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History in the Age of Chat GPT

In March 2024, the *New York Times*' list of the fifteen top best-selling books in the nonfiction category included no works by professional historians. Only two of the books could even be considered History – and, surprisingly, both were written by the same author, the talented journalist David Gann. His book, *Killers of the Flower Moon* (number 5 on the list), became the basis of the celebrated film of the same name. From this limited evidence one might infer that US readers, at least, prefer to read biographies of icons of popular culture, sports, or politics, exposés of tech industry bad boys, and quasi-scientific musings about the nature of aging, trauma, meditation, and cognition. As Professor Moro suggests, many people prefer to learn history – if they learn it at all – as a form of entertainment, through cinema, for example.

The impact of social media is a key factor. In addition to the factors Professor Moro adduces, we could add their effect on the attention span of readers. Users of Instagram, TikTok, and even Facebook become accustomed to instant gratification. They receive their information, including historical information, in short, bite-sized portions, their appetites never satiated, as they devour one mouthful after another. Cognitively, they lose the ability to spend time with a lengthy text, to absorb a detailed or complicated account. They become used to receiving their information in the form of bumper-sticker slogans or memes. They lack the patience for, and have never learned the pleasure of, sitting for hours absorbed in a book.

These attributes – short attention span, preference for visual images – are not limited to young people, unfortunately. As president, Donald Trump had no patience for his daily intelligence briefing. Not only would he refuse to read the reports; he would not even listen to the presentations of intelligence officers, ordering other officials, such as the Vice-President or Secretary of Defense, to do so. To get President Ronald Reagan, the former Hollywood actor, to pay attention to intelligence reports, the Central Intelligence Agency would prepare short videos on topics such as the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, the Soviet space program, or an upcoming summit meeting in Moscow.

To evaluate historians' influence on public policy, we should look not only at popular audiences but also at the level of national leadership. Several US presidents, for example, were famously influenced by historians – for better and worse. John F. Kennedy often mentioned Barbara Tuchman's *The Guns of August*, a book on the origins of World War I that was published in 1962, just months before the Cuban Missile Crisis. Kennedy's cautious approach and his resistance to accepting the advice of military officers and hawkish civilian advisers owes

much to Tuchman's stress on the role of «miscalculation» in causing the outbreak of war. As he ordered a naval blockade of Cuba to prevent delivery of more Soviet missiles, the president told his brother Bobby: «I wish we could send a copy of that book to every Navy officer on every ship right now, but they probably wouldn't read it».

History books do not always play a positive role in presidential decisions. In facing the violent breakup of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, President William Clinton was evidently much influenced by the journalist Robert Kaplan's *Balkan Ghosts* – more of a travelogue than a history, but one that offered various historical generalizations. Kaplan's book evidently convinced Clinton that the brutal violence in Yugoslavia owed not to economic and political factors, but to “ancient hatreds” among the federation's constituent nations, and therefore there was nothing that the United States or its European allies could or should do about it.

Although we are not aware that he read her book, Ronald Reagan met several times in the 1980s with the historian Suzanne Massey, author of *Land of the Firebird: The Beauty of Old Russia*. She provided him background on Russian culture before his meetings with Mikhail Gorbachev, and she taught him the proverb «*doveryai, no proveryai*» («trust but verify») that he repeated at every occasion. Massey, born in New York, later emerged as a harsh critic of US policy toward Russia under the administration of Joseph Biden. She traveled to Russia in May 2021 to attend the military parade on Red Square. She praised Vladimir Putin as a «gentleman» and told him: «I would be very happy if I could become a citizen of Russia».

Not surprisingly, writers of popular history, oriented toward a wide readership, are likely to receive more attention than university-based scholars, whose works draw on years spent in dusty archives. Sometimes, however, there are surprising exceptions. Perhaps the best example in the US case was British-born Yale University historian Paul Kennedy's astounding success with *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*. Recognizing the book's potential popular appeal – even at some 700 pages – the trade publisher Random House put out the book in 1987, at a time of US fears of economic competition with a rapidly growing Japan and the continuing threat of Soviet military power. It rose to number six on the best-seller list for hardbound books in 1988 and sold thousands more copies when it came out in paperback the following year. It is perhaps mainly remembered now for his advice to US policymakers to “manage” affairs «so that the relative erosion of the United States' position takes place slowly and smoothly» – and this just four years before the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the onset of a decades-long economic stagnation following the burst of an “asset bubble” in Japan, and the emergence of the United States as the sole remaining superpower (the so-called Unipolar Moment).

