

World History Bulletin

Disappearances and Preservations



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How I Forced a Room Full of Historians to Laugh at a Butt Joke: Genre and Message in a Public History Podcast

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Like many who read the *World History Bulletin*, I've devoted my career to ethical study and preservation of the past. But recently, I deliberately distorted the historical record in my public-facing history podcast, targeting my respected colleagues and friends at the Southeast World History Association (SEWHA).

special, recorded-live-in-front-of-a-studio-audience episode of my podcast.¹ The general theme of the show is "how history helps us understand the strangeness of now." Inverting the famous L. P. Hartley quotation, I called the SEWHA conference session, "The Present is a Foreign Country."²



Historian Doug Sofer records an episode of his podcast, "You Are A Weirdo," at the annual SEWHA Conference. October 25, 2024. Source: The Editors of World History Bulletin.

My transgression? I edited my podcast to make it sound as if the audience at SEWHA laughed at a butt-joke I'd told.

Here are the facts of my confession. In October 2024, I interviewed the entire SEWHA conference for a

I created my show to defend scholarly history and highlight its insights. Amid digital propaganda, deepfakes, bogus news, and sensationalized amateur podcasts, I wanted to show why professional academic history matters. Understanding today's odd world lets history

challenge our cultural assumptions, much as experiencing foreign norms does. Academic historians gain similar insights by immersing themselves in different past contexts.

I started off the panel doing what I always do these days: urging my fellow professionally trained historians and advanced history students to get better at engaging the public. More than ever, we must explain patiently, engagingly, in as many ways as we can muster, how we use evidence to understand the past. Academic history is on the ropes these days. Outside of academia, people seem to understand little about what historians do for a living. Some 66% of Americans think history is simply memorizing dates, names of leaders, famous battles, and so forth.³

In academia, history department budgets are being slashed, and our programs are being mischaracterized as impractical. At SEWHA, I wanted to convey the desperate straits in which our profession finds itself.

“History,” I explained, “is getting its butt kicked.”

I paused dramatically and added slowly, deliberately, doing my best to channel some kind of North American version of John Cleese:

“Insofar as history may be said to have a butt.”

Yep: that was the joke.⁴

I braced myself for the inevitable raucous laughter, expecting everyone to recognize my comic genius.

But nobody laughed. Silence. Crickets.⁵

Except in the episode that I dropped in January 2025, you can hear my colleagues laughing their heads off.⁶ To a listener who didn’t know any better, it sounds as if I’ve charmed my audience with the boldness of my quip. They’re delighted as they marvel at what the posterior of history must look like. Maybe they’ve conjured up a double-entendre—something to do with Hegel’s or Francis Fukuyama’s musings about “the end of history.” Either way, they’re clearly laughing at something.

The butt-ugly truth is I spliced their laughter from another part of the session onto this line. By doing so, I made myself the villain—a real-life, modern Lt. Stephen Hauk from *Good Morning Vietnam*, who, in cringy earnestness, pleads with his superior officer,

“Sir, in my heart I know I’m funny.”

In the movie, Bruno Kirby’s Lt. Hauk represents overbearing military bureaucracy, believing his own jokes

are superior to Robin Williams’ irreverence as Sgt. Adrian Cronauer⁷, a real Vietnam War deejay.⁸

Had Hauk lived in the twenty-first century, he would have relished the ease with which he could use software to physically coerce his audiences into laughing.⁹ While editing my episode digitally, I took liberties with the raw recording of the SEWHA session. In retrospect, it was pretty ungrateful of me to have been allowed to interview an entire history conference, which had been a very generous gift in itself. It was an entire session at the October 2024 meeting—no concurrent panels. I had more or less the entire conference in attendance to help me put this podcast episode together. The forum’s discussion centered around a single question, stated as follows on the conference program:

Imagine that the historical people you investigate suddenly appeared in the present day. What would surprise them the most about the present-day world, not only technologically but also socially, politically, and culturally? What else would they find strange?¹⁰

The chat went very well. About a dozen historians and students, at various career stages, shared insights on why professional history matters. They reflected on how odd the present appears in historical context, joked about its potential strangeness to ancestors, and discussed how historical research reveals our current assumptions rest on a young, fragile status quo.

