The implications of online connectivity for world heritage in a digital platform society

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Abstract
The exponential growth of social media, digital interaction and platforms over the last decade has brought digital culture and public participation to the fore of the field of heritage. Initially, social media promised to be a panacea for democracy; enabling global communities to use digital technologies to engage with World Heritage properties. However, the reality has turned out to be much more complex and nuanced: challenging established national narratives; potentially infringing on copyright; blurring notions of communities and audiences; and revealing the entanglement of corporations and algorithms in tangible and intangible forms of cultural heritage.

World Heritage is increasingly mediated by digital platforms. This shift enables many more people to connect online with World Heritage, through searches for information, sharing of images and even shopping for travel and books. A friend’s recommendation or photo at an inscribed site is only a few clicks away from related purchases. In a new platform society driven by a culture of connectivity and algorithms owned by transnational corporations such as Google, Apple, Amazon, Microsoft and Facebook clicks are quickly converted into advertising dollars, user data and a tradeable commodity that is implicated in the public values we hold, not just for World Heritage, but for all culture.

This paper explores how this new societal paradigm inverts what might be conceived of as ‘digital heritage’ from a subset or type of heritage to the crucible in which culture and particularly, World Heritage is framed within society. It seeks to open up larger questions about the implications of such socio-technical transformations for the future of World Heritage by considering the programme’s strategic objectives, in particular what this means for ‘communities’ and ‘communication’ and to propose that perhaps for ‘connectivity’ might now need to be considered.

Introduction
In the last decade society has been transformed by digital technologies. By 2019 half of the total global population will have access to the internet (eMarketer 2018). But the internet is not a homogenous and democratic collection of websites and services. The internet is now structured by a few transnational platforms that harness data and structure engagement through their proprietary algorithms. Three out of four search queries take place via Google (Mangles 2018). One in four people across the globe use Facebook. (Internet World Stats; Facebook 2018). In an increasingly digitally mediated world, search queries, social media and even shopping platforms, such as Amazon, are becoming gateways to information, images and online experiences of World Heritage for billions of people. While on the surface, such experiences might seem innocuous, they are in fact critical. Public knowledge and perceptions of World Heritage sites is underpinned
by their dissemination and representation online, which can in turn affect understandings of their significance and economic support for their material conservation.

Engaging with communities is one of the five strategic objectives of the World Heritage programme. The Budapest Declaration on World Heritage (Budapest Declaration) (UNESCO) was adopted in 2002. The declaration articulates the aspirations of the organisation through four objectives: ‘credibility’, ‘conservation’, ‘capacity-building’ and ‘communication’. These first four objectives imply public engagement. However, the World Heritage programme, along with the professionalisation of heritage, has also been criticised for its expert-driven approach and lack of inclusion of community values (Clarke & Johnston 2003; Jones 2017; Smith 2006; Waterton & Smith 2010). In 2007, ‘communities’ was added as a fifth strategic objective in order to ensure community engagement is an explicit focus.

Like other heritage instruments, the World Heritage programme’s strategic objectives inevitably embody the historical and cultural conditions of the time of their adoption. In 2002, when the Budapest Declaration was first adopted, society was, as yet, largely untransformed by internet communication technologies and participatory platforms. Even in 2007, when the fifth ‘C’ was added, the implications of the growing dominance of platforms and their algorithms and data collection were not yet widely understood. The addition of ‘communities’ was largely intended to ensure local communities were consulted and included in the nomination and management of World Heritage properties (UNESCO 2007). So how can the strategic objectives be understood today, at a time when ‘the digital’ is not just a form of heritage, a tool for documentation, or a platform for participation, but rather a social structure within which World Heritage is situated?