Despite these US examples of historians' influence on political leaders, Professor Moro's generalization about their influence on the broader public rings

true: «gli storici accademici hanno perso il loro primato nell'influenzare la memoria di un pubblico sempre più molteplice e complesso e debbono competere, per ottenere attenzione e influenza, con i non professionisti, così come con opinion-makers». Sometimes, however, the professional historians receive the attention they deserve. Nicholas Mulder, my colleague at Cornell's Department of History, is a case in point. His scholarly study, *The Economic Weapon: The Rise of Sanctions as a Tool of Modern War* (Yale University Press, 2022), received a high level of attention, especially for a first book by a young scholar. Although his focus was the interwar period – Mulder studied, among other cases, the League of Nations' sanctions against Italy following the invasion of Abyssinia/Ethiopia – the international reaction to Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine made his topic of economic sanctions of immediate relevance to public policy. Mulder found his work cited in, and he was invited to write articles for, periodicals such as *The New York Times*, *The Economist*, *Financial Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Guardian*, and *The Nation*, among others.

A growing trend among US universities is to promote the research of their scholars, to try to get them quoted in mass media. In the case of Professor Muller, the results flowed naturally from his research. But in other cases, specific offices of “news and media relations” encourage professors to prepare “tip sheets,” available online on the university website, with quotations that journalists might incorporate into their reports or to form the basis for interviews on television, radio, and social media. The office then distributes reports to the entire faculty, listing the scholars who have succeeded in attracting media attention, the outlets where their work was cited or their interviews broadcast, and the number of “hits,” readers, or viewers – *pour encourager les autres*.

Many historians and social scientists believe that their work should not produce knowledge only for knowledge's sake, but should be useful to society. Yet, one can see the risk of excessive seeking of public attention – it can become a distraction to our genuine scholarly research. Moreover, we might strain too hard to make our historical analyses relevant to contemporary politics. One could make the case, for example that the 2001 US invasion and occupation of Afghanistan was bound to fail, based on the British and Soviet historical precedents from previous centuries, or that we can anticipate something of Vladimir Putin's intentions from the example of Adolf Hitler, or understand Donald Trump by analogy to Benito Mussolini. But the pressure (whether from our universities or self-induced) to gain media attention by making such claims risks a vulgarization of historical knowledge and an offer of poor or inappropriate policy advice, if the relevant qualifications and nuances are obscured.

Another form of “popularization” of scholarly work is presentation by scholars of their research online, in articles (or videos) oriented toward a general audience. The internet has allowed for many historical documents to be uploaded to the worldwide web (including from the national archives of many countries, and – for students of the Cold War and after – the extraordinary cache of mate-

rials provided by the private US organization, the National Security Archive). Historians who want to present their scholarship to a broad audience can write and upload articles with their online sources embedded as “hyperlinks” – something that younger readers, in particular, seem to prefer. There are two drawbacks to this phenomenon, however: it gives the impression that the only sources worth citing are the ones that can be found on the internet; and it makes it impossible to know what sources the author is citing without clicking on each hyperlink. In this respect, a quick glance at footnotes, endnotes, or a bibliography – the “old-fashioned” method – is far more efficient and informative.

Professor Moro ends his compelling observations – many of which seem rather discouraging – with a forward-looking call for historians to remain committed to their social responsibility for the sake of imagining a better future. His essay does not mention a particularly grave threat to the task of producing historical scholarship, whether or not relevant to policy concerns, that has emerged recently: the proliferation of Artificial Intelligence. So-called large language models, such as Chat GPT have been shown to “hallucinate” – to invent facts and sources, including scholarly articles. AI is able to mimic voices and create audio and visual “deep fakes” of things that never happened. More than ever historians need to be experts at distinguishing the true from the false, in ways we never imagined would be necessary.