If the history conversation exceeded my expectations, the audio engineering challenge was daunting. I had never interviewed an entire audience before. As host, producer, writer, and sound engineer, I was figuring things out on the fly. I set up two wired mics on desk stands, connected to my laptop through a USB interface, and recorded with Logic Pro, which I learned during my 2022 sabbatical. I arranged everything—laptop, mics, and folding chairs—on a folding table. The room, unfortunately, was large and echoey, more cafeteria than studio.¹¹ From the moment I saw the venue, I knew extensive editing awaited—what real audio engineers, I hear, do *not* call “post.”¹²

During the live conference session, I had led off with the butt comment, followed by the awkward silence. I'd been a bit rattled by its lack of impact, but I managed to keep going. My many years of telling objectively hilarious jokes to college students have inoculated me to the hush of unimpressed crowds—even though I know in my heart that my jokes are funny.

Plus, I reasoned at the time, *they're nervous*. And I had just started recording, so they must have been quiet so as not to interrupt my intro with their rowdy guffawing. Maybe they were just being polite. And perhaps I had brought everyone down a bit when I mentioned the sad state of the history profession. Who could blame them for not laughing at what was an otherwise unmistakably sidesplitting line?

In either case, the show went on.¹³ A few minutes later, my initial nervousness melted away, and the process began to flow more naturally. Better still, the audience became increasingly energetic about the topic, and more scholars began to chime in. The hour flew by, and I forgot all about how no one laughed at my initial hilariousness.

Until, that is, I began to edit the episode. I already knew that I'd have to redo my own moderator role in the conversation because I hadn't positioned myself anywhere near my mics during the talk. I was standing and walking around, working the crowd, but I had contributors sit down on either side of the folding table near the two mics. Moreover, *all* of my episodes are heavily edited, even my scripted shows with no interviewees. I make it a standard practice to remove my own “ums,” “ahs,” awkward pauses, my frequent maladroit verbal blunders, and my amateurish involuntary saliva noises. In this episode, thankful for such enthusiastic audience participation, I resolved to make each speaker sound as coherent, clean, and professional as possible. Though my first priority was to represent their comments as faithfully as possible to their intended meaning, I also wanted their words to sound polished and slick. With some digital fiddling, I figured out how to minimize the room's echoes. I found a plugin for Logic Pro that digitally cleaned the gymnasium feel, making it sound instead like a reasonably small classroom. From my home studio, I re-recorded greatly embellished versions of my own moderator comments.¹⁴

Then I digitally *added* a small amount of additional reverb to my newly recorded track, so it sounded like I was in the same small space as everyone else. All of which is to say that present-day podcasters with a little bit of training and a smattering of technical acumen have at our disposal a massive quiver full of digital arrows, capable of transforming sounds into more or less whatever audio fantasies we can imagine.

My own fantasy was to make myself far more coherent than I'd actually been as a nervous, live moderator. I wrote elaborate executive summaries of each speaker's comments and added transitions between sections. I rearranged some of the conversation to make it flow more logically, and then I even removed an entire (excellent) thread because it didn't fit comfortably with the rest of the session's themes, which made the episode longer than I'd wanted. In short, I attempted to make the entire session as clean and compelling as possible to better align with the podcast genre.

Except for the laughter, I don't believe that any of those additions and subtractions is any more nefarious than any other kind of revision process. I had not transformed the session's content any more than if I had written down the participants' words instead of recording them directly.¹⁵ When we write, we're constantly shuffling words, sentences, and paragraphs around; adding, removing, and subtly altering content for the sake of coherence. That illusion takes place as soon as we record on paper anyone's spoken lines. We clean up the “ums” and the “ahs.” We polish up imprecise vocalizations. We strike from the written record various coughs, breaths, and any other facial noises that happen to get made. If someone mispronounces a word—“expecially,” for example—we remove the “x” in our transcription.¹⁶ In fact, I've edited the very essay you're reading right now scores of times in order to make it clearer, smoother, more coherent, and a better all-around representative of the essay genre.¹⁷

