England has invested heavily in equipment and training for the use of new technology in schools, it has proved more difficult than envisaged to train teachers so that they are all adept and accomplished users of Information and Communications Technology (ICT). Reports by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) in England note that there are still substantial variations in the extent to which new teachers are able to use new technology effectively in their teaching (Ofsted, 2010).

Social context

The past decade has seen a revolution in the way that people receive information about "the news", and about "the past". At the opening of the World Congress of Historical Sciences at Jinan, in 2015, the President of the Congress noted that "It seems the historical world view of the younger generation is built on popular presentations of history on media, films, TV, often written by non-professional historians. How can we keep abreast of new developments?" (Hietala, 2015:1). A 2016 "YouGov" survey of over 50,000 young people across 26 countries (including 2,000 from the UK) reported that 28% of the respondents cited social media as their main news source, compared with 24% for TV (BBC news, 15 June 2016). At about the same time, the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism Research also suggested that 51% of people with online access use social media as a news source. What are the implications of these developments in new technology and social media for History teachers? In what ways (if at all) should we teach History differently in the light of the development of the internet, social media, and Web 2.0 applications?

Much of the history that appears on social media platforms is unmediated by History teachers or academic historians. Historian John Tosh points to "the diversity and unevenness of the history which is now publicly available" (Tosh, 2008:136) and Eric Hobsbawn argued that "History is being invented in vast quantities… the world is full of people inventing histories and lying about history" (Hobsbawn, 2002:19). Current controversies such as the election of US President Donald Trump, the UK exit from the European Union and debates about climate change have been marked by accusations that many people's views have been influenced by "Fake News" and falsehoods. It should be mentioned that "bad history" is not just limited to salacious and unprincipled hate sites and news channels, although these might be some of the most extreme examples of "bad history". The statements of elected politicians about the past, national History curricula, school textbooks, history on television, history in the newspapers and some of the outputs of "celebrity" historians are also often questionable in terms of their regard for truth and accuracy. As Hobsbawn (2002) points out, the world is full of people trying to use the past for their own, often unscrupulous purposes (for some examples of "bad history", see Haydn & Ribbens, 2017).

Given that part of what makes history useful to young people is teaching about the principles and conventions which historians use to ascertain the validity of claims (corroboration, contradiction, provenance, authority, witting and unwitting testimony, motive, purpose, audience etc.), our subject would appear to have a lot to offer in terms of responding to this situation.

This is not to suggest that the development of the internet and the growth of social media has had an entirely negative influence on History education. The internet, social media and Web 2.0 applications have make it easier for History teachers to access "impact" resources which can help to make a particular teaching point more effectively than with just text books and teacher exposition and to quickly build up collections of powerful and effective resources to teach topics (Walsh, 2004). The internet also provides access to resources which help link the past to the present and to the "real world" in a way which enables pupils to "see the point" of the subject (e.g. digital newspaper archives) and for pupils to learn the subject outside taught classroom sessions through the use of wikis, discussion boards and a range of Web. 2.0 applications. Although the use of mobile phones within schools is still a controversial issue in English schools (Doward, 2015), given the number of young people who now possess mobile phones or other digital devices,

the possibilities of "reaching" pupils are significantly expanded. Perhaps as important, the facility to access the richness of historical resources that are available on the internet has made it easier to teach the subject in a way that motivates and engages pupils.

However, for all these assets and advantages, the development of the internet and social media poses difficult questions and challenges for History educators, and throws a different light on the question, "What it means to be good at ICT", as a History teacher or student.

Evolving views on the role of new technology in History education

The context of influence: Politicians and policy makers

An indication of political perspectives on the role that new technology might play in education can be gleaned from a Department for Education statement about priorities for education:

> *The government's principal aim for the education service at all levels and in all forms of learning is to support economic growth and improve the nation's competitiveness and quality of life by raising standards of educational achievement and skill and by promoting an efficient and flexible labour market* (Department for Education and Employment, 1995:1).

