

FEEDING AND CARE OF THE PUBLIC

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From newspaper headlines, movie plots, and video games, it is apparent that the general public loves archaeology. It is not always as apparent that archaeologists reciprocate that feeling. While many archaeologists are making efforts to engage the public, the majority of information about archaeology appears to come NOT from our field. Journalists, screenwriters, fiction writers, etc. seem to be mostly feeding the public their information. As a result, the general vision of “What is Archaeology?” is at best entertaining, but too often just aggravating. As the Society for California Archaeology turns 50 and looks forward, how can our members best serve up the past?

Mark Hylkema and Scott Williams asked me to speak at the plenary session for the Society for California Archaeology’s 50th annual meeting. Scott asked that I consider the “major connections (landmark events, discoveries, interpretations, people, etc.) that set or changed the underlying tone” of the Society for California Archaeology (SCA) meetings. I suggested to Scott that I wanted to address the topic of public interpretation. As a member and participant of the SCA for the last 25 years, I have seen reactions to the idea of public engagement on the topic of archaeology grow from disinterest at best (hostility at worst) to become an integral part of how SCA members conduct archaeological studies. Looking to the past, I think through the collective efforts of generations of archaeologists, archaeology has become a household word. Looking forward, I think that our society still has work to do, but I am optimistic about the future of archaeology as a well-known discipline with important messages to inform the future about the past.

FINDING EVIDENCE FOR WHAT THE GENERAL PUBLIC THINKS ABOUT ARCHAEOLOGY

My first thought about how to present information on archaeology and the public was to focus on how common or uncommon the term “archaeology” is in everyday life. While talking about the topic, my husband poured me a glass of wine from a bottle, reading words from the wine label: “Like archaeologists searching for a rare treasure, wine enthusiasts seek hand crafted wines that are distinctly different and exciting....” With that, it dawned on me that what I needed to do was to do what I was taught to do as a young archaeologist: observe and listen. From a local television news hour, I heard about a young girl named Isis who was being shamed for her name. The newscaster suggested that she instead identify herself with a 1970s television show, in which an archaeologist gains an amulet that lets her turn into the superheroine goddess Isis and fight evil. While taking a flight to San Diego, I found an article about “The Indiana Jones of the Yucatan” in United Airlines’s *Hemispheres* magazine. As my last anecdotal spotting, a search for a new quilt pattern for children found a design littered with dinosaurs that was “Great for the Child who Wants to Become an Archaeologist.” To sum up my search: the good news is that archaeology is a common term in American vocabulary; the challenge is to understand how the public defines archaeology.

How does the public view archaeologists? Where do they get their information? Films and television shows are filled with archaeologists. Yet as one website author bemoaned (http://www.cracked.com/article_18988_8-famous-fictional-archaeologists-who-suck-at-their-job.html), he could easily find “8 Famous Fictional Archaeologists who Suck at their Job” including the likes of Dr. Jones, Dr. Daniel Jackson (Stargate), everyone in the film *The Mummy*, and Lara Croft (Tomb Raider). Apparently artifacts are viewed as great plot devices to highlight explosives, handguns, and “competitive burglary.” Enough said on this topic. Printed fiction also regularly features archaeologists, yet a summary

of the 101 popular archaeological fiction books from goodreads.com highlights time traveling, science fiction, thrillers, and mysteries filled with improbable events and characters. Are there other sources of information? To begin to answer this question, with the help of a retired sociologist neighbor, we conducted what I can only call a non-scientific (scien-terrific?) survey.

SURVEYING NON-ARCHAEOLOGISTS ADULTS FOR RESPONSES

Nancy Hugman-Gordon and I set up a short survey on the Survey Monkey Internet platform. Although we sent the survey link to a larger group, we received 70 responses. Likely based on our background and contacts, or perhaps due to willingness to take surveys and give information, 85% of our respondents were female, 61% had at least a four-year college degree, all were above the age of 25, and 35% were in their 50s. One of the questions that we asked was “What words do you associate with archaeology.” Figure 1 illustrates their response in a word cloud format, with larger words being the more common responses. Words associated with archaeologists range from the specific and scientific (digging, artifacts, bones, ancient, digging, knowledge, Leakey, documents, tedious) to the more fictional or sensational (Indiana Jones, Jurassic Park, relics, King Tut, khakis, excitement). Sixty percent of the respondents stated that they would like to learn more about archaeology, and 34% responded that they maybe would like to learn more. Sources of information (Figure 2) seem to fall along the same spectrum as associative words, from the ones that I would expect (books, *National Geographic*, PBS, school) to words and associations that rather worry me (aliens, Bible, entertainment). There is an interesting addition of the personal. Words like “sister,” “friend,” “niece” seem to suggest that along with the popular and perhaps expected responses, the input of archaeologists is important.

