Reframing History

Episode 5: Now What? Using the Reframing History Report and Toolkit

Series Description:

As the public debates around history grow louder, it seems there's a gap between how history practitioners understand their work and what the public thinks history is. We need a more productive public conversation about history. But how do we get on the same page? How do we promote an understanding of history that is inclusive and builds trust in the process of nuanced historical research? Over the course of this series, we'll be speaking to historians, history communicators, and educators from around the country about the language we use to communicate history to the public. Hosted by Christy Coleman and Jason Steinhauer, this six-part series delves deep into a new, research-backed communication framework developed by FrameWorks Institute in partnership with the American Association for State and Local History, the National Council on Public History, and the Organization for American History. *Reframing History* is produced by Better Lemon Creative Audio for AASLH.

Episode Description:

Over the course of this series, we've explored the research and recommendations of the "Making History Matter Report." In this final installment, we'll discuss how to put the report's findings into practice with a little help from two leaders in our field: Jennifer Ortiz, Director at the Utah Division of State History, and Steve Murray, Director at the Alabama Department of Archives & History. Then AASLH's John Marks walks us through the Reframing History Toolkit and addresses some FAQs about the report.

Episode Transcript:

[Theme music plays]

John Marks: One thing that we've heard from people are questions about how we know what we know in this report and why we feel as comfortable as we do making these recommendations. We wanted to know is the ways that people in the history community communicate what our field is. Are they having the effect that we want? Are they helping the public better understand what history work is? And that's an empirical question. That is something that can be answered with research and with the method that we used in this report.

Jennifer Ortiz: I have staff and team members who are really struggling with how to navigate conversations around critical race theory. How do we have conversations and be inclusive of our fuller story, our diverse narrative?

Steve Murray: It may not go the way you hope the first time, don't feel defeated. There's going to be lots more opportunities to try that. And the toolkit, I think, does some really good job. I like the way that some of this language is presented in the toolkit in terms of giving you segues to try to redirect conversations. That is not always...I don't know that it's ever easy to do, and sometimes it can be quite difficult to do.

Christy Coleman: This is *Reframing History*: A limited series from the American Association for State and Local History.

I'm Christy Coleman, Executive Director at the Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation.

Jason Steinhauer: And I'm Jason Steinhauer, Global Fellow at The Wilson Center and author of History Disrupted.

Jason Steinhauer: In this six-part series, we're speaking to history practitioners from around the country about how they communicate the role and value of history to the public. To help frame this conversation, we're using a new report on history communication called "Making History Matter." This research-backed report offers specific language that communicators can use to bridge the gap between how we talk about history and how the public understands history work. You can download the report at aaslh.org./reframinghistory.

Christy Coleman: This is Episode 6: "Now What? Using the Reframing History Report and Toolkit"

[Music ends]

Over the course of this series, we've covered the entire "Making History Matter" report. In this final installment, we'll discuss how to put the report's findings into practice with a little help from two leaders in our field.

Then AASLH's John Marks will walk us through the Reframing History Toolkit and address some common questions and concerns that have come up since the report launched.

Jason Steinhauer: Jennifer Ortiz and Steve Murray have been involved in discussions about this research and possible applications over the past year. They joined us today for a discussion about the report and toolkit. To kick things off we asked them to introduce themselves and their organization's most immediate communication challenges.

Jennifer Ortiz: My name is Jennifer Ortiz and I'm the Director for the Utah Division of State History. We are the state historical organization for the state of Utah. We're a government

agency. And within the Division of State History we have our library and collections, so collections from across the state. Historical collections, our historical society and public history team, publications, and then our outreach division as well.

Steve Murray: Hi, this is Steve Murray, I'm Director at the Alabama Department of Archives and History. We are also a state agency. We function as the official repository for state government records and also are home to the state's history museum.

Steve Murray: Well, very much in the forefront of our minds these days is the whole issue of Critical Race Theory and divisive concepts in K-12 education. Our agency works extensively with K-12 educators throughout our state, and we're involved in discussions in our state about what really happens in K-12 classrooms and why it's so important to the functioning of a constitutional democracy.

These issues also have resonance for work that we've been undertaking for a long time at our agency but have been much more vocal and explicit about in the last couple of years. In 2020, in the wake of George Floyd's murder, our agency released a statement of recommitment to inclusive history. And that statement arose at the time because we wanted to point out resources that we had at our organization that could help the public understand what was happening in this new national discussion about the history of racial injustice and discrimination.

