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Make History Accessible: The Case for YouTube

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Preface

Ten months ago when thinking of ideas for a thesis, I knew I wanted to do something practical. I wanted my thesis to have an impact and planned on doing that by pointing out a glaring trend missed by the historical community. But, this was incredibly difficult so I came up with a thought experiment: If you randomly picked an American from 1990 (Person A) and made them talk to another randomly picked American from 2019 (Person B)—what would surprise Person A about Person B's daily routine? The most likely answer is that Person A would be stunned by the domination of the internet and would be shocked at how dependent Person B is on it—professionally and personally.

I was keen on using the term "information revolution" to describe this phenomenon, but that is not appropriate. The term has been in use since the 1970s to describe the rise of commercial computers and their ability to process and store unthinkable amounts of data. But, information in this case is referring to data storage—and is much more technical; instead the term "media saturation" is far more appropriate. On average, Person B spends 11 hours a day interacting with media—and that includes: Live Television (TV), Time-shifted TV, Radio, DVD/ Blu-ray device, game consoles, internet connected device, internet on a computer, app/web on a smartphone, and lastly app/web on a tablet.[1] Assuming, Person B sleeps 8 hours a day that leaves 5 hours for… everything else? In comparison, Person A's household spent an average of seven hours a day watching TV—which is still nothing to scoff at.[2]

Jokes aside, "interacting with media" is a broad term and could encompass actual productivity if that is one's industry (i.e. marketing). Moreover, "interacting with media" is not an exclusive activity; for example, one can drive and listen to radio at the same time. But, the

number is still staggering and it shows no signs of slowing down. Out of the 11 hours, the largest chunk is spent watching "live TV"—so so that means the internet did not take away the TV's relevance as much as it did complement it. In fact, TV's viewing peaked from 2009-10—long after the supposed "death" of cable TV.[3] Simply put, instead of switching over to the internet, Americans prefer to consume both media, and that partly explains the stark increase.

So what does this have to do with history? Why should I, as a history student, be concerned about today's media-saturated landscape? History is about noticing trends, and this can be simply and crudely understood as: (change)/(time). I wanted to examine how this clear trend affected the historical field. And, to most people history too is a form of media they consume. I also felt a duty as a historically-minded person to propose a solution that could increase public interest in history—and I felt the best solution to be accessibility. If you want to make something popular, you make it widely and easily available. Luckily, people already spend an inordinate amount of time online—a quarter of U.S. adults are online constantly.[4] So, it made natural sense to find the suitable "social media" service for history professionals and amateurs alike—I chose YouTube.

To say that the existing historiography is sparse is an understatement, and is a reason why this thesis incorporates sources from so many different fields. I read about everything from algorithms to public history to news controversies to SEC reports to educational texts to communication theories. All to understand YouTube—but there is still so much to uncover. However, what became abundantly clear was that YouTube works for history—even with its myriad problems. I believe the trade-off is suitable and that is where the controversy and debate will arise—a difference in judgement.

Introduction

Philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche suffered from many illnesses throughout his life—one of them being poor eyesight. As he got older, his vision greatly inhibited his ability to physically write. So, Nietzsche, in an attempt to relieve his problem, adopted the use of a rather modern machine for the time—the Malling-Hansen Writing Ball. The writing ball was an early typewriter and Nietzsche felt that he wrote completely differently because of it. In fact,

> One of Nietzsche's friends, a composer, noticed a change in the style of his writing. His already terse prose had become even tighter, more telegraphic. "Perhaps you will through this instrument even take to a new idiom," the friend wrote in a letter, noting that, in his own work, his "'thoughts' in music and language often depend on the quality of pen and paper."... "You are right," Nietzsche replied, "our writing equipment takes part in the forming of our thoughts"[5]

The takeaway is to question the belief that technology does not change humans when they interact with it. Nietzsche's writings, and by extension his thoughts, fundamentally changed due to the medium he was working with. Technology, which represents advancements in human knowledge, changes the way we think and consume our media—and history is not an exception to this principle.

However, the historical discipline—right now—is in great danger because of not following this principle. Public interest in history, and the humanities as a whole, has severely dipped in the past 10 years. A graph to visualize the problem: [6]

Fig. 2: History's share of all US Bachelor's degrees since 1950
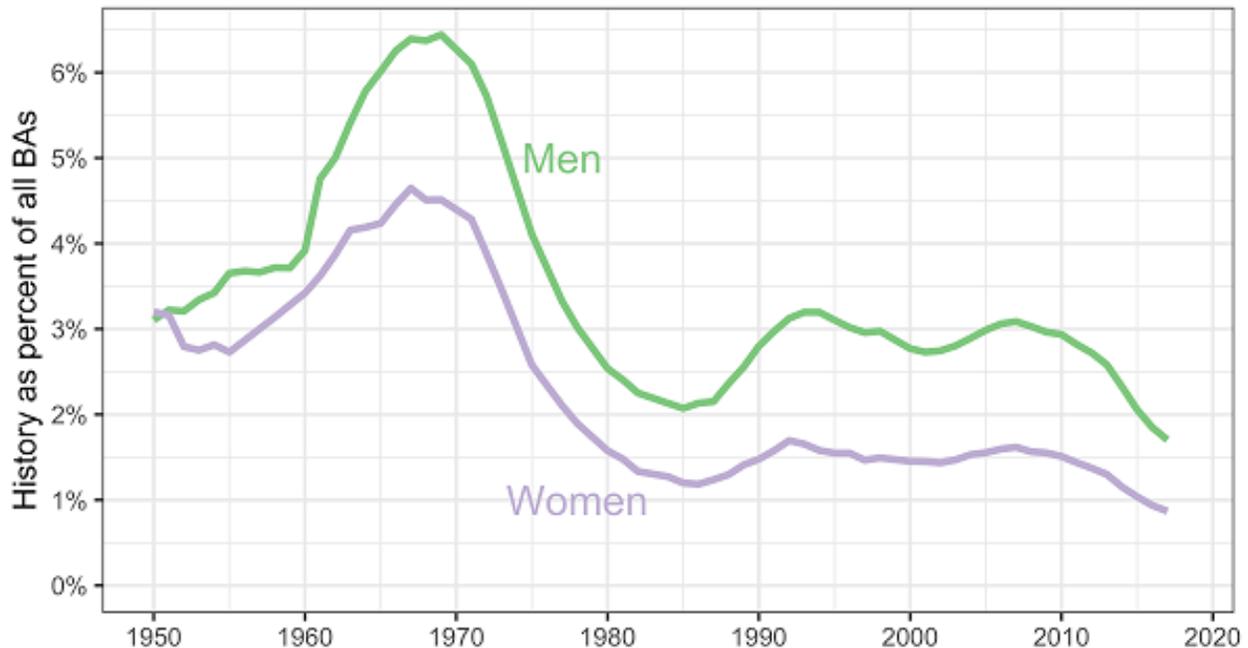
There have been great variations over time of undergraduates choosing to major in History. Moreover, the trends can be explained by many factors—but that is tangential. The focus should be from the years of 2008 to present day. There is a clear dip in both men and women choosing the history plan of study. A common explanation of this shift away from history is the Great Recession and its effects on incoming undergraduates choosing a major. Undergraduate education was already a large investment and tuition increasing at a higher rate than inflation itself only increases risk. In fact, using the 2016-7 dollar as a constant, tuition across all undergraduate institutions was $18,604 from 2007-8. But, tuition from 2016-7 was $23,091.[7] If tuition increased at the pace of inflation, then the cost from 2016-7 should have been: $21,458.43.[8] So, even if one's income increased in accordance with inflation from 2007 to 2017 —they would still need to pay an additional $1,632.57 on average across all institutions just for

