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Target Audiences and the Public Humanities: Identifying and Connecting with Niche Communities

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Session: What Do You Want from Early America?

Target Audiences and the Public Humanities: Identifying and Connecting with Niche Communities

Despite much-publicized concerns regarding the place of the humanities in contemporary American society, early America still has much to offer the general public, even that segment of readers not intrinsically interested in history or literature. Consider the recent success of Fox's television drama *Sleepy Hollow*. When Washington Irving's Ichabod Crane winds up in modern-day Sleepy Hollow, New York, he uses his colonial-era skills and knowledge to team up with police detective Abbie Mills to solve demon-related crimes in the small town. The series' success has been attributed to the show's intriguing integration of early American history with important modern overhauls, such as an Ichabod Crane who is tall, strapping, courageous, and so good-looking one critic notes that somehow "his befuddlement at hair dryers, cars, and even doughnuts look[s] sexy." Admits executive producer Alex Kurtzman, "We recognize fully the premise is crazy. It doesn't have to be real, but it does have to feel authentic" (Hibberd).

Having personally attended a session devoted to *Sleepy Hollow* at last year's Wonder Con in Los Angeles, I can attest to the affection the fans of the show—Sleepy Heads, as they are called—have for not only the characters but also the historical element of the drama. And although as professors we probably are not planning to produce a prime-time television series, we can consider and perhaps apply to our own fields the elements that might draw a modern audience to watch a tv show that is largely about colonial America.

My premise for this paper is that one way to provide opportunities for the general public to engage with early America is to connect with niche communities. Niche communities are

essentially target audiences that I have found respond positively to early American subjects when two criteria are met. First, the topic should originate from what lay audiences consider to be key themes or even flashpoints in colonial American history—cultural communication and exchange, issues regarding race and gender, government and civic engagement, religious experience, and exploration and discovery, to name a few. These are themes that most people associate with colonial America, even if they are not familiar with or interested in the historical details. Second, the early American connection must offer the target audience intersections with their everyday lives that are relatable, practical, enjoyable, even instructive.

So, in the case of *Sleepy Hollow*, the aspects of early America that most viewers expect are present—the Revolutionary War, Benjamin Franklin and Betsy Ross, secret codes and messages that pop up in colonial documents, medicines and spells made from herbs and flowers, and cool colonial clothes. And, second, the show is enjoyable, with just the right amount of plot twists, suspense, supernatural battles, and attractive lead characters. For the viewers, those two features are enough to make them interested.

In this paper, I would like to share how I have connected over the years with one niche audience in which these two requirements converge and create a keen interest in one aspect of early America—practicing Christians and the subject of religion. Although usually not the darlings of the academy, practicing Christians, often evangelicals, do recognize and respect the role and exercise of Christianity as an important issue in early America, and they readily seek to learn from it and even apply those lessons to their daily lives. If you want to find a lay person today who knows the names Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, Cotton Mather, Anne Bradstreet, or Edward Taylor, chances are that person will be an evangelical Christian. By sharing some of the specific ways I have connected with this target audience, I hope to foster

discussion of how we can engage other sub-groups with subjects they recognize as strengths of colonial American study that can offer them constructive, practical advice on how to think and act in areas they value.

First, let me share a few of the types of connections I have had with this niche community. I have been invited to publish articles in online Christian magazines, most recently writing an article on the leadership traits of Sarah Edwards for women in vocational ministry. I've been asked to teach in a private Christian elementary school on the First Great Awakening, and in a private high school on colonial printing methods and print sources. Leaders of a Methodist congregation interested in church growth invited me to speak to around 100 people from their congregation about the role of lay leadership in the First Great Awakening. I've even had friends order the textbook I use in class on spiritual autobiography because of their personal interest in colonial religious experience.

Certainly my encounters with this niche community are varied and perhaps in some ways unique, but overall they have several characteristics in common. First, they all happen in venues that are comfortable for the audience. Instead of being held in a library or college classroom, these connections happen on the listeners' "home turf," so to speak—their churches, their schools, their websites. I go to them. Second, I use their language. Sarah Edwards is not a "clergyman's wife," she's a "vocational lay minister;" a religious movement is not an "awakening," it's an "intense community religious experience;" and Jonathan Edwards' *Personal Narrative* is not a "spiritual autobiography," it's a "personal testimony." Third, the focus of my presentation is always on what listeners can take away and apply to their everyday lives. Lay leaders at a Methodist church do not care about the 18th-century controversy over unordained ministers—they just want to know how lay people worked with paid church staff to

foster and maintain a meaningful movement of God in their congregation. So, unlike the classroom in which transmission of important information is a primary goal, in these settings, practical, simple application of our knowledge to life is what listeners want. Lastly, in all these instances, authenticity matters, as the *Sleepy Hollow* producer recognized. Target audiences respond well to hearing about individuals and their experiences in ways that make those individuals seem real and accessible. Knowing that Sarah Edwards struggled with depression and at times resented the town's demands on her husband actually may not be important information for understanding her leadership qualities, but it sure does make her seem like someone who would be fun to have lunch with at Applebee's.

The good news is that, as educators, we spend our professional lives tailoring our material to our audiences, so none of these suggestions is beyond our skill set. And early America was saturated with interesting, unique people and dramatic, momentous events, so good subject matter is not wanting. The only question is, what other target audiences are out there that might connect with subjects they recognize as strengths of colonial American study that can offer constructive, practical advice on how to think and act in areas they value?

Obviously, the possibilities are endless, as they say, but some niche communities come readily to my mind. Local high school civics teachers might be interested in learning about Mercy Otis Warren's politically-active life and her *Observations on the New Constitution* at their next teacher in-service day. Neighborhood AAA members might attend an evening program to discuss Sarah Kemble Knight's cross-cultural travel experiences before an upcoming trip to New York City. A city newspaper might be interested in printing a letter highlighting innovative ways to celebrate cultural diversity culled from constructive colonial encounters with Native Americans. A graduating class from a local girls high school might appreciate an assembly on

the lives and experiences of eighteenth-century students at the Young Ladies Academy of Philadelphia. A global rights website might be willing to include a link to a paper on John Woolman's stance against the African slave trade. I would ask you to consider the niche communities you are already a part of and brainstorm some colonial American subjects that might naturally interest them.

Target audiences that value a specific aspect of early America and believe they personally can learn from its study provide promising areas of focus for connecting early Americanists with a broader lay readership. I hope this paper has reminded all of us of the very real, applicable, perhaps even transformative resources that we have to offer those outside the classroom.

Works Cited

Hibberd, James. "The Secrets Behind *Sleepy Hollow*'s Success." *Entertainment Weekly*, no. 1281, 18 October 2013, p. 16. *Film & Television Literature Index with Full Text*, www.ebscohost.com/academic/film-television-literature-index-with-full-text.