ARCHAEOLOGISTS RESPOND TO SURVEY ON PUBLIC OUTREACH

Following up on the information from the non-archaeologists, I altered the survey (but retained a similar format) to ask if archaeologists were interested in public outreach. The call to answer the survey went out on SCA email and on Facebook. Perhaps it is stating the obvious that those most interested in public outreach would be the ones to answer the survey questions. Given that caveat, there were 123 respondents. Sixty percent were female, and 61% had a graduate degree. Their answer to the question of “What words do archaeologists think of when they hear the word ‘Archaeology’?” was remarkably similar to that of the non-archaeologists (Figure 3). Words like past, artifacts, ancient, history, excavation, science appear, although with fewer words associated with the sensational and popular. Indiana Jones seems to be a constant. The source of information where archaeologists think the general public gets their information contains many duplicates of the non-archaeologists’ response, with an important exception (Figure 4). The word “Unfortunately” regularly appeared in the archaeologists’ responses. That is to say, many archaeologists do not seem to be happy with the public sources of information. Yet many of the respondents (94 of the 123) are making regular efforts to do public outreach, perhaps as a response to their dislike of existing sources of information.

Figure 5 shows the archaeologists’ answers to the kinds of public outreach activities that they engage in. Lectures (talks at local clubs, historical societies, etc.) and classrooms are the most popular forum for archaeologists to communicate with the general public. Social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.), museums, and websites are also regular venues. How does this compare to how the group on non-archaeological respondents (65 responses of the 70 who took the survey) on how they would like to learn about archaeology? Figure 6 shows the sources of information that the respondents would like to get their information from. The correlation to where non-archaeologists (at least this demographic) want to get information and where archaeologists are providing it is uneven. For the non-archaeologists, websites, television, magazines, and online classes are the most desired venues. Lectures and classrooms are less popular with the non-archaeologists, but a regular venue for archaeologists. Museums did not appear in any of the answers of the non-archaeologists as a source of information. I have no doubt that subsets of

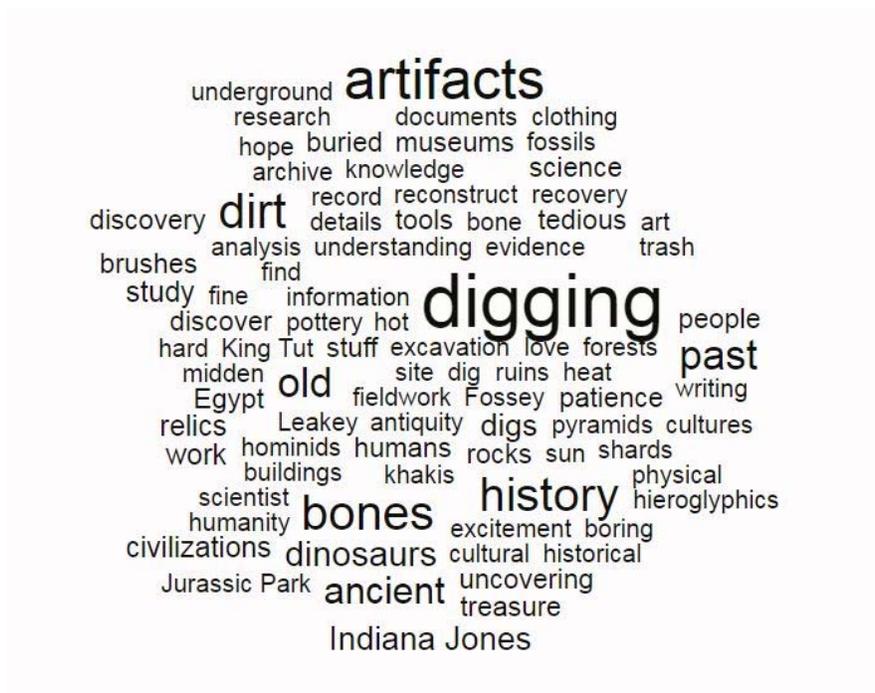


Figure 1. Words that non-archaeologists associate with Archaeology.

