The following opinion piece was written for Bible and Interpretation (http://www.bibleinterp.com), a website that aims to bring scholarship in Biblical Studies and Archaeology of the Ancient Near East to a broader public. I post it here for interested Religion Today readers.

Thanks to the efforts of Ann Killebrew, the new editor of Near Eastern Archaeology, the Forum in NEA’s September 2008 issue makes clear what many of us have feared. When it comes to TV documentaries, archaeology gets no respect. While shows about archaeology may be popular with audiences, the clear point of the three main essays featured in “Archaeologists and the Media” is that archaeologists and their knowledge-based views are not popular with those who make such shows. As far as the producers are concerned, archaeologists are only important to lend tacit approval of and authority to the point made by those in charge of the documentary.

Eric Cline begins by castigating TV for producing sensationalized shows supposedly based on archaeology but which use archaeological expertise only for window dressing. According to Cline’s essay, “TV and the Near Eastern Archaeologist,” these programs—with topics such as Noah’s Ark, Sodom and Gomorrah, and Ark of the Covenant—focus on mysteries rather than history, secrets rather than archaeology, treasure hunting rather than education. Cline argues that the problem lies with the producers of such shows, who are woefully ignorant about proper archaeological procedure and evidence. He calls for archaeologists to work with such producers and educate them, using any helpful means to bring real archaeology into the programs.

Neal Asher Silberman, who has made his career communicating archaeology to the general public, lays the blame not on the documentary producers, but on archaeologists themselves. In “Still Not Ready for Primetime,” he argues that archaeologists are “entirely fixated on meaningless archaeological factoids and have nothing very interesting or profound to say to the public at large.” Indeed, “today’s archaeologists are grimly focused on their potsherds and seed samples. What makes them,” Silberman wonders, “deserving of being recognized as the most skillful and authoritative interpreters of our collective memory?”

Silberman’s solution is nothing less than the transformation of archaeologists and their field. “Effectively using TV...is not just a matter of popularizing an arid, scholarly consciousness. It requires that the scholarly consciousness itself be reformed and academic curricula more closely reflect the kinds of skills that archaeologists will need to engage with the public seriously, not superficially.”

Cornelius Holtorf’s essay, “TV Archaeology is Valuable Storytelling,” responds to Cline’s essay in a different manner. It emphasizes that documentaries tell stories. Agreeing with Silberman that archaeologists are little more than purveyors of archaeological factoids, he further argues they are not good storytellers and so need others to tell their stories. Unfortunately this means that archaeology takes a secondary position in its own tale. “Specifics [about sites, for instance] matter only insofar as they become elements in larger stories...” This sounds OK if we imagine the larger story to be one archaeologists want to tell. But Holtorf makes its clear this is not the case: “...larger stories ...about great adventure, treasure hunting, detective work, quests for answering big questions, or races to save some threatened valuables.” In other words, TV archaeology is not about archaeology, it is about goals that could be accomplished without archaeology; adventure and detective stories can certainly be told without archaeology. Holtorf drives the point home. “In popular culture, any specific historical information or indeed interpretation of the past offered by archaeologists has meaning only insofar as it contributes to making the adventure more adventurous, the mystery more (or less) mysterious, the revelation more pertinent, or the rescue mission more urgent.”

Archaeology is not irrelevant for Holtorf. He just thinks that its practitioners need to understand the characteristics of the modern public it serves. “TV archaeology is not in the business of understanding the past, but of enhancing people’s lives through adventures, mysteries, discoveries, and revelations, and by offering possibilities for people to care about valuable cultural heritage. Through compelling storytelling, archaeology can directly improve people’s quality of life and that is no small achievement.”

If the three essays provide a single conclusion, it is this: TV archaeology is about “compelling storytelling.” Few of the archaeological storytellers are archaeologists themselves, and so the stories being told are not those the field would tell. Archaeologists, furthermore, are lousy storytellers, so until they change, they will remain unsuited to tell archaeology’s own stories.

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Of course, it is this last that archaeologists need to do. As Cline makes clear in his response to the last two essays, we must “begin telling the tales ourselves.” To make the case more forcefully, Cline likens archaeology to franchising a brand. “Just as George Lucas and Steven Spielberg fiercely protect their Indiana Jones franchise and its marketing, and Microsoft™ and Coca-Cola™ protect theirs, I believe that archaeologists must band together to protect the franchise and marketing of archaeology with equal fervor.”