And we wanted that history to be useful to the public but also knew, in the process of promoting those resources, that we needed to be honest about our own agency's contributions to systemic racism in the past, because our organization practiced collecting and preservation in a way that was highly discriminatory throughout a good portion of the 20th century and was actively involved in promoting a skewed and incomplete version of history for consumption by both K-12 students and the public over decades. And so we've been engaged heavily in trying to be clear about messaging and talking specifically about what history is and what good history is.

Jennifer Ortiz: Yeah. I will echo a lot of what Steve has already talked about. A lot of our communication challenges as a history organization, and of course a state history organization, it's the interaction with what is happening in the media today. I have staff and team members who are really struggling with how to navigate conversations around Critical Race Theory. How do we have conversations and be inclusive of our fuller story, our diverse narrative? Even in a place like Utah, it exists. But I think there's just so much fear around these communication challenges that we're seeing as public history organizations. And so that has been a big hurdle in the last few months, especially for us at the Division of State History in Utah. I think another big communication challenge that we have that I think Steve has alluded to is this idea or conversation around, who are the experts in the room? And that I think historically has been a challenge in our field. What are historians? What do they do? And how do we communicate that to the general public? And I think that's where the report comes into play and helps us frame that conversation really well.

Christy Coleman: So let's talk about what's working well. Specific language, recommendations from the report; what's been most helpful to you or your staff?

Steve Murray: Well, I find very appealing the recommendation addressing the framing of history as detective work and the idea that we are about examining and interpreting evidence, and all the challenges that come with that. And I think for especially those of us who work in government organizations, that's a familiar concept. Not just in the popular culture framework of TV detective work, but the fact that state agencies of all kinds use evidence to draw conclusions about the services that they're delivering, what the needs of their constituencies are. And that, to me, seems like a vocabulary that resonates with legislators and policymakers. And it's easily adaptable, I think, depending on who you're all audience is. So it may not be specifically how detectives use evidence in their work, but if you know that you're speaking to a legislator or a county commissioner who works in real estate or in banking, those professions all

use evidence in very specific ways and they are sometimes presented with contradictory pieces of evidence.

You get different appraisals on properties or different ways of evaluating the creditworthiness of an applicant for a loan. And so they have to make decisions and parse this information in a way that is not dissimilar from what historians do when we are trying to draw conclusions about what the evidence tells us about the past. So that to me points us in an important direction to thinking about, rather than the polarizing aspects of truth and untruth, to think more about process and tools and the kinds of thinking skills that we use and that we want young people to develop.

Jennifer Ortiz: The thing that has really resonated with us as a team has been a handful of the points in the report. One of them has been using concrete and location-specific examples to build support for inclusive history. We do need to be mindful of the audiences as a state agency and who we're speaking to, particularly legislators in our state. When we go to seek funding for this kind of work, we have been using these specific examples of more inclusive narratives to hone in the need for this continued work. And so for example, as part of our pitch for funding, we talk about there's over 100 languages and dialects that are spoken in Granite School District in Salt Lake City alone.

And that's a fact that a lot of people don't know. But those are the hidden pieces of information, that it is our role and our responsibility to tease out and to share. To, again, make that really concrete and to sort of pull back the veil, because that history is here. It's just not part of the dominant narrative of our state's history.

And so when we pull out those examples, you can see in people's faces when you talk to them, like, "Wow, I didn't know that." And, "Wow, that's a really incredible piece of information. What

else can you share with me?" And so it opens up the dialogue for people that may have not thought about that to begin with because they don't have a connection to maybe the diverse population in our state or in Salt Lake City. And so that has been really successful for us as an agency to help introduce the conversation and broach the subject of a more inclusive narrative.

One of the other pieces of the framework that has been really successful for us is being solutions-focused, so highlighting those positive examples of inclusive work. The report mentions that we're trying to be honest but also not fatalistic as we move forward. And that really has proven to be successful. So when we can pull out and tease out those stories of successful solutions-based work, that is where we have been finding success with maybe communities that are struggling to understand or are struggling to do inclusive work. Maybe dragging their feet a little bit. And so that, especially again, being in a conservative state, that has been more successful for us.

Christy Coleman: Now let's get into any challenges you've found in using the report. Have there been any recommendations that just didn't work as well for you?

Jennifer Ortiz: Yeah. I think the report gives us a great framework to start. It gives us a framework to start having conversations. I think it's not a blanket salve to our problems around communicating the need for inclusive dialogue and inclusive narratives within our history sector, but it's a starting place. Anecdotally, we already know that some of the language seen in the report just isn't going to fly with our audiences.

