Useful and Used: Roy Rosenzweig Making History Public and Accessible

M. Chmiel, J. Hsu and T. Owens

George Mason University
Abstract:
Over the last 50 years, significant changes have occurred in the subject matter of historical research, and the way historians interact with the public. This paper traces how one historian, Roy Rosenzweig, played a critical role in effecting change in the historical profession. The case presented in this paper highlights how the values in his scholarship connected with the work he engaged in. In particular, this paper focuses on how Rosenzweig created new institutions, embraced and promoted new technologies, and in doing so, played a critical role in bringing about significant changes in how historians engage with the public.
Useful and Used: Roy Rosenzweig Making History Public and Accessible

In the 1960s and 1970s, the American historical profession was undergoing dramatic changes. Prior to this time, historians focused on stories of the elite, such as presidents, generals, kings, religious leaders, etc. It was in the 60s and 70s when this began to change. Some historical scholars advocated telling the stories of individuals often overlooked: minorities, women, and the working class. In retrospect, it perhaps sounds like a simple change, but the shift in historical subject matter was revolutionary; a revolution with deep implications. A change in subject matter brought along a change in the historian’s orientation to the public. Historians recognized the critical need for their involvement with the public through outreach and education efforts. History changed in both style and substance.

Anyone who has experienced this kind of radical shift in the foundational elements of a profession, scholarly or otherwise, will realize that such changes create tension and power struggles. Often, these shifts become rifts, fracturing old institutions and creating new disciplines. The changes in the American historical profession are no different. This case explores the story of Roy Rosenzweig, one of the leaders in the transformation of the American Historical profession. While dramatic changes in a profession are typically the result of collaborations and alliances escaping the credit of one solitary individual, this paper highlights the critical role of Roy Rosenzweig: a historian around whom much of this change pivoted.

Toward people’s history and history for the people

Rosenzweig was the beneficiary of a elite education. He graduated at the top of his class in Columbia, received a fellowship to study at St. John’s College Cambridge, and received his doctorate from Harvard University. However, the focus of his scholarship always examined the working class. Before finishing his doctorate, he had published articles in Labor History and
Radical America, both journals that focused on telling a kind of peoples’ history. His dissertation became the book Eight Hours for What We Will, a history of the workers’ movement to establish the eight hour work day, and his second book The Park and the People, is a history of how different groups of people in New York City have used Central park during the 20th century.

Rosenzweig played a critical role in forming a community of previously unconnected scholars who were interested in the study of the workers’ movement. As Elizabeth Blackmar, one of his coauthors and colleagues stated, “What do you do when you don’t know what you are doing? You organize a reading group; you form a collective to produce a journal, you make sure that all your friends know each other. You give other people drafts of your work to read and read theirs and talk to them.” She goes on to suggest that Rosenzweig “helped us all collectively to gain the confidence to do our creative work and he helped many of us find jobs, housing, roommates, and life-long friends” (Grafton, xii). The role Rosenzweig played in catalyzing this community would become a critical asset in the changes he would bring about in the historical profession.

Turning Scholarship Toward the Public

Outside of his specific subject matter, Rosenzweig would play a much more significant role in shaping another shift in historical practice and scholarship. The term “Public History” came into usage in historical writing in the early 1980s, and embraced the idea that historians should care more broadly about both how the public understands history, and on ensuring that historians play a role in presenting history to the public. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s Rosenzweig helped shape this emerging field by editing two often cited collections of essays, Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public in 1986 and History Museums in the United States: A Critical Assessment in 1989. Both of these works brought together many of the
scholars who were beginning to work in this area and helped to set the agenda for defining public history. In this case, Rosenzweig had played an important role in shaping the focus of study. However, the most significant changes he would help to create were yet to come.

**Turning Disruptive Technology on the Historical Profession**

Rosenzweig was an early adopter of computing technology and saw the potential that technology could play in the historical profession. As early as 1984, he had written the article “Automating Your Oral History Program: A Guide to Data Base Management on a Microcomputer,” which appeared in the *International Journal of Oral History*. He continued to work on a range of digital projects, and ultimately, in 1994 established the Center for History and New Media (CHNM) at George Mason University.

Initially, the “center” was really just a name for his office. He was the only staff member. However, based on the network he had built of scholars focused on telling the peoples’ history and making historians more involved in the public, he had both a network to leverage and a message that he felt fit quite naturally with the affordance of new technologies. It is easy to see how the features of his work came together in CHNM’s first major project, a CD-ROM called *Who Built America*. This CD-ROM provided an early kind of multimedia textbook and set of primary sources created for college teachers to use for teaching the history of the working class in America. Ultimately, Rosenzweig’s work creating, running, staffing and managing the Center for History and New Media would prove to be his most transformational work. Built on the interests and networks he had helped to catalyze around bringing history to the public, computing, and more specifically the web, would transform much of what historians do and the institutions they take part in.
The types of projects that CHNM went on to create offer vivid illustration of how Rosenzweig's academic interests were turned into practical ways to connect people with their history. In 2001, shortly after 9/11, CHNM launched the September 11th digital archive, a public website where anyone could contribute their stories, images, and emails, to begin collecting the history of their lived experience. After creating a series of different online exhibits, CHNM built an open source software tool called Omeka which is now used, for free, by more than 1000 museums, historical societies, and others interested in presenting history online. In this case, the tool helps present history to the public, and as an open source project, demonstrates that even the core components of tools should be accessible to everyone. Lastly, through projects like History Matters and the Teaching American History Clearinghouse, CHNM has worked to make digitized primary sources and quality lesson plans for working with those materials, accessible to K-16 history educators. In short, the ideals, and ideology evident in his early scholarship found an outlet to make lasting changes for the public through his interest and willingness to make use of the web. In his efforts of both scholarship and knowledge dissemination, Rosenzweig valued community and collaborating above all. This value was apparent in Rosenzweig's management style, and informed his mentor-ship of all of his employees.

