



Fig. 1. Social networks.

CULTURAL HERITAGE AND SOCIAL MEDIA

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New technologies have revolutionized the world: nowadays we can communicate instantly to almost everywhere in the world with just a click from our cell phones or laptops. These technologies have also stormed the cultural heritage field, causing major changes in how institutions, stakeholders and communities approach their heritage. From taking part directly on the restoration process to social tagging, in this paper I will analyze how social media and cultural institutions have become deeply interconnected.

Keywords:

Social media – heritage – participatory culture – social tagging – conservation

1. INTRODUCTION

Social media and 2.0 web enable users to create, share, exchange content and collaborate or participate in many virtual communities. New websites, forums, blogs (including microblogging), social curation and wikis are among the different types of social media we can find on the net, which - thanks to our globalized world - have allowed a massive increase in access to information. We live continually bombarded with information: we just need a simple app on our cell phones to instantly receive incoming news, especially when it comes to a critical situation or emergency. Social media has been an intrinsic part of recent global changes (sometimes allowed by local authorities, but in other cases with a negative perception) such as the Egyptian Revolution in 2011, where people were summoned to Tahrir Square through social media, especially twitter; or the case of the emergency caused by Hurricane Sandy in New York where we had information and updates every minute.

So, if social media is part of our everyday lives, why shouldn't it be part of our cultural heritage institutions? Indeed, social media can offer a lot to cultural heritage efforts. It can be used for conservation, dissemination, protection and participatory culture (including social tagging and social memory, for example).

2. DISSEMINATION, SOCIAL MEDIA AND CULTURAL HERITAGE

Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest, Instagram, Flickr... These are some examples of social media that numerous cultural institutions around the world are using to engage with their community, by sharing with them day-to-day updates of an excavation, information about restoration projects, or the staging of an exhibition. But most importantly, they are using them to raise awareness on cultural heritage issues.

However, each social media is different and therefore it is necessary for cultural institutions to understand their differences in order to use them appropriately. Not every idea is valid on social media, and not every idea works. Assuming that the simple fact of having an account on a social network will make our collection, our heritage or our institution more visible, and will magically activate an intense dialogue with the public is naive. A cultural institution needs to set a social media plan with achievable objectives, a clear message, a well-defined audience and evaluation methods and indicators to analyze whether the implemented strategy was successful or not.

Twitter, for example, is a micro-blogging space where anyone can write 140-character messages and which

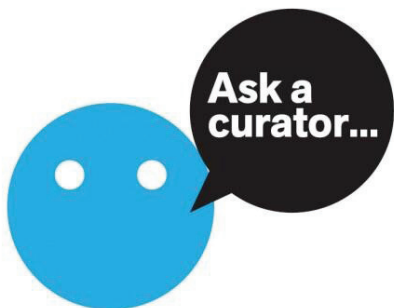


Fig. 2. Ask a curator.

allows the user to also share images and links. This is a network with a very immediate exchange of information, where hashtags play a fundamental role and the timeline of shared information updates fast. The case of Ask a curator is an excellent example: every year, during an entire day, museums around the world come together to answer the questions of their followers; Twitter users can ask curators, conservators and restorers questions about the “backstage” of their profession, an insight into what is not visible of their work. Ask a curator achieves its goal: they eliminate the barrier between curators, who can sometimes be seen as inaccessible, and the public.

Another great example of excellent Twitter use is Erik Kwakkel, a medievalist working at Leiden University. Every day, he shares images of medieval manuscripts (often not available to public view) with catchy

captions. The result? Often you end up also clicking and surfing his blog where the story of the manuscript is expanded, including restoration processes or conservation problems. One of his most famous tweets was about a cat walking through a manuscript; the result was that this feature appeared in the international media, even though the picture was not even his! It was sent by Emir O. Filipović, another medievalist working at the University of Sarajevo.

On the other hand, information published on Facebook stays longer but it should be eye-catching in order to get our audience’s attention. One of the greatest advantages of Facebook use is that it allows us to play and interact with our audience through different activities and campaigns. ICCROM’s project entitled This is my heritage is a very nice example on how useful Facebook can be to raise awareness on

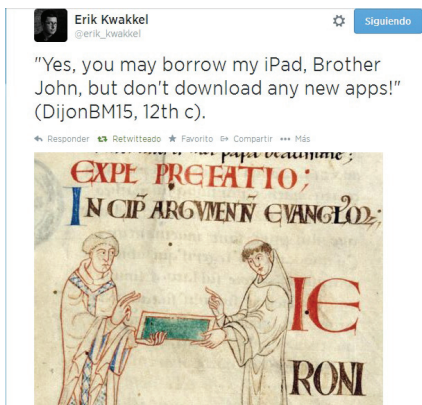


Fig. 3. Erik Kwakkel’s Twitter.