Scrutiny of politicians' statements about computers and education reveals a strong emphasis on the vocational and economic justification for the use of computers in schools. This was to be a consistent strand in politicians' statements about the virtues and importance of ICT, running from Kenneth Baker, one of the architects of the first National Curriculum in England (introduced in 1991), to Michael Gove, a more recent Secretary of State for Education. In the Department for Education and Skills policy document *Transforming the way we learn: a vision for the future of ICT in schools* (DfES, 2002:4), there was reference to the potential of ICT to boost the prospects of British industry, and to make Britain "a world leader in the export of learning services", but no mention was made of improving teaching and learning in school subjects. This instrumental and economic justification for the use of computers in schools was epitomised by Prime Minister Tony Blair's rationale for the use of new technology in schools: "The future lies in the marriage of education and technology. The knowledge race has begun. The pace of technological change means the task is urgent. Knowledge is power. Information is opportunity" (Blair, 1995:14).

A more recent manifestation of this *technicist* rationale for the use of new technology in schools can be found in Secretary of State Michael Gove's 2012 speech to the British Educational Training and Technology Show, praising British software companies export record, and calling for much more emphasis on programming and coding in schools (Gove, 2012), and later designating 2014 as "The year of code" in a revised version of the National Curriculum, with computer coding becoming a compulsory part of the curriculum for all pupils over the age of five (Gove, 2014). Tech journalist Jay Griffiths noted that in introducing "the year of code", "Gove's speech made 54 references to the future, speaking of the new, a vanguard of change, transformation, innovation, progress and jobs" (Griffiths, 2014).

Throughout this period, the vision of policy makers was that ICT in schools was about enabling England to compete with other modern economies, to produce a technologically enabled workforce, and to promote jobs and entrants to the professions in Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) subjects.

The context of text production: ICT competence specifications for initial teacher education

After a period of having had a very extensive list of requirements and prescribed technological competences relating to capability in ICT, extending to over a hundred competence statements and 15 pages of text within the overall statement of competence required to be granted Qualified Teacher Status (DfEE, 1998), England moved towards a less detailed and prescriptive framework for assessing the competence in ICT required to be awarded Qualified Teacher Status. Out of 33 "standards" which had to be met in order to pass the course, four related to ICT:

- They must have pass an online "professional skills" test in ICT. The students must demonstrate the ability to make changes to slides in presentation software using a web browser, use email and various functions within email, use a text editor and email, update a spreadsheet, download resources from the internet and register for a newsletter).
- They must know how to use skills in ICT to support their teaching and wider professional activities.
- They must be able to design opportunities for learners to develop their ICT skills.
- They must be able to teach lessons and sequences of lessons across the age

> and ability range for which they are trained and in which they use a range of teaching strategies and resources, including e-learning (TDA, 2007).

A later guidance document (TDA, 2009) laid down a list of 12 recommendations for good practice for preparing student teachers to use new technology effectively in their subject teaching (see Appendix 1).

All these initial teacher education competence frameworks had a heavy emphasis on technological capability – the ability to use PowerPoint, the interactive whiteboard, Virtual Learning Environments, e-portfolio software etc. There was no suggestion of differentiation according to subject discipline, and no mention of the question of pedagogical effectiveness – the question of whether the student was able to use new technology to improve teaching and learning in their school subject. None of the competence specifications for initial teacher education courses have contained any reference to training teachers who are able to help pupils to make critical and discerning use of the internet and social media.

The context of practice: The perspective of History teachers and teacher educators

An early development in the use of ICT in English schools arising out of the idea that the main function of computers in schools was to train pupils to use computers was the phenomenon of "curriculum mapping" of ICT, whereby each subject department would be given responsibility for getting all pupils to use a particular ICT application. So; for example, all pupils would at some point use *Excel* in a maths lesson, all language classes would do a word processing exercise at some point, all History classes would do a desktop publishing exercise. In the words of one teacher, "it was like dipping sheep" (Haydn, 2004). Unsurprisingly, most History teachers were not thrilled to give up precious teaching time to do a job that they regarded as the responsibility of the Computer Studies department. Like most teachers, their main interest in new technology was whether it could do anything that would help them teach their subject more effectively. As Walsh (2004) pointed out, the facility to "cut and paste", to save things on a memory stick, and to link to "impact resources" on the internet, were to prove much stronger incentives to using new technology. A series of articles and special editions of *Teaching History,* the main professional journal for History teachers, helped to spread ideas about "good practice", and the possibilities offered by new technology, and a number of teacher or teacher educator "pioneers" provided a plethora of

