

WINTER IS COMING: COMMUNICATING ARCHAEOLOGY IN A POST TRUTH WORLD

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THE AUTHOR [SEATED RIGHT] DISCUSSING THE THEFT OF METAL FROM JUTLAND WRECKS WITH JOE CROWLEY OF BBC1'S THE ONE SHOW FOR A PACKAGE BROADCAST ON 30 MAY 2016

It is one of the wonders of the Day of Archaeology that as the day progresses we get to see in near real time what friends and colleagues are doing in one day in July, from the timeless task of troweling at the trench face, through the deployment of the latest technology to open up a new avenue of knowledge helping us to interpret the past, to the colleague who is writing about what she did yesterday because today is a childcare day for a working mother.

Hopefully too, people from outside the profession will look in through the various windows this annual exercise in open communication provides, and in the time honoured spirit of the BBC it is to be hoped that they will be in some way or other, informed, educated and even entertained. After all, and I know we are not supposed to admit it because we are an academic study, a humanity and a science, validated in the ivory halls of academe, archaeology done right is fun, as well as fascinating, and in its way our science, and our storytelling, can even help to make the world a better place, offering perspective by placing our today in the context of what went before, and helping to build a positive sense of place and identity for communities swept by the wind and weather of globalised existence.

That then is the informative, fascinating and fun Day of Archaeology which is just fading outside my office window. My day of archaeology however has been thinking about the future and it is hard to avoid the sense that, to quote a certain television epic made by HBO, which contains somewhat more violence, sex nudity and dragons than your average excavation, “Winter is coming.”

In particular, as an archaeologist editing a news blog specialising in reporting and discussing archaeology and the archaeological media as news and current affairs, there are two contexts above all which could be seen as bell weathers indicating the potentially chilly environment in which future Days of Archaeology, and I hope there will be many, will be reported.

The first is “Brexit,” the narrow vote in a referendum advising the UK Government that the portion of the population which expressed an opinion by voting wished to leave the European Union.

The second is the nomination of Donald Trump as Republican Candidate in the United States Presidential Election which takes place in November.

I am not going to discuss the potential impact of Brexit on the way archaeologists are able to move around, live and work in the geographical space and political construct we call Europe; [Kevin Wooldridge](#) has already done that superbly in his article “Thoughts from a Corner of Sweden;...” Instead I am going to look at the wider implications for archaeology and the archaeological media, of the intellectual environment within which many political and academic analysts argue that the EU Referendum, and the US Presidential Primaries, were fought.

Both the success of the Brexit campaign and the nomination of “the Donald” have been seen as an expression of what has been called “Post Truth Politics,” a phrase probably coined by the American writer [David Roberts](#) in an article for the on-line environmental magazine Grist in 2010. Roberts analysed how post truth politics works in this way;

“Voters use crude heuristics to assess legislative proposals. This runs somewhat counter to the idealized Enlightenment view, which goes something like this: Voters

- . **gather facts,**
- . **draw conclusions from the facts,**
- . **form issue positions based on the conclusions, and**
- . **choose a political party that shares those issue positions.**

The best evidence from political science shows that the process is almost exactly the reverse. Voters:

- . choose a tribe or party based on value affiliations,
- . adopt the issue positions of the tribe,
- . develop arguments that support those issue positions, and
- . choose facts to bolster those arguments.”

Why is this political analysis important to archaeology? There are two reasons which I would identify.

The first is the apparent view of many cotemporary politicians, put most notoriously by British Conservative politician, and leading Brexiteer, Michael Gove in an [interview](#) with Faisal Islam of Sky News on 21 June 2016. Challenged over the number of expert bodies questioning the wisdom of Brexit, Mr Gove responded that we;

“...have had enough of experts”

This populist claim was backed up by data from polling organisation [You Gov](#) which suggested that 54% of “Leave” voters in the UK Referendum did not “Trust Academics.” On the “Remain” side just 19% expressed the same lack of trust.

Journalist and author Jonathan Freedland suggested a reason for this shift in an [article](#) for the Guardian newspaper. According to Freedland’s analysis it is down to a basic function of human nature;

“...fact checking is laborious, tedious and time-consuming, especially compared with the brio that can be generated by a sweeping (but false) assertion... You can almost hear the nation’s inner teenager chant in unison: bor-ing.”

However, perhaps worse for archaeology, even than the general lack of trust in experts and academics, is the sense that, outside of the efforts of a select few archaeologists and historians who get regular media work because they are able to convey enthusiasm, while at the same time translating effortlessly from academic into human, the world of popular communications and TV Factual has already abandoned mainstream archaeology for a post truth construct of its own.

