Historian Urges Colleagues to Take Control of the Internet

Marshall Poe has one message for fellow historians – get yourselves online. The University of Iowa professor outlines the importance of this in the April 2009 issue of Historically Speaking, the bulletin of The Historical Society.

“Hunkering down in our offices and seminar rooms until the storm passes will not do the trick, for the storm will not pass,” Poe writes. “The Internet is here to stay, and we need to be on it.”

Historically Speaking, which is published five times a year by the Johns Hopkins University Press, features lively essays, interviews and forums on all aspects of history, historiography, and current affairs.

Poe’s essay “Fighting Bad History with Good, or, Why Historians Must Get on the Web Now” offers a direct argument for bringing historians out into public to assure that accurate historical information is available to online readers.

“The Internet allows anyone to broadcast anything. That may sound wonderfully democratic, but it also may spell trouble,” Poe writes. “If all people see is bad history, bad history is what they will come to believe.”

Using examples such as Iraq’s involvement in the attacks of 9/11, President Obama’s religion and Sen. John Kerry’s war service, Poe uses simple suggestions to explain why academics should not avoid tools such as Wikipedia, discussion groups and message boards. The suggestions include:

- Edit Wikipedia
- Put up a decent Web page
- Start a blog
- Teach a “New Media and History” class
- Write in popular on-line forums

An active participant in many online communities, Poe urges colleagues to take advantage of whatever new media tools they can master in order to keep others from “practicing history without a license.”

“We must actively engage the Internet,” he writes. “It is only by spreading good history that we will win the struggle against bad history.”

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