ideas about how to use ICT to improve teaching and learning in History. An OECD study of the ways in which teacher education providers attempted to get student teachers to be able to use ICT effectively in their subject teaching found that many tutors and teachers who were acknowledged as being "expert" in their use of new technology had reservation about some of the expensive applications that had elicited the interest and enthusiasm of policy makers. Several experienced and accomplished tutors noted the pressures to keep up with "the latest thing" in new technology, whether it be interactive whiteboards, response software, or e-portfolio software (OECD, 2010). The pressure for the provision of "one-to-one" tablet computers has also been seen as another example of "hyped" claims for the use of ICT by some researchers (see, for example, Convery, 2009).

As early as 2008 – well before current concerns about fake news, Walsh (2008), a leading figure in History education in England, was arguing that information literacy, particularly in relation to internet sources, should be a major concern for History educators. The following extracts are from interviews with 14 year olds, asked about the provenance of the sources they used for an internet enquiry:

- *I think it was a site called Wikipedia.*
- *Can't remember, I just printed it off.*
- *I can't remember, it came up with different ones.*
- *I think it was Wikipedia.*
- *I looked up Adolf Hitler recently and I think that was Heinemann.*
- *I have no idea.*
- *I Googled it* (Walsh, 2008:5).

In a more recent publication, Walsh (2017) argues that although many pupils use the internet a lot in their study of History, they do not use it well, and often do not go beyond a simple "retrieval culture", whereby they simply find and use the first results of a Google search, often in an uncritical and unthinking way. He points to "the challenge of students" almost unlimited access to information and a general unpreparedness to use it effectively', arguing that

> *History teachers have a vitally important role to play in this area. By avoiding generic 'go and find out' approaches and focusing on the specific issues posed by specific resources, they can help to bring some of the discipline of the historian and hopefully make students better users of the web (Walsh, 2017:258).*

As the sections above hopefully demonstrate, there is a considerable difference between the ideas of policymakers about the role that new technology should play in schools, the demands of competence specifications for initial teacher education, and the ideas of practising History teachers and teacher educators.

The next section of the papers focuses on recent research findings about deficits in digital literacy amongst young people (12-15 year olds) in England.

Digital literacy in England

Digital literacy is here defined as the ability to make a reasonably accurate and well-founded estimation of the reliability and truthfulness of information derived from the internet and social media.

The available evidence supports Walsh's concern that many young people are not accomplished evaluators of the reliability of internet and social media sources.

> *The information literacy of young people, has not improved with the widening access to technology: in fact, their apparent facility with computers disguises some worrying problems…. Internet research shows that the speed of young people's web searching means that little time is spent in evaluating information, either for relevance, accuracy or authority* (Joint Information Systems Committee/British Library, 2006:23).

More recently, an Office for Communications survey found that "Over three in ten 12-15s year olds (32%) believe that if a search engine lists information then it must be truthful, and one in seven (15%) don't consider the veracity of results" (Ofcom, 2013:105).

Given the sophistication of the ways in which information about the past and the present can be distorted and manipulated, these findings raise important concerns for the health of liberal democracies, and has implications for the ways in which History as a school subject might contribute to the civic literary of young people.

The limitations of "Our island story" models of History teaching

In England, as in many other countries, there has been strong political support for a form of History teaching and learning that focuses on transmitting a positive and congratulatory progress narrative of the national past which is it hoped, will promote social cohesion and harmony. In England, the "shorthand" for this is the transmission of what is termed "Our island story".

