

New Product/Service Launch Campaign

2019 Winner: Organization of American Historians

Entry Title: Historians and the Media: A Database for Informed Public Opinion

Project Overview

Freedom of the press is an important cornerstone of American democracy and a right guaranteed by our constitution. Yet, today, journalists are under attack and have the daunting responsibility of writing stories on a wide range of topics on short notice. These stories often require historical background, especially in the area of policy issues. Given the broad range of subjects on which they are asked to provide insight and expertise, it is not surprising that they may not always provide complete or even accurate background for every topic they cover in the print, television, and electronic media. In today's highly charged political climate, the journalist's need for expertise on a variety of policy issues is even more demanding, and mistakes can result in even more distrust of the media. This public distrust is dangerous because a free press is necessary for a democratic society. Moreover, the degree of urgency to this request as the need for background for various policy issues is intensifying. Our member historians possess the background information and insight on U.S. history that journalists need to provide important context for the stories they are covering. Therefore, the OAH decided to develop a new product - a database to match historian experts with the media. This database was created to allow members of the media on the local, state, national, and international level, in print, online, and broadcast media, to have 24/7 access to informed historical knowledge and insight and locate experts on a wide variety of subjects.

Goals/Objectives

When we decided to undertake this project, we had no funding to pursue this so the first was to obtain funding to establish the database. We approached the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and received a \$25,000 grant to develop a media experts' database. After obtaining the funding, our goals were to:

1) To create a database with categories that cover many areas of expertise of our members and that are of value to the media.

OAH members can select from over 755 fields of specialization in our member database. Therefore, one of our main objectives was to reduce this number to a few dozen categories that would be especially useful and timely to the media.

2) To create a database that would allow journalists to choose from among those who work on a specific topic, won prizes in the field, written for, or spoken widely to general audiences, received teaching awards, worked with public history organizations, or who specialize in a given locale. In short, we needed a database for the media that truly had the leading experts in various fields.

- 3) To create a database that attracted the leading member experts/scholars in the field who were willing to make themselves freely available to the media.
- 4) To ensure that the database was useful and easy to use by the media.
- 5) To Increase the number of media outlets having direct contact with the Organization of American Historians and OAH representatives, thereby positioning the OAH and its members as a valuable resource to the media and establishing historians as an important resource for informed public opinion.
- 6) Give long-term members who are well-known in the field (and who may not need our other resources to enhance their careers) a reason to retain membership in the OAH.

Strategy/Tactics

After receiving a small grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, we developed the American History Experts database and then advertised it to the media.

To do this, we needed to:

- 1) Reorient the OAH database to make it more useful to people outside, as well as inside the profession. For the new database, this involved reducing the 755 areas of specialization to a few dozen categories. We ended up with 36 categories some of which include politics, civil rights, women, race relations, immigration, religion, business and capitalism, environmental protection, monuments and memorials, agriculture and food, presidents, constitutional law, and sports.
- 2) Then we had to determine what information we wanted to glean from our member experts. This included not only their name and institutional affiliation, but also recent books published, exhibitions curated, general magazine article or blog posts published, op-eds written, awards and recognition, radio and podcast interviews, and television interviews.
- 3) After determining the data fields needed from the above information, we designed the database, tested it, and refined it. We also had to set up the login system for both experts (to enter data) and journalists (to find experts).
- 4) We bought the domain names www.americanhistoryexperts.com, www.americanhistoryexperts.org, and www.americanhistoryexperts.net so searching for the system would be easy.
- 5) We invited our members to make themselves available to the media as experts and fill out the lengthy form. We devised a system for reviewing these experts before allowing their data to go live.
- 6) The final step was publicizing the availability of this resource to the media. We did this through a press release sent through the Meltwater system and over the AP wire.

We also contacted media-related associations to have them publicize this free tool to their members. We continue to publicize this resource.

Success Metrics/Results Achieved

Once we had 500 individual experts in the database, we publicized the database to the media. However, within a few short weeks of announcing the development of this to our members, we exceeded our initial goal of 500 experts in the database, and within a few weeks had over 650 member experts sign up for the database. We now have over 788 experts in the database. This database went live late last summer, and we then sent out dues renewal statements. All 650 expert members in the database at that time renewed their membership! Using the Meltwater press release system, we sent a press release to over 700 major media outlets. We also individually contacted over 20 journalism associations, several of whom put notice of this database in their newsletters or publications. We continue to send out press releases about the database, but to date we have over 70 journalists in the database including ones from the Washington Post, New York Public Radio, NPR, PBS, the Discovery Channel, USA Today, NBC News, ESPN, News Media Alliance, the National Press Foundation, the Center for National Integrity, and several major dailies. Although many individuals from media outlets noted to us that they were glad we developed this, a comment from a reporter at the Washington Post said it best with only two words when he received the release announcing the American History Experts Database, “Cool beans.”

We feel that this was a great addition to the OAH’s offerings for both our members and the media. The OAH and its historians can have a positive impact on society by preserving a cornerstone of democracy – freedom of the press. The Indiana Society of Association Executives presented us with a 2018 STAR Award for Excellence for Impactful Technology for this project.

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Association Website:

www.oah.org