The Promises and Challenges of Teaching History through Television

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This instrument can teach, it can illuminate; yes, and it can even inspire. But it can do so only to the extent that humans are determined to use it to those ends. Otherwise it is merely wires and lights in a box. There is a great and perhaps decisive battle to be fought against ignorance, intolerance and indifference. We are in the same tent as the clowns and the freaks—that's show business.

——Edward R. Murrow

Famed American journalist Edward R. Murrow held a complicated view of television, even while the industry was still in its infancy and its scale and potential could only be imagined. It was, on the one hand, a powerful medium that could teach, explore, and enlighten the public. Yet it was, on the other hand, chiefly a form of entertainment. The question was, for Murrow, which would it become? What would the nation want of television, to be educated or to be entertained?

From 2007 until 2013, I worked as one of the hosts for History Detectives shown on the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS). From this experience I have come to
deeply appreciate the power of television to educate. But I have also learned how television’s imperative to entertain places very real limitations on how deeply and broadly subjects can be explored. Indeed, this popular show was eventually cancelled not because it lacked new material or ratings, but because a team of new executive producers at PBS wanted to create shows that played to a different and younger audience, like those on cable television.

The essence of the show focused on source analysis and research methods as hosts pursued answers about the historicity of artifacts presented by viewers. This many not seem an exciting topic to some, but History Detectives was shot in a way that brought the viewer along on the investigation, and in the process, uncovered little-know information about American history. This one-hour show first aired over the summer months of 2003, and after that it went into reruns until the next summer when a new season of episodes aired. This was the pattern that the show followed every year since then, until 2013. Each episode contained between three and four stories, and these stories could run anywhere between twelve to seventeen minutes long. Until the final season, each episode also contained “interstitials” at the end of every story, which were a minute-long side-stories that focused on a historical method, moment, or figure that was related to the main story.

Origins of the Show

Who came up with the idea for the show was perhaps the greatest mystery that we never solved. Gwen Wright relates how the idea evolved from early discussions with television producers for a show called “American Attic”, which eventually became History Detectives. However, an executive producer at Lion Television—one of the production companies that filmed the show—related to me the show was developed from a colleague who was looking through his grandparents’ attic one day and he began to wonder what stories these artifacts could tell, and how his grandparents might have intersected with significant historical moments associated with those artifacts. Another story came from Oregon Public Broadcasting (OPB)—the partner production company with Lion—that the story simply grew out from a creative free-flow of ideas. However the show originated, OPB partnered with Lion Television and pitched the show concept to PBS.

The Public Broadcasting Service, or PBS, as it is more commonly known, is a non-profit American broadcast television network. It first started out in 1952 as National Educational Television, and was launched as the Public Broadcasting
Service in 1970. Its original name illustrates the vision for PBS, that it was to serve as source that, even then, resisted the trend in television to merely entertain. Its shows would not be produced or evaluated on ratings, but on content and quality. Presently, the PBS network has 354 member television stations that hold a collective ownership with communities throughout the United States. For example, in the Phoenix area, where I teach at Arizona State University (ASU), KAET is operated by ASU and serves as the local PBS affiliate. Some of the most well-known television shows from PBS are Sesame Street, Antiques Roadshow, and Downtown Abbey.

**Show Hosts**

The show began with four hosts: Wes Cowan, Elyse Luray, Gwen Wright, and Tukufu Zuberi. Wes is an anthropologist by training and served for a time as the curator of Archaeology at the Cincinnati Museum of Natural History and Science before he opened a very successful antiques dealership in Cincinnati, Cowan’s Auctions. He has frequently appeared on another popular show on PBS, Antiques Roadshow. Elyse graduated from Tulane University with a degree in Art history and was the youngest vice president in Christie’s Auction House before she transitioned to full-time television work as an appraiser on Antiques Roadshow and History Detectives. Gwen Wright is an award-winning architectural historian at Columbia University, and Tukufu, a Sociologist by training with a specialty in Africa, is the Lasry Family Professor of Race Relations in the University of Pennsylvania.

