UNFIN'SHED

January 7, 2022

Happy New Year and welcome back to the Unfinished newsletter, where we explore key issues at the intersection of tech, ethics, and society. I'm Damon Beres.

How is the internet changing our understanding of the past? This week, I'm talking to the author of a new book on how the web has warped the way we record and remember history.

*Did someone forward you this email? **Sign up to receive your own copy here**.*

What we're thinking about

The future 🚀 of history 📚 .

Here's a brain-fryer: Is it possible that the internet—and the attention economy on social media in particular—is morphing our perception of the past? The historian **Jason Steinhauer**, author of the new book *History, Disrupted*: *How Social Media and the World Wide Web Have Changed the Past*, certainly thinks so.

Earlier this week, I reached out to him to understand more about what he terms *e-history*: "discrete media products that package an element, or elements, of the past for consumption on the social Web and which try to leverage the social Web in order to gain visibility." It's a fancy way of describing viral content like PragerU videos, which purport to educate while working to "**overturn liberal orthodoxy**."

Steinhauer argues that even though people have greater access to information than ever before, much of that content is created in service of the skewed incentives of the modern internet. This has led to a host of problems, he says.

"This proliferation of information about the past online does not equate to a better understanding of history," he writes in *History, Disrupted*. "The fragmentary nature of e-history of widely varying quality and agendas, with no uniform ethics or standards, compels individuals to try and derive meaning from simplistic, controversial, pseudo-academic and conspiratorial sources intermixed with scholarly and journalistic ones. The results can be confounding…. More historical information online does not translate to greater ease in finding, learning or understanding that information. It may, in fact, have the opposite effect."

Of course, I'd say there are obvious benefits, too. Now, a broader range of voices can be heard. These are people with valuable things to say without access to traditional seats of power and information-sharing, like professional publishing or academia. Still, it's no big secret that social media has launched us into a crisis of "information disorder," **as we've previously explored in this newsletter**.

Steinhauer says there's potential in new technologies to address some of these problems, which is why he's minted his own coin—"**the first cryptocurrency devoted to history**," he calls it.

Here's an excerpt from our conversation. It has been edited for clarity and concision.

Damon Beres: One function of social media is a kind of diversification of information. I'll be on TikTok, and I see people talking about Indigenous history in the United States, for example, in a way that goes far beyond

what I might have learned in grade school or high school, whatever. There can be a rich conversation online that does actually lead people back to a substantial engagement with history that is not gate-kept in these traditional, academic ways. How do you view this in the context of e-history?

Jason Steinhauer: It's this battle between impression versus more in-depth research, because people will come to me and they'll say, 'Well, I follow one or two historians on Twitter, and I like and retweet their stuff.' That doesn't mean that it's working for all historians.

I draw this parallel between galaxies and stars and planets: e-history shows us the stars, the brightest shiny objects. It makes us think that we understand the whole galaxy. But what we're not seeing is the dark matter, which makes up 95 percent of the universe.

So I just think … we have to take a step back when we try to evaluate the effectiveness of social media and the web based on the handful of shiny examples that are at top of mind, because the handful of shiny examples at top of mind are not indicative of the larger pattern.

This is the game that Silicon Valley plays every day, right? You hype something up, you get it trending online, you make it seem like it's really important, really buzzy, really newsworthy, really shiny, everything is great about it, and it obscures everything below the surface.

Well, and a lot of what's bubbling up to the surface is Breitbart and Fox News.

We talk a lot about outcomes when it comes to the web and social media, but I think we need to be equally talking about the incentives, because the incentive structures that allow the Indigenous history to break through are the same incentive structures that allow Breitbart to break through. The question then becomes: Are we good with those incentives? … Or do we actually need to design completely new incentives for the next iteration of the web?

That's a good transition to the web3 conversation. It's actually directly linked to our project at Unfinished. Our Labs team is developing a decentralized social networking protocol, and so much of our effort is oriented around including many different people in the construction of this next era of the web.

When you think about history, what do you see in the future, and how are you responding to these conversations around web3?

When people get kicked off of social media because they've said something objectionable or something against the mainstream, they don't all of a sudden go home and be like, "Oh, I was wrong." What they do is double down on their beliefs, and then they find some community where they can express them.

The more we kick people off of Twitter and Facebook to sanitize those spaces, the more likely it is they're going to find other spaces, whether it's Discord channels or other underground networks online, where they can continue to crowdsource their ideas and find other ways to elevate some of these nationalistic, xenophobic, racist, or misogynist ideologies and inject them into the mainstream … What web3 is doing is further siloing people into communities.

