Citizen Heritage: provoking participation in place through digital technologies

Hannah Lewi and Wally Smith
Introduction

This special issue of Historic Environment explores what innovative digital media can bring to the conservation, documentation and interpretation of heritage places. The collection of articles grew out of a dedicated session at the Association of Critical Heritage Studies conference in Canberra, 2014 (organised as part of an Australian Research Council project), and also from selected papers from the national ICOMOS ‘Fabric’ conference in 2015, followed by a wider call to related research fields.

The impetus for a special issue on digital heritage is the need to understand the significance of a plethora of new tools and applications that seek to create both repositories of information and digital communities through which memories, stories and experiences can be shared. Through their emphasis on ubiquitous connectivity, co-production and online participation, these tools can potentially ‘open up new ways of exploring and articulating a community’s relations with the physical and social settings…thereby enabling a form of social production of heritage as the locus of our sense of place’ (Giaccardi & Palen 2008: 282). When successful, they can also function as a way of either creating and/or archiving intangible heritage artefacts and stories situated within the tangible fabric of buildings, sites and places.

Despite such promises, however, relatively little focused analysis has been carried out to date that probes the efficacy and value of digital applications and social media as applied in heritage practice and consumption. Our focus on ‘Citizen Heritage: provoking participation in place through digital technologies’ seeks to address this need. As co-editors of the special issue, we have been particularly interested in what part these digital technologies might play in the, by now well-documented, turn towards ‘bottom-up’ vernacular history that is assumed to be more community and citizen-driven in its production and consumption. As characterised by Robertson (2012:7) and Dicks (2000:37), a bottom-up approach aims to address the everyday, so as to ‘offer ordinary people now’ the chance to ‘encounter ordinary people then’.

Further, we have been keen to explore what is potentially gained and lost by situating these encounters between past and present in ‘ordinary places’ outside of recognised museums and sites of significance. As Atkinson notes: ‘Rethinking memory as a less bounded and continually reconstituted process steers attention towards the less spectacular places where social memory is produced and mobilised’ (2007: 537).

Digital innovation has also been positioned as a key strategy in turning around the anxieties that have grown, since the 1990s, about the perceived ‘over-production’ of heritage, towards an active acceptance that heritage is potentially everywhere, is for everyone and we are all heritage experts (Schofield 2014: 2). However, as many researchers and practitioners have expressed, attempts to pursue community-based and localised heritage that exists largely outside of professionalised and institutionalised directives and practices can be problematic on a number of fronts. Indeed, as explored by many of the papers in this volume, digital...
communities and applications that focus on the dissemination of local heritage, histories and memories, share many of the same difficulties and challenges that have been critiqued within more traditional forms of heritage interpretation and custodianship. And in practice, it is often difficult to draw clear-cut distinctions between bottom-up community driven and top-down institutionally derived digital sites—just as the distinctions are generally blurred in heritage management and interpretation.

Focusing on local sites and communities is also seen as a way to achieve more ‘accessible’, ‘participatory’ and ‘democratic’ versions of heritage. By adopting the term ‘citizen heritage’ in the special issue title and call for papers, we are consciously borrowing from the field of citizen science to signal a shift towards distributed forms of grass-roots knowledge, production and experience surrounding the heritage, history and memory of local places. The sociologist Alan Irwin described a vision for ‘citizen science’ as a way to bridge the divide between expert scientific knowledge and the ‘needs and concerns’ of citizens: ‘Science and technology ...exist both as a body of “facts” about the world and as a framework for rational thought ...Meanwhile, that form of rationality may blind us to alternative ways of valuing ourselves and the world around us’ (Irwin 1995: 1). Part of this vision was for science to be ‘developed and enacted by citizens themselves’. Critical here is the appeal to the political notion of the citizen as someone who has rights but who acts with a sense of obligation towards the state. By analogy, citizen scientists are cast as those with an independent viewpoint on a phenomenon of interest which is relevant and respected, but who willingly bring themselves to the service of a scientific project. This is distinct from the idea of ‘community science’ (Carr, 2004) which is more strongly located and enacted within public interests and concerns.

As described in the paper in this volume by Lewi et al, different models of citizen science have emerged which cast the citizen in different roles, characterised by Bonney (2009) as ‘contributory’, ‘collaborative’ and ‘co-created’. In practice, real-world citizen science projects work best in situations where the public has a pre-established interest, such as wildlife conservation and protection. Studies of such real-life citizen science projects in action reveal a complex relationship between expert scientists and citizens with overlapping but sometimes mismatching objectives (see for example Cornwell and Campbell, 2012). Although with quite different concerns, we have found borrowing from the conception of citizen science useful in opening new ways of thinking about the relationships between experts, institutions and individuals in the production of heritage knowledge.

