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M'er F'ing History: Speaking in Our Audience's Language

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M'er F'ing History: Speaking in Our Audience's Language

Abstract

I was talking to Jake the other night about Cookie Monster. Really, we were talking about the theory behind Cookie Monster's latest strategic move and how we could all learn a thing or two from him. Which move was that? The short, furry blue monster's brilliant foray [into pop culture with "Share It Maybe,"](#) the music video parody of Carly Rae Jepsen's song "Call Me Maybe." In one day, Cookie has racked up 2.3 million hits on the less-than-four-minute video. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

CW150, Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Civil War Era Studies, Civil War Interpretation, Agency Voice, National Park Service

Disciplines

Cultural History | History | Public History | Social History | United States History

Comments

Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public is written by alum and adjunct professor, John Rudy. Each post is his own opinions, musings, discussions, and questions about the Civil War era, public history, historical interpretation, and the future of history. In his own words, it is "a blog talking about how we talk about a war where over 600,000 died, 4 million were freed and a nation forever changed. Meditating on interpretation, both theory and practice, at no charge to you."

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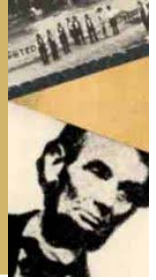
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https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=-qTIGg3I5y8

"Share It Maybe?"
Damn skippy, Cookie! I'll share it!
It's good enough for me.

I was talking to Jake the other night about Cookie Monster. Really, we were talking about the theory behind Cookie Monster's latest strategic move and how we could all learn a thing or two from him. Which move was that? The short, furry blue monster's brilliant foray [into pop culture with "Share It Maybe."](#) the music video parody of Carly Rae Jepsen's song "Call Me Maybe." In one day, Cookie has racked up 2.3 million hits on the less-than-four-minute video.

"Why," I mused, "can't *we* (i.e. the National Park Service) do something like this?"

OK, so I might have been a bit more vulgar in that sentence, with an expletive or two thrown in for good measure, but I'm retelling the story so I get to make myself sound a bit more refined and all-sophisticated-like.

I quickly preempted Jake by answering the question myself: "[Expletive Deleted] Agency Voice."

There's this rote answer that folks will give to a question like mine, a question of, "why can't we do this or that cool thing?" It morphs and changes, lengthens and shortens, but it boils down to those two words (minus the Nixonian aside). "Agency voice." As a public agency, as a Federal agency, we must maintain a dignified image. According to many loud voices within the Service, we can't do something that is sly, funny, witty or slightly crude, because we run the risk of belittling the Service's reputation.

Jake shot his own retort back to me: "This is the problem though - we have tons of people who think nature and history aren't pop culture, that they shouldn't be pop culture. Why can't we have a fun agency voice? Why can't we proudly say, 'we take our job seriously, but we have fun?'"

Dignity can be wildly overrated. At times, it can even be a barrier to communications. Speak in too dignified a tone, in too snooty a language, and you'll alienate the very people you'd like to reach most. We have thick style guides in all of our jobs, the approved and set-in-stone language we *must always* use when speaking with the voice of our agencies or institutions or museums. Sometimes, the bravest and most meaningful thing to do with those books are to burn them to cinders.

What should we be doing more? Compare the two videos below. On the left, a C-SPAN clip attempting to convey the importance and meaning of Alexander Hamilton. On the right, a clip from

the White House trying to convey an importance and meaning of Alexander Hamilton. Go ahead, compare and contrast. Trust me.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RK4rG8l7PB4&feature=player_embedded

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WNff7nMIGnE&feature=player_embedded

Which video do you remember better? Which video inspired more? Which video imparted a meaning *to your soul* more effectively?

But would this pass a museum's sniff-test for agency voice? I know the answer I'd get from a chunk of my co-workers in the NPS: "no, this is not dignified enough, we must speak with our authority."

But then look at what Lin-Manuel Miranda's rap video has wrought: there are [remix slideshows](#). There are [cover versions](#). There are people finding Alexander Hamilton who more-than-likely never would have encountered him before and *internalizing* his story. Not simply hearing it, but caring about it, making it their own and expressing it.

When was the last time you saw an average American teenager making a slideshow with eh voice-over of a dry video of a Park Ranger talking direct to camera? When was the last time you saw an average American teenager remixing lethargic video of Shelby Foote or Ed Bearss or any other talking head in front of a wall of books?

What would happen if we all tried to emulate Lin-Manuel Miranda? What if we went out of our way to speak the language of modern Americans? That language is a pop-culture verse, sometimes hip-hop beats, sometimes bubble-gum, sometimes crass and sometimes humorous.

But wouldn't we reach America? Couldn't we tell our stories to all of America, not just the small percentage who can stand boring talking heads seated in front of nondescript bookshelves?

And isn't reaching *every single* American and helping them find a personal meaning within the past our sacred responsibility as public historians?

EDIT:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H1G7g1yw86U&feature=player_embedded

A parody?
Hell yeah!

Jake pointed out a fantastic parody of Lin-Manuel Miranda's Alexander Hamilton Mixtape produced by a comedy troupe of historical founding fathers. Yeah... nerdspllosion right there. When was the last time some interpretive product *you* produced was parodied word-for-word by a man in a powdered wig?

I rest my case...