Within those communities, there are going to be all sorts of different ideologies that fester and bubble up and get crowdsourced into "truth." And then they're going to wind up manifesting themselves one way or another, whether it's in an election cycle or whether it's in another demonstration at the Capitol or in any anti-vaxx campaign. We have to deal with that.

The web has purposely been set up to not be expert-centric, right? The web is user-centric. So all these tools are developed in order to allow users full autonomy to engage and to create more content, because that is the way you extract revenue from people.

Inside of these clusters that are forming across the web3 world, there is this real antipathy toward expertise that has been growing and which will only intensify, because those silos are going to be increasingly impenetrable to expertise, right? They're going to crowdsource their way into some sort of nationalistic or xenophobic truth, and then they're not going to want to hear from people like me, that what they're thinking about is maybe misguided or not based in historical evidence.

In addition to things like blockchain and Discord channels, we also have to really think very carefully about artificial intelligence. When you do semantic web searches, much of the information you get back is fed to you by machines, either machines that are reading snippets or excerpts from Wikipedia and other sources and piecing together little blurbs or little paragraphs for you, machines that are serving up information to you based on algorithms that are off behind the scenes.

This gets back to that question of, where do we value the human work that goes into researching and writing and doing good history? Visiting the archives, spending hours in the library: these are all human tasks, but we increasingly are throwing our money and our resources and our media attention towards algorithmic tasks, automated tasks, A.I. tasks, A.I. technologies, artificial narrow intelligence, artificial general intelligence.

What we've seen over the past ten to fifteen years is that history funding is plummeting while funding for things like engineering and science and A.I. is skyrocketing. So we have a real mismatch and a real imbalance in our society in terms of funding and supporting humanistic research versus funding and research for STEM and algorithmic and machine learning research.

I see that only continuing as web3 evolves, because that's where the money is going to be.

I've actually kicked off something called the **History Communication Institute**, which is supposed to be a forum wherein historians and others can talk about some of these changes to [the fields of] history, communication, and technology, and start to develop solutions in order to ensure that there are still human beings ten years from now who are being funded and supported to do the type of historical work that we, as a society, need.

You are clearly not someone who thinks technology is all bad, who thinks it's all doom. You use Clubhouse, you have $JASON coin. Clearly you see some utility for these new technologies, as well.

I actually think Clubhouse is a very powerful tool. There is something about voice [communication] that is very powerful. I also think it's been a smart decision on their part not to succumb to the temptation of virality… What I like about Clubhouse is that yes, you can pin a link in a room, but you can't send a room viral. You can't send a link viral. It removes that temptation. Instead, it just allows you to focus on having a good conversation.

Now, Clubhouse is not perfect by any stretch of the imagination, and I've publicly written about some of the things on Clubhouse I don't like—**including the anti-Semitism**—but I do think that voice is a powerful tool.

Now, what about $JASON coin?

The coin, I think in some ways for many historians, will soon become a necessity. As I said, there is so little funding and support right now for historians and history education and history research. So if crypto can be a way that historians support themselves, or gain support for their work, or are able to monetize things like Clubhouse rooms or podcasting, I see that as a positive, even as I recognize that crypto has some parts of it that make me uneasy.

So the coin for me is partially a way that I can support myself in my work, because books don't make a lot of money, and it's also a way that I can support other historians. So what I'm planning to do with the coin is through the History Communication Institute, I'm planning to give grants to historians in crypto. So if you're a historian who can't find any support to make a podcast or do a Clubhouse series, you can apply to the HCI and could get a grant in $JASON coin to do that public basic history work.

Neat. Is there a reason why crypto is better for this versus something like Patreon?

If I went to 215 random people and told them to give me money to support history, 214 of them would be like, "Eh, I'm not that interested." But 215 people have bought my $JASON coin. There's something about the sort of sizzle and

intrigue of crypto that brings people in, in a way that Patreon or Venmo or just me asking for cash donations does not. It's a little bit of, come for the crypto and stay for the history.

It also allows you to facilitate this grant in a different way as well, because the grant is tied to the coin.

In some ways, I think crypto is brilliant, even as I see some of the problems with it. Because if no one is going to give you money, then just make your own money. That's basically what it comes down to, which I think is great. I love the audacity of it. We've got to find a way to support ourselves—and maybe crypto can be an answer.

🐦 Join us on Twitter Spaces today!

Today at 12pm ET, Unfinished will host a live conversation with Jason Steinhauer about the intersection of tech and history. **Join us here** to participate—you can even take the stage and ask your own questions, if you'd like.

Thank you for reading!

Follow Unfinished (**@byUnfinished**) and me (**@dlberes**) on Twitter for ongoing chitchat on the changing web.

Have a great, restful weekend.

Damon + the Unfinished team