In various ways, through case studies and current literature analysis, the seven papers of this volume all scrutinise and problematise the overly broad claims that have been proffered about the mobilisation of un-mediated digital production and consumption in the heritage field. But equally, looking beyond these reservations, the authors demonstrate that when created, applied and managed thoughtfully, virtual and digital communities and tools can deliver exciting potential to encourage what Affleck and Kvan have characterised as ‘a deeper engagement with the significance and meaning behind cultural heritage by both participants and observers’ (2008: 269). Through recent Australian and international examples the papers tease out some of the motivations, potentials and limitations of digital applications in heritage interpretation, documentation and display.

The first three papers all explore how social media, such as Facebook and tour apps, can supplement people’s interactions with sites of heritage and historical significance. In our paper, co-authored by Hannah Lewi, Wally Smith, Andrew Murray and Steven Cooke, we critically evaluate a selection of recent digital applications and websites that use place as the primary generator for locating and displaying collective memories and histories. Our analysis borrows from citizen science to form a typology of attributes around three types of ‘users’ of these heritage related apps as the ‘visitor’, the ‘contributor’ and the ‘conversationalist’. We analyse the selected to heritage technologies as sites of, sometimes, competing demands of social engagement and uptake versus institutional stewardship and moderation.

Staying with place as the primary focus, Kelly Greenop, Emily Juckes and Chris Landorf explore in their paper how digital social media sites like Facebook may contribute to richer and more
dynamic social understandings of a community’s attachment to places, and how they change over time. Through their case study site of Brisbane’s King George Square—a public place in the central city that has undergone many design changes over the course of its urban existence—they reveal a perceived disconnect between heritage concerns felt by local citizens and communities, and the more conventional processes of documenting and managing heritage significance; in particular aspects of intangible and tangible cultural and landscape value.

Moving to Sydney, Cristina Garduño Freeman examines how more fluid and contingent expressions of cultural participation in iconic heritage sites can be captured and understood as evidential of social and cultural significance. The World Heritage site of the Sydney Opera House forms a telling exemplar in this paper that is also theoretically framed through the writing of Jose van Dijck. Garduño Freeman suggests that digital technologies are making productively disruptive and complex interventions into notions of community and community attachments to iconic places. They reflect critically on a research project ‘The Port of Sheffield’ that designed and delivered location-aware mobile technology as a powerful place-specific and interactive platform for fostering public citizen engagement within a complex and multi-layered urban site.

Katherine Lloyd looks at new ways of fostering digital participation in the construction of place through the project Co-Curate North East. She focuses on how the digital can enhance school children’s sense of agency and belonging in their local historical environment. Lloyd critically reflects on her experience in working with groups of teachers and students in England’s north-east. She suggests: ‘models of working that facilitate social relationships between heritage practitioners and users within ‘virtual places’ are necessary in order to realise the potential of digital participation in place.’

The next two papers in the special issue shift focus beyond off-the-shelf existing digital tools, to the process of designing and deploying new tools and arrangements of digital technology. Both examine projects that have created digital tools for promoting interpretation and engagement in heritage places in the United Kingdom. The three-mile stretch of the early nineteenth century Sheffield & Tinsley Canal in the City of Sheffield is described by Adam Park and Chengzhi Peng in their paper as a neglected, yet potentially character-rich heritage and urban space. They reflect critically on a research project ‘The Port of Sheffield’ that designed and delivered location-aware mobile technology as a powerful place-specific and interactive platform for fostering public citizen engagement within a complex and multi-layered urban site.

The final two papers in the special issue examine cases of heritage sites that offer the potential for future digital developments. Kristin Barry’s paper ‘Interpreting Rock Art from Afar: the potential for disseminating heritage through enhanced digital media and simulation’, examines extremely delicate and challenging ancient sites. Referring to a range of international examples, Barry documents and questions new potentials in digital and ‘4D’ virtual technologies to create more immersive, atmospheric and experiential representations of ancient rock art sites. She elaborates on the task of balancing the ongoing protection of often remote, indigenous community-based locations with accessibility in response to the ever-growing expectations of international tourism. She asks if new digital techniques may aid in negotiating these competing demands so as to safe-guard ancient sites, while also opening them to more empathetic heritage experiences – if in a virtual mode.

In a related paper, Rebecca Hawcroft investigates how digital visualisation and interpretation practices may open new opportunities for re-thinking cultural repatriation and interpretation of artefacts and collections significant to indigenous communities. Three cases are examined in this paper: The Mobile Museum project by the Nilak community in Papua New Guinea; the Māori tribal group Te Aitanga a Hauiti’s innovative use of digital technology in the Te Ataakura: Digital taonga project; and the Aboriginal owned, interactive digital archival Ara Iriyiti. Through these projects, Hawcroft looks at how relationships between centralised repositories and local communities shift when objects, and the community-generated knowledge that surrounds them, are repatriated through digital means. How can digital repatriation negotiate complex issues relating to the culturally specific protocols, sensitivities and restrictions of archival access? And how might new modes of community interaction and participation be enacted?
We would like to thank very much all the authors who have engaged so positively with the theme of this issue of *Historic Environment*. Sincere thanks also to the editorial team of *Historic Environment* for giving us the opportunity to shape this theme, and all the referees who contributed their time and valuable insights.

**References**