When we cut through the metaphors of “story” and “franchise,” the question boils down to this: How do we communicate archaeology to the interested public? Here are three suggestions.

First, Eric Cline correctly calls for archaeologists to make their own material. To accomplish this, he echoes Silberman’s call for curricular reform to teach budding archaeologists how to communicate. He responds by saying, “It is high time for undergraduate and graduate archaeology students, and their professors as well, to begin taking courses in their school’s communications departments,” and goes on to argue “and forging alliances with respected filmmakers and cable television channels so that we can begin telling the tales ourselves, rather than allowing someone else to do it for us.”

This is a good beginning, but it will not accomplish Cline’s goal. Only undergraduates could possibly have the time to take more than one such course, given graduate students’ already overwhelming schedule expectations. And it will take years for such changes to take effect.

Instead, archaeology should lead with its strength, specifically, teambuilding. All successful excavations require the formation and management of a team, one usually consisting of experts, mid-level supervisors, and trainees. Few excavation leaders know how to do every task and every form of analysis required in an excavation; they bring in others to do them. Apply the same principle to making documentaries: put together teams to tell archaeological stories. Universities and colleges contain a multitude of experts in filmmaking, scriptwriting, and storytelling. They inhabit departments of Communication, Journalism, English, and Theater. Archaeologists should bring them on board, tell them what they want to communicate, and let them help work it into an interesting and filmable story. Bring in colleagues from history, classics, and ancient studies to help tackle a topic broader than the archaeological data. Furthermore, many institutions have TV studios and cameras, as well as editing and duplicating equipment. Rather than thinking we cannot do anything without the National Geographic or Discovery channels, we should realize we have access to the resources to tell our own tales.

Second, OK, once a team comes together, what story should archaeologists tell? Is archaeology stuck telling tales of “Adventure, romance, treasure hunting, solving mysteries,” as Ann Killebrew writes in her book review? Certainly that seems to be Holtorf’s message at first reading. But I think we can understand his observation in a second way. He said, we recall, that archaeology makes the “adventure more adventurous, the mystery more (or less) mysterious, the revelation more pertinent.” In other words, archaeology helps a story be better; an adventure story becomes more exciting and helps explore a mystery or solve it. So if archaeologists tell their own story, then the use of archaeology can help that story be more interesting.

With a creative team of filmmakers, scriptwriters, and storytellers, archaeologists can break out of the mold of mystery, secret, discovery formulas where the entertainment comes from the non-archaeological host rather than from the archaeological story itself. Archaeology and its finds are exciting to the interested public. Archaeologists are not just purveyors of factoids— even though these shows often represent them that way— but constitute pursuers of broader and deeper understandings of antiquity. Rather than take these formulas as the only way an archaeological story can be told, let’s look to other models and see what they inspire. I suggest James Burke’s Connections or Sister Wendy’s Story of Painting. Maybe Simon Schama’s A History of Britain might inspire new modes of storytelling. Even Ken Burns’ The Civil War could be suggestive; antiquity is not littered with letters, but there are some from the cities of Canaan, Egypt, and other urban areas.

Archaeologists also need to be thinking about the message they want to deliver. Most archaeologists in the USA are teachers. They are not trained in producing mere “factoids,” even if that seems to be the way filmmakers package them, but rather approach their subjects with much broader perspectives. Classroom topics are not narrow, but broad. Smaller, specific examples are used to illustrate larger, important principles or conclusions. Discussion of archaeological sites and excavations are interpreted in the light of historical questions and knowledge. Sy Gitin, one of the excavators of Tel Miqne, for example, took part in a larger project trying to understand patterns of trade and migration in the Eastern Mediterranean. Archaeologists also address process and method, which can be interesting in and of itself, to teach students in how we actually draw conclusions about the past. Archaeologists have many interesting things to convey to an interested audience; they just need to get away from thinking that only TV or documentary producers can produce interesting materials.

Third, where do we tell those stories? Despite the Forum’s title of “Archaeologists and the Media,” the essays really...
only focus on one medium, that of television, and ignore the rest. And, despite this blinkered view, if there is one point that the three essays agree on, it is that TV has not been very cooperative in letting archaeologists tell their own story. The fault seems to lie in the medium’s very structure. As Silberman says, “Today’s five-hundred-channel cable TV spectrum…is a chaotic, noisy, public marketplace that succeeds by stimulating the viewers’ strong emotions—strong enough to keep them watching a certain channel, and not surf away during the commercial breaks that pay for everything.” TV is both a highly competitive and a decidedly commercial medium. Channels display what pays, and what pays are the shows that make a station competitive on a large scale.