Moreover, if written transcripts and essays take liberties with their contents, most other genres take many, many more. Those of us who study world history understand that each and every genre contains at least some distinctive and fabricated elements. That is why we must be thoroughly familiar with the genre of any primary source to understand it. After all, genres

fundamentally shape the information we consume. When a 2024 report by the National Library of Medicine from the National Institutes of Health claims that “The global tobacco epidemic is one of the most significant public health challenges, claiming the lives of over 8 million people annually,” that statement of fact carries a level of scientific rigor—peer review, repeatability, and so on.¹⁸ By obvious contrast, when a full-color page in a magazine claims that “20,679 physicians say Luckies are less irritating,” we recognize it as a cigarette advertisement.¹⁹ Both sentences claim to be statements of fact about smoking, but identifying the latter as pertaining to the ad genre fundamentally changes how we understand it in contrast to the research report.

The same is true, for instance, when you start reading an account of the seemingly unquenchable lust of St. Mary of Egypt (ca. 344–421 CE). Before the narrative even gets going, you already know that by the end she will trade in her lascivious ways for a life of piety. Why? Because she’s a saint; *it’s right there in her name*. Redemption from one’s sinful lifestyle is always part of the genre of hagiography.

An understanding of genre is essential for making sense of the over 250 varieties of Chinese opera. Aficionados of one or more of these genres already know the well-known traditional stories upon which these works are based. In other words, audiences frequently know how a Chinese opera will end before it begins. The actual form of a given operatic work must conform to those conventions.²⁰ And in Sichuan opera, even the characters’ faces get edited during the performances. The three-century-old practice of *Bian lian* (變臉) allows performers to instantly change their masks, delighting and astonishing audiences. To outsiders, it feels like a simple magic trick, but to genre-savvy audiences, the meanings of these facial transformations play a major role in forwarding the stories. Understanding any Chinese opera performance, then, requires a deep understanding of time, place, and any given operatic work’s myriad cultural conventions.²¹

If world history is full of stylized narrative genres, it makes sense that my podcast should fit into one as well. In fact, when I posted the show to my podcast hosting service, it required me to list *two* thematic categories.²² The first was, obviously, the podcast genre of “History.”

For the second, I looked for a category called “Humor.” But seeing none, I took in a deep breath and, in my hubris, checked the box labeled “Comedy.”

By clicking that little checkbox, I had claimed my podcast uses humor to explain why history matters. Doing so meant that I *had* to be funny. In turn, people must laugh when I say things I’d designated in my head as jokes. Since the SEWHA show was my first one in front of a live audience, I felt I almost *had* to depict people laughing. And if that meant sledgehammering the triangular peg of a real-life conversation into the square hole of humor through digital editing, then so be it.

Except that, weeks later, it made me feel what might be called, for lack of a better descriptor, *icky*.

My father used to take a lot of digital photographs, and he once used Photoshop to force-edit me to smile in a photo when I, in my edgy youthfulness, had been trying my best to appear sullen. The digitally manufactured smile felt like a betrayal of trust, of reality itself. In the big picture of breaches of trust, it was probably a misdemeanor. Still, after publishing the podcast episode, I found myself recalling that feeling of having been sold out in this doctored photo.

That aforementioned *ick* is why I decided to edit the podcast episode again, inserting a brief explanatory *mea culpa* about how I faked the laughter at my joke. In re-editing that part, I once again had to distort a bit of history—in this case by altering the originally released version of my own episode. A reality of any online digital medium is that it can be altered at pretty much any time. I’ve corrected errors before on already-published episodes—usually just cleaning up minor audio glitches that I’ve found after having officially uploaded the audio file. There seems to be no statute of limitations; a podcaster can just replace one audio file with a new one, no explanation needed.

In the process of editing, re-editing, and re-re-editing, I find myself reflecting on how a history podcast differs from a history essay. I believe that the speed and scope with which any jerk with a microphone and some reasonably affordable hardware can scatter information all around the world has increased in ways that would astonish those who lived before us. When I publish an episode, people in Turkey, Bhutan, or Malawi can listen to it almost immediately in the little rectangular boxes

they carry in their pockets.²³ Equally impressive is that when I alter the content, it changes it everywhere. It's like I'm virtually reaching into those pockets and switching out what's contained therein, all without the owners being any the wiser.