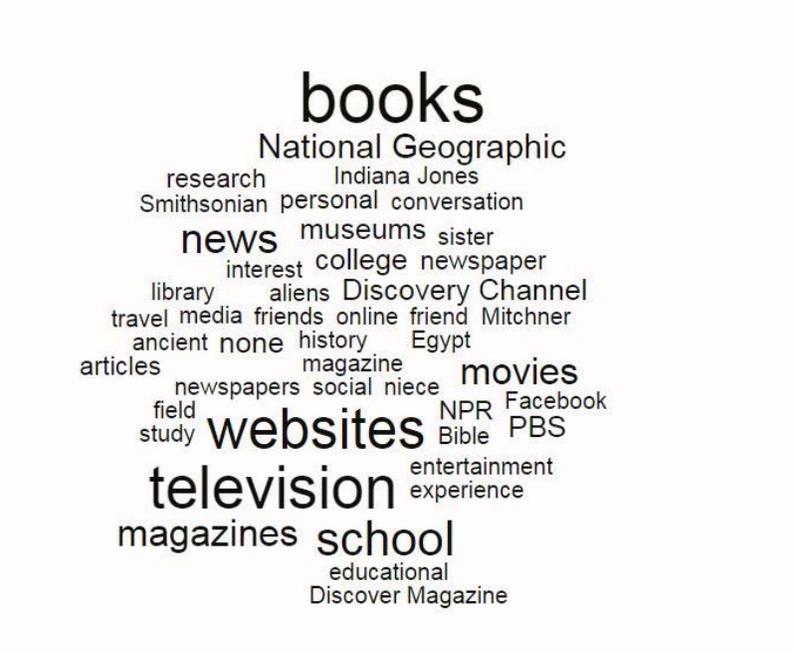


Figure 2. Sources of information on archaeology that non-archaeologists consult.

Material Culture Societies Science Lost
 Indiana Jones Rocks Dirt Fun History
 Anthropology Past Heritage Artifacts Public
 Ancient Research Excavation Think Job Look
 Exciting

Figure 3. Words that archaeologists associate with Archaeology.

Discovery Channel Reports Indiana Jones Hollywood
 Museums Unfortunately
 National Geographic Nat Geo
 Television Education News PBS
 Movies TV Shows Media Popular Internet
 Programs History Print Newspapers School

Figure 4. Sources of information on archaeology that archaeologists think non-archaeologists consult.

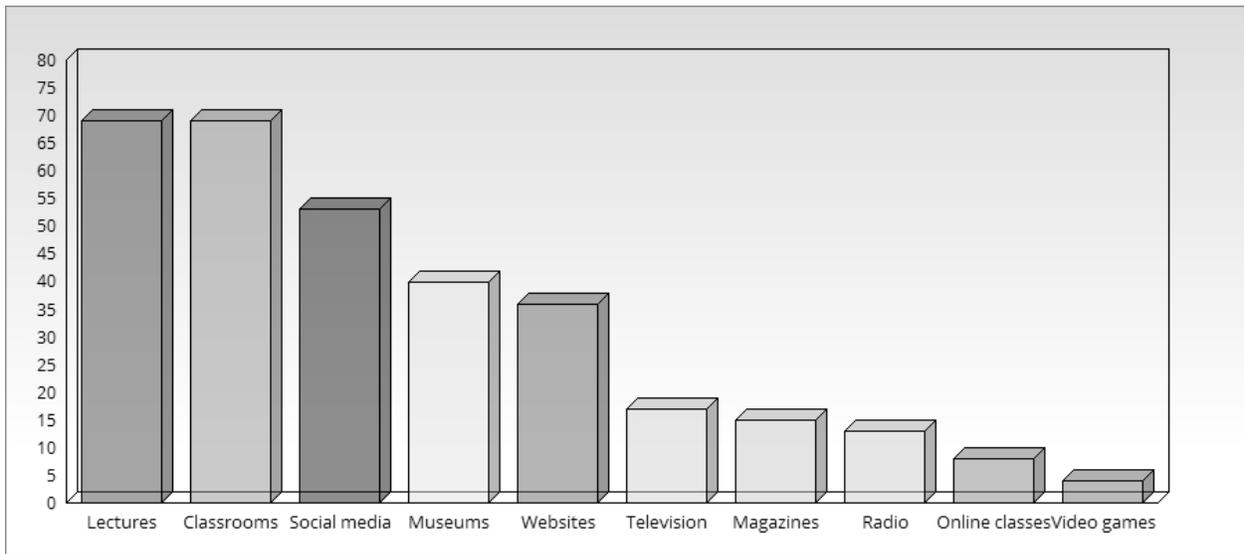


Figure 5. Public outreach efforts made by archaeologists.

