

“The Early American Digital World”

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First, I’d like to thank my fellow panelists for inviting me to sit on this panel. My name is Michael Hattem and I am doctoral candidate, an academic blogger, history podcaster, and I have worked on a few digital history projects, including Founders Online. So I guess that in relation to the title of the panel, I am here to talk briefly about the early American “digital world.” I would like to begin by suggesting that the technologies that we have and the ways in which we are currently using them are leading to, if not entirely new kinds of history, then perhaps new conceptions of the *field* of early American history and our relationship as historians to the field and to one another.

Now the digital humanities panel earlier largely covered digital history projects, and we have had some excellent examples of those in our field in recent years. I’m thinking especially of the accompanying website to Richard Dunn’s recent book and a project by Vincent Brown devoted to the slave revolts in Jamaica in the early 1760s. But I want to talk less about digital PROJECTS per se than about a quickly developing, broader early American “digital world” that includes those projects but also includes blogging, social media, and podcasting.

For longer than I’ve been alive, our field in a structural sense has been organized through the great efforts by the main institute in the field, the Omohundro Institute of Early American

History and Culture and, later, the McNeil Center for Early American Studies and the Society for Historians of the Early American Republic. From fellowships to seminars to conferences, these institutes gave to the field the significant sense of community it had. And I would argue that the new early American “digital world” is not changing that but expanding upon it. Social media and blogs like *The Junto* are adding an additional layer of social infrastructure within the field itself, creating spaces that foster an even broader and more inclusive sense of community in the field, largely through the ability to include people who for whatever reason don’t have access to or are outside the immediate orbit of those institutions and the field’s traditional channels of community-building. So let me talk a little bit about blogging, social media, and podcasting...

In terms of blogging, I am a member of *The Junto*, a group blog of junior faculty and grad students, started by Ben Park. And our site, for those of you who don’t know it, mixes book reviews, historiographical essays (or in my case, rants), interviews, coverage of early American digital and public history, and we also do our own March Madness tournament each year. For me, our blog is valuable for two primary reasons: first, it has created a largely unprecedented platform from which junior scholars and grad students can speak to their colleagues within the field. Second, it has created a space in which established historians, junior scholars, history professionals, non-higher ed educators, and, even, non-academics can engage with one another. Finally, it aims to create and/or further important conversations within the field, and in a sense it democratizes those conversations because on the blog individuals can participate in those conversations on equal standing.

In terms of social media, I want to say that this past weekend’s coverage of the MHS conference on the Revolution via Twitter and blogs is an excellent example of how social media

opens the field (and the conversations it creates and fosters) to those previously excluded by circumstance. Over 1800 tweets were made with the conference's hashtag in less than three days, providing a way for people not there to participate in the conversation and also providing a public record of that important conference. Of course it is not always ideal to have conversations about important topics when you're limited to 140 characters, but that is where the integration and symbiotic relationship that has emerged between Twitter and the blogosphere is important.

And finally, I also produce a monthly podcast called "The JuntoCast," which is hosted by Ken Owen and another Juntoist, Roy Rogers. Each month we choose a topic in early American history and then engage in an hour-long informal, though loosely structured, roundtable discussion about it. And the goal is to expose our non-academic listeners to the work being done by academic historians. And from our feedback we know that episodes have been assigned to undergrads and that secondary social studies and APUSH teachers are using them in their flipped classrooms and for their own professional development, which helps them feel part of the field.

There has also been a new addition to the early American podcast sphere, a podcast called *Ben Franklin's World*, which is produced by Liz Covart with each episode interviewing a historian about their recent book, thereby offering those historians access to a broader audience than they might otherwise have had. These podcasts are downloaded approximately thirty-thousand times per month. And they are done without any institutional or financial support of any kind. Podcasting, I believe, is a sorely underestimated and underutilized medium by academic historians, especially at a time when the field continues to worry about its shrinking relevance in higher education and contemporary society and its inability to engage the public with the scholarship the field produces.

And so I think that the two main themes running through these remarks are about fostering conversation within the field and engagement with those beyond the field. These tools are restructuring the ways in which we historians engage with one another on a regular basis as opposed to the intermittent basis of conferences and seminars. And I think that is going to have a profound impact on the field. The field produces scholarship in the form of monographs and articles but it also produces conversations via these other mediums and as they increasingly intersect (as they did this past weekend with the MHS conference), it will be that much more important to be aware of the latter as the former. And the blogosphere, social media, and podcasting are providing the infrastructure that allows that to happen and that allows more people than ever before—both academics and those in the other groups I mentioned—to participate in and feel that they are genuinely part of the field of early American history.

And so I believe this is a liminal moment in the development of field. We have this ever-growing box of tools and we've only just begun to really use them or even think about using them. But it is important to recognize that they not only hold the potential to change the ways in which we do history, but to change the structure and nature of the field itself. That is, they not only offer us new ways to present our scholarship in the form of digital history projects, but they also offer us countless opportunities to deepen our engagement with the field as historians as well as our engagement with one another as academics and with a broader non-academic audience. And that gives us a real opportunity to expand and re-shape this early American digital "world" into a larger and more inclusive early American digital "community."