One of the criticisms that I did want to make sure we talked about in this space today is that a lot of the recommendations feel like they're really focused towards a white audience. And I do

think that the report addresses some of that. And in looking in some of the data that was pulled by the Frameworks Institute and who they spoke to it is fairly reflective of our demographics across the country. Now, that doesn't necessarily apply to us in individual communities.

And so we have to be mindful of that language moving forward. I think one of the things that I would love to see in a future iteration is tactics that are demographic-specific because I do think that there are differences that are going to come out there about, how do we communicate history's significance and communicating history to Latino audiences or to Black audiences? Because there are going to be differences. And so the report for us, and I hope for a lot of other people, is a starting place, not the end place.

Steve Murray: I think that's so important, Jen. And even thinking about the audiences we encounter on a daily basis. And we will have to tweak it according to our own experience and according to the person on the other side of the table from us. And sometimes that can change unexpectedly in terms of how the conversation's going. And it's easy to develop a game plan going into that important conversation and trying to frame it in a particular way, but depending on the receptiveness of the audience you could find yourself taking a 90-degree turn right in the middle of a conversation, and they may not be receptive to where that conversation's leading and the language that you're trying to frame the discussion in.

And I think that's okay. I think it's important for us, especially people who are trying to gain new experience and advocacy with these kinds of tools, to understand that, don't feel defeated after the first conversation goes sideways–if that were to happen–because it's going to happen. And just because it may not go the way you hope the first time, don't feel defeated. There's going to be lots more opportunities to try that.

And the toolkit, I think, does a really good job. I like the way that some of this language is presented in the toolkit in terms of giving you segues to try to redirect conversations. That is not always... I don't know that it's ever easy to do, and sometimes it can be quite difficult to do. But it's one of those things that takes practice. And I think one of the things that we can do as a field is help to support each other and provide opportunities for practice to actually get that language in use.

Jennifer Ortiz: Yeah. I would just build off of that to say the practice is so key here of having the conversations and reading the room, frankly, of who you're talking to. Going into that meeting or that presentation, having a good sense of who you're talking to. And that is absolutely a skill set. It's a skill set I'm still learning. I've put my foot in my mouth plenty of times leading an organization.

And so the thing for me with this report is it allows me to help empower staff, to say, "It's okay, as we navigate conversations around doing inclusive historical work, that we're going to mess up along the way. And that's okay." I think there is a lot of fear on staff, especially, of how to navigate these conversations. And so I think that the piece of practice is really important, of being able to, again, come into a situation and know how to navigate it. Not all the recommendations are going to work for every specific audience, but again, tweaking them to your audiences as needed and on the fly is definitely a learned skill set.

Christy Coleman: Absolutely. I think if you don't give your staff the opportunity to fail, they're not going to succeed.

Now, the report says several times that the exact language they share can be adjusted, as long as the same ideas and concepts are being communicated. Can you give us some examples of how you've tweaked the report to fit your specific audience and communication needs?

Steve Murray: Yeah. To that point, I worry that the term "critical" may be lost to us as a useful

piece of vocabulary. So I've been speaking more about analytical thinking skills as opposed to critical thinking skills just as a way to avoid those triggers that can suddenly shut down the receptiveness of an audience or just change the vibe in a room in a heartbeat.

Jennifer Ortiz: We have been using...so instead of inclusive history, in the context of the Peoples of Utah Revisited we've been framing it as a "fuller narrative of the state's history" and "many perspectives," which has been successful in help helping us gain some traction.

Steve Murray: Thinking about the message of inclusion and what our mission should be and how we go about doing that, I have never received any pushback when I have discussed this in ways of what taxpayers can and should be able to expect from a public agency. In the past we have worked in a discriminatory way by serving some taxpayers while not serving others. They all are taxpayers and they all deserve to receive services of an agency charged with preserving the history of our people and sharing that and promoting an understanding of that history. So sometimes inclusion can also be what's fair in terms that ring familiar to an audience that you might be speaking to.

Jennifer Ortiz: And I think that is where those site-specific examples can really be beneficial to communicating maybe larger efforts on an organization's part. I think for Steve and I–as statewide organizations–we can sometimes. At least I feel this way. I sometimes fall into the trap of speaking generally when we can actually pull those threads in hyper-local, hyper-specific ways that can help communicate, "Okay, this is a really important story. Here's why we should tell this history at a much larger scale on behalf of our state's history," for example.

Christy Coleman: That's what's really at the heart of this research project, right? Let's find out what the public thinks and then adjust our language to match that.