Archaeology is not a commercial enterprise. Sure, excavations burn through large amounts of money to carry out their work, but the end product is a dig report which aims to enhance the understanding of the site, and hopefully, a variety of contributions to a broader understanding of the ancient world in which it participated. Most digs produce a few interesting artifacts to be displayed in museums. None of this is money making. So why should archaeology subject itself to a medium in which the almighty dollar reigns supreme? TV is a poor choice for those who want to achieve accurate representation of archaeology.

A better match for achieving the goal of communicating archaeology to the interested public is the Internet. Most people over 40 have yet to realize the sea-change in communication that the Web represents—one that has already happened among younger generations. For example, I picked up a new habit from my students; I watch TV with my laptop. When a show makes an interesting remark about science, or history, or archaeology, or literature, I’ll Google it to learn more. If it is a nature question, I’ll often wind up on an environmentalist website, or a nature society website (think Audubon Society). If it is a medical question, I usually come to a site sponsored by medical society, a drug company, or a research team. If it is literature, I may find the actual text of the literary work. If it is Bible or Near Eastern archaeology, however, I am more likely to wind up at Wikipedia—if I’m lucky. The academic field of Near Eastern archaeology lags behind in taking advantage of the Internet.

This is a shame. As the Obama campaign demonstrated on a large scale, the Internet enables the delivery of one’s own message to interested parties without the filter of TV pundits and producers. It was a triumph over the very problem that Eric Cline bemoaned in his essay.

So how could Near Eastern archaeologists use the Internet to disseminate information about archaeology?

Well, to improve my internet-assisted TV viewing, they could contribute more frequently and extensively to sites like Bible and Interpretation. This site has worked to bring archaeological results to the public, to provide explanations and interpretation of archaeological finds, and to support debate of historical and archaeological issues that are accessible to an educated and interested public.

Professional archaeologists and their students could create their own wikipedia, known as a “wiki” these days. Rather than let anyone write anything, a wiki focusing on Near Eastern archaeology could incorporate the vetting and editing of articles.

Archaeological digs could bring a writer onto their excavation team whose responsibility was to post a regular blog about each day’s activities and finds, along with photographs. If such a blog included interpretive discussions with a site’s chief archaeologists, it could provide some of the “spade work” for the season’s preliminary report.

If it is video imagery that we want to replace the poor TV programming, YouTube and other video sharing sites provide distribution locations for materials. While archaeologically oriented postings will probably not gain the millions of viewers attracted by some “virus videos,” YouTube is actually a good place for more serious material. More importantly, it can host video material in tandem with a website much more cheaply than such a site can do by itself.

The Bamburgh Research Project at Bamburgh Castle in Northern England has experimented with video in several ways (http://www.bamburghresearchproject.co.uk/index.html). A few postings appear on YouTube, but more importantly the excavation team includes a media department that records all the site’s work. These recordings provide the material for several media-based ventures.

Other Internet tools may prove useful. Social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter help attract attention and enable groups to keep in touch. Distance education schools have been experimenting with ways to use them in teaching. Indeed, distance education is a good place to learn how different Internet techniques and tools can be used.

Many organizations are already working in different ways to bring archaeology online. Museums such as the one at the Classics and Archaeology Virtual Museum at the University of Melbourne (http://vm.arts.unimelb.edu.au/) and the Cobb Institute of Archaeology (http://www.cobb.msstate.edu/) have created online digital databases of archaeological information as well as virtual...
museum tours. And many of us have seen the virtual exhibits of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Organizations like ABZU (http://www.etana.org/abzu/) have been working to make out-of-copyright archaeological treatises available online. Now with hundreds of volumes available, there is more scholarly material online concerning Near Eastern archaeology from the early twentieth century than from the early twenty-first century.

I could continue listing Internet tools and giving examples of how different archaeological organizations have used them, but the essay’s point is clear. The question of Archaeology and the Media is not “How does archaeology relate to the media?” but “How does archaeology communicate its message to the public and what are the best media forms for that task?” The Internet provides a new paradigm for accomplishing that goal, one that can potentially reach a wider audience than the media forms of TV (and newspapers) that dominated the latter half of the twentieth century. Given the failure of those old media forms to serve the needs of archaeology, it is time to move on.