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Editorial: Digital Video and Social Studies

[Thomas C. Hammond](#)
Lehigh University

[John K. Lee](#)
North Carolina State University

Historical Background

The “social studies” as a domain of K-12 instruction is a legacy of early 20th-century Progressivism (Fallace, 2009). The movement to establish social studies was shaped and defined by such milestones as the 1916 report of the National Education Association’s Committee on Social Studies, which situated social studies within the Progressive vision of “modern education” that aimed at “social efficiency” (Committee on Social Studies, 1916, p. 9, reprinted in Nelson, 1994). This document was followed by the founding of the National Council for the Social Studies in 1921 and involvement in practitioner journals such as *History Teacher’s Magazine* (founded in 1909 and renamed *The Social Studies* in 1934). Throughout the 20th century, the social studies community has grappled with current events, crises, curricula, standards, testing, and much more.

The same time period saw the growth and commercial maturation of an important medium of communication: the motion picture. Shortly before the turn of that century, Thomas Edison and his employees developed the techniques of motion picture recording and projection in the United States (e.g., see the first “Monkeyshines” from 1889-1890, Video 1). The Lumière brothers of France developed a competing, lighter-weight design that allowed them to record street scenes and aspects of daily life (e.g., “Workers leaving factory,” 1895, Video 2). (**Editor’s note:** URLs for all online digital videos are listed in the [Resources](#) section at the end of this editorial.)

Video 1. [1889-90 Monkeyshines](#) from YouTube.com.

Video 2. [The first film ever "Exiting the Factory" \(1895\)](#) from YouTube.com.

What do these two seemingly disparate events have in common? For one thing, as a human and cultural activity, the development of technologies such as film and video are content for social studies. Furthermore, from its inception, film has been used to capture events of enduring interest to social studies teachers, whether slices of daily life, such as a snowball fight in Paris ([Lumiere. Snowball Fight, 1897](#)), or moments in the national political narrative, such as Teddy Roosevelt's 1905 inauguration ([Teddy Roosevelt Oath of Office 1905](#)).

Beyond capturing social studies content, the new technology shifted the way humans viewed the world. People were able to see events, cultural ideas, and social conditions from places and in ways never before imagined. Social studies simultaneously emerged as an academic context devoted to the study of exactly these concepts—"the nature and laws of social life," as the 1916 Committee expressed it (p. 9, as reprinted in Nelson, 1994). Just when humans needed a context in which to process the new information that motion picture technology made accessible, social studies was born.

The relationship between social studies education and the motion picture can be characterized as close but troubled. The relationship is close because each community has recognized an opportunity in partnering with the other. Thomas Edison, a consummate entrepreneur, immediately identified the education market as a ready demander of his invention. The *New York Times* reported as early as 1912 that Edison's Home Kinetoscope was being demonstrated in local schools, and that "the children in Public School 155 are saving up to buy one of the new machines for their own edification" (1912). In 1913, Edison asserted,

Books will soon be obsolete in the schools. Scholars will soon be instructed through the eye. It is possible to teach every branch of human knowledge with the motion picture. Our school system will be completely changed in ten years (quoted in Saettler, 1990, p. 98).

The social studies community had a reciprocal interest in the moving image. Some of the earliest research in social studies education focused on the use of films to teach history (Consitt, 1931; Knowlton & Tilton, 1929). In the following decades, the social studies community developed a considerable body of literature for social studies teachers. This literature provided practical advice, such as when and why to use film: "Generally films serve to introduce a topic or idea, furnish details...or act as a summary" (Hartley, 1965, p. 5). Other publications provided lists of films to consider showing that were organized by topic (e.g., Dobbs, 1987; Wilson & Herman, 1994). Social studies methods textbooks directed instructors to include "media," such as "films, filmstrips, ...pictures, [and] TV programs" in their planning documents (Barth, 1981, p. 62). Social studies teacher educators and researchers have noted film's affordances for learning content, developing empathy, practicing analysis, and engaging in civic preparation (Marcus, 2007).

However, the relationship between film (or video) and social studies is also troubled. Critics have accused social studies teachers of showing films merely to fill time rather than to educate (Cuban, 1986). Even in the context of focused instruction, teachers and students may fail to grasp the agency of film in establishing a perspective and pursuing an editorial goal (Marcus, 2007). They may confuse representations (and elaborations) of

the past with the actuality of historical events (Marcus, 2005). Students may also assume that seemingly “objective” formats such as documentaries are, in fact, constructions. Filmmakers sometimes exacerbate such conditions. One documentary filmmaker described himself as “a storyteller. I use real life as the plot and real people as characters” (Hess, 2007, p. 195). Finally, students may internalize information and impressions from films (and other popular media) as a “cultural curriculum” that persists despite classroom instruction (Meyerson & Paxton, 2007; Wineburg, 2001, Ch. 10).