Over the next four years the show built a steady following, eventually becoming one of the highest-rated shows on PBS. But the producers of the show wanted to continue evolving the show’s direction, so in the summer of 2007, I received an email one day from an executive vice president at Oregon Public Broadcasting. It simply asked if I was interested in becoming a guest host for History Detectives.

I had watched the show before and liked it, but I was suspicious about this invitation that arrived by email. It is not every day that one receives an invitation from a television show to become part of the cast. I had very limited television experience, and I was so suspicious of the invitation that I almost deleted the email. But before I did that, I decided to see if I could at least verify that the message might be legitimate. So I started my own investigation of who this executive vice president was, and whether he had any credible relationship with the show.
Even though I was able to verify that this executive vice president was with the show, I was still suspicious. Phishing attempts can look very real. But I decided to respond with a tentative interest to see where this all went. So we agreed to a date when he would fly into town and we would do a test shoot.

Once that was done, the producers at PBS invited me to become a guest host for the 2007 season. After that, I was invited to become a regular part of the cast, and here is a picture of all of us in 2008.

**Behind the Scenes**

How does the show get made? First, it all begins with a question.

The show depends a good deal upon the historical questions submitted by our viewers. Through internet sites at PBS.org and Facebook, viewers can submit questions about a historical artifact, most often one they have in their possession. Within any given year, the show receives between 7,000 to 8,000 story submissions annually. While that number may seem impressive, the truth is that not all of those stories fit within the premise of the show, and we are budgeted to film only 26 stories per season.

The show’s hosts can submit story ideas, too, although this does not mean that a host’s idea has a better chance of making it on air than a viewer-submitted idea. All story ideas undergo the same level of scrutiny for whether they allow us to explore American history with greater depth, and whether there is enough information, in the form of documentation, to do a credible job of investigation.

The credit for doing the work of vetting the story submissions goes to a small team of researchers. Production assistants at both Lion Television and Oregon Public broadcasting sift through the submissions to look for stories that are both compelling and documentable. At times this process can take up to a few years until all of the pieces fall into place, and at times the documentation can be found in a matter of months. [13]

Once story ideas were vetted for fit and viability, our researchers then set about to prepare a story “pitch”, which is a proposal for a story. First, for a pitch to be compelling, all of the documentation needed to tell the story, as well as the experts who can speak to that documentation or to the artifact’s historical content, must be complete. Then the actual pitch was crafted. It is a short proposal of about one single-spaced page in length, that succinctly outlines the mystery to be solved, the documentation, the experts to be interviewed, and particular aspect of American
history to be explored.

These story pitches were circulated and widely discussed among the program staff, and the show’s executive producers were the ones who give final approval to a story idea. Sometimes story ideas would be sent back to the researchers with further questions about documentation or even about whether the story is interesting or not.

Once story ideas were approved by the show’s executive producers, then the production staff got involved in coordinating all of the logistical details required to send a crew out on the road. Reservations for hotels and air flights had to be made, filming locations had to be reserved, and so on. They even had to find time of the year when the weather will allow us to film outdoors.

My role in the pre-production process was somewhat like overseeing an undergraduate independent study. I was not involved in doing the actual research myself, but I advised research staff about experts to contact based on my knowledge of the field. At times my role in the story development process was also to help the television production staff understand the historiography on a given historical moment, as well as the nuances of historical interpretation.

This also became important sometimes during the actual production, when we are out filming the investigation. The film crew is made up of people who have technical expertise in their respective areas of photography and sound, but they don’t necessarily know what is historically significant. And it was not uncommon to discover surprises when we were out filming. Sometimes someone would reveal something to us that we didn’t know, or sometimes they would not commit to saying something on camera that they were willing to talk about off camera.

While on the road filming the investigation, the crew travelled light. A typical production crew consisted of the producer (who was also the director); the associate producer, who was the one that originally drafted the story proposal; the director of photography (who also took care of all the lighting); the director of sound, and the production assistant. Usually the production assistant was the only who will not travel with the crew because they are locally based and they help us find things like where to eat and where to find resources in the local community.