Moving on, some of our listeners right now may be wondering what the first step is–in terms of putting this report to work. Where would you recommend someone–maybe at a small

organization or a medium organization, wherever they are–who may not be used to having these big conversations about communication…how would you recommend they get started?

Steve Murray: I think one of the most important things can be finding buy-in from your leadership. Your board is maybe the first key audience for introducing some of these concepts. And that can be done in informal ways. You don't necessarily have to walk into a board meeting and lay out the entire new vision for how you are going to communicate your organization's purpose, but that into conversations and trying it on with people who are there to support you. And see how it resonates with them, because they are representatives of your community in one way or another.

And it seems to me that that's probably a good starting place. And then also just reaching out and developing, finding communities of practice just like we do with collections management and education. There are other organizations that are wrestling with the same issues. And I always find it helpful. I rely so heavily on peer networks that Jennifer is part of at the state history level to bounce ideas off of other people, because it's so much easier when you can do that. Even if your situations are not identical, just having the opportunity to have those conversations is so much better than going it alone.

Jennifer Ortiz: I know we've been in so many conversations about very similar things. And what was so interesting was that I think, Steve, you and I have very similar political... Just looking at our states, and just the politics on the ground are similar to each other. But in execution, it looks a lot different on the ground. And of course, this comes back to thinking about our audience and demographics. But I'm just curious how things have been going on the ground, and thinking and talking about critical race theory. It comes at such a good time. And it's hard too because these conversations have been so difficult to have.

Steve Murray: Yeah, that's exactly right. And it's going to be interesting to live with this for a

while and see how, as we continue to try to incorporate these ideas into our conversations... We've got lots of opportunities to do it, for sure. And I think as much as anything, if they help to propel conversation, they are helping us to be productive.

The other thing that is important to remember I think for anybody who's trying to use the report is that sometimes political environments function in a way that aren't ultimately conducive to anyone's mind being changed because it's not about where true conviction lies. It's about, what does the political ecosystem require certain political players to say and positions for them to take? And that's what I think is so important about advocacy work, is finding opportunities for us as organizations and our staffs. And that's one of the things I really admire about Jen, is how thoughtful and intentional you are about incorporating your staff into that work and helping them to mature as people who can think about those situations.

But I think that's critical because in every room, like you said, you never know what you're going to find when you walk into a conversation. And what you think you may know about motivations and what led to that point could be true, but you could also be completely off base and that there are other kinds of things working in the background that bring you to a particular point of debate or conflict on these issues. B ut I hope to underscore how important exercising these skills is and trying to develop them in a way that equips all of us, whether you're agency executive leadership or a collection staff who are involved in leading a behind the scenes tour, we all have a role to play in communicating about the work that we do and advocating for that work.

[Musical transition]

Jason Steinhauer: Jennifer and Steve covered a lot of ground for us there, but before we move on to our next guest…Christy, any further thoughts on how we should be getting this framework out there and in use?

Christy Coleman: Well, in terms of getting it out there, I think the AASLH has a very good distribution setup. The real question is, is it gonna be put into use by the sites as they get them? And I think that this will be easier for those sites who are more conscious about sort of dialogue engagement and the use of that versus sort of the widget approach to their work, right, they're pointing out, oh, this thing over here, and that thing are there, or this is how you would do this back in the day. But I think it's, it's going to be an easier thing, an easier framework to use if in fact effective dialogue and engagement with visitors is already a part of the practice.

Jason Steinhauer: Well, I really enjoyed this interview with Jennifer and Steve who are actually two of my favorite people in the public history world. And I think this interview illustrates and underscores why public history needs to be its own discipline within the profession, because when you think about the work that public historians have to do in the field, it is very different from what happens inside of an academic classroom. Certainly, research and scholarship are both part of it, but the number of stakeholders involved and the political dynamics are so much different on the ground in states–especially like where Jennifer and Steve work–then they are inside a Princeton, Yale, or even Purdue or Indiana university classroom. And I think that this is really critical to have the voices of public historians who are in these settings, speaking about what they need in order to be successful and to advocate for history's importance at the regional and local levels.

And the last thing is I really appreciated both Steve and Jennifer expanding our idea of what inclusive history is and what it looks like because for them in their settings, inclusive includes

people who don't share the same political affiliation as you. It includes political actors who you may not particularly like engaging with or may see things very differently with, but they are taxpayers and they are people who are stakeholders in your organization. And so inclusive needs to somehow include them. Uh, and it includes a wide range of people than perhaps we immediately think of when having these conversations and discussions. Um, so I think for all those reasons, this is a really important interview and a really important next step for this report. And this work is to think about the different languages that it can be done in to think about the different types of communities it can be serviceable to and to think about what a really inclusive picture of public history looks like in the 21st century. I'm excited for those conversations.