In the words of recent Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove:

> *There is no better way of building a modern, inclusive patriotism than by teaching all British citizens to take pride in this country's historic achievements. Which is why the next Conservative Government will ensure the curriculum teaches the proper narrative of British History - so that every Briton can take pride in this nation* (Gove, 2010:4-5).

This idea of school history extended to teaching a positive view of the influence of the British Empire, and other aspects of Britain's past:

> *Instead of being taught about Magna Carta, the Glorious Revolution and the heroic role of the Royal Navy in putting down slavery, our children are either taught to put Britain in the dock or they remain in ignorance of our island story. That is morally wrong, culturally self-defeating, and we would put it right* (Gove, 2008: paragraph 9).

This vision of school history faces two problems. First, as Gilbert has pointed out, the idea that national problems of equity, well-being and social justice have been eliminated after the march through history towards a perfect democracy, unblemished prosperity and social harmony is difficult to sustain given contemporary realities in most countries (Gilbert, 1984). Second, the attempt to present an unblemished and celebratory version of the national past is almost certainly doomed to failure precisely because of the growing role of the internet and social media as a source of information to young people. More than ever before, people get their knowledge of the past and the present from outside the History classroom, and they will inevitably find out at some point via the internet and social media that, for example, not all historians thought that the British Empire was unequivocally "a good thing" for all concerned, and that they have been misled by heroic and unproblematic stories of the national past. The continuing and misguided political obsession with a school History curriculum based around positive renderings of the national past (see, for example, Berger, 2017; Carretero, 2017), is a doomed project given the recent revolution in the way that information is shared digitally.

Conclusion

Given the exponential rise in the reach of social media, and the proliferation of "bad history" in society, the ability to handle information (about the past and the present) intelligently and discerningly is more than ever before, an essential component of a historical education relevant to life in the twenty first century.

Given the widespread public availability of "bad history" it is important that young people are taught/equipped to discern between good and bad history. The most intelligent way forward towards this aim is not to "shield" young people from bad history, but to show them examples and show them "how it is done" – how information about the past can be manipulated and distorted in very sophisticated and subtle ways. The internet provides some very good examples of "bad history" which enable History teachers to spell out what makes representations/interpretations of the past "good" or "bad". (And social media makes it easy to share examples).

This is important for the health and well-being of democratic societies, because as the previous section attempted to demonstrate, there are currently (certainly in England, but probably in other countries as well), substantial deficits in the digital and information literacy of young people. The fact that many people are "easily led" is an important issue in History:

> *Among the most remarkable and least studied aspects of world history are the many examples of how easily led human beings can be... . We may now claim to be more sophisticated and less easily manipulated than our ancestors, but there is little evidence of this. From the awesome ceremonials round Stonehenge or the temple of Karnak right through to the Romans, the Crusades, Napoleon, Hitler, Kennedy or Yestsin the ability to deploy propaganda skills has been one of the major determinants of historical direction* (Thomson, 1999: preface).

So what can History teachers do to address the problem of "fake news", and the sophisticated and unscrupulous ways in which politicians, organisations and journalists attempt to distort and manipulate the past for present day purposes? In addition to showing pupils examples of good and bad history and explaining the criteria and hallmarks of both, and getting pupils to understand how information about the past (and the present) can be distorted and manipulated for unethical purposes, teaching about "provenance" needs to expanded and updated to teach pupils about terms such as "astroturfing", "blackhatting", "domain authority", "reverse searching", and "trolling". (An excellent summary of "astroturfing" – what it is and why it matters is Bienkov, 2012). Another crucially important resource is the recent Stanford History Education Group research on Civic Literacy, which explains the mistakes that internet users often make in attributing authority to internet sources, and the techniques that "expert" internet users deploy to make accurate judgements on the reliability of web sources (Wineburg, 2015; Wineburg & McGrew, 2016). In a wide ranging discussion of what he terms "participatory propaganda" - fake news sites, media bubbles, clickbait, Macedonian news

factories, astroturfing – Caulfield argues that "The web is really delivering on its potential to be the biggest misinformation engine in history…. But the web also has the potential to be the best fact checking resource ever devised" (Caulfield, 2016, n.p.). However, this potential will only be realised if young people acquire the information literacy skills which Wineburg and McGrew (2016) describe. Given the scale and importance of the problem of "fake news", one of the most important responsibilities of the History teacher is in helping pupils to be able to "filter" information from digital sources, so that they become mature, autonomous and adroit use of information from digital sources, and become accomplished in making judgements on the reliability and trustworthiness of information from a range of sources, including information on the internet, social media, television and newspapers.