Production

Once we began filming the investigation of an artifact, the show was filmed in a way that brought the viewer along on the investigative trail, until the moment that we found the answers we were looking for.
The entire process of being out in the field lasted between five and six days. On most filming days, call time, or the time that we actually began the day, was usually at 7:00 am. On some days, call time was much earlier. On most days, the filming ended by 10:00 pm, but sometimes the filming could also go much later. There was one shoot that I was on where we had to be on our feet for 20 hours, beginning the day at 4:00 am in New York City and finishing just past midnight in Portland, Oregon. Thankfully, that was not a normal day!

Given the demands of filming, meals were often whenever we could find a break in the filming process, which meant that more often than not, our lunches and dinners were often very late and often cold. There were a few times when we finished so late in the evening that all of the local restaurants were already closed.

Most of our travel was usually by plane into a major city, combined with a long drive to a remote location, or wherever our investigation takes us.

When the production was finished, we usually had about five hours’ worth of raw footage for a story that will last about 15 minutes long. To put that in perspective, the final story that is shown on television used only up to 5% of what we filmed, and the other 95% of what we filmed is never seen.

All this footage gives the film editors lots of material to work with, which is a good thing. We all look and sound like geniuses because the editors pick only the very best moments of our work on camera.

**Post Production**

Once we finished production, the work was not yet over. All of what we shot had to be transcribed and time stamped, and the producer and associate producer then used that transcription to begin editing those five hours of footage into what is known as a “rough cut”, which is simply a rough draft of the final product. Part of that rough cut included the addition of music, additional sound effects, and graphics to enhance the story.

Then executives at the PBS Corporation reviewed the rough cut and sent back suggestions and feedback to refine the story. Once the rough cut became a fine cut, then an actual script is produced for the narrative “voice over”, and then the host went to a sound studio to read the narration. But even then we continued to be involved in the process, and often I would suggest a phrasing that sounded more natural, or more accurate.

The final cut then went back to PBS Corporation for their final review.
Sometimes they would request more revision, or something they would approve the story as is. Once it received that final approval, the story was then ready to be aired on television.

**Promises and Challenges in Working with Television**

Some might wonder why I, as an academic historian, devoted part of my time to working on television. About a decade ago, I had worked with another television show on PBS called *The American Experience*, which is another history-focused show. The producers wanted to feature a moment in history that I had written a book about, and so I was quite involved in that production, both as a lead historical consultant and also as an on-screen expert. When that episode aired, I realized that more people tuned into to see that episode—about two million viewers—than would ever read my book.

I also realized what a powerful medium television can be. Through the use of images, graphics, and sound, important ideas and concepts can be conveyed in ways that I could only describe with words through traditional publications.

At the same time, however, there are some significant challenges to working with television, which can be limiting. First, American television is a business—even a publically supported network like PBS, which receives some of its operating budget from taxpayers. Ultimately, television is in the business of attracting viewers, and most often that is accomplished through some form of entertainment. So as a business, television does not exist to advance complex ideas or to encourage more sophisticated thinking, which is what we strive to do as academic scholars. To be sure, there have been many powerful documentaries and in-depth analyses of complex issues aired in the history of American television. But those types of shows are relatively rare in comparison to the overabundance of situation comedies, game shows, soap operas, and so-called reality television shows that populate the airwaves.

This is not to say that television is in itself intrinsically anti-intellectual, only that American television executives and producers fear the simple television remote. They fear it because with a simple touch of a button, a viewer can switch to another show, or simply turn the television off entirely if they find what they are watching to be too tedious, or too boring. Thus American television tends to eschew complexity in favor of a streamlined narrative, and this is the second challenge in working with television: how do you keep the viewer watching? The most common approach to this in American television is to keep introducing new and more interesting information in
order to keep the viewer watching. Sometimes that can take the form of creating tension in a storyline, or perhaps an element of mystery, which shapes (or sometimes distorts) what and how information is conveyed. But the basic format of almost all American television shows, from situation comedies to historical documentaries, is that a problem or a conflict is introduced at the beginning of a show, and information builds until a resolution is ultimately provided at the end of a show.