Christy Coleman: Yeah. I mean, I agree. They are in an environment that really does challenge them in, in that regard with some of the stories that they want to share and that they want to tell. What concerns me, I'll just, let me just put it this way. What concerns me to some degree is that when people see the framework, is it going to be interpreted as a framework for the audiences they're *already* receiving? Or is it going to be an opportunity for the audiences that have been unserved, not underserved, unserved? Will it work? And how do we begin to capture and attract those voices that may be asking for something a little different? I'm not entirely sure.

What I was hoping in the methodology report, and this is something that can be followed up on I'm sure. But I will say this, one of the things that I was curious about is that, you know, the study went to great lengths to talk to, um, the far right, for lack of a better term. I don't see any evidence of them doing that. Conversely, the people who are highly critical of museums for being exclusionary or white-centered to get that data set, to get that understanding of where we may have failed, especially for those that are in more urban-centric or communities of

color-centric. Because I am pretty sure that–or at least let me put it this way–my instinct suggests that this may or may not work the same way may not have the same response. I'm just not sure, but it's worth the conversation and it's worth our institutions trying to figure that out and being able to bring that experience from the field back for whatever the round two study provides for us.

Anyway, that's my pitch for the next study from the Public History Research Lab… is to dig a little deeper in that area too, because let's face it…what is it by 2040 by 2030 by 2040, America as a whole is not going to be a white European majority anymore. And so what will that look like in these conversations about public history and what we're doing in our museums?

[Musical transition]

Jason Steinhauer: Our last interview guest for this series is John Marks. John is the Director of AASLH's Public History Research Lab, where he's been involved in every aspect of this report: from the grant-writing stage to inviting us to host a podcast about it.

We asked John to walk us through the Reframing History Toolkit. The Toolkit is built on the research and recommendations in the report. It's designed to help incorporate the framing strategies into your work. When it comes to communicating about history, consistency is key, and hopefully, the toolkit will help us all get on the same page.

John Marks: The Reframing History toolkit is a resource that we created to exist alongside of the report itself that can really help people understand how they can put these findings into action in their professional lives and at their institutions. One thing that we find very important at the

American Association For State and Local History, particularly around all of our research projects, is making sure that we aren't just researching questions because we find them interesting or because we think that they will be interesting to members of the field, but really making that final connection to using research and the reports that we develop to inform public history practice and making sure that we are not just publishing a shiny PDF, but that we are developing resources alongside them that can really help professionals learn how to integrate them into their work.

I think, across the field, people are all very overworked. People don't have enough time to do the job that they are paid to do, let alone time to stay abreast of what's happening all across the field. And I think that leads to a lot of these well-intentioned, really interesting, and fantastic projects getting a couple of days of social media play and then getting swept away by the next big piece of content. We wanted to make sure that didn't happen with Reframing History. And so, we wanted to make sure that even if you don't have the time or inclination to read the report and think about our methods, that we still offered a way that was accessible and digestible, that could help you integrate the Reframing History findings into the work that you do in communicating the past.

Jason Steinhauer: John walked us through the toolkit and highlighted some strategies you can start using right away.

John Marks: The first section of the Reframing History Toolkit is called “Common Communications Traps and How to Avoid Them.” And this section puts forth some different ways that I think all of us in the history community use from time to time, whether you're in the academy, or in a museum setting, or some other kind of public historian, ways of explaining what history is and why it matters that I think a lot of us fall back to, and ways that they aren't

working for us the way that we think that they are. And then, it offers some approaches using these recommendations to revise how we explain those ideas in a way that will have greater resonance with members of the public.

Jason Steinhauer: Let's dig into just one of these communication traps:

John Marks: I think a big one–and it's one that I see a lot in historians' communication right now–is an over-emphasis on the truth. I think a lot of us want to emphasize that we have the truth as historians and that people should take our word for it, that what we are putting forward is the truth. Even when that's correct, it's not something that has a lot of resonance with the public. And it often sets up this really unproductive binary between truth and bias. And it leads to this politically freighted conversation about who has more ownership over the truth about the past. And so, an example is that one way that this comes up is to say, "To grapple with the real history of our country, we must confront the truth. And the harsh truth of Christopher Columbus is one of violent colonization." And I think even so as much as that rings true to professional historians or people in the field, I think it's not the most effective way of conveying that message is what our research has shown.