Of course, there is more to "being good at ICT as a History teacher" than just being able to induct young people into intelligent use of the internet and social media. It is still quite useful if History teachers and teacher educators are reasonably sound "technically", in the sense of being relaxed and reasonably adept at working out how to use new applications and fix "glitches"/minor or straightforward technical problems. History teachers ought to be knowledgeable and up to date in their awareness of the range of ICT applications and programs which can be used to enhance teaching and learning in History. It can help to motivate and engage learners if History teachers are accomplished in their use of the interactive whiteboard or PowerPoint. Walsh (2004) argues that one of the most important affordances of the internet is the facility it offers to build up really good 'collections' of powerful impact resources on a wide range of topics and that teachers are able to deploy these resources to construct well designed and intellectually rigorous pupil tasks and enquiries using ICT. Recent developments in social media mean that it is also useful if History teachers are able to make good use of ICT (websites, discussion groups, Blogs, Twitter etc) to develop their use of ICT in History by being a proactive and diligent part of the "community of practice" of History teachers in the field of ICT and are able to get pupils to use ICT to learn History outside taught sessions.

But none of these attributes, useful though they are, are anything like as important as the development of History teachers who are able to expertly educate young people about the reliability of information on the internet and on social media platforms.

Aldrich (2008), and Tosh (2009), amongst others, have argued that the aims and purposes of History education might shift in the light of present day concerns and exigencies. It could be argued that the revolution in information technology over the past decade necessitates some degree of reappraisal of aims and purposes, and of the ways in which History educators approach the use of new technology in the History classroom. In a world which has rapidly descended into a "post-truth", "alt-facts" and "fake news" condition because of the influence of the internet and social media, and the ways in which they operate, the development of young people's digital and information literacy has become perhaps the biggest responsibility that History teachers face in the world today.

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Appendix 1: "Characteristics for the provision and use of ICT that all teacher training providers should be aiming to attain" (2009:60-61). TDA, ITTE, BECTa, London: TDA.

(Available at https://www.oecd.org/edu/ceri/45046837.pdf)

1. All trainees have personal access to mobile computing and are able to access and transfer data between their placement school(s), their home and their training centre.
2. Trainees and trainers are offered opportunities to use a range of digital multimedia technology, e.g. subject and phase specific hardware and software.
3. The training provider is proactive in ensuring that the trainee has access to, and training in, the use of interactive whiteboards.
4. The training provider is proactive in ensuring that a trainee has access to whatever VLE is available, (e.g. school, local authority, Regional Broadband Consortium and ITT provider) when the trainee is on a school placement.
5. The training provider allows access to a range of web-based applications and also wireless technologies and infrastructure that support the needs of ITT, e.g. wikis; social bookmarking.
6. E-based support is an integral part of the provider's training programme and all documentation and materials are available online.
7. The training provider is proactive in ensuring that trainees have opportunities to make up for any poor or mediocre experience they have had in using ICT during their school placement(s), e.g. to visit schools that make innovative use of ICT.
8. Where appropriate, trainers and trainees have opportunities and are encouraged and assisted in developing a professional level e-portfolio.
9. Trainees have opportunities to research into innovative use of ICT.
10. There is an integrated approach to the professional development of teacher trainers in the use of ICT in teaching and learning which is reviewed on an annual basis. This approach is preferably modelled by ITT trainers.
11. The training provider is to have regular, effective and productive links with other training providers on ICT issues across all phases and subjects.
12. There is an integrated approach to e-safety training that is not limited to the classroom but includes the acceptable and professional use of ICT