Third, television shows most often run between 30 and 60 minutes long, with time allotted for the commercials of sponsoring corporations. What that means is that complex stories can sometimes be simplified in order to fit the allocated time. Or perhaps that there are some stories that are deemed to complex for television because there are too many pieces to show and too many elements that the viewer has to remember within the medium’s timeframe.

“Pancho Villa Watch Fob”

I ran headlong into these challenges with my very first story for History Detectives, called “Pancho Villa Watch Fob” (2007). One of our viewers, Deidre Koiste, was given an old, commemorative watch fob by a neighbor before he passed away. He told her that he had survived Pancho Villa’s raid on Columbus, New Mexico as a child, and that this fob was made as a memento of that event. Deidre wasn’t familiar with that conflict and wanted to know more about the story, and especially whether it was true that he was actually there.

To me, one of the very interesting things about this story was that there are some great differences about who actually raided the town. There is no doubt on the part of American historians that Mexican revolutionary Pancho Villa led the raid. But there is credible evidence, which is given greater weight by some Mexican historians, that Pancho Villa could not have led the raid. Not only was he nowhere near New Mexico at the time of the attack, according to some of his contemporaries, the actual raid itself was a military blunder of great proportion that was uncharacteristic of his strategic abilities. Further, there were numerous reports at the time that German operatives were actively trying to keep the United States pinned down in a confrontation with Mexican forces in order to prevent American soldiers from entering the European theater of the First World War. So the raid was not conducted by Pancho Villa’s forces, some contend, but rather by mercenaries hired by German operatives.
I worked hard to convince the show’s producers that in order to tell a more complete story about the raid, we had to acknowledge these competing historical interpretations. This is the approach that academic historians embrace; we strive to explore all sides of an issue in the name of objectivity. But the producers feared that the introduction of competing theories would only complicate the story too much for viewers. And so, at the end of the day, we did not explore the question of who actually raided the town, nor did we introduce alternative interpretations of the event. The best that I could get was a very brief mention in the narrative voiceover that historians still debate the question of who was responsible for the raid.

This might seem strange to those unfamiliar with television production, that I, as the on-screen host, held so little sway over the story. The truth of the matter is that the hosts of the show are responsible for producing the raw footage, but, like many other productions, they are not involved in the editing process or the production of the story. The assembly of the final product lay in many other hands, and the final voice in what the story contained—perhaps the only voice that mattered—came from the executives at PBS who underwrote the show.

“Navajo Rug”

Finally, the expense of telling a more complete story may simply be too great for the budget that a show has to work with.

One of our viewers in season eight contacted us about a very interesting Indian rug. Bob Peterson is a collector of beaded handbags made by American Indians. One day as he was looking through a popular online auction site, he found a rather curious Indian rug for sale. He was not a collector of rugs, but there was something about this particular rug that stood out to him, and he thought that it might be something of importance. So together with a few other collectors, he purchased the rug for $8,000 in US currency.

When he contacted History Detectives, he wanted to know whether we could determine if the rug was an authentic rug, as well as an historic rug. In other words, was it truly made by Indian artisans, and was it truly an old rug? Further, he wanted to know if we could determine what the symbols mean on the rug, and who might have woven the rug?

One of the challenges in answering this last question is that if the rug was truly an historic rug, and not a contemporary reproduction, then determining who would weave it is a very difficult thing to do. Early Indian rug weavers did not sign their
work. But they did leave behind important clues based on unique weaving patterns. So we had a place to start.

Weaving has always been an important part of Navajo life, from the earliest days of their existence. [19] The knowledge of weaving was given to them by Spider Woman and Spider Man, two sacred deities who helped the Navajo in this sphere of existence. Every part of weaving is highly symbolic of harmony and balance.

Their rugs became very popular across the country at the turn of the 20th century, and rug making became an important economic endeavor for the Navajo. In order to make rugs that were appealing to American buyers, American traders urged Navajo weavers to develop more colorful rugs with interesting designs. It was around this time that one particular design, the “yeibechei” rug, was created.