an undergraduate degree. This financial stress incentivizes technical degrees due to their higher stability and greater job prospects—at least initially. History does not benefit from that incentive, and that plays a role in its decline over the past 10 years.

So what can undergraduates, graduates, historians, and even the average history "buff" do to reverse this change in a cheap and effective manner? The lack of public interest is not because the public is necessarily averse or disinterested in history. There is a great difference between a person not choosing the history major because of interest and a person not choosing the history major because of financial reasons. But, subsidizing tuition or even offering scholarships, which are steps in the right direction, are solutions that require vast amounts of political, social and economic capital. Rather, the effective and cheap solution lies in accessibility and adaptability. Following Nietzsche's example again—technology changes the way we interact with our media. In this case, "technology" is all the rapid advancements in digital communications over the past quarter-century and "media" is history—which is consumed and interpreted. In short, how can the public be interested in something if they do not see it? History has an accessibility problem; it has not adapted well in today's digital landscape. Therefore, the popular video-sharing platform YouTube presents a great opportunity for both professional history educators and amateur history enthusiasts to share and grow interest in history among the public.

Part I: Why YouTube?

At first, YouTube may seem like an odd choice as the preferred social media network for history. It is not a social media network exclusively built around promoting history, its social features are dwarfed by its competitors, and the controversial and ongoing "Adpocalypse" has

hurt its content creators (creators) and its general perception.[9] Also, the internet as a whole is recently under question by policymakers who are weary of its influence and are suggesting some sort of regulation. These are all glaring problems and there exist many more (which will be discussed), but this is an acceptable trade-off for the many benefits the platform offers for public history. YouTube offers the best opportunity for making history more accessible due its four advantages: design, reach, lack of restrictions, and community-building.

YouTube's Design

History requires a medium that encourages long-form communication. This is why the dominant method of distributing historical content has been through books and magazines where it is far easier to elaborate upon an argument. Fortunately, YouTube's friendly design incentivizes just that—it encourages longer video lengths because it not only benefits the platform, but also its creators. A generalized way to remember this relationship is: the longer the video=the likelier it has more ads=more advertisement revenue for creators, their partners, and YouTube itself. Even YouTube's own "recommended" algorithm suggests progressively longer videos when compared with the starting video.[10] On the topic of the algorithm, which is shrouded in mystery and often misunderstood, its objective is to, "[As such, the goal of the system is to] provide personalized video recommendations that help users find high quality videos relevant to their interests. In order to to keep users entertained and engaged, it is imperative that these recommendations are updated regularly and reflect a user's recent activity on the site. They are also meant to highlight the broad spectrum of content that is available on the site."[11] As a related

note, one can receive recommended YouTube videos even if they do not have an account—but a YouTube account is preferable and convenient as it is already part of one's Google account.

Another appealing design feature of YouTube is its advertisement system—which has been around since 2007 and is constantly evolving.[12] Officially called the YouTube Partner Program (YPP), it allows for creators to monetize their content. There are only five requirements: Follow YouTube partner policies, live in a country where the program is available, have more than 4,000 watch hours in the last 12 months, have more than 1,000 subscribers, and finally have a linked AdSense account (which is only a few steps).[13] There are also six variations of advertisements available including: display ads, overlay ads, skippable video ads, non-skippable video ads (which are especially alluring), bumper ads, and sponsored cards.[14] Combine this with the high probability of YouTube creators are also avid users and the term "produsage" emerges.[15] A "produser" is someone that not only creates content, but also avidly consumes it. This unique economy has resulted in media scholars to term services like YouTube as both a "playground and a factory".[16] Of course, it is hard not to see why this internet economy has been so controversial—YouTube is dependent on a slim portion of its creators, who also happen to be heavy users, to generate advertising revenue for both itself and the creator. The relationship between creators and YouTube is stressed even further with the "professionalization" of YouTube as many creators now rely on YouTube for an income. In fact, third-party organizations called "Multi Channel Networks" (MCNs) work with creators to handle everything from,

> [Content producers (YouTubers) increasingly rely on] these intermediaries in order to grow their audience and manage the complex network of affiliate marketing – the so-called revenue sharing–which is mandatory for them to turn their video production activity into a profitable business. MCNs promise to navigate the 'mysteriousness' of the

YouTube algorithm and how it works (Cunningham et al., 2016: 381) and thus increase views while also helping YouTubers become professionalized faster (Lobato, 2016).[17]

MCNs are crucial and add an extra risk to a potential YouTuber—and the amount of people relying on YouTube for an income is only growing. It is the predominant service through which online creators generate an income. In a recent study by Create Coalition, they found that YouTube creators collectively made a total of $4.004 billion in 2017 alone—a 21.1% jump from 2016 and $2,545 billion ahead of the nearest other service (Etsy).[18] While the advertisement system could use more work, YouTube's design that makes videos go "viral" cannot be reproduced on any other service consistently. This virality, which is intentional, makes YouTube special and bodes well for making history accessible. One extremely good example being Bill Wurtz's breakout hits, "History of Japan" and "History of the World" which received 47 and 65 million views respectively.[19]

YouTube's Reach

YouTube's audience is anyone with an internet connection. By 2021, it is predicted that YouTube will have 1.86 billion users—and that prediction does not include people without an account.[20] It is not only the dominant and preferred service for online content creators, but also holds a monopoly on the entire "video" industry online. Moreover, the service is immensely popular with most age demographics—achieving at least a simple majority in every category. It is to be expected that young people use the platform far more than an older demographic. For example, 96% of internet users aged 18-24 use YouTube while 85% of internet users aged 45-54 use YouTube. The lowest usage is among users aged 75 and over—coming in at 51%, but this is

still relatively high.[21] Another important statistic to consider is how internet users use YouTube—

are they approaching it casually or do they have dedicated accounts with multiple subscriptions?