The effect of this unwillingness to challenge an audience on the broadcast documentary media was seen most clearly and crudely early in 2016 in the debacle which was the reality documentary series [“Battlefield Recovery”](#) [aka “Nazi War Diggers”], which set out to excavate artifacts from Second World War battlefields in Latvia and Poland. The production company, London based ClearStory Productions, first approached a cross section of academic specialists in the archaeology of modern conflict [myself included] for advice, only to proceed to ignore all of us, instead choosing to employ a trio of amateur metal detectorists and a dealer in Nazi militaria to front the programme. The result was an intellectually

and chronologically shapeless jaunt around Latvia and Poland, digging up stuff, where the historical context was reduced to a few newsreel clips and a shallowly scripted voiceover. So far just so much of a missed chance and at one level, the reason behind this casting is probably, as the advert says, “simples”. A certain breed of militaria collecting metal detectorists are quite happy to hoik stuff out of the ground without recording it, get moist with excitement when they find guns and explosives without getting too concerned about elf’n’safety, and dealers are quite happy to put a price on the finds. In short the chosen cast enabled ClearStory to deliver a character driven, reality show, for blokes about other blokes, finding war stuff which some people sell for cash; and they did it in a way which was cheap, with no expensive and untelegenic post excavation and reporting.

However, it is at the deeper policy level, that the decisions made by the producers of Battlefield Recovery become really disturbing. Having consulted expert professionals, including several with extensive media experience, ClearStory and the National Geographic Network which originally commissioned the series, still deliberately chose to adopt a format which pandered to their perception of their target audience’s expectation for goodies, guys , guns, and stiffs rather than challenging it. The result was a “look at that, wow!” freak show, where tipping a human skull out of a soldiers helmet on camera, replaced a genuine exploration of the experience of that soldier in that war and deliberately short cut any attempt to establish his identity and return his remains to his family through forensic archaeology. Like the export of post truth Trump style political campaigning to the UK during the referendum campaign, this was the export of American post truth documentary to UK television, where all that matters is the bottom line, the political or ratings win, not how you get there.

Understandably the wider archaeological community responded to “Battlefield Recovery” with fury. Both the UK broadcaster Channel 5 and the regulator Ofcom received scores of complaints, including reasoned arguments from leading sector organisations such as the Chartered Institute for Archaeologists, the Council for British Archaeology and the Society of Antiquaries. Many of the complaints focussed on the ethics of amateurs digging up human remains and and the egregious safety breaches shown on screen, both in excavations and in handling unexploded munitions and still the programmes were broadcast and still Ofcom refused to even investigate the complaints.

I would identify a number of reasons for this. First of all there is a freedom of speech argument. Under the US First Amendment and the European Convention on Human Rights you have to put up a pretty strong case to prevent someone having their say, however unethical or deluded you think it is. Indeed, much as I despise “Battlefield Recovery” as a programme, I would go to the barricades to defend ClearStory’s right to make it. The true problem lies in the fact that ClearStory felt able to use the format they did in the first place, and then in the complete lack of accountability to its subject and audience once the programme was made. Here I would suggest that the biggest reason for the failure to have “Battlefield Recovery” held to account was that in the eyes of Ofcom and the broadcaster, the opinion of archaeologists just does not matter in the way that, for example, the opinions of the medical Royal Colleges were heard in the heated debate over the coverage of the controversy surrounding claims that the MMR vaccine caused Autism in some children. This can only be thanks to the failure of successive generations of archaeologists to engage and embed with the broadcasters in helping to deliver the mass

audiences which our media serve and which their networks and accountants crave. We have been so comfortable in our own space, welcoming in those few who are enlightened enough to come to us, that we have made too little attempt to seek to venture outside to seek and nurture new audiences. Now we do need to venture outside to combat ethical abominations such as “Battlefield Recovery” we find that a large part of the pass has already been sold.

Across much of the digital broadcasting spectrum, what the commissioners call history factual now consists largely of treasure hunting reality TV of the kind shown in “Treasure Quest” and of which “Battlefield Recovery” was a cheap and cheerful example; of deluded conspiracy theory TV claiming to prove that the history we were taught at school was wrong and archaeology is one big cover up, of the kind peddled by Forensic Geologist Scott Wolter in “America Unearthed” and “Pirate Treasure of the Knight’s Templar”; or outright fictions such as “Hunting Hitler”, “The Curse of Oak Island,” and most notoriously of all “Ancient Aliens.” It is the consistent failure of all but a few archaeologists to challenge and be seen to challenge these cynical, formulaic, conspiracy products which is almost certainly one of the principle factors which has enabled the media, Ofcom, and even Government to largely discount archaeology in policy making, in programme commissioning and in calibrating regulatory frameworks.