So alternatively, rather than this emphasis on the truth, I think the best way to communicate that message is an emphasis on the importance of critical thinking. Emphasizing critical thinking can really help people see the value in grappling with different perspectives and understandings of the past, and help them see that history is something that they need to engage with in an active way. And so, rather than saying that "to understand our country we need to teach the truth, and that means rejecting mythology." We can say that "meaningful engagement with the past requires grappling with perspectives that might change how we see it. And that means reckoning with Columbus' legacy of violent colonization is a critically important understanding

for our nation's history."

Christy Coleman: This adjustment lines up with the first recommendation in the report, which we discussed in episodes 1 and 2. And if you look at both the report and the toolkit, you'll see one communication pitfall for each report recommendation. So pay to attention to that.

John Marks; One of the most useful tools in this toolkit is the section called "Keeping Conversations On Track," which we also refer to as our Bridge and Pivot Guide. I think all of us, in the history community, have been caught in a conversation that you can just see is very quickly going off the rails. And it's really difficult sometimes, without an intentional plan, to get some of those conversations on track. And so, what this piece of the toolkit does is it identifies some of the major ways that conversations about history, right now, tend to go off track and helps provide a frame that can help move those conversations into more productive territory.

The way that we do that is through a three-step process. The first is to analyze what it is you're responding to; what is actually happening in this conversation. What we found in our qualitative research is that pushback against inclusive history tends to fall into some pretty well-established lines. So, it's this idea that people might share this idea that historians are just sharing their personal opinions. They might say that history is just the facts and interpretation is the same thing as bias. Or they might say that society is equal; discrimination is a thing of the past.

The second step in this process is to bridge where the conversation is now to where you want it to go. There are some really well established ways of building that bridge and some common phrases that can really be productive in taking a conversation that could be veering towards confrontational and move it back to someplace productive. So, some things like, "What's most

important to understand is," or "Let me answer you by saying," or "That speaks to a bigger point." Some of these really simple phrases that I think any of us can commit one or two of them to memory, and they will, I think, quickly become part of our toolkits of how we have these conversations can really do a lot to take it from where the conversation is now to where you want it to go.

And then, the third step in this strategy and what we offer in this toolkit is how to pivot that conversation. What we have is an easy table that you can remember or can refer back to that tells you, when they're using one of these well-established talking points or ways of approaching a conversation about inclusive history that are unproductive, which of these framing recommendations you can respond with in order to shift the conversation, and in order to shift the person you're speaking with's understanding of what's at stake when you're talking about inclusive history.

For example, if you're talking to someone that says, "That's not how I learned history. You're just engaging in revisionist history. And that's something that is unacceptable. History is the truth. History is just the facts, and you're trying to revise that," you should respond with the frame that focuses on doing detective work. Emphasizing detective work can be a way of helping to build understanding. So, they might say, "History is actually about just the facts. And I don't appreciate this revisionist history." You might say, "What's most important to understand here is that doing historical work is like doing detective work. It involves using a range of sources, a range of different methods, and it requires us to update our understanding as we learn new information or as new questions animate our investigations." And so, rather than getting into a back and forth about what is and isn't revisionist history, you've been able to shift that towards more productive terrain.

Jason Steinhauer: Getting even more practical, we then get four pages of sample texts that you copy and adapt as needed.

John Marks: The third major item in the toolkit are sample reframed messages. These are really before and after models that anticipate some of the major uses for these Reframing History recommendations and offers an example of how you might put that into practice. What the research team did was to work with AASLH and our advisory committee to identify some major ways that people might use Reframing History, whether it's describing a history department, or whether it's describing a history department in a university, or writing an about page for a historical society, or writing an op-ed for publication in a local newspaper, and it offers a way that people are doing that now and what that looks like, and then offers some suggestion about how you can make those types of communications more effective using these Reframing History strategies.

So included within these sample reframed messages are sample online content for an academic course, a way you might describe a U.S. history survey, or you might describe the offerings of a history department. We have an introduction to an exhibit, so something that you might put in your communications about an upcoming exhibit, or you might put on the wall directly. We have a letter to funders, so a fundraising appeal that you might use that tries to explain why history is important, why it matters for society, and why people should consider giving money towards it. And then, we also have the opening of an op-ed, something about addressing some of the recent legislation to restrict the teaching of critical race theory, to restrict the teaching of systemic racism in American classrooms, and how you might use these strategies to make those kinds of pieces as effective as they can be.