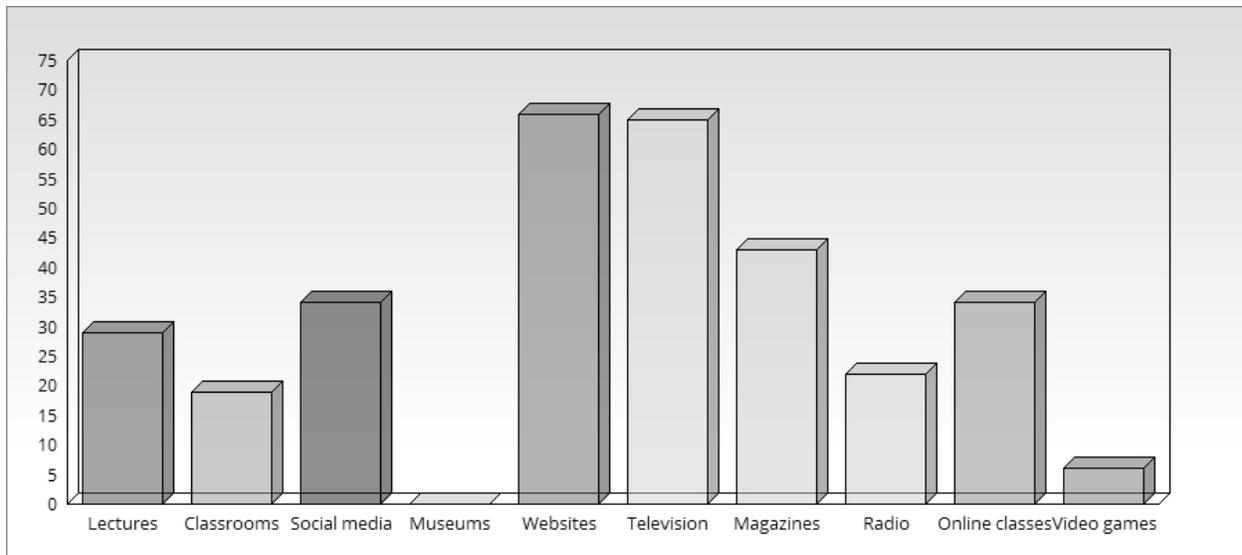


Figure 6. Public outreach efforts wanted by non-archaeologists.

the non-archaeological population would answer these questions differently, but these answers are suggestive of a larger pattern. While many archaeologists are engaging in public outreach, their efforts do not necessarily correlate with what the public wants.

FEEDING AND CARE OF THE PUBLIC EQUALS THE FEEDING AND CARE OF ARCHAEOLOGISTS

SCA newsletter Volume 1, January 1967, stated that “We hope that we are entering a new period of increased interaction, increased and better-organized research, and improved public understanding of the aims and goals of archaeology.” In his response to my suggestion that I talk on this topic for the 2015 plenary, Scott Williams stated: “I myself believe that the issue of public interpretation is paramount to the very survival of archaeology and cultural resource management. Although we as a discipline have done great things in the past, I believe your concept is extremely timely and we need to refocus on giving back to the public in the future or we will become irrelevant to future generations, as well as this one.” Extrapolating from these two quotations, I have learned that many in the SCA care passionately about archaeology, believe that we have important information about the past, and are willing to publicly share that information. Maybe our goals should be to hone our messages, and hone our public outreach platforms.

I hope that more are willing to do so, and that public interpretation becomes a norm rather than an exception of what we do as archaeologists, in academic, agency, non-profit, and resource management venues. To that end, I offer the following thoughts:

- We are our own best advocates. Most of us became archaeologists because we have a passion for learning about the past, coupled with curious, interesting, and intelligent thinking. Let’s learn to share that.
- Learn to write and speak for a public audience. Practice. Be interesting. Be succinct.
- This does not come naturally. It is learned behavior. Learning how to engage in public outreach should be a part of the archaeological curriculum and training.
- Always remember audience. Some audiences are passive learners and seekers of information. Others want to be actively engaged and interact with the information.

- Find existing examples of platforms that help us to share why the past matters. SCA activities (Archaeology Month) and platforms (our website, Facebook page) have good examples.
- Find other examples, those that pique your interest, and suit your own capabilities. Learn from what has been done. And then be creative.
- As a discipline and professional group, we need to find ways to better engage the fictional world of television, movies, books, and video gaming. While there are many individuals already carrying this banner, I think it is going to take a group effort to make the fictional archaeological world a better place.
- We need to challenge ourselves, and keep up with the technological curve. Smartphone and tablet apps are the new frontier and I for one am looking forward to seeing where they take us.

Archaeology matters to us. For us to matter to the public, we need to continually and thoughtfully share with them why we think the way we think about the past. For all of our sakes, during the next 50 years, I would like the topic of public outreach to continue to have a place in the plenary, as well as in many (if not all) symposia. Or maybe better yet, when public outreach does become the norm, it's no longer a separate topic of conversation, but becomes integrated in the same way that field and lab work are so central to what we do as a profession. I am hopeful.