

Why Learn History (When It's Already on Your Phone)

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THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS

Chicago and London

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Introduction

In October 2010 the *Washington Post* broke a story about a fourth-grade textbook called *Our Virginia, Past and Present*. The book describes the role that African Americans played in the Civil War. If you are a movie aficionado and have seen *Glory* and know the story of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry and the 180,000 African Americans who served the Union—constituting over 10 percent of the fighting force—you might expect that to be the focus. Wrong. *Our Virginia, Past and Present* presents Virginia’s fourth-graders with some questionable historical information: “Thousands of Southern blacks fought in the Confederate ranks, including two battalions under the command of Stonewall Jackson.”¹ For this statement to be true, it would have to have occurred at the height of the Civil War, since Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson died by friendly fire from the Eighteenth North Carolina Infantry Regiment on May 10, 1863.

It has long been known that the Confederate army forced slaves into service as cooks and laborers who provided backup for weapons-bearing troops. We know of dozens of cases like this. We even have some scattered photographs of slaves suited up in uniform sitting next to their masters. But that’s not what we’re talking about. We are talking about the formal mustering of *thousands* of black soldiers under Jackson alone and, by extension, thousands more under other generals, who trained them in weaponry, organized them into battalions, and taught them to fight for the South. We are talking about enslaved black

Americans voluntarily risking their lives so that they could remain enslaved.

Common sense balks at these claims. The only document we have from the Confederacy about drafting African American soldiers comes in the waning days of the war, a last-ditch effort less than three weeks before Lee's surrender at Appomattox. If thousands of blacks were already bearing arms for the Confederacy, the South would not have had to enact General Orders #14 on March 23, 1865, to try to draft black soldiers to the South's cause. Even this late in the war, the proposal was so controversial that its authors felt compelled to issue a disclaimer: "Nothing in this act shall be construed to authorize a change in the relation which the said slaves shall bear toward their owners."²

Where would *Our Virginia, Past and Present* find support for a claim rejected by every reputable Civil War historian we could think of?³ There's no documentation for claims that so contravene common sense and, I might add, human nature. What would slaves be fighting for—their right to remain in chains? When queried about her sources, author Joy Masoff told the *Washington Post* that she conducted her research . . . on the Internet. Her publisher, Five Ponds Press, sent the *Post* the links that Masoff consulted, some of which led to the website of the Sons of the Confederate Veterans, "a patriotic, historical and educational organization, founded in 1896, dedicated to honoring the sacrifices of the Confederate soldier and sailor and to preserving Southern Culture."⁴

Our first reaction might be shock at Ms. Masoff's carelessness. And it's unfortunate that her assertions ended up in a book for schoolchildren. However, I want to suggest something different. I want to consider the possibility that Joy Masoff is not so different from you or me.

We live in an age when going to the library means turning on our laptops and making sure we have a wireless connection. Being on the Web and searching for information is radically different from how anyone learned to do research a generation ago. In those days of yore, libraries and archives represented quiet stability. I was eleven when I engaged in my first act of library research (a report on the Bermuda Triangle assigned by my incomparable sixth-grade teacher,

Diane Abbey). I took a city bus to an imposing building with Corinthian columns in my hometown of Utica, New York. In hushed tones, the librarian revealed to me the card catalog, bestowed upon me a stubby, eraser-less pencil, and taught me to write down cryptic strings of numbers that sent me deep into the stacks. Obviously, it was never the case that just because something was printed meant that it was true. Mrs. Abbey taught us that in 1969. At the same time, we often ceded authority to established figures. We relied on them to make sure that what we read was accurate, that it had gone through rounds of criticism before it met our eyes. Only a small number of us were published authors. Most of us consumed information others had created.

The reality we inhabit now is very different. The Internet has obliterated authority. You need no one's permission to create a website. You need no hall pass to put up a YouTube video. You need no one's stamp of approval to post a picture on Instagram. Tweet to your heart's content—just look at the president. Go ahead—be an author! What determines whether you go viral is not the blessing from some academic egghead, but from the digital mob.⁵ In our Google-drenched society, the most critical question we face is not how to find information. Our browser does a great job. We're bombarded by stuff. But what do we do once we have it? Digital snake oil salesmen compete with reliable sources for our allegiance. Can we tell the difference? A recent national survey suggests not.⁶

Between January 2015 and June 2016, my research team tested students in twelve states and analyzed 7,804 responses. Our exercises measured *online civic reasoning*, students' ability to judge the information that streams across their smartphones, tablets, and computers. At each level—middle school, high school, and college—we encountered a stunning and dismaying consistency. Young people's ability to reason about information found on the Internet can be summed up in a single word: *Bleak*.