Fig. 4. Erik Kwakkel’s Twitter.

flickr Sign Up Explore Upload

back to photographer

The National Archives UK

Tower Bridge (nearly)

Description: "A photograph of unfinished bridge (New Tower Bridge over the Thames)" taken by Sidney Alfred Beer.

Date: 1992

Our Catalogue Reference: COPY 1/408/164

This image is from the collections of The National Archives. Feel free to share it within the spirit of the Commons.

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☆ BigBen, Joe Engle and 68 more people faved this

Fred J Carss 4y
Amazing shot - the bridge without its covering.

elyshaw 4y
Folk often ask me how I am. I often reply "TOWER BRIDGE". I meaning that life's full of ups and downs - sometimes ok sometimes not. They look puzzled until I explain. And today?? AH TOWER BRIDGE.

23,579 views 70 faves 7 comments Taken on May 21, 2013

○ No known copyright restrictions

London, England, United Kingdom

This photo is in 1 album

Travel and Transport
48 photos

Tags: The National Archives (UK), SEPA, Transport, London, bridge

People in photo: Tower Bridge

Fig. 5. National Archives.

cultural heritage and its diversity. Life imitating art of Voluntary Arts Ireland in partnership with Ballymena - the Creative Borough was a very creative way to connect the world of art with the community; by taking a picture of someone (friends, family, pets) imitating a piece of art, it invited the audience to have a connection with a piece of art, making it relevant. This contest has been so successful that it has been repeated every year.

It is also important to emphasize the use of social media as an advertising tool. If a cultural institution is well positioned and known, it will be easier to make its collection better known, and therefore, better preserved. The Rijksmuseum had some of its sections closed for remodeling for many years and when the time came to announce the re-opening, instead of publishing advertisements on newspapers or journals (being such an important museum, that probably would have been enough), they created a great campaign through social media that culminated with a flashmob (which can be found on YouTube, another great social media used to share videos). The success was immediate and the campaign went viral!

3. PARTICIPATORY CULTURE, SOCIAL MEDIA AND CULTURAL HERITAGE

Social media allows us not only to disseminate cultural heritage, but it can also break the distance that may exist between the user/public and the institution

(Li Liew, 2014; Rine, 2012). Indeed, the boundaries between what was seen as "high culture" and society are broken: what was previously reserved for a few privileged scholars, is now open to a much wider audience.

These changes are not only beneficial to the general public but also for cultural heritage institutions, as they can benefit from the so-called popular wisdom. The Commons of Flickr is a project created in 2008 in partnership with the Library of Congress, with the objective of increasing access to photographic collections and to promote contributions from the public. This means that an institution can obtain new information and reconsider how images are cataloged and indexed. (Omen et al., 2011; Li Liew, 2013; Rine, 2012)

Social tagging is used to gain and add information about an image. It not only increases our knowledge about the image itself, but it also promotes participation, and adds value to the collection as a shared heritage (Omen et al., 2011). There are many institutions who are using The Commons such as the Getty Research Institute (United States), the National Archives (United Kingdom), and even NASA (United States).

As mentioned before, inviting the public to be part of the curatorial process benefits everyone. It has the ability to even boost previously known heritage. The case of The Guardian or the French National

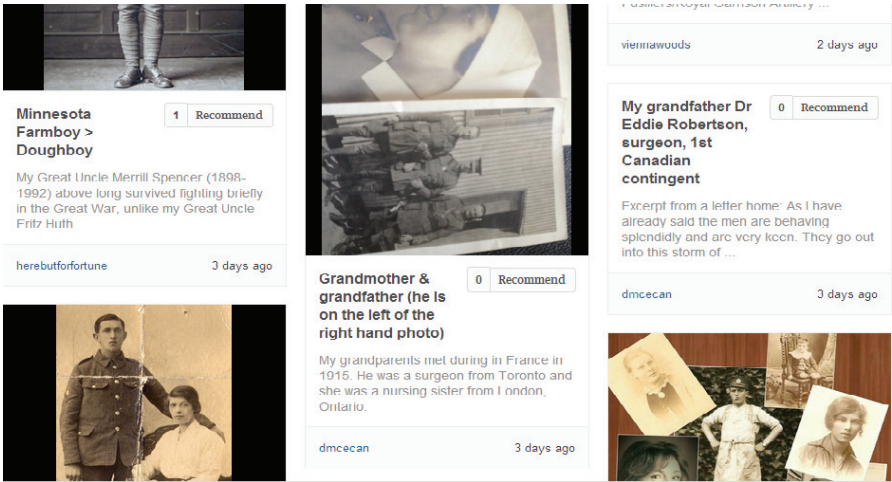


Fig. 6. History pin helps people around the world to build their history. Their philosophy is that everyone has a story to tell. South Australian Community History { Social tagging is also used on Twitter, like the South Australian Community History did on the Ask a Curator 2013 day. Image taken 8 August 2014}.

