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Injecting Extension into the American Zeitgeist

Abstract

Extension is a product of times past and needs to be updated and upgraded for today's world. "Zeitgeist" is a German term that encompasses the moral, cultural, and intellectual climate that exists within a certain time and place. Defining how this relates to Extension is not easy. Extension should examine popular culture and realize that story-driven and relatable visual media, such as television and film, are what capture the public interest. Extension must tap into that to assimilate with the younger demographics. Ultimately, we in Extension are responsible for telling and being the heroes of our own story.

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A couple of recent conversations on Twitter with Kevin Gamble (@k1v1n), Jeff Hyde (@jeffhyde), and the eXtension Educational Technology Learning Network (#EdTechLN) got me thinking again about the place of Cooperative Extension in the current American zeitgeist. "Zeitgeist" is a German term that encompasses the moral, cultural, and intellectual climate that exists within a certain time and place. Defining how this relates to Extension is not so easy.

Our country is very diverse, thus making a term like zeitgeist difficult to sum up in a sentence or two. Extension is a product of times past, and one must wonder if it is able to be updated and upgraded for today's world. That is not to say that it doesn't have utility today—it does and is still relevant to certain populations, primarily older, rural, and agrarian. However, those populations are shrinking fast, leaving Extension to decide whether it will persist into the future or decay as a relic of times gone by. To examine the zeitgeist in America and discover where Extension fits into it, we must look at how information is consumed to get an idea of what capture the American imagination.

Extension and Popular Culture

What is popular in today's culture? What reaches the masses? Extension needs to be asking itself these questions and realize that story-driven and relatable visual media, such as television and film, are what (currently) capture the public interest. Fictionalization, as long as it is used with restraint, can be a strong method of teaching new concepts. Diversion is a strong driver of entertainment, being able to experience a world that one will not, cannot, or have yet to be part of is where the strongest release of imagination exists. Extension must tap into that to integrate with the desirable younger demographic.

Williamson and Smoak (2005) touted e-learning as a method to engage students. They stated that e-learning is the future and that Extension needs to accept it as a way to stave off obsolescence. However, because of time, labor, and cost limitations and peer acceptance, new e-learning developments have been limited. Extension, and other disciplines (Gallagher, 2012) are struggling with how to make academic concepts accessible and interesting without losing the rigor, integrity, and validity of the work. Gallagher (2012) concedes that academic work has minimal value if it cannot be conveyed effectively to the masses. New and upcoming generations of Extension workers have a greater sense of media literacy than their predecessors, and that is good for research (Gallagher, 2012). Reynolds (2012) lists television, music, movies, video/computer games, and the Internet as the new primary education platforms for youth today. He also argues that classroom learning is dwindling in significance because the youth of today do not identify with it as they do with popular culture.

Extension should be a model for creativity and innovation within the university system by looking to hiring non-traditional personnel, such as individuals who majored in creative writing, attended film school, or developed video games, to create a linkage with a demographic we currently have difficulty reaching. Through these processes, new popular culture material could be introduced in which the narrative, and thus, the outcomes are controlled by Extension.

Bruce and Ewing (2009) stated teaching methods that incorporate popular culture are a creative way for learners to associate theories and abstractions with real-world applications. Extension, and all of academia, should foster an understanding and application of popular culture and strive to incorporate it into information outreach. Of course, the old, tired question is, "How does it count toward my promotion?" Harley, Earl-Novell, Arter, Lawrence, and King (2007) and Hahn (2008) advocated for recognizing non-traditional work as scholarly as long as peer review remains a core constituent of the process. Non-traditional work has benefits such as the potential to reach new, and larger, audiences, but until more promotion and tenure committees are faced with accepting non-traditional work as scholarly they will likely continue to prefer more traditional outlets (Harley, Earl-Novell, Arter, Lawrence, & King, 2007).

Public Consumption of Science

Bathurst (2000) wrote a compelling perspective on how the public views a scientific field (in this case, archaeology) through the lens of media interpretation. She correctly states that the media have had greater success in communicating to the public than has the scientific community. The scientific community must improve communication methods with the public, because the public only takes in what is available to them (Bathurst, 2000). The media has sensationalized the identity of scientists

and scientific fields by making them more consumable and relatable. In this case, the popular media is satisfied to interpret and profit from false narratives. Although some of these narratives (e.g., Indiana Jones) have come with a modicum of benefit, such as increased awareness of an academic discipline (Bathurst, 2000; Seidermann, 2013), they also distort reality (Barnett et al., 2006) and are ultimately "empty calories" when it comes to educating the public, and the impact is only felt as long as the medium is current. These types of media-driven stories, although presented as scientific, take great liberties in the name of entertainment.

In a reimagining of the Cooperative Extension Service, why could we not be in control of or at least contribute to these efforts in order to ensure accuracy of information? Ultimately, we in Extension are responsible for telling and being the heroes of our own story. As Bathurst (2000) states, "People like a good mystery," thus interpreting our Extension story via storytelling can be a compelling method of information transference. Storytelling that is intriguing, captivating, and in line with popular culture via television, movies, books, and other methods could be a viable way for Extension to establish linkages with today's generations (Bloch, 2009; Dilevko & Barton, 2014).

It is via this convention that Perkowska-Gawlik (2014) describes use of the novel *Fatal Equilibrium* to teach economics as a way to view the world. The novel, written by two professors of economics, was used in their courses, companion discussion questions on related topics like cost-benefit reasoning, marginal utility, and lost opportunity cost were even prepared. As Perkowska-Gawlik (2014) stated, science and literature can only gain from working in concert to explore new dynamic channels for reaching students. Development of interactive e-books, novels (Dilevko & Barton, 2014), video "games" (e.g., learninggameslab.org), music (Winter et al., 2009; Crowther, 2012), and other inventive formats (Lesser & Pearl, 2008) used not only in the classroom, but also with Extension audiences, could engender knowledge gain in a more comfortable format as long as it was presented with structure and intention (Lesser & Pearl, 2008).

Expanding Creative Boundaries

Universities are already in the entertainment business (i.e., athletics), so couldn't they go farther afield? Talent agencies could be engaged by the university to search out and develop stories that engage with the public at large. Argabright, McGuire, and King (2012) argued for creativity and innovation in Extension to include programs that may be privatized or competitive by leveraging existing knowledge within the Extension system and breaking down the barriers that inhibit release of that potential talent.

For example, do you know who needs Extension more than ever? The survivors on *The Walking Dead*, that's who. Based on a comic book series, it is the most popular show on television. It is also a program where Extension personnel could play a pivotal role in the survival of everyone involved. The knowledge that Extension brings to the table could help restart an entire country. Need to know how to create and fix your own clothes? Need to know how long to cook meat (let's just stick to animal protein for this conversation)? How about seed storage and germination? Pest control? Leadership? Proper use of firearms? Really, I could go on forever. The ultimate issue is that even if Extension was represented on the show, Extension would not be in control of the narrative. But, I know we have visionaries within Extension who could dream up something just as captivating—and more edifying, if

only given the opportunity.

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