One Navajo weaver named Yanapah is considered to be the originator of the yeibechei rug. She was born in the Gallegos Canyon area of New Mexico, and was the daughter of a prominent Medicine Man. Like many young women, she began weaving at the age of sixteen. She unfortunately died in her early twenties and is believed to have produced perhaps four rugs in her lifetime. Of those four rugs, only two are known, and the other two are missing. They are highly valued rugs partly because we know who wove it, and partly because they were the first of a design that is popular today.

Even though the yeibechei design is widely used today, it was considered to be highly controversial when it was first produced. The yeibechei are human representations of what the Navajo call yei. The yei are demigods, or non-human beings, that can be either a spirit, a god, a demon, or even a monster. The presence of the yei can be invited through acts of representation, and Navajo Medicine Men commonly invited their powerful presence through sand paintings created during their healing ceremonies. [20]

Representations of the yei are considered by the Navajo to be very powerful, and they must be handled very carefully. Neither yei nor yeibechei were ever meant to be permanently displayed. To do so would be to invite harm.

The way that the Navajo think about the power of the yei is similar to how people of the modern period think about using electricity. As a source of power it must be handled with great care. But if one is careless around electricity, then it can be very destructive, if not deadly.

I had never authenticated a rug before as a historian, and this is one of the things that I truly enjoyed about working with the show. Not only did I learn more
about particular moments of the past, I also learned more about research methods that were outside of my discipline. We began the process of authenticating the rug by locating specialists who have expertise in this area. We found a textile specialist with the Smithsonian Institution who also specialized in Navajo rug weaving. We also located a practicing Medicine Man who had taught at Arizona State University in the past and who was willing to work with us to understand the symbols on the rug. When the investigation was completed I was confident that the rug is one of the missing Yanapah rugs. But the central question, why would she weave such a powerful and controversial design, was never fully answered during the production of the story.

It was not until the crew had wrapped the production and we were on our way to the airport that it hit me: Yanapah never intended for that rug to be sold. We had the provenance to document that her husband sold it only after she died. We had historical evidence that the marriage was an arranged one, and there was evidence that suggested that the marriage may have a deeply unfulfilling one for Yanapah. Indeed, her husband, an English trader, may have been abusive. Suddenly the power symbols woven into the rug made sense: the dark warrior figure who held the power of lightning and thunder in his hands and feet, and the war symbols that surrounded him, all spoke of pain and anger. In weaving that rug, Yanapah reached into her heritage to create a resource that could provide her protection, and perhaps a measure comfort through that protection, when she needed to call upon greater powers. This rug was her very personal way of coping with a difficult domestic situation.

As I excitedly shared this insight with the crew, we realized that it was too late to go back and re-film some of the key scenes where I could have explored this interpretation with our experts. It simply would have cost too much money to reschedule another shoot. And so the edited story revolved around whether the rug was an authentic Yanapah rug or not, and we left the question of why she would have woven such a controversial rug open.

**Conclusion**

Despite some of the complications of working within the confines of television, I still believe that it is a powerful teaching tool. More viewers will tune in to history-themed shows in a single night than a popular book will sell in an entire year. The visual medium can convey themes and messages in a shorter space of time than any book can. And, if done well, history-themed television can, at times, educate
viewers better the traditional learning environment of the classroom. Frequently viewers would comment on the History Detectives Facebook page that they learned to appreciate history through this show.

Despite the limitations of the medium, more scholarly historians need to engage the medium to present their work and teach the nation about the past, and more networks need to produce history-themed shows. There is clearly a demand for it.