A simple, but effective, statistic asks the question: Do you have any favorite YouTube channels

that you watch regularly? 34% of surveyors responded with "Yes, many", 24% responded with

"Yes, one or two", and 42% responded with "No".[22] Lastly, when talking of a new medium—it is

good to compare its reach with the previous medium. In YouTube's case that would be cable TV

—with one channel in particular: The History Channel. Specific documents relating to the

general operation and strategy of the channel were hard to find, but Brian Taves elucidates,

> The approach is not the specialized one of the academy or a social science, but instead of
> a form of popular history, similar to the standard presentation of nineteenth-century
> schoolbooks. The History Channel's website makes clear it appeal to the traditional
> amateur history enthusiast, with an abundance of trivia, such as today in history, and
> factoids designed to appeal to school age youth and older potential audiences.[23]

This information is hard to extrapolate on, but it is clear that YouTube's demographic is far

greater and more diverse than that of The History Channel. YouTube's design allows for niche

entertainment like History, Military History, Political History, etc to flourish due to sheer amount

of users. This is no guarantee that if one started a history-focused YouTube channel, then they

would outclass The History Channel's viewership. In fact, no history-based channel comes close

to the decreasing, but still massive, 89 million subscriptions held by The History Channel.[24]

However, that figure has been steadily decreasing over the past couple years and does not show

signs of stabilizing. There could be many reasons, but the channel's quality is definitely a major

factor—a graph outlines the extent of the problem: [25]

Number of Subscribers (Nielsen Ratings) vs. Year
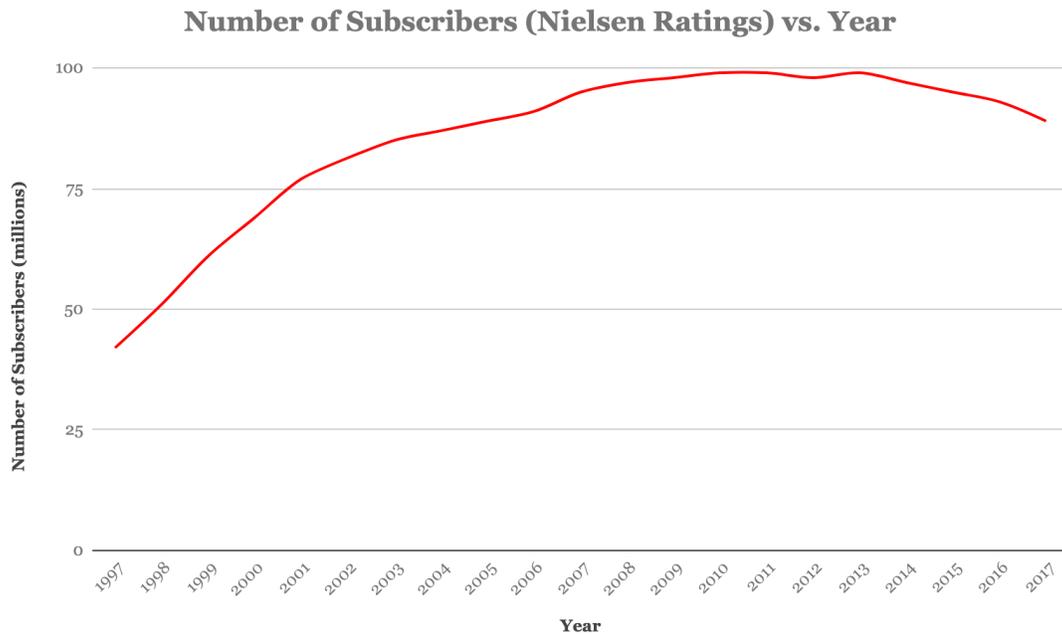
Granted, YouTube is still a relatively young service (the internet as a whole is when compared with cable TV), and most channels never achieve the tens of millions views consistently achieved by cable networks. But, its reach alone makes YouTube lucrative, and its design enhances that (although there are two additional major reasons that YouTube even better).

YouTube's (lack of) Restrictions

The Internet has a long-storied tradition of upholding two sacred qualities: decentralization and democratization. In recent years, this has been threatened by some lawmakers and corporate interests—who have been advocating for the end of net neutrality. But, considering what came before the internet (cable TV which neither democratic or decentralized), it is no surprise that most successful internet ventures incorporate these principles into their design. YouTube is no exception and showed this with its defunct slogan, "Broadcast Yourself".

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Theoretically, one can start a multi-million dollar business with just a video camera and editing software—and it has been done many times over resulting in the phenomenon of the "YouTube Celebrity".[26]

This is the ultimate allure of YouTube—the "YouTube Dream" (similar to the "American Dream") is to become fabulously wealthy and famous by being yourself on camera—without the hassle, politics or cost of traditional media. A closer look reveals that YouTube is not necessarily the anarchist heaven that users hoped it to be. For example, YouTube may not be as democratic as it claims to be. Without going into the realm of conspiracy, the existence of the YouTube's recommended algorithm is inherently undemocratic as it has to make a choice of which videos fall under the "recommended category". Some consider it as discrimination because the choice is not being made by the creator or the consumer—which ideally should be the only ones in control. Another similar and more famous example of this is Google's algorithm: PageRank. Regardless of the intention, PageRank caused irreversible consequences when it "[brought] order to the web". By indexing the entire web in the most relevant manner, most internet users preferred Google over any other search engine—and the search engine business is a lopsided industry where a few services dominate. This results in some people being unhappy with their page rankings—not only are they pressured to make appealing content, but also have to worry about Google's search engine rankings. One particular story stands out,

> "I am in a state of stupefaction regarding your ranking process," read one typical comment. "Since you created this search engine, you need to create a hideous error which is both laughable yet hurtful to a webmaster. Please type the words 'Ulysses S. Grant' into your search engine and look at the results. My website, 'The 'Ulysses S. Grant Home Page' was voted 'The Best Civil War Website' in the February 1998 issue of Civil War Time Illustrated...This website is graded as the premier website on any Civil War personality or battle. Bill Gates even wrote me a personal email praising it...You...rank

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other, inferior (and some pathetic) sites higher...This is an injustice of such magnitude that it begs explanation. I feel confident that if you take 5 minutes to look at my website you will rank it higher. [27]

This story was, and continues to be, a common complaint and this pattern of being at the algorithm's will continues with YouTube. A simple search of "YouTube algorithm" will bring up enough negative results (or videos that claim to have solved it). Even with these considerations, YouTube is democratic enough, and there are plenty of stories of unknown channels rising to unparalleled stardom.