Christy Coleman: At the time we're recording this episode, the "Making History Matter" report

has been publicly available for a few weeks, and we've gotten some feedback on people's first impressions and reactions. We asked John to answer some of the main questions that have come up since the launch:

Jason Steinhauer: Frequently asked question number one: Is this just your opinion on what strategies work best?

John Marks: One thing that we've heard from people are questions about how we know what we know in this report and why we feel as comfortable as we do making these recommendations. And I think something that's important for readers and people in the history community to remember is that the core of this project is we wanted to know is the ways that people in the history community communicate what our field is. Are they having the effect that we want? Are they helping the public better understand what history work is? And that's an empirical question. That is something that can be answered with research and with the method that we used in this report. And so, we wrote the report itself in a way that was accessible and that was open to people who maybe aren't as well versed in this kind of research, who aren't interested in the data and the methods behind it, and they just wanted solutions to the communications challenges they're having.

But ultimately, everything in this report is grounded in more than two years of mixed methods empirical research. We did deep qualitative research with people grounded in cultural anthropology and other disciplinary approaches that involved interviews and focus groups that really helped us understand the ways that people think about history. This is qualitative research that goes far beyond opinion polling. This isn't just how people feel about history or whether they like it or don't. It's certainly not about what they know about history. It's really deeply grounded research in the ways that people think about history, the assumptions they

use, the comparisons they use, the things that are shared across members of the U.S. adult population that help them understand what history is and why it matters.

And then, it was also supplemented through deep quantitative research. We ran a nationally representative survey experiment to make sure that the recommendations we were making were shifting public understanding and were doing so across different demographic groups, across people of different ages, different political leanings, different racial and ethnic groups, different gender identities.

While the report itself is something that reads very straightforward and it's not full of footnotes, those were intentional decisions to make it as accessible as possible to a very diverse and dynamic field. But in data and methods appendix, you can see that all of this information, all of these ideas, are really rigorously grounded in some very cutting edge research.

Christy Coleman: The report itself is all about the results, but if you want to dig into the research process, there's a "Research Methods and Data Appendix" available for download at aaslh.org/reframinghistory.

Jason Steinhauer: Another frequently asked question or concern that has come up is whether this report is just aimed at white audiences.

John Marks: The strategies and recommendations that we make in Reframing History are designed to work for all audiences. Over the course of our research, we really rigorously tested all of these strategies to make sure that they would, to make sure that they resonated with people of all different backgrounds, of all different identities. Any individual person is going to

come to a conversation about history with lots of overlapping identities, right? People have different racial and ethnic backgrounds. They were raised in different areas of the country. They have different political leanings, have religious beliefs. And those pieces of their identity might incline them to understand history or to understand conversations about the past in different ways.

But there are also things that we all bring to the table in a conversation, ways that we approach a conversation, that are the same, that are shared very widely across diverse groups of the population. And those are really the areas that we try to build these recommendations on, these cultural models that are shared widely across people of different backgrounds and different identities. As part of our research, we did a national survey experiment that allowed us to test these shifts in understanding we were observing in the experiment and control for demographic factors to make sure that it wasn't demographics that was driving this change, but that it was actually the frames themselves and that they were working across a broad set of the population.

It's the same research strategy that helps us say, with the confidence that we do, that these are things that the public believes in a way that is singular, and I think uncomfortable for many members of the public history community. But it's the different disciplinary approach and different methodological approach that we use in this project really gives us a high degree of confidence that these are recommendations that are going to work.

I think the ways that these recommendations get put to use are going to vary from institution to institution and from professional to professional. I think anyone who is interested in using these recommendations should do so with confidence that they can resonate with audiences of all different types.

Christy Coleman: Next up, frequently asked question number three: Do I need to use the exact

wording from the report? Will it still be effective if I tweak the language?

John Marks: While generally, I think that's something that's acceptable, I also think people shouldn't assume that something won't work just because they feel like it won't work. We did test these very widely and have a lot of confidence that they will resonate with communities even when it seems like they might not. So, a great example is our third recommendation that emphasizes progress toward justice. What we found was that even though for many people it seems like "Oh justice, that must be something that people are now associating with left-wing politics and are associating with social justice. I don't think that's going to fly in my community."

We found the opposite that justice isn't connected to this idea of social justice, and it does have broad resonance, especially for people on the conservative end of the political spectrum. And we were conducting that research in 2020 and 2021 when these conversations about systemic racism about critical race theory were really at their peak. And so for justice to still have that kind of resonance across the political spectrum was really encouraging for one thing, but also I think speaks to the need to really take seriously what these recommendations are. So, you can just explain what justice looks like, whether it's more equal representation or equal treatment by the criminal justice system or whatever the case might be, but the term justice isn't one that has been deemed out of bounds by certain communities.