The technological advances of the 1980s and 90s both accelerated these trends and opened new possibilities. The development of videotapes and players made distributing and showing films much cheaper. By 1997, 98% of teachers reported having television and video accessible for classroom instruction (Corporation for Public Broadcasting, 1997, p. 10). The development of digital formats and proliferation of lightweight video cameras made recording accessible for professional, home, or educational contexts (e.g., Brown, 1995). The introduction of free (or bundled) digital video editors on MacIntosh and Windows computers at the turn of the millennium made postproduction a practical reality for casual users.

Today, online services now provide streaming commercial content on demand to teachers and students (e.g., Discovery Education streaming or SAS’s Curriculum Pathways). Video sharing sites such as YouTube (youtube.com) host user-generated content from around the globe, allowing anyone to browse videos created and uploaded by the global community.

For example, to support a discussion of Haiti, social studies students can refer slice-of-life footage, such as a motorcycle ride through Port-au-Prince ([Port au Prince to Petionville Dec 2007](#)) or laborers singing a work chant on Gonave ([Haitian Work Song](#), 2008). Students can also explore more heavily editorialized perspectives on the country and its crisis such as news reports ([Poverty in Haiti spawns child slavery 13 October 2008](#)), documentaries ([Haitian Voodoo](#), 2007), or personal essays ([Haitian's Pride channel](#))

Teachers can produce and share their own videos (e.g., [TeacherTube.com](#)) or even guide students through their own process of video creation and sharing (e.g., [www.primaryaccess.org](#)). Finally, through free technologies such as Skype and Ning, classrooms can videoconference or videoblog with anyone on the other end of a web camera.

Digital Video and the Aims of Social Studies

To an extent, every technological innovation presents an opportunity to rethink and reimagine a curriculum. Even chalkboards were once a novelty. Their effective use had to be described and the pedagogical possibilities pointed out—the teacher could use the blackboard to motivate students and to assist them in organizing information (Evans, 1910). Textbooks, television, computers, and the Internet have all changed the landscape for social studies teachers and thinkers. Each technology opens new possibilities for teachers to achieve the aims of “the cultivation of good citizenship” (Committee on Social Studies, 1916, p. 9, reprinted in Nelson, 1994) or to “prepare students to identify, understand, and work to solve the challenges facing our diverse nation in an increasingly interdependent world” (National Council for the Social Studies, 2008, “A Guiding Vision: The Goals of Social Studies”). Digital video is just a more recent tool, so why should it deserve additional scrutiny as a component of social studies instruction?

First, the concept of “the social studies” is not a tidy, organized construct. The 1916 document seems to be clear enough: In 60 pages it lays out a definition, aims, possible outline of courses, and so forth. However, as social studies historian Michael Lybarger (1991) has noted, social studies is quite contentious.

One of the most remarkable aspects of the history of the social studies has been the ongoing debates over the nature, scope, and definition of the field....They began with the emergence of the field and give no evidence of abating. (p. 9)

In its almost 100-year history, social studies has undergone periodic crisis and conflict. In 1960, Shirley Engle summed up a long-running theme asserting that decision-making was the central focus of social studies instruction (Engle, 1960). That same decade saw an attempt to shift to the New Social Studies, a more inquiry-based approach with an emphasis on the social sciences side of the curriculum (Bruner, 1960). However, the teacher-centric, transmission-oriented instruction that predated social studies itself (e.g., Knight, 1902) soon reasserted itself (Goodlad, 1984).

The 1970s provided clarity over the cross purposes of the social studies, whether for cultural transmission, social science, or reflective inquiry (Barr, Barth, & Shermis, 1977). The 1980s saw a call for standards and an emphasis on history and testing (Ravitz & Finn, 1987). Once national standards were crafted in the 1990s, they were grounds for a political firestorm (e.g., Nash, Crabtree, & Dunn, 1994).

Within the accountability regime started by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, standards-based testing has had the unintended consequence of squeezing out social studies instructional time at the elementary level (e.g., Rock et al., 2006). The field of social studies can be compared to a pumpkin patch, its vines spreading out in an unruly tangle, with each gourd competing for space, light, and nutrients.

In the 1916 report some of the roots of this tangle can be spotted. For example, in describing the social studies, the Committee notes that courses must be differentiated to meet local needs.

The course of study outlined is flexible and permits of differentiation to any extent necessary to meet the needs of characteristic groups of pupils....It is conceivable that in a class of immigrant children more frequent emphasis might be given to American history and less to European history than in a class of native children. In both European and American history the selection of topics for emphasis should, within certain limits at least, be made to meet industrial or other specific needs....[C]ommunity civics needs special adaptation to rural conditions and requirements. The committee can not [sic] emphasize too strongly its belief in the desirability of such careful adjustment of courses to local and current circumstances. (p. 13)

This call for flexibility and adaptation to the needs of the local environment is a response to the diversity of communities and conditions that existed in early 20th century. The authors of the report were considering classrooms filled with the children of a globalized, mobile labor force. The Committee’s language and frame of reference are antiquated, but the circumstance is identical to that facing the social studies community today, albeit with an even more thoroughly interconnected world economy and labor market and more finely stated differences in opinion, market organization, and theology.