The way Rosenzweig's people skills came into play at CHNM is best exemplified in a discussion of one of his management approaches. On a weekly basis, he would make the rounds of the Center for History and New Media's office, stopping briefly with each of the twenty-some people who worked in the office. He would ask employees what they were working on over the next week or so. Inevitably, in that process he would end up suggesting a few other people he knew that the employee should consider contacting about their projects. This wasn't micro-managing, he wanted to hear how his employees were planning to accomplish a task and was
supportive of their efforts. Instead, it was that there were always people in the network of individuals he had worked with, studied with, or who had studied from him, who were pertinent to a given project and he was constantly working to help discuss and suggest ways that his staff could connect with others outside the organization. After discussing work, Rosenzweig would always end by asking what it was that you were doing outside of work, if you were having any trouble with things like registering for classes, or if you need feedback on some other project you were working on outside of work. Inevitably, he would leave each of these interactions with a short list of things he was going to do to help the individual employees at CHNM accomplish their goals, work related or otherwise. At the core, Rosenzweig's approach was focused on generously giving of his time to students, colleagues and employees. He expected a lot out of other people, but it was far less than he would give.

Taking over the old institutions

As a young scholar, Rosenzweig had been dismissive of the American Historical Association (AHA). He, like many in the radical historians’ movement, saw the AHA as the old guard: a stifling, unimaginative organization that worked against the goals he thought historians should be working for. However, as times changed and his colleagues and compatriots from the radical historians’ movement continued to grow and fill the ranks of the professional association, the AHA slowly changed course. In part, due to the disruptive (Christensen et. al. 2010) nature of the technology Rosenzweig had made central to his work at the Center for History and New Media, when the AHA first launched its website, the URL for that website was http://aha.chnm.gmu.edu. That is, the leadership role that CHNM had come to play in the historical profession meant that for someone to visit the American Historical Association online,
they had to go to a subdomain, a subspace, of the Center for History and New Media and George Mason University’s web presence.

From 2004-2006, Rosenzweig served as the vice president of research for the American Historical Association. In that role, he was able to change the *American Historical Review*, the premiere publication for historical scholarship, to provide open access to its articles online. One of the most prestigious historical journals was now accessible to anyone and everyone who wanted to read it. Open online access to the journal illustrates an important element of the change that Rosenzweig brought to the historical profession. Rosenzweig had taken the ideals and moral purpose that guided him in his work and appropriated computing technology as a means to help accomplish his purpose. Over the course of his career, he helped to build a community of historians who were interested in different subject matter, the peoples’ history. He then helped to shift the focus of the profession on how it might better engage with the public. Ultimately, his most significant contributions to the field came from how he was able to take advantage of new disruptive communications technologies to bring about change to the practices of historians.
Teaching Notes

Reflecting on the actions of Roy Rosenzweig, his technology-driven decentralized philosophy acts as an exemplar of pivotal paradigm shifts in pedagogy. Rosenzweig's "people first" mantra demonstrates how learner-learner interactions can be institutionally implemented at a fundamental level. Furthermore, analyzing education through the lens of an environment undergoing constant change, congruence between Rosenzweig's actions and the Fullan model emerge. These connections are reinforced in texts such as Ken Bain's *What the Best College Teachers Do* and John P. Kotter's *Leading Change*.

1. Learner-learner interactions center around the principle of acquiring knowledge experientially with other learners. Leveraging communication technologies, Rosenzweig not only highlights history through the eyes of the "common man" but enables the common man to partake in the writing of history and not solely the reading of history's.
2. Consider how Rosenzweig's moral purpose aligns with his actions and his goals. Rosenzweig exhibited unwavering moral purpose toward decentralizing history, along with a strong focus on understanding change, relationship building, and knowledge creation -- all tenants of the Fullan Model (Fullan, 2007, p. 4). His managing of CHNM displays the power of proactively kindling the coals of innovation in a personal way that fosters strong relationships. The end result is commitment to work together towards a common goal.
3. Communication is a vital component to Rosenzweig's success. The openness to converse about non-work related activities along with personal aspirations and difficulties is a display of special trust, a byproduct of how the best teachers treat their learners (Bain, 2004, p. 141).
4. Rosenzweig's tenacity and consistency has created a philosophical outlook for CHNM that is reciprocated in everyday practice. He has successfully anchored the change in culture, the final step in Kotter's change model (Kotter, 1996, p. 21). Having only the vision or only disconnected singular efforts will not successfully define an organization's culture.
5. Technology plays a critical role in this case. Part of how Rosenzweig was able to effect the change he did, and create CHNM is that he leveraged the affordances of computing technology to effect his change. Christensen et. al. (2010) have identified the computing technologies he worked with as disruptive technologies, that is as technologies that have the potential to break the status quo and make significant changes to how businesses and schools work.
References


