

Communicating the Historical American West through Lewis and Clark Bicentennial Websites

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An examination of public Lewis and Clark Exploration Bicentennial web communications uncovers two approaches to communicating the American West as historical place to the general public. A large sample and detailed analysis of current Bicentennial website communications categorizes their images and text into traditional or revisionist interpretative categories. Traditional text and image categories include weapons, exclusively white or male figures, or military symbols. Revisionist text and images include animals, diverse human groups, or natural environments. In image use, commercial and government Bicentennial sites had twice the frequency of traditional images as compared to organization or educational websites. Images on Bicentennial webpages set the tone for the text communication and indeed its entire American West message. Text on bicentennial webpages fleshes out the historical details of the place communication, and may either complement or conflict with the tone set by the symbology. Government and commercial websites used overwhelmingly traditional text by an 8-to-1 ratio, while educational and organizational sites used carefully neutral or revisionist text to describe the historical place of the Lewis and Clark Expedition. Statistically, commercial and government websites employ traditional historical place interpretations while organizational and educational sites tend to present an inclusive and complex interpretation of the Expedition.