Archives commemorating the First World War are perfect examples: The Guardian invited their readers to send diaries, letters, photographs, or other relevant material from their friends or relatives who took part in the Great War. In the case of French National Archives, in partnership with Europeana, they asked

their public to submit documents related with this war for two weeks, then conservators and archivists would identify them and would them accessible through the Europeana webiste. As a result, the documents were preserved, gained value and were shared with the rest of the community.

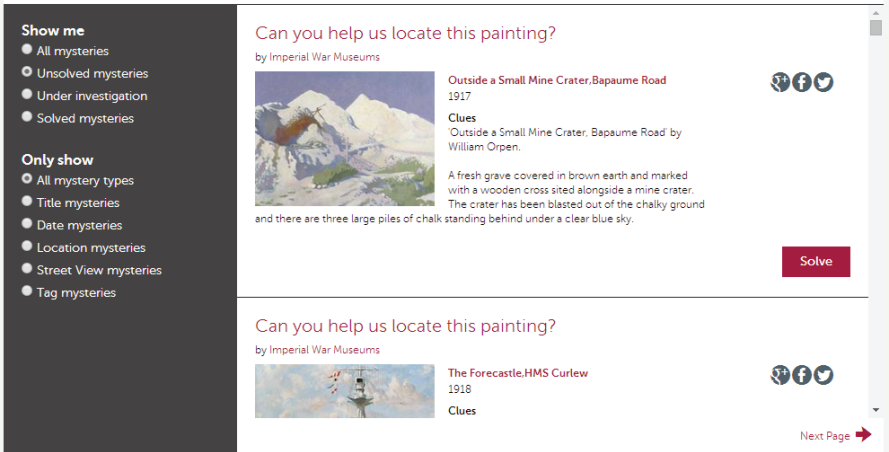


Fig. 7. Some institutions are using it for social tagging such as the Imperial Museum, showing the public various artworks and invited them to try to locate them in a geographical context. Image taken on the 8th August 2014.

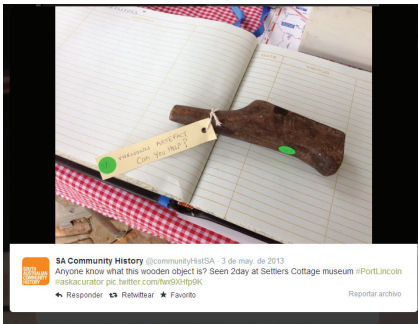


Fig. 8. Social tagging is also used on Twitter, like the South Australian Community History did on the Ask a Curator 2013 day. Image taken 8 August 2014.

Using these social media technologies allows institutions, and the public, to have a better understanding of cultural heritage and to raise awareness of its diversity. However, remember not everything is valid, nor useful. If a cultural heritage institution wants to take advantage of these tools, it must develop a clear strategy; and in the specific cases where archives and collections are opened to the public, it is important to read very carefully the terms and conditions of the site they are planning on using.

4. CONSERVATION, SOCIAL MEDIA AND CULTURAL HERITAGE

Social media has allowed us to know places and/or collections that were impossible to reach before, either because their location, conservation problems or because they were not available for public view. New technologies have also allowed us to approach them without leaving our homes.

Through these tools, the most fragile and inaccessible heritage can become accessible using digital reconstructions or virtual exhibitions, demonstrating the fragility of cultural heritage as well as the

importance of preserving it. (Morenés y Mariátegui, 2013). Moreover, it also helps to disseminate not only the “great heritage” but also the least known one (but not less important). Across the globe we can witness local strategies that show us how rich our cultural heritage is, both geographically and by typology: audiovisual heritage, ethnographic collections, built heritage etc. and it is through social media that we can witness this.