In the early 20th century, the cutting edge instructional technology available to educators was the textbook. The 1916 report concluded, right after a section called “The Preparation of the Teacher,” with a section on text materials. The aim at the time was the production and distribution of the proper textbook as “a positive aid to study and to teaching, provided, of course, that it is of the right kind and is rightly used” (Committee on Social Studies, 1916, p. 59, reprinted in Nelson, 1994).

This emphasis on the textbook makes sense. The most mature medium of communication was print. Print was affordable to produce and distribute, widely understood, and valued by all. In contrast, the motion picture was in its infancy—ruinously expensive to record, difficult to reproduce, expensive to distribute, and awkward to play.

In the 21st century, however, this relationship is reversing, or at least leveling off. Digital video is approaching the level of a mature medium of communication. Americans incessantly consume television, film, and web video content, and we dabble with recording and sharing our own. It is the mass medium of our age, the channel through which politics, news, commerce, entertainment, and leisure are pursued.

Conversely, in the context of K-12 instruction, students are averse to reading textbooks. Rather than being a guiding force for a curriculum, the textbook is being relegated to periodic in-class use in the event of a substitute teacher or grist for literacy exercises that have migrated into the social studies classroom.

The juxtaposition of the birth of social studies and the first stages of the motion picture prompt us to reflect on what the 1916 Committee might think if it were meeting today. Certainly their sweeping generalizations about classrooms of “native” children or children of “industrial districts” would be replaced with more nuanced statements about the diverse, multicultural, multilingual classrooms of the 21st century. The textbook would not be held in such high esteem. The Committee would certainly be interested in digital video, given the diversity and urgency of the material it presented and the opportunities for engaging students in producing and sharing their own material.

While writing our chapter in the forthcoming book, *Teaching With Digital Video* (Hammond & Lee, in press), we grappled with the amorphous aims of social studies and the infinity of possibilities afforded by digital video. The framework used in the book—*watching*, *analyzing*, and *creating* digital video—is designed to be simple (and even intuitive, to be understood on its face) and to encompass a wide range of opportunities provided by digital video. The chapter presents examples of working within each of these modes, and we will be pleased if it provides inspiration and useful guidance to teachers as they prepare instruction using digital video.

The question of using digital video to teach social studies merits a longer, more in-depth examination that attends not only to tools and techniques but to the goals of social studies. We have begun a series of discussions with social studies teacher educators and researchers, centering on their uses and aspirations for digital video in their methods courses. What models and practices for working with digital video are social studies methods professors presenting to their students? In what ways do methods professors feel that their uses of digital video serve the purposes of social studies education? What trade-offs do methods professors make between their desire to explore the possibilities of digital video and the constraints of limited class time and available technological infrastructure?

In the conversations thus far, we have observed a wealth of tools being used (Skype, Ning, YouTube, the Prelinger Archives, VoiceThread, and many more) in pursuit of a spectrum of social studies purposes (working with primary sources, developing a sense of agency and community, promoting marginalized voices, problem-solving, etc.). As a hallmark of a maturation process, several teacher educators have described changes in their practices over time, moving from exhaustive video production projects to more scaffolded or lightweight processes, such as image montages. As our research unfolds, it reinforces our belief that digital video is a tool that speaks to the aims of the social studies, both in terms of its historic goals and in the evolving patterns in communication in the 21st century.

As the field of social studies approaches its 100th anniversary, we recall a statement that Czech dissident (and then president) Vaclav Havel made in 1990 on his first state visit to the US. Addressing Congress:

As long as people are people, democracy, in the full sense of the word, will always be no more than an ideal. One may approach it as one would the horizon in ways that may be better or worse, but it can never be fully attained. In this sense, you, too, are merely approaching democracy. You have thousands of problems of all kinds, as other countries do. But you have one great advantage: you have been approaching democracy uninterruptedly for more than 200 years. (Havel, 1990)

Havel's statement about "approaching democracy" resonates with us, as social studies educators, in terms of our pursuit of the goals of social studies in our own classrooms. What the Committee on Social Studies put forth in 1916 was an idea about social studies, and we can only approach that idea. Whether or not we have had (almost) 100 years of "uninterrupted" progress towards that goal is certainly open to debate, but nonetheless, we are on a journey. We feel that digital video may present a medium that is in tune both with the times and the enduring questions of social studies.

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Resources

YouTube Videos:

1889-90 Monkeyshines - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AldD5v-lHX4>

Haitian Work Song - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2PYVieNDMYo>

Haitian Voodoo - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kpeLdXeIbwA>,

Haitian's Pride channel - <http://www.youtube.com/user/PRIDESOFHAITI>

Lumiere. Snowball Fight - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KL0th6vWe-8>

Port au Prince to Petionville Dec 2007 - <http://youtube.com/watch?v=1sNbcpRXNZw>

Poverty in Haiti spawns child slavery 13 October 2008 -
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fnk1OfJRSE>

Teddy Roosevelt Oath of Office 1905 -
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xDEHuPaFzSU>

The first film ever "Exiting the Factory" (1895) -
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OYpKZx090UE>

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