That ability to alter audio may be used for good or evil. Cleaning up background echoes in an acoustically uncooperative room, removing “ums,” “ahs,” and hems and haws—I believe those actions sharpened my guests' arguments. It made them sound clearer while preserving and even improving the impact of their words. As media scholar Siobhán McHugh asserts in *The Power of Podcasting*, a successful narrative nonfiction podcast of any variety requires substantial digital editing to convert raw audio into a compelling story. In one example, she details a podcast production team struggling with the first draft of the podcast “Phoebe’s Fall,” which would eventually become a prestigious audio series and an exemplar of excellent audio journalism:

To anyone with an attuned ear for audio narrative, listening to [the initial draft] was a dismaying experience. Though it contained gems of interview quotes and some moving and even funny stories, the overall impression was of a dreary lecture. It was dense with expository narration that could not be absorbed in a single hearing; turgid, due to relentless swaths of interview excerpts with no nonverbal relief . . .²⁴

McHugh continues, describing how these podcasters added many narrative elements, radically reorganizing

Notes

Doug Sofer, PhD, is Professor of History at Maryville College in East Tennessee. He casts his pod and blogs his blog at findyourselfinhistory.com. Sofer is past president of the Southeast World History Association, a regional affiliate of the World History Association. Sofer would like to thank the Southeast World History Association, the conference organizers, and Southeast Missouri State University for offering him the amazing opportunity described in this essay. He also extends his appreciation to the members of the Knoxville Writers' Guild's literary nonfiction writing group who offered invaluable comments on an early draft of this essay.

and reframing the piece until it formed a single, coherent, and compelling arc across multiple episodes. For my part, I don't (yet) have a team, but I definitely didn't want my listeners to have a “dismaying experience” when they heard the SEWHA episode.

It does not take much historical imagination, though, to realize I could have easily used these same techniques and technologies nefariously to distort the speakers' meaning. I might have taken them out of context to make them seem loyal to some mad demagogue, or to promote some unjust cause. I could have engaged in the sonic equivalent of Josef Stalin airbrushing his assassinated political rivals out of official photos.²⁵

Ultimately, my deception with the audience's laughter probably wasn't totalitarian censorship or a predatory scam that could make me rich at the public's expense. But upon reflection, I realized it was genuinely dishonest. Moving the laughter to where I told the butt-joke ultimately did come from a genuinely self-aggrandizing impulse. It was a deception designed to make me appear smarter and funnier than I actually am.

In publishing this confession, I'm attempting to relieve myself of some of the *icky* feeling. In my heart, I know I wasn't as funny as I'd hoped. Even so, upon considering our lives in the digital age, I am reminded once again of how utterly strange our world has become. It's yet another demonstration of how even my own history project and attempts to stay true to the standards of our profession have contributed in some small part to the peculiarity of the present.

¹ Doug Sofer, host & producer, *You Are A Weirdo*, podcast, December 2022–, <https://findyourselfinhistory.com/where-to-listen/>.

² Hartley's opening line is “The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.”

³ American Historical Association, “History, the Past, and Public Culture: Results from a National Survey,” accessed September 23, 2023, <https://www.historians.org/history-culture-survey>. Over 90% of respondents acknowledged that history is important. Some simply appreciated how history offers knowledge of the past (39%), others recognized the experience and/or knowledge the past brings to the present

(19%), and a full third found historical information entertaining (33%).

⁴ Insofar as it may be said to be a joke.

⁵ No, not even crickets; if there had been a cricket or two around, I would have greatly appreciated it. I could have pretended that my little orthopteran insect friend was offering up its chirpy leg-rubbings as a merciful gesture. No such luck.

⁶ Or, perhaps, their butts.