At the middle school level, 82 percent of students couldn't distinguish between an ad and a news story. Almost 70 percent couldn't explain why they might question an article written by a bank executive about millennials' need for fiscal advice. Despite their adeptness with

social media, three-quarters of high school students missed the significance of the blue checkmark showing that an account was verified by Facebook. Over 30 percent thought a fake news post was *more* trustworthy than a verified one. Viewing a screenshot of “nuclear flowers” supposedly taken near the site of the Fukushima Daiichi disaster, four in ten considered it to be “strong evidence” of environmental damage, even though there was nothing in the picture to indicate that it had been taken near the site—or even in Japan.

At the college level, students struggled mightily when confronted with a site that hid its backers. We sent undergrads to [MinimumWage.com](#), a project of the Employment Policies Institute, which styles itself as a nonprofit organization that sponsors nonpartisan research. Less than 10 percent of college students were able to suss out that Employment Policies Institute was a front group for a DC lobbyist or, as *Salon*’s headline put it, “Industry P.R. Firm Poses as Think Tank!” Searching “Employment Policies Institute” with the word “funding” turns up the *Salon* article along with a string of other exposés.⁷ Most students never moved beyond the site itself.

It’s not just the students who are in trouble. We all are. If you think I’m an alarmist, consider what happened in Rialto, California, a community outside of San Bernardino. Middle school teachers created an exam inspired by the new Common Core State Standards, an educational reform effort adopted by forty-two states and the District of Columbia.⁸ Teachers surfed the Web and culled a set of documents they believed made “credible” arguments, each representing a different position on a historical controversy. The issue under debate was the Holocaust. Students were given a set of documents and told to write an essay arguing whether the Holocaust was real or whether it was a “propaganda tool” concocted by world Jewry for “political and monetary gain.”⁹ One of the “credible” documents handed to students came from [biblebelievers.com.au](#), an anti-Semitic Australian website.¹⁰ According to “Is the Holocaust a Hoax?” *The Diary of Anne Frank* was a fake; pictures of piled-up corpses were actually “murdered Germans, not Jews”; and there are “compelling reasons [why the] so-called Holocaust never happened.” Many students found this docu-

ment the most convincing. “There was no evidence or prove [*sic*] that there were gas chambers,” wrote a student who also needed work on spelling. “With the evidence that was given to me, it clearly was obvious, and I wouldn’t know why anyone would think otherwise,” wrote another. A third asserted, “I believe the event was a fake, according to source 2, the event was exhaggerated [*sic*]. I felt that was strong enough [*sic*] evidence to persuade me the event was a hoax.” This last essay earned 23 out of 30 points. The teacher commented, “You did well using evidence to support your claim.”¹¹ When the story got out, the Rialto school board held emergency meetings. They ordered teachers to undergo “sensitivity training” at Los Angeles’s Simon Wiesenthal Museum of Tolerance, the presumption being that this assignment came from an animus toward Jews and the teachers needed prejudice reduction.¹²

I think this is a gross misdiagnosis of the problem. There’s no evidence that these teachers were particularly racist or prejudiced or bigoted. I doubt they needed an Rx for sensitivity training. I believe their sin is that they, too, were overwhelmed by what the Internet spews, and they regrettably put a spurious document on the same footing as legitimate historical evidence. My hunch is that they would’ve come up with a similar assignment had the topic been black Confederates or any number of historical issues where fake sources crowd out the real thing.

These teachers—like their students, like Joy Masoff, like us—are living in an age where changes in how information is created and disseminated outpaces our ability to keep up. The Internet teems with made-to-order history by pseudo-scholars who invent footnotes and Photoshop images to shore up fraudulent claims.¹³ We are spinning in a moment when the tools we have invented are handling us—not the other way around. Throw in for good measure the Common Core and the scant professional development that teachers received to implement it, and you have the recipe for a perfect storm. That’s what happened in Rialto. A perfect storm with all the ingredients amply supplied by the Internet.

Welcome to the chilling future of learning the past, where not

just our students but our teachers and textbook authors fall victim to fake history. Back in the analog Stone Age, information literacy meant learning to decipher the hieroglyphics of the *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature*. The challenge then was how to locate information. Gasping for air under an information overload, we face a different question: What information should be *believed*? We are woefully unprepared to answer. Instead of teaching the skills needed to navigate this digital free-for-all, our educational system trudges along doing the same thing but expecting a different result. Not that long ago, if you wanted to examine George Washington's letters, you'd have to fly to Washington, DC, and curry favor with the Library of Congress archivist. Today, sitting at the kitchen table, twelve-year-olds can be inside the Washington papers in a few clicks. But in school, these same twelve-year-olds take tests on minutiae accessed more quickly on their iPhones than retrieved from memory.