"Good journalism is bad business, and bad journalism can be very, very good for business".[28] Yellow Journalism like this is present in every medium, including YouTube, but its negative consequences are severely amplified because of its accessibility. Yet,Network TV is marred with a cartel-like mentality where only a few companies exist and it is in their best interest to fiercely stomp out new competitors. This consolidation is best expressed by Prof. McChesney,

> The mega-media firms have enjoyed a staggering rate of growth in the last decade. In 1988, Disney was a $2.9 billion a year amusement park and cartoon company; in 1998, Disney had $22 billion in sales. In 1988, Time was a $4.2 billion publishing company and Warner Communications was a $3.4 billion media conglomerate; in 1998, Time Warner did $26 billion of business. In 1988, Viacom was a measly $600 million syndication and cable outfit; the new Viacom is expected to do $22 billion worth of business in the coming year.[29]

Unfortunately, this pattern has not stopped in 2019; Disney is worth almost $246 billion[30], WarnerMedia was worth $108.7 billion before its merger with AT&T in 2018[31], and Viacom is worth $12 billion[32] (this is less than 1998 levels, but the overall pattern is abundantly clear). Rich media companies tend to get richer and the only effective way for a new media company to breakthrough is to take advantage of new technologies—like YouTube did. Unlike traditional

media companies like Disney and WarnerMedia, YouTube channels do not stomp out competition, and other than the recommended algorithm, there is theoretically nothing stopping a YouTube channel from reaching to the top. This decentralization puts power back into the creators' hands—YouTube is not an overbearing media giant, but rather an enabler for creators and their community to interact and enjoy.

Lastly, traditional media is extremely expensive to produce—primarily due to legal problems and labor costs. Using the History Channel as an example of traditional media, author Brian Taves explains the financial hurdles involved in creating original programming,

> Using the funding that the cable channels are willing to offer, contracts are usually awarded primarily on the basis of the lowest bid. The commissioned companies churn out documentaries inexpensively and quickly, often on topics which can be filmed cheaply or where public domain footage is easily available. Hastily constructed documentaries are pieced together according to assembly-line standards, cutting corners to maintain a profit —deficiencies that are not only evident to the historian but to any thoughtful viewer. Such productions are marked by such flaws as slipshod chronology, minimal research and analysis, and a fragmented narration highlighting the lack of any unifying thesis. The producers would justifiably complain that no more can be expected; shortcomings are inevitable given the budgets and schedules from which they must work.[33]

Traditional media outlets like The History Channel, CNN and MSNBC usually do not create the historical documentaries they premiere. More often than not, it is far more economical to buy the rights (or commission) from a third-party who created the documentary. However, if the company is large enough (like the History Channel became), original programming is preferred. This is also why streaming services like Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Hulu have started to create their own shows—partly due to the exclucity (which drives loyalty to the network), but also because the long-term costs of original prommaging tend to be lower. This is where The History Channel's now infamous "it was aliens" reputation comes from—it stems from their attempt to

create original programming. Even with its massive amount of subscribers, The History Channel suffered financial constraints when creating their own TV shows. Instead of simply worrying about broadcasting, now executives had to worry about the writer's staff, budgeting staff, had to conduct polls about their shows, and so much more. This was the dilemma that faced entertainers in the era of cable, and the potential risk was acceptable when cable was the dominant way people consumed media. But, the benefits are diminished with the advent of YouTube. YouTube's reach is massive (albeit scattered), it is designed incredibly well for niche entertainment and virality, and most importantly, it is free! Of course, cable is still valid in some cases, but YouTube is superior in many ways—especially for an amateur.

Using YouTube to build Communities

YouTube's emphasis on video-sharing allowed it to build the diverse and impressive amount of communities it now hosts. In fact, a major reason why YouTube is so dominant over other platforms is simply because of the existing communities on it—not every content creator uploads to Vimeo, but most upload to YouTube.

The concept of "digital self" is not new—it describes a person's online persona and behaviors. But, what is surprising is that some people feel closer to their online communities than the "physical" communities they are part of. In fact, online communities can help foster growth in physical communities—take the case of Atlantic Canada,

> Forty percent of the YouTube users believed that watching more videos about Atlantic Canada, posted by Atlantic Canadians would help them feel more like a member of an Atlantic Canadian community. A high proportion (73.3%) believed that greater interaction with the site such as posting comments and videos would make them feel more like members of the YouTube community. Almost all the YouTube users (96.7%)

reported talking about videos they had seen on YouTube with other people.[34]

Some authors, like CP Chen, even suggest that YouTube is an advancement of traditional

parasocial relationships seen on TV. One YouTuber even states,

> No matter what strategies we use, the final goal is to extend our social influence. After all, we want to be famous. Today, when I upload my personal performances or images onto YouTube, there are at least one million people in the world who can see me. The impact is more than any TV show in Taiwan could ever produce.[35]

This sense of community was one of the reasons why social media became so popular (YouTube

included). Theoretically, one could start a YouTube channel called "Art History" and find a

worldwide community of enthusiasts that they would not have been able to find in their

proximity because of the niche topic. Moreover, subscribers of "Art History" could comment/

like/dislike the videos or interact with the YouTube community page itself to leave feedback and

contribute to the "Art History" community.

However, not all YouTube participation is the same, and it could be roughly divided into

two categories: publicly private and privately public. Publicly private is exclusive, but once one

is in the group—they have full access to the information (ex. secret society). Privately public is

inclusive—it is when the creator is open about their content, but keeps irrelevant and personal

details private (ex. mysterious YouTuber).[36] The former being far more common on YouTube and

there are little to no restrictions in joining a community. Lasly, there already exists a sizable

community of history buffs and history YouTube channels focused on all kinds and types of

history. It is impossible to list all of them and a strict criteria would have to be created. But

luckily, there was a recent collaboration between many popular history YouTubers called

"Operation Odysseus" on November 24, 2018. The collaboration, which was about Naval

History, contains 16 videos by 16 distinct channels and has amassed 208,945 views.[37] Although impressive, this is a low number when compared to the extremely popular "World History" series by education channel Crash Course—which has amassed a staggering 53,631,647 views over 42 videos.[38] Either way, this is great news when attempting to increase public interest in history.

