The Moral Dilemas of Historians – JYRoig

History has always interacted with politics, especially when constructing text books.[[1]](#endnote-1) However, nowadays, the interaction has become ever more stark. Particularly, under the Trump presidency, the field of history has become a battleground. This is exemplified by the 1766 project that Trump championed. A response to the 1619 project, the 1766 project aimed to provide a "patriotic education".[[2]](#endnote-2) The publishing and endorsement of the 1766 project demonstrates the politicization of history. Although the 1766 project was not written by historians, it was immediately denounced by them.[[3]](#endnote-3) This public rejection of the project demonstrates a common attitude among the field; there is a social responsibility to combat misinformation. Another issue with misinformation is its presence amongst the public. The example of Charlottesville is one of the most blatant, however less overt examples abound. A more innocuous example would be the current discourse around traditional gender roles, with republicans harkening to a perceived past where women were subservient and then projecting their preconceptions into the far past. However historical findings indicate that traditional gender roles regarding family are a relatively new phenomena, as seen with professions like brewing[[4]](#endnote-4) and farming.[[5]](#endnote-5) The next issue, which is related closely with lying, is the discourse surrounding Holocaust denial.1 The current debate with the AfD in Germany posits an interesting dilemma and a possible failure on the part of historians. A failure to properly communicate with both the politicians and public.

However, this is a task with many aspects. While historians combat misinformation coming from the politicians and the public, it is important they do not shut themselves away in the ivory tower of academia. Public history is still very important and people are interested more than ever; the rise of re-enactment and living museums bear witness to this trend.1 This task of public history overlaps with museums, therefore historians must constantly adapt to new methods of communication. History, in the age of digital communication, is at a turning point. The rapid dissemination of information is a double edged sword. While misinformation is communicated with more speed, information has never been easier to access. Youtube, Tiktok and Instagram are platforms ideal for information exchange. It is important to take into account that both TikTok and Instagram communicate bite-sized information, therefore the objective should be to spark curiosity and not outright provide specific information.

Finally, among academics there is a responsibility to engage in falsification as exemplified by the Abraham affair.[[6]](#endnote-6) Methodologies and theories are always evolving, it is the task of both academic historians and public historians to engage with the new discoveries in the field lest they find themselves repeating the mistakes of their predecessors.

1. Hunt, Lynn. 2018. “History: Why It Matters.” In *History : Why It Matters*, 1. Why It Matters. Cambridge ; Polity. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Trump, Donald. 2020. “Remarks by President Trump at the White House Conference on American History.” The American Mind. September 17, 2020. <https://americanmind.org/features/reclaiming-american-history/remarks-by-president-trump-at-the-white-house-conference-on-american-history/>. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Crowley, Michael, and Jennifer Schuessler. 2021. “Trump’s 1776 Commission Critiques Liberalism in Report Derided by Historians.” *The New York Times*, January 19, 2021, sec. U.S. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/18/us/politics/trump-1776-commission-report.html>. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Dietler, Michael. 2006. “Alcohol: Anthropological/Archaeological Perspectives.” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 35 (1): 229–49. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.35.081705.123120>. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Bennett, Judith M. 1987. “Wives and Husbands.” In *Women in the Medieval English Countryside: Gender and Household in Brigstock Before the Plague*, 100–141. Oxford University Press. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Novick, Peter. 1988. “The Abraham Affair.” In *That Noble Dream: The Objectivity Question and the American Historical Profession*, 612–21. Ideas in Context. Cambridge University Press. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)