In the current post truth political climate that is a dangerous situation for archaeology to be in. All the more so as we now live in a media world where any kind of serious questioning is increasingly difficult.

This is in large part thanks to the effect which digital activist Eli Pariser has called “[the filter bubble](#)”. That is the sense that as the media each of us as individuals consumes becomes increasingly fragmented across multiple digital formats, which can be chosen and time shifted at will, while being at the same time personalised by the algorithms offering us the information on our Facebook pages and Google searches which the companies behind them think we want to read, confirming our existing attitudes and bias, it becomes ever more difficult for us to recognise and challenge those biases, even if we want to.

Outside the filter bubble, our world of academic archaeology where debate, discussion, and challenge are the norm and even deliberately sought out, looks increasingly isolated and odd, perhaps even in that most deadly of modern political insults, “elitist”. Any such dismissal of the core essence of what we do could have a dangerous practical effect on the future of archaeology as we know and practice it. To channel the spirit of the famous quote about the threat of Nazism written by Pastor Martin Niemöller.

When they come for the archaeologists, to make the cuts, to close the university departments and to liberalise the planning laws, thus destroying the economic basis of commercial archaeology and the jobs which go with it, who is going to be there to stand alongside the lecturers, the surveyors, the finds specialists and the diggers, when all those who, like the “Time Team,” reached out to a wider audience have passed on or have been dismissed as academically lazy populists. No one will be there, because those who might have been our audience and who might have chosen to stand beside us if we had only reached out to be inclusive and bothered to put up a fight on the wider political and media stage, are instead at home, sitting in their underpants under a tinfoil pyramid watching “Ancient Aliens” on the History Channel.

And it is not as if we did not have the chance. For twenty years the seminal archaeological procedural “Time Team” on Channel 4 delivered audiences in the millions, in the process becoming, and remaining, an instantly recognisable national institution. The trouble was no one else stepped up to the plate to challenge “Time Team’s” hegemony, or to develop other formats grounded on evidence based process, until like the mega fauna caught out by the deadly double whammy of climate change and predatory humans, even “Time Team” became an evolutionary dead end, succumbing to changing priorities at Channel 4 and the inevitable aging of its cast and core audience. Time Team’s co-creator, the late Professor Mick Aston of Bristol University summed this up in his last major interview, given to [Current Archaeology in June 2013](#);

“But even though *Time Team* built up an incredible audience, the archaeological world never really ran with it. All the public interest generated in that first 15 year period was wasted. Our colleagues were too busy saying ‘you can’t do it in three days’, or ‘I don’t like the way you’ve done that.’ Nit picking really, but it could get nasty. If you went to a pub and mentioned *Time Team* to a bunch of archaeologists you’d instantly have a fight on your hands. People who got what the programme was doing thought it was great, but others just said ‘you can’t do archaeology like that’. I feel as though I’ve suffered from that for 20 years.”

Aston added later;

“The sad thing, I think, is despite the public interest in archaeology we don’t seem to be able to harness it. I don’t know why, because so much work does need doing. If every parish had a project like Winscombe going on not only would we learn a lot, but the spin-offs in terms of social cohesion and the involvement of people would be absolutely phenomenal.”

It is difficult to communicate when you no longer even have the means.

Martin Baron, the executive Editor of the Washington Post [and hero of the recent film “Spotlight” which celebrated the role of investigative journalism in exposing the scandal of paedophile priests in the United States] put the danger we are all in, on account of this failure to communicate outside our particular silos of knowledge and opinion, most succinctly in his [commencement address](#) to the School of Media and Communication at Temple University earlier this year;

“Today we are not so much communicating as miscommunicating. Or failing to communicate. Or choosing to communicate only with those who think as we do. Or communicating in a manner that is wholly detached from reality.

Too often we look only for affirmation of our own ideas rather than opening ourselves to the ideas of others.

Too often we are inclined only to talk. Too rarely are we inclined to listen — when listening is the superior route to learning and understanding. Listening has become a lost art.”

And before anyone asks why I am quoting a journalist and not an archaeologist, especially when “journalistic” is so often inscribed on an undergraduate, or higher, essay as a term of criticism, ask yourself this.

What is the point of being an archaeologist if you cannot and do not communicate your work to anyone who wants to listen and learn?

And do we too not all too often take the easy route of only discussing our work with the people who think like us, and when we do, are we also often guilty of using a jargon ridden language only we, and sometimes not even all of us, can understand?

Ask also, when did a leading archaeologist last talk about the need to communicate with the world in those terms?

We have enough trouble even communicating with each other.