Notes:
[1] http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0375341/?ref_=fn_al_u_1, Accessed 17 January 2014.
[2] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8yy7goPV70M, accessed 4 February 2014.
[3] http://www.liontv.com/usa/home
[4] http://www.opb.org/
[5] An executive at Oregon Public Broadcasting also shared with me that the name of the show came from a contest held among the staff, which lends support to the “free-flow” account of how the show originated.
[6] http://web.archive.org/web/20120822192909/; http://www.lib.umd.edu/NPBA/subinfo/net.html, accessed 4 February 2014.
[7] http://www.pbs.org/about/corporate-information/ See also http://www.cpb.org/aboutpb/act/.
[8] For studies on the history of PBS, see James Ledbetter, Made Possible by: The Death of Public Broadcasting in the United States (New York: Verso 1998), and Barry Dornfeld, Producing Public Television, Producing Public Culture (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1998).
[9] http://www.azpbs.org/50years/
[10] http://ec2-23-23-94-117.compute-1.amazonaws.com/wgbh/roadshow/appraisers/cwesley-cowan/, accessed 4 February 2014.
[11] http://www.elyseluray.com, accessed 27 January 2014.
[12] http://www.gwendolynwrighthistory.com/index.php; http://sociology.sas.upenn.edu/tukufu_zuberi, accessed 27 January 2014.
[13] History Detectives began to show research assistants as part of the investigative process in season 10 (2012 – 2013). See http://www.pbs.org/opb/historydetectives/video/2260076830/
[14] http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/
[15] http://www.pbs.org/opb/historydetectives/video/1143720703/
[16] See for example Alberto Calzadíaz Barrera, Por Qué Villa Atacó Columbus: Intriga
Internacional (México, Editores Mexicanos Unidos, 1972).

[17] Jessie Peterson and Thelma Cox Knoles, eds., Pancho Villa: Intimate Recollections by People Who Knew Him (New York: Hastings House, 1977) includes the memoirs of Dr. R. H. Ellis who served as Villa’s medical chief of staff and as an observer for President Wilson. Ellis was adamant that Villa had nothing to do with the raid and claimed that he had proof that the Germans organized and financed the raid, hiring soldiers who fought with Carranza to pose as Villistas. If true, the raid links with the famous Zimmerman Telegram of 19 January 1917 that revealed Germany’s larger efforts to drive a wedge between the US and Mexico and to arrange an alliance between Mexico and Germany. The publication of that telegram in US newspapers furthered the loss of neutrality towards Germany and played a significant role in Congress’s passing a declaration of war against Germany on 2 April. Friedrich Katz, The Life and Times of Pancho Villa (Palo Alto, CA; Stanford, 1998) cites two Americans who interviewed Villa after the raid. Although Villa was circumspect on his exact role in Columbus raid, he promised that he would reveal his location on the day of the raid, witnessed by three Americans.

[18] http://www.pbs.org/opbdetectives/video/1176774004/

[19] Kathy M’Closkey, Swept Under the Rug: A Hidden History of Navajo Weaving (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002).

[20] Trudy Griffin-Pierce, Earth is My Mother, Sky is My Father; Space, Time, and Astronomy in Navajo Sandpainting (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1992); Gary Witherspoon, Language and Art in the Navajo Universe (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1977); Gladys Reichard, Navajo Religion; A Study of Symbolism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950).

[21] Lee Iacocca’s memoir sold over a million copies in one year, compared to the 2.5 million average viewership of History Detectives. See http://jeffreykrames.com/2009/03/04/how-many-books-do-you-have-to-sell-to-be-a-bestseller/

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Dr. Pagán is currently a co-host of History Detectives on PBS, and has worked previously with the award-winning PBS series American Experience as the lead historical consultant for the television episode and Web site entitled “Zoot Suit Riot”, based in part on his book Murder at the Sleepy Lagoon: Zoot Suits, Race, and Riot in Wartime L.A. (University of North Carolina Press, 2003). He has served as a panelist for the Department of Education, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Arizona Humanities Council, and he has served as a committee member for the Organization of American Historians.

Dr. Pagán is currently working on two book-length projects. The first explores racial constructions and violence in territorial Arizona, and the second is a history of Latino terrorism in the US. In addition to his numerous scholarly publications, Dr. Pagán also authored Historic Photos of Phoenix, which won the Arizona Book Publishing Association’s 2008 Glyph Award, and Remembering Phoenix.