This paper grew from observations that people’s primary experiences of World Heritage today are likely to be digital rather than physical, and that such engagements can be quantified and designated an economic value (Simes et al. 2013). It is founded and builds on established research that argues how people’s online participation can evidence the social value of World Heritage, and the way in which this becomes a form of networked significance where heritage is an entanglement of the personal, experiential, performative, communal, commodified and sanctioned (Garduño Freeman 2018). The paper seeks to explore the present-day implications of the ‘digital’ for World Heritage at a time when transnational corporations such as Google, Amazon, Apple, Microsoft and Facebook are becoming gateways to information, images, opinions and experiences of these esteemed places. Rather than framing digital heritage as a ‘type’ of heritage, distinct from ‘tangible’ or ‘intangible’ heritage, the paper argues that we are at a point of inversion where all heritage is now reconstituted in one way or another through the online sphere. This scenario, of course, offers opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, World Heritage has never been more accessible to global communities and audiences. A simple Google search query can return immediate information and images about a World Heritage property that can be the commencement of much longer-term support for its conservation. Yet, this instance also gives authority to Google’s indexical power to decide what to return, to judge the quality of information and its relevance from the millions of potential sources available. Google, like the other dominant platforms, collects and filters data through a complex mathematical algorithm. These technologies prompt new questions around heritage; how is a material and physical discipline transformed in an era of online communication and experience?

**Heritage and the ‘digital’**

In 2003 UNESCO adopted the Charter on the Preservation of Digital Heritage (Digital Heritage Charter) in response to the increasing use of digital technologies within museums and cultural heritage institutions. Initially, digital artefacts were characterised simply as virtual copies of material artefacts. Over time, however, they have gained agency as cultural elements in themselves, with their own unique characteristics and often with no material equivalent. The Digital Heritage Charter is the only international instrument specifically focused on digital heritage. The charter lays out a set of principles for the preservation of digital artefacts in order to ensure that they remain accessible in an era of rapid development and change, generally contextualised within archival institutions (De Lusen 2007). The charter and the principles it espouses, have been valuable in recognising the distinct problems associated with preserving
cultural artefacts arising from advances in digital technologies. But the charter is arguably also obsolete (Garduño Freeman 2018, p. 177), having not been revised to account for the exponential growth and transformation of the internet and its close-knit relationship with every-day life.

The Digital Heritage Charter was adopted before Web 2.0 (O’Reilly 2005), when the internet was conceptualised as a unidirectional form of communication. The subsequent growth of social media platforms around 2004 shifted concepts of the internet as a two-way form of communication, heralding an age of apparent democracy and endless participation. Research into the implications of participatory culture, generally and for heritage in particular, proliferated in the decade that followed (Burgess & Green 2009; Delwiche & Jacobs Henderson 2013; Garduño Freeman 2018; Giaccardi 2012). The turn towards participation in heritage shifted discussions on digital heritage from solely focused on the preservation of artefacts or the use of digital technologies as tools for preservation (Kalay, Kvan & Affleck 2008) to include the way digital technologies were extending the reach of cultural institutions (Cameron & Kenderdine 2007), sites for communities to engage with heritage (Garduño Freeman 2018) and technologies that were shifting the representation of existing heritage sites (Waterton & Watson 2010). Such academic investigations explored heritage through proprietary websites as well as popular online platforms such as Wikipedia, Flickr, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, among many others. The Digital Heritage Charter, understandably, does not account for the way the internet, its participatory practices and artefacts, have changed engagements with heritage. Similarly, scholarship around digital heritage is still largely framed by these established themes, which together situate digital instances of heritage as a subset of a larger discipline that exists in a broader social and physical world.

Yet, much of the world is now largely structured by digital technologies. Some of the largest companies are digital platforms. Apple, Amazon, Alphabet (Google’s parent company), Microsoft and Facebook are the five largest companies in terms of market value (Forbes 2018). These transnational companies are impacting notions of national boundaries as they structure commerce, news, sociality and connectivity as their underpinning algorithmic structures and the ability to capture the new commodity of data has become evident (Galloway 2017).

Figure 1: An everyday series of engagements with World Heritage across ‘the big five’ digital platforms (diagram by author)
Connectivity is now a social currency (van Dijck 2013). In doing so, normative practices, such as searching for information on Google, buying items on Amazon, or subscribing to Apple products, have come to structure not just online activities but also offline social life, controlled under the