The late Roy Rosenzweig paved the way when it came to understanding the relationship between history and mass media, and his article "*Can Wikipedia Be Open-Source?*" poses a very important question: Does crowdsourcing help or hinder history? A good portion of the scholarly work about YouTube focuses on its ability to become the next great "Alexandria" for not only historical content, but all types of video content. With titles such as "*YouTube as archive: Who will curate this digital Wunderkammer?*"[39] and "YouTube and academic libraries: building a digital collection"[40], it is clear that there's interest in treating YouTube as an online library. Again, YouTube's lack of restrictions incentivizes this; it is a free service that stores a large amount of data. Moreover, a more comprehensive community guidelines page (similar to that of Wikipedia) can possibly help crowdsource video content. However, YouTube and Wikipedia are not the same; the latter was intentionally designed to be an encyclopedia while the former was designed to share videos. Historian Alan McKee sums it up best,

> This is particularly important considering the relative permanence of digital democratic archives and traditional public institutions as a whole—rather than simply of individual items in the collections. The articulation of traditional archives with states—one of the most stable of human social institutions—gives them a longevity that commercial objects such as digital democratic archives rarely match. There is clearly still a role for traditional archives in the digital world.[41]

Regardless, YouTube is already a forum for historical discussion, appreciation, and education—and there is still plenty more potential.

Successful YouTube Case Studies

Discussing YouTube's features is well and good, but have there been instances where YouTube (and by extension the internet) has aided in historical education or entertainment? Yes—very much so. YouTube's four defining features, which make it a great medium for history, have made a positive impact on education and historical interest.

1. <u>Iowa State University Archives:</u> In 2008, its archive (The Special Collections Department) decided to innovate how they stored film. The results were positive (50 videos on channel) and here is the most important data: 52,000 total views and 60 subscribers (from all reaches of the globe). The archive also experienced a sharp increase in the number of requests for video reproductions. The overall conclusion was, "Despite the time commitment, this experience has been worth it. As an outreach tool, YouTube has provided the department with a worldwide audience we never would have had otherwise."[42] The report also expressed enthusiasm for adopting other online mediums. Lastly, the channel is still active and boasts a total of 900,974 total views and 2,263 subscribers—impressive for an archive to say the least.[43]

2. <u>Australian Film Archives:</u> In 2011, Historian Alan McKee (who has been referenced before in this paper), investigated if YouTube could be a more useful

substitute as a historical archive than traditional archives. McKee believed that YouTube outclassed most archives in terms of scale, accessibility, ease of use, and called it a "democratic digital archive". Moreover, due to its accessibility, YouTube simply features more content—Mckee states,

> Legions of amateurs, fans, retired technicians and announcers from the heyday of broadcasting have stepped in to fill the void [of television history] left by cultural institutions and by television itself. They collec video clips, theme music, idents, intros, and test patterns.[44]

However, this is one drawback. Unlike an archive, which is carefully organized by trained librarians, YouTube is far more chaotic—it is best to use both.

3. <u>Ebola Outbreak Information:</u> Albeit a bit different from the other examples, this study examined how information and misinformation about the 2015 Ebola outbreak was disseminated on YouTube specifically. Unfortunately, and not surprisingly, there was a lot of low-quality information about Ebola and also a heavy media presence despite the fact that 60,308 people were diagnosed with influenza from 2014-5. However, inspired by these reasons, the authors urge the medical and public health community to,

> [In the era of cost-conscious care], universities and academic centers should consider dissemination of reliable information through the social media and video sharing websites, especially in countries with good penetration of the Internet and social media. Channeling healthcare funds towards such efforts could potentially reduce unnecessary medical visits and, as a consequence, hospital admissions for diseases mistaken to be part of ongoing epidemics.[45]

4. <u>YouTube in the Classroom:</u> In 2006, Historian Joe Coohill noticed that many more of his students now consumed history not through books or magazines, but rather the History Channel. In order to have more effective lessons, he incorporated more images and videos into his lectures—and noted their impact. The results were overwhelmingly positive in favor of using more images in lecture; 87% of students over a two-year period believed it helped with the material. Of course, sourcing and reliability of information is a constant problem (i.e "Bert is Evil").[46] Professor Alan Marcus has also done similar research, but rather investigates the use of film in history classrooms.[47] YouTube, which hosts a considerable amount of historical content (a lot of it being legitimate and credible), would be the natural progression. Yet, if YouTube does not work properly, the digital humanities community has several other recommendations—especially with regards to public history and history education.[48]

There exist many more examples of successful case studies, and also unsuccessful case studies. YouTube is by no means a perfect platform and its accessibility can also be a tremendous downside. However, the pattern of taking education online has flourished in the past 10 years—especially with education services like Coursera, Khan Academy, and MIT OpenCourseWare. History should also adapt—and YouTube accommodates that request.

Part II: Popular vs. Professional History

This is a classic dilemma that almost all historians face when creating a work—"should I aim this work to the general public, and therefore make it more accessible, or should I aim this

work to history professionals in order to advance the literature?" Of course, there is a question whether this divide should exist at all—why must there be a tradeoff? Theoretically and ideally, a great historical work should experience both academic and commercial success. However, that is not necessarily the case. Of course, there exist great historical works that are commercially successful, but there also exist plenty of "bad" histories that go on to sell millions of copies. The classification of "good vs. bad history" is not the focus of this thesis (it is controversial enough with its suggestions), but there exist "bad" historians who have been commercially successful, but are ostracized by professional historians. Two that immediately come to mind are: David Irving and Gavin Menzies who wrote the works, *Hitler's War* and *1421: The Year China Discovered the World*. Of course, there also exist non-history professionals who attempt to write histories—which by itself is not a bad thing—but usually leads to poor historical works that are still commercially successful. The most recent offender being American journalist, Bill O'Reilly, with his extremely popular "Killing…" series that prioritizes splendor over thorough historical analysis. Granted, "pop. history" is an entire industry (and it is growing)—historian Jerome de Groot explains,

> Popular historical books, in their various forms, have a huge audience and sell in massive numbers. In 2003, £32m worth of history books were bought, 3 percent of all books sold; this was a record, demonstrating the growth of the market share as well as the popularity of the format. The market has been swelled since by the rise in ebooks and the shift towards self-publishing and dynamic, cheap editions accessed online and through devices such as Amazon's Kindle. Reports suggest that in 2002-12 "sales have increased by more than 45 percent to nearly 5.4 million copies a year—more than double the rate of growth across the publishing industry as a whole. These figures have been contested but the point is that history publishing seems to be sustaining its boom over the years.[49]

These problems arise because history, by its nature, is a subjective field. Historians are tasked with interpreting mass amounts of information and then condensing it down to an overarching

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theme—and this results in conflicting interpretations. Regardless, this dilemma will continue, but this thesis will follow the advice of historian David Cannadine,

> On the other hand, it would be a bit rich or, as we say this side of the pond [academia to entertainment], unseemly, for someone who was, in the end, given four whole years to complete our fifteen programmes, to whine about this. Graduate students are always making the same complaint; and the longer they are allowed extensions, the longer they say they need—until some magical moment of critical mass is reached when they know they have arrived at the definitive truth. This is the "scholar's mirage", certain to disappear the closer one approaches it. So the line between invigorating urgency and panic-stricken haste—the line all of us in television choose to live with—is often very fine.[50]

This "scholar's mirage" is important in understanding this divide between pop. history and professional history. Both sides are not blameless in this debate, pop. historians tend to prioritize splendor over substance and professional historians suffer from the "scholar's mirage" and/or not having accessible prose. But, having reservations about YouTube because it might allow for more pop. history to flourish over professional history is failing to capitalize on the opportunities YouTube offers. Moreover, this is not a unique problem that comes with YouTube—history too has had its debates on what bookstores should shelf. YouTube just happens to be the world's largest and most popular bookstore where anyone can publish and everyone goes there.