This brings me to a related issue, one with which I am particularly engaged, and which has risen up to bite again in the course of my research and writing during my day of archaeology. That is the issue of access to the transfusing lifeblood of academic debate, academic articles communicated through publication in journals of record.

As happens to all of us, a notification sat in my inbox this morning regarding a paper which would, on the face of it, be directly relevant not just to a paper I am currently writing, but also to a heritage crime investigation I am currently involved with; so in that routine way you do I tapped on the link.

Of course, as a freelance archaeologist and writer with no current academic affiliation I do not have the magic login which serves as the free pass to the higher degrees of academic discussion [in spite of the fact that I do self identify as an academic, possessing as I do a Masters degree and some subject expertise, which should be tested, and might even be of use to colleagues], so having been treated to the abstract, which confirmed I certainly wanted to read the full article, I was asked to pay £26 for the article, or £124 for the complete issue of the journal concerned.

The verbal response to this shameless demand for a poll tax on knowledge is of course well known to scholars of Old English and consists of two words, the second of which is “off”.

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As a result of this short sighted imposition of an academic exclusion zone there are no winners. I do not get to access the information and arguments contained within the article which might well have helped to ground, focus or enrich my paper, thus impacting on anyone who reads my work when it is published [which it will be, in an open access format of course].

Meanwhile the four joint authors of the paper I would like to read suffer because they lose a citation, and the pleasure and challenge, of being quoted and maybe questioned. The brutal marketing decision of their publisher has taken them from High Impact to No Impact at the click of my mouse.

The only bright spot in this is that the publisher also loses because their greed and willingness to facilitate a research apartheid has gained them precisely nothing.

So; For inflicting that completely avoidable collateral damage to the ongoing, international, debate and development of archaeology and on the careers of five professional archaeologists, Routledge, of the Taylor and Francis Group, publishers of World Archaeology, consider yourselves named and shamed.

[In fairness I should add that other publishers and Journals of Record are equally guilty of turning legitimate researchers without an academic login into the research equivalent of Cassandra, speaking truths, but condemned never to be listened to]

But this is the day of archaeology. A day when we celebrate each other, our work and let the public in to see us, so I should finish on some form of up beat. Let me suggest what we can and should be.

Later in the commencement address quoted above Martin Baron quoted one of the founding principle of the great newspaper the Washington Post;

“The first mission of a newspaper is to tell the truth as nearly as the truth may be ascertained.”

The Day of Archaeology proves every year what a diverse, brilliant, thoughtful and thought provoking profession and calling we are lucky enough to participate in, as our work attempts to ascertain what those sometimes elusive and difficult historical and archaeological truths are, as nearly as maybe. It is also a profession and a calling which I think most of us would agree is at its strongest and most creative when we think, talk, and act together.

And it can be done. The package about the theft of metal from the wrecks of ships sunk in the Battle of Jutland pictured above, was broadcast on BBC 1’s daily magazine programme the One Show on 30 May 2016, the eve of the one hundredth anniversary of the battle. Working closely with academic colleagues, the programme production team, their lawyers and presenter Joe Crowley, himself a history graduate, in seven minutes, using a popular magazine format in Prime Time, we managed to cover the historical context of the story, show the archaeological evidence for the theft and identify the thieves, address the ethical issues surrounding maritime military graves and explain the Protection of Military Remains Act, all to an audience of over three million, who also saw the human aspect of the battle and the emotional cost of the theft, expressed through an interview with a relative of one of the sailors lost in the sinking of HMS Queen Mary. It is a bonus that we also managed to embarrass and hold to account the Ministry of Defence by forcing them to answer questions about their failure to protect the wrecks.

Overall, the One Show package was a prime example of the kind of popular public service broadcasting which can still be achieved if archaeologists seek out the right stories, the right partners and employ the right visual and spoken language.

However, allowing the continuation of ever decreasing literary circles to take place in a succession of sealed and self regarding academic halls of mirrors, is not only in my view counter productive for our profession, risking rendering it increasingly inward looking and to the wider world, irrelevant. Worse, in the post modern, post truth environment, where we breathe the atmosphere of lies and misrepresentations generated by the likes of the Brexiteers, the Donald and the producers of “Ancient Aliens” and “Hunting Hitler”, not to communicate what we do in the widest most effective way possible is also a dereliction of our duty to take an active role as participants in the wider world which we go home to when our day of archaeology comes to an end.

About Andy Brockman

Andy Brockman is a specialist in the Archaeology of Modern Conflict and editor of the on-line archaeological media and current affairs blog [thePipeLine](#)

He particularly enjoys researching, reviewing and debunking pseudo history from buried Spitfires in Burma to Hitler's 1945 excursion to Argentina by U-boat.