An exaggeration? Sharpen your pencil and identify the achievements of Gabriel Prosser and Benjamin Gitlow. Prosser fomented a failed slave revolt in 1800. Gitlow published a socialist newsletter and was convicted under New York's Criminal Anarchy Law in 1920. Few of us could say anything intelligent—forget intelligent, *anything*—about either. Yet both names appear on a test of historical facts given to high school students, the National Assessment of Educational Progress.¹⁴ That's right, Educational *Progress*.

Our read-the-chapter-and-answer-the-questions-in-the-back pedagogy has a familiar coziness, but it exacts a heavy price. Teaching students to separate fact from fiction by reading textbook narratives purged of ambiguity is akin to preparing a swimmer who's never ventured outside a wading pool to navigate the torrents of a raging sea. Facing waves of claim and counterclaim (that is, the world *outside* of school), current practice prepares today's students to drown. And they do so in droves. A week after the story broke about Rialto, I gave a talk at a large state university. My presentation was in one of those old-style amphitheater lecture halls, where the professor stands in the orchestra pit and looks up at rows of students. I peered out at a sea of faces partially obscured by open laptops. When I told the story

about middle school Holocaust deniers, the students gasped. Then I projected the web page for the Hitler Historical Museum, which claimed to be “a non-biased, non-profit museum devoted to the study and preservation of the world history.”¹⁵ When I asked, “How many of you use the Internet for research?” every hand went up. “Keep ’em up if you can come down here and in one click show me who owns this site.”¹⁶ Like the wave at a sporting event, hands fluttered down (including those of the bemused faculty in the front row). These backward-baseball-hat-wearing college students—probably grazing Facebook, Twitter, and ESPN as I was talking—were rendered clickless.

Technology has left no part of modern life untouched. Yet in the midst of these transformations, school, and what we teach there, remains stuck in the past. My book sheds light on how we got ourselves into this mess and what we might do to get out of it. The following essays are organized in four sections. The three chapters in part 1 describe our current plight. Chapter 1 describes the game we play on the young, where the testing industry rigs the system to make students look dumb before they’ve even had a chance to sharpen their pencils. Chapter 2 tells the story of the hapless efforts by the federal government to usher history teaching into the twenty-first century by spending a billion dollars between 2001 and 2012, while leaving nary a trace on the landscape of history teaching. Chapter 3 describes attempts to balance jingoistic accounts of American history by assigning Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States*, a work, I argue, that confuses sounding critical with thinking critically.

The two chapters in part 2 make the case that historical thinking is a unique orientation to the world, one that is desperately needed in an age of digital manipulation. I draw on the voices of participants from my research studies—high school students and teachers; scientists, members of the clergy, and working historians—to demolish the myth that the most important attribute of historical study is a supple memory. History, I argue, provides an antidote to impulse by cultivating modes of thought that counteract haste and avert premature judgment.

Part 3’s two essays take an autobiographical turn. The first tells

the story of how I went from writing up carefully designed studies of historical thinking, read almost exclusively by other professors, to becoming an Internet entrepreneur, producing free, open-source materials that have been downloaded over five million times. The second chapter, composed in the wake of the 2016 presidential election, describes the challenges we face when the world comes to us via our laptops and smartphones. It tells the backstory of research with historians, college students, and professional fact-checkers who were observed as they sat before a computer screen assessing the validity of digital information. I argue that the old ways of reading won't do. We'll need new ones to cope with the mountains of information that threaten to bury us each day.

Part 4 contains a single essay, but one that offers a ray of hope that education can change. It draws on a national survey with 4,000 kids and adults who were asked to nominate the "most famous Americans in history" (not including presidents and first ladies). Contrary to pundits who insist that the curriculum remains dominated by "Dead White Males," the three most-cited figures were all African American: Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks, and Harriet Tubman. The heroes who today draw Americans together look somewhat different from those of former eras. While there are still a few inventors, entrepreneurs, and entertainers on the list, those who most capture our imagination acted to expand rights, alleviate misery, rectify injustice, and promote freedom. Finally, the book concludes with a brief afterword in which I address why, even in a future-oriented, technological society, the study of the past has an indispensable place in the curriculum.

In an age when no one regulates the information we consume, the task of separating truth from falsehood can no longer be for extra credit. Google can do many things, but it cannot teach discernment. Never has so much information been at our fingertips, but never have we been so ill-equipped to deal with it. If, as Thomas Jefferson claimed, what distinguishes democracy from demagoguery is the critical faculties of its citizens, we've got work to do. Let's get started.