User-Generated (UCG) vs. Professional (PCG) Content

Similarly, YouTube too suffers from its own "popular vs. professional" dilemma—instead the dilemma is between amateur user-generated content (UCG) and professionally-generated content (PCG). The original vision of YouTube was to be the internet's "virtual village"—and that is clearly expressed with its unofficial, but now defunct, slogan: "Broadcast Yourself".

However, its immense popularity presented a new challenge; due to its global reach, it has become a prime distribution channel for organized mass media. One one hand, if YouTube becomes friendly to PCG content over UCG—it no longer is YouTube. But, the service is no longer the same "virtual village" it was in 2006. Author J. Kim elaborates on this,

> Emphasizing PGC, a network video service does not follow UGC's core philosophies, which are amateurism and populism. What the media industry wants is for YouTube to provide an ad-friendly media environment that links content and advertisements smoothly. Initially, the industry was concerned with the copyright issues arising because of YouTube, but once Google had purchased YouTube and enforced copyright law more strictly, media companies began to think about profitable uses of online video services. Networks 'formalized' online video services into providing the same commercially interrupted viewing culture as TV.[51]

Part III: Problems with YouTube?

By no means is YouTube a perfect platform—it comes with a diverse set of problems, and some were discussed previously. However, all these problems can be roughly divided into three categories: misinformation, disinformation, and the "scarcity or abundance" problem.

1. <u>Misinformation:</u> Misinformation is information that is not intended to be false or deceptive, but is. It is far more common than disinformation as it is easier to make an honest mistake as opposed to a deliberate and systematic use of propaganda. Unfortunately, misinformation is a large problem on YouTube, and social media sites in general.

    A content analysis from 2013 by a Taiwanese group of doctors investigated anorexia-related misinformation on YouTube. Out of 140 videos, they found that 29.3% of them were explicitly pro-anorexia, and these videos

featured increased community interaction and were favored well. The report recommends that health professionals start paying attention to YouTube's influence (in 2013) and conclude that, "More research is needed to study the characteristics of pro-anorexia videos in order to develop algorithms that will automatically detect and filter those videos before they become popular."[52]

Another example of misinformation on YouTube is The Marina Joyce Case. Shortly summarized, during July 2016 a large portion of creators as well as users on the site got into a mass hysteria and several conspiracies about YouTuber Marina Joyce. The belief was that Joyce has been acting extremely odd in her recent videos and users and creators pointed to examples like: her lack of eye contact, "subliminal" messages in her videos as well as a noticeable amount of bruises on her arm. This led to creators and users wildly speculating that Joyce was either held against her will, was part of a marketing ploy, and most outlandishly, was kidnapped by ISIS.[53] Of course, none of this happened and the changes people noticed were a result of Joyce's declining mental state—for which she seeked help.

Both stories are excellent cases of misinformation; the uploaders and users are not trying to perpetuate lies, but unfortunately do so either due to lack of expertise or lack of oversight. Due to YouTube's sheer scale, misinformation is hard to track as it requires some form of interpretation—which is hard to do with automatic bots that may accidently flag a video that does not qualify. This is a major controversy and the most famous example is YouTuber Pewdiepie accusing

the Wall Street Journal of taking him out of context (WSJ accused Pewdiepie of antisemitism earlier).[54] However, do these examples of misinformation warrant the level of criticism YouTube receives? And more importantly, do these examples of misinformation warrant the complete omission of YouTube as a place of historical learning and research? Of course not.

First, YouTube has promised to revise its recommended algorithm so that it limits offensive content.[55] Examples of such content include: White Nationalism, White Supremacy, 9/11 conspiracy videos, "The Decline of the West", Scientific Racism, etc. Writer Mathew Ingram believes that YouTube has not done enough—and this is a popular view.[56] However, YouTube's Product Chief, Neal Mohan, claims YouTube is trying to tune its recommended algorithm (which has commonly been referred to as a "rabbit hole" or less favorably as "a petri dish") to flag its offensive content.[57] This is a dilemma for YouTube; if they create more-conscious algorithm that can outsmart reprehensible content (if that is even possible), then YouTube becomes less accessible. It can be argued that traditional media is regulated and it is about time that YouTube, and by extension, all other social media services be regulated as well. In fact, if YouTube does not take a more active stance on this issue, then Silicon Valley's days of self-regulation are most likely over. The problem of misinformation is so rampant that it has been a talking point for 2020 presidential candidates—most notably Senator Elizabeth Warren—to regulate companies like YouTube.[58]

Instead of a reactive solution, a proactive solution is far better suited. As

in, why should historical learning and research be affected by these "bad apples"? Yes, the situation is bad and YouTube has not responded as favourably as hoped—but does that mean that history professionals and enthusiasts alike who share a love of history should stop using the service all together? No. In fact, the high amount of misinformation should serve as an impetus—and YouTube happens to be an extremely efficient forum. If Silicon Valley does not respond and politicians are slow to respond as well, it becomes the job of the users to manage the platform's content before a critical mass is hit. Specifically with regards to History, historians are trained to think historically and methodically—and this is a step in the right direction to fight misinformation if spread to YouTube. This solution is education; if there are more historians and historically-minded people on YouTube, the problem of misinformation (especially with regard to history) decreases because of community interactions. The reason being that a lot of bad information is rooted in poor sources or arguments—which can be debunked easily and that tends to stop them. Of course, historical analysis is a learned skill, but simply maintaining an online presence goes a long way—a successful example to possibly follow could be Reddit's popular subreddit, "r/askhistorians". [59]

2. <u>Disinformation:</u> On the other hand, disinformation is information that is purposely intended to be false. The actual word was recently coined by Joseph Stalin and was extensively used by the Soviet KGB during the Cold War—but it is still very

much relevant in today's digital world.[60] Other related terms include: fake news and propaganda (cyber), but disinformation is more fitting. On an important note, channels such as "The Alex Jones Channel" or "Stefan Molyneux" are extremely popular YouTube channels that could fall into this category (the former being banned off YouTube for violating community guidelines—which is rare). However, disinformation is far more severe as the person or organization has to actively promote false information—these channels are examples of extreme misinformation and are dangerous, but there is a probability that their creators believe in what they say and do not intend to spread false information.