Even though the protection of cultural heritage is traditionally covered by governments and cultural institutions, on many occasions this strategy is far from successful: this is due to insufficient monetary resources, political issues, abandonment and lack of regulations that make it increasingly difficult for cultural institutions, stakeholders and authorities to protect their heritage. Responding to these problems, social media can play quite an active role in protecting people’s heritage. More and more often we find that communities demand an active voice in the decision-making process regarding their cultural heritage (Morenés y Mariátegui, 2013). If a community feels strongly identified with its heritage, and feels the need to protect it, social media can be a great instrument to protect it.

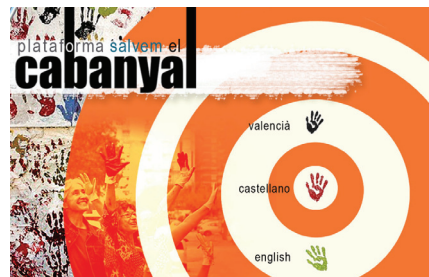


Fig. 9. This platform not only uses social media as a way of disseminate their problems, but also they offer locative games though QR codes in order to create awareness on the fragility, diversity and importance of this local heritage. Image taken 8 August 2014.

There are cases when the community does not agree with the decisions made by their authorities regarding their heritage. Such a situation is happening in Cabanyal, Spain. The community has taken the lead to protect their heritage, including dissemination and campaigns to prevent the demolition of the historical neighborhood. Web platforms such as change.org encourage people around the globe to transform their communities and get involved, whether it is a local problem or an international one. These campaigns can mobilize hundreds of signatures, pressuring governments and stakeholders into being more responsive. During the Syrian conflict, the World Monuments Fund created a campaign raising awareness and trying to protect Syrian heritage. It does not automatically mean that the conflict will stop or cultural heritage will be protected, but it is very meaningful to think about the large number of people who have signed the petition. The international community is becoming involved. This is an extraordinary example of how a very well-known organization is using social media to raise awareness and protect a World Heritage Site.

In other cases, member of various societies do not only wants to raise their voice, but also to collaborate directly. Thus, when economic crisis hit public budgets, the community may decide to take action through

specific websites destined to raise money such as Kickstarter, IndieGOGO, or Rocket Hub. Using these platforms an individual or a group can propose a project and the community decides to support it. There are also specific websites dedicated to protect heritage; such is the case of DigVentures crowd funding, where any heritage-related project might apply, as long as the project is committed to sustainability.

These are examples of campaigns started by the community, but sometimes even the government tries to raise money through different public campaigns like the French government did with the Centre des Monuments nationaux who, in partnership with My Company, began a campaign from November 2012 until May 2013 to raise money to restore four French monuments: the Panthéon, Carcassonne, Saint-Cloud's park and Mont-Saint-Michel. In exchange for money, people will have their picture on the monument they helped to restore for six months. At the end of this campaign, 123 219€ were raised, three times more than the sum they were trying to reach!

In conclusion, social media are a new way to approach the public to their cultural heritage, and it can exist outside and within the most traditional institutions.

In terms of heritage conservation there is still much to discover and research, but little by little cultural institutions are using these technological changes to

The image shows a screenshot of a Change.org petition page. On the left, there is a banner with the text "HERITAGE IN THE CROSSHAIRS" overlaid on a circular image of a city at night with a crosshair. Below the banner, the text reads "Petitioning Dr. Maamoun Abdul-Karim" and "Help Ensure the Survival of Syria's Cultural Heritage". A logo for the World Monuments Fund is visible, along with the text "Sponsored by World Monuments Fund". On the right side of the page, there is a sign-up form with the heading "Sign this petition" and "with 5,765 supporters". A progress bar shows "1,735 NEEDED". The form includes fields for "First Name", "Last Name", "Email", a dropdown menu for "Mexico", "Postal Code", and a text area for "Why is this important to you? (Optional)". A red "Sign" button is at the bottom of the form. Below the button, there are two checked checkboxes: "Display my signature on Change.org" and "WMF may send me news on this campaign and other global cultural heritage updates." At the very bottom, there is a link to "By signing, you accept Change.org's terms of service and privacy policy."

Fig. 10. Change.org

Fig. 11. Mes Aynak twitter account. Created to address the problem on Mes Aynak, an important archaeological site which is going to be destroyed by mining

narrow the gap between great art and the public. It is clear that society wants to take part in the decision-making process regarding their heritage. However, in order to make this happen, cultural institutions must never forget to consider creating a coherent strategy with clear objectives and evaluation methods, since not all the public is going to react the same, and not all the cultural heritage can be disseminated in the same way.

Social media is a great instrument to preserve and promote cultural heritage. It is part of our lives. It is the future turned into present.

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