And then the other example that I would use is I think people need to be careful when thinking about critical thinking and using variations on the term critical thinking. I think for a lot of people in the professional history field, we think of critical thinking and historical thinking as being synonymous and the public does not think that way. For most of the public, historical thinking is the ability to recall facts and dates, the ability to call to mind and to answer trivia questions and to regurgitate this textbook version of history and capital T truth. And so while

we think of historical thinking and think of evaluating multiple sources of evidence and weighing different perspectives and trying to figure out where the balance of evidence lies to draw conclusion, that is what critical thinking means to the public. And so that's an example where we can use some variations on these. I think critical thinking and analytical thinking might both work equally well, but historical thinking might get the public to veer off in a different direction.

[Musical transition]

Christy Coleman: All right. Well, Jason, any final thoughts on the report and everything we've covered in the series?

Jason Steinhauer: Let me first say that I wanna applaud AASLH for this effort as someone who's been pre about the importance of history communication since 2014, it's really, gratifying to see leaders in the field now taking it seriously as a sub-discipline and as a, a lens which needs to be analyzed and critically thought about. I think this is a bold step to take, to put this out there and to be very upfront about where things are working and where they may not be working. That is gonna unsettle people because people take their work and their passion for this public history field very seriously. They put a lot of time and effort and resources into it, and it can be very jarring to tell people that what you're doing is not working or not succeeding as well as you think it's succeeding.

So, I wanna applaud AASLH for, for having this podcast in this report and allowing the space for this conversation to happen. I may not agree with everything in the report, and I may not agree with everything that's been said by our guests on this show, but I think the conversation is so

invaluable to the field and to where we're operating and heading in this landscape where the communications challenges are getting even more pronounced and profound. And so, um, if we think about history as an always evolving intellectual argument, this is a new always evolving intellectual argument that we're having about the way to communicate history and how to do it most effectively in the its landscape. And I think that is a really important discussion that needs to happen over the next few years. And I'm thrilled to be a part of it.

Christy Coleman: Yeah. I couldn't agree more on, on several of your points. Yes, I do think this is an extremely important study that, um, actually has the potential to have a far greater impact on the history museum field than other reports that we've seen. It's succinct. It is direct, it gives prime examples. It encourages a different kind of practice, which again, I do think is really, really critical as we move forward, especially if we want to be impactful institutions. And so like you, there were certain things that were said that, you know, in the back of my mind, I was like, oh God. Or, you know, other times where I thought, hmm, that's very insightful. You know, it's something for me to think about as we move forward, right? Is the framework perfect, absolutely not, but what it is, is an exceptional piece for the conversation to continue–not only to begin, but to continue.

And I think for that, it is highly valuable and it should not be shoved at a shelf or at a corner or in a drawer. It needs to be used. It needs to be implemented. It needs to be practiced. I am thrilled to have played some small part in term of helping to communicate what this is. And, again I'm just delighted with it…90%, you know? And I think anything that is done that has the potential for what the framework offers us, the reframing history framework has to offer us. I think if you're not being critical and really thinking of where potential gaps may be and all of that, as you're implementing and practicing, then again, you know, how serious are you about your work? What, what is it that you're really trying to do?

So yeah this has been really great. We've had some fabulous guests, kudos to AASLH and its leadership kudos to the reframing history network and the public history research projects, that have informed this work so deeply for two years.

Jason Steinhauer: And what else is great is we got to meet!

Christy Coleman: Absolutely. I've been an admirer of your work for a long time. I may not always agree with you either, but you know that's how it works [laughs].

Jason Steinhauer: [Laughs] Listen, no one agrees with me all the time, not even my wife or my family.

Christy Coleman: [Laughs] Oh, it happens to the best of us; I'm right there with you.

Jason Steinhauer: That's part of the fun of it. The different perspectives. Inclusive.

Christy Coleman: Absolutely.

Christy Coleman: And that's our show. Thank you for joining us and being a part of this important conversation.

[Outro music plays through end]

Jason Steinhauer: *Reframing History* is brought to you by the American Association for State and Local History. It is made possible through support from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. To learn more about the project and read the report, please visit AASLH.org/reframinghistory

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Again, I'm Jason Steinhauer…

Christy Coleman: And I'm Christy Coleman.

If you enjoyed this episode or learned something you'll apply to your history communication toolkit, please let your friends and colleagues know so that this research gets shared as widely as possible.

You can share your thoughts on the Reframing History project and this series on social media by using #ReframingHistory.