Of course, if YouTube is a breeding ground for misinformation—then it is a haven for agents of disinformation. YouTube's combination of reach, lack of restrictions, lax guidelines, community-building aspects (which are all positives if used properly) compound into an information nightmare for innocent users of the service who either use for entertainment or information. By far, the most flagrant abuse of YouTube's accessibility has to be for nefarious political purposes—most notably by firms such as Cambridge Analytica (CA) and AggregateIQ for the 2016 US presidential and Brexit elections. In the now famous "Cambridge Analytica Files" article, journalist Carole Cadwalladr interviewed Christopher Wylie, CA's former director of research, and the results were extraordinary. Wylie admitted that CA illegally scraped up to 87 million Facebook profiles and created psychological profiles of up to 230 million Americans just by using mined social media data.[61] Other than just being an extraordinary chapter in the history of

political warfare, CA's work, and by extension AggregateIQ, fundamentally challenged western-style republics worldwide. Madeline Albright's quote, "While democracy in the long run is the most stable form of government, in the short run, it is among the most fragile," gains a new meaning after this scandal.[62]

But, the practice of "strategic communications", "data mining", and "data scraping" has only been more prevalent after the scandal—and this is greatly due to the accessibility and reach of social media services like YouTube. Other than CA and Aggregate IQ, there are examples of traditional information warfare waged by nation-states—who take advantage of YouTube and other social media. In particular, states like Iran, Russia, Venezuela, and Bangladesh use a multitude of tactics, such as: social media bots, troll farms, fake pages, fake accounts, and fake events.[63] The point of these campaigns, and disinformation campaigns in general, is "to create a society in which we can't tell the difference between fact and fiction."[64]

What does this mean for YouTube? Misinformation is one thing, but disinformation is another matter entirely. An important question to ask, for historians and enthusiasts alike is, How conducive is YouTube's design to disinformation and how that affects historical understanding and learning? In a recent social network analysis, researchers from The University of Arkansas and Creighton University investigated a suspected channel running information campaigns. This particular channel (they chose not to disclose the name because of legal concerns) had been inactive for a long stretch of time, but rapidly started

to post videos again starting November 2017. By May 2018, the channel had posted a little less than 1,300 videos and as the report states, "While one can post as many videos as he/she likes, getting unusually high number of views as soon as a video is posted is rather odd, especially for an unknown YouTuber. This is a strong indicator of a sophisticated information campaign run by this channel."[65] Moreover, it did not help that the channel's content was about conspiracies and involved keywords such as: "Russia", "USA", "Israel", "Syria", "Iran" in context with "World War III". This may lead some, such as journalist Charlie Warzel to state that, "Intentionally or not, it [Big Tech] was designed this way," and adopt a rather bleak view of YouTube.[66] Yes, YouTube is viral, and YouTube may favor more extreme subjects because its users favor more extreme subject matter. The virality of the information flow makes this so much worse. But, like with the case of misinformation if YouTube does not self-regulate properly (in fear of being less accessible) or if politicians do not act quickly—it becomes the job of users to rectify the problem.

3. "Scarcity or Abundance": Best expressed by Roy Rosenzweig in his book chapter, "Scarcity or Abundance? Preserving the Past", Rosenzweig points that the the internet is excellent at both remembering history (in terms of information overload) as well as forgetting it. This is a major problem for historians, especially since the internet will be the predominant medium future historians

(and some current) look back to create histories. Rosenzweig outlines the problem,

> [Thus] historians need to be thinking simultaneously about how to research, write, and teach in a world of unheard-of historical abundance and how to avoid a future of record scarcity. Although these prospects have occasioned enormous commentary among librarians, archivists, and computer scientists, historians have almost entirely ignored them. In part, our detachment stems from the assumption that these are "technical" problems, which are outside the purview of scholars in the humanities and social sciences. Yet the more important and difficult issues about digital preservation are social, cultural, economic, political, and legal-issues that humanists should excel at. The "system" for preserving the past that has evolved over centuries is in crisis, and historians need to take hand in building a new system for the coming century.[67]

The "scarcity or abundance" problem is not just limited to YouTube or even the internet. Just recently, there was a controversy between the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) and historians that illustrated this problem. Both NARA and the Obama Foundation agreed upon digitizing all the material, but not necessarily having the physical copies.[68] Moreover, researchers are not allowed to "[Under National Archives policy researchers are not given access to] paper originals when electronic versions are available".[69] Obviously, this sparked concern among historians; historian David Garrow even states that, "The absence of a true Obama presidential library will have the effect of discouraging serious and potentially critical research into the Obama presidency." Of course, a digital library is cheaper, more accessible, easier to organize than a traditional library. In fact, the proposed library has a fantastic mission of accessibility and is a victory for public history. Nevertheless, there needs to be balance. Although, this thesis

advocates for YouTube, that does not mean that it advocates only for YouTube. Digital libraries, like the internet, are a great complement to history and add more to understanding the past. In addition, digital history is not "an inevitability" by any means, but as stated above will be the lion's share of sources for future historians. The "scarcity or abundance problem" is still extremely prevalent, but should not deter people from using digital sources. But, it should deter people who exclusively rely on digital sources.

Again, these categories are generalizations, but are an accurate portrayal of the biggest gripes historians have for YouTube (or just anything digital). As stated repeatedly, these problems are not exclusive to YouTube. Yes, the scale at which these problems happen is far greater, but so are the benefits—and this has to do with accessibility. Remember, accessibility is a two street. Only the last problem is unique to the digital medium—the other two have been and will continue to be prevalent across all of mediums. Therefore, it feels unnecessarily harsh to criticize YouTube and other digital efforts.

Part IV: Conclusion

Accessibility is the easiest and most cost-efficient solution to the "great history drought"; and there is already an existing service in place that also happens to be the second most popular website on the internet.[70] If YouTube is not the preferred service, there also exist other extremely popular services like Coursera, Khan Academy or University Open Source programs (MIT OpenCourseWare is the most famous and notable one, and Yale's History Department puts select courses on their website).[71] Yet, preferring Coursera over YouTube is not an objection to this

thesis—both services make history far more accessible and convenient. The lesson is not YouTube, the lesson is to rally and strengthen the history community for professionals and enthusiasts alike. This could mean professors uploading to YouTube, using YouTube in the classroom or perhaps even consulting and interacting with popular YouTube historians. Fortunately, UConn has made some progress on this effort with their "Open Educational Resources", but there is still much to be done when compared to MIT, Yale, Berkeley or Michigan.[72] All these potential solutions could go a long way for the average user.