⁷ In a 2008 public address to the American Veterans' Center, Cronauer asserts that while "none of the [other] characters in the film are based on actual people On the other hand, if you name any character in the film, I could think of a half-dozen people" whom they resembled. American Veterans Center, "Good Morning, Vietnam! Adrian Cronauer on Accuracy (2008 AVC Conference)," YouTube video, 9:42, March 25, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V8FkXRgA4Sg>.

⁸ The movie, like the original, pre-disclaimer version of my podcast episode, also distorts the historical record. Real-life Sgt. Cronauer co-wrote the script for *Good Morning, Vietnam* and, in the process, deliberately wedged his own experiences into the particular subgenre of comedy that was very popular in the US in the late-twentieth century. In the final years of the 1970s, Cronauer and another US Vietnam veteran originally wanted to create a television show about their wartime experiences. Inspired by the success of the program M*A*S*H and its depiction of the Korean War, Cronauer's show would take on serious issues through a humorous lens. And much of that humor would be about cheeky, irreverent soldiers speaking truth to power and defying orders of humorless military bureaucrats. The factual Cronauer was much more of a rule-follower than Williams' character. In fact, the Air Force's bureaucrats recognized Cronauer's value and awarded him multiple medals for his exemplary service.

⁹ That is, if he had been a real person to begin with.

¹⁰ Southeast World History Association (SEWHA), "Prior Conferences," accessed October 1, 2025, <https://www.sewha.org/prior-conferences/>.

¹¹ I think my public junior high called our version of this kind of room a "cafetorium." To be fair, having never recorded an audience before, I hadn't thought to ask the kindly organizers at our host institution for a more acoustically manageable space.

¹² Okay, *some* do say 'in post' but that phrasing comes from filmmaking. The preferred audio term seems to be 'in the mix.' At least that's the impression I picked up from lurking the Audio Engineering sub at Reddit. Search for "in post" at

r/audioengineering, Reddit, accessed July, 2025, <https://www.reddit.com/r/audioengineering>.

¹³ It must.

¹⁴ "Home studio" sounds better than "spare bedroom," but the latter is more accurate.

¹⁵ Oral historians understand very well that the very act of converting an audio conversation into a written transcript may involve a great deal of interpretation, redaction, and clarifying addition. See, e.g., Shelley Trower, "Oral History Transcribed, Edited and Published," in *Sound Writing: Voices, Authors, and Readers of Oral History*, ed. Shelly Trower (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), Ch. 3.

¹⁶ I find that pronunciation especially "escruciating."

¹⁷ Insofar as this contribution may be said to be an essay.

¹⁸ National Institutes of Health, National Library of Medicine, "A Review of Smoking Cessation Interventions: Efficacy, Strategies for Implementation, and Future Directions," accessed June 3, 2025, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10858725/>.

¹⁹ See <https://tobacco.stanford.edu/cigarettes/doctors-smoking/20679-physicians/>.

²⁰ Samantha Webster, "A Lesson in Sichuan Opera to Celebrate the Year of the Dog," Feb. 13, 2018, accessed June 4, 2025, <https://hammer.ucla.edu/blog/2018/02/a-lesson-in-sichuan-opera-to-celebrate-the-year-of-the-dog>. This blog post is an interview with Susan Pertel Jain, then-Executive Director of UCLA's Confucius Center.

²¹ For an overview of Chinese opera forms and the significance of the Chinese Revolution in altering the genre, see Hsiao-t'i Li, *Opera, Society, and Politics in Modern China*, 1st ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2019), Ch. 1, "Overture." On bian lian, see, e.g., Smithsonian Institute, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, "Face Changing in Chinese Sichuan Opera," accessed June 6, 2025, https://www.si.edu/object/face-changing-chinese-sichuan-opera:yt_K1IVyo7Txus.

²² The fine print on Buzzsprout, my hosting service, explains that most podcast directories use only the first genre, but that some specialty tools check for the second genre as well and make recommendations to listeners accordingly.

²³ Insofar as some of those pockets might be on their butts.

²⁴ Siobhán McHugh, *The Power of Podcasting: Telling Stories Through Sound* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), especially 157–162. Italics are McHugh's.

²⁵ Made infamous in David King, *The Commissar Vanishes: The Falsification of Photographs and Art in Stalin's Russia* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 1997).