YouTube is already 14 years old and is no longer the innovative service it used to be. In fact, YouTube was not even the first multimedia streaming service to have a user base in the millions—Napster, MySpace, and even email chains came far before it. Moreover, there will be companies after YouTube that introduce new technologies that fundamentally change human behavior and interaction. For this inevitable and upcoming change, the historical discipline should be prepared to adapt instead of pushing back and losing opportunities. If nothing else, this thesis urges the historical community to adopt an adaptive mindset that actively seeks opportunities to spread education further beyond traditional academia or the K-12 school system. Accessibility is just the solution for the current problem of public interest—that might completely change in 20 years with emerging technologies that are unimaginable today. For a field that analyzes and evaluates change, history has done a poor job of re-inventing itself. Hopefully, Nietzsche's story about adopting the typewriter makes more sense now.
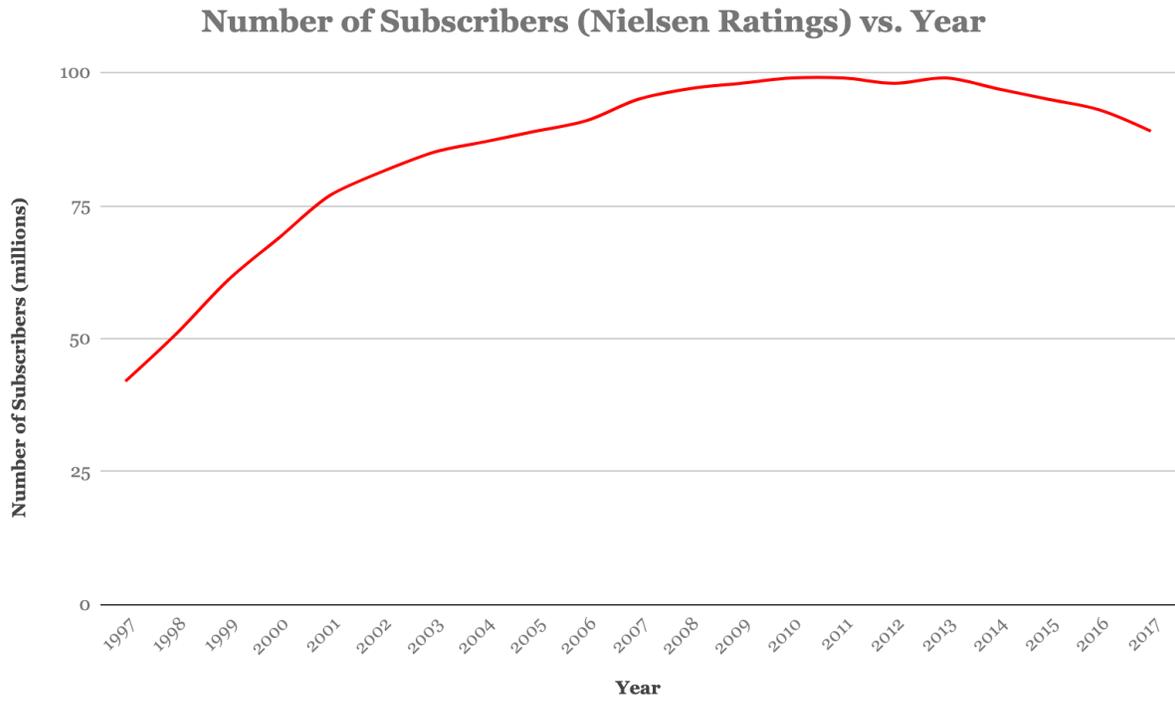
Appendix A

Fig. 2: History's share of all US Bachelor's degrees since 1950
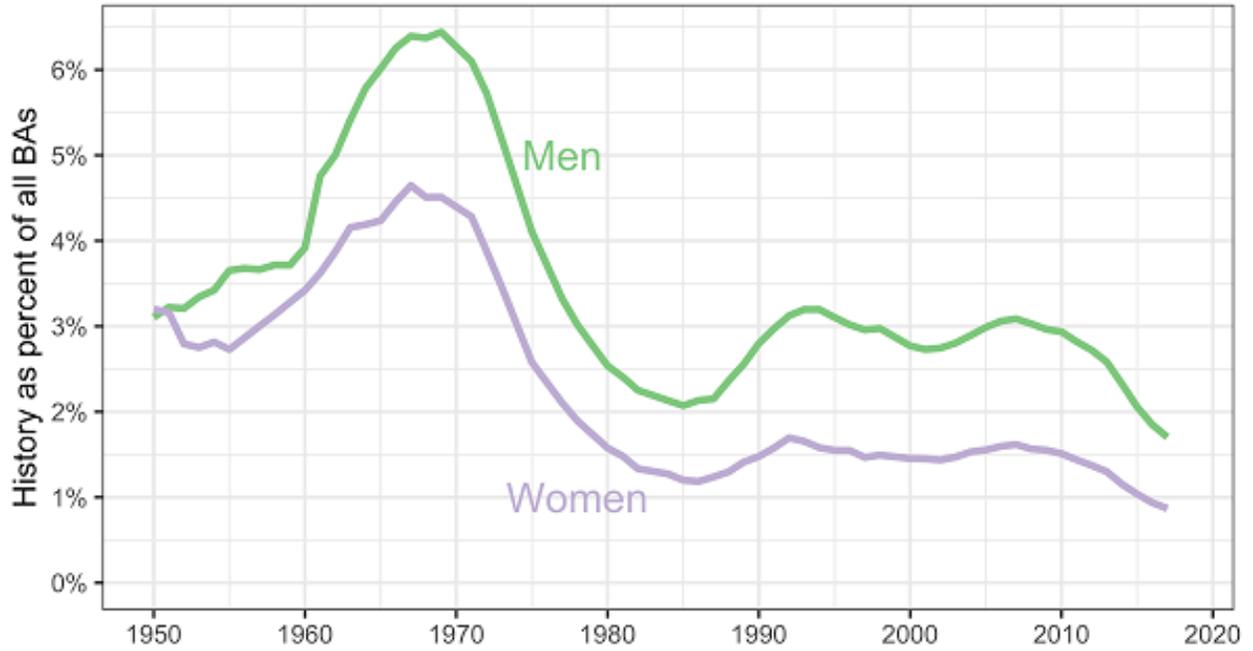
Sources: IPEDS & HEGIS datasets and printed Dept. of Ed. bulletins
Collated by Benjamin M. Schmidt for the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2004.

Appendix B

Number of Subscribers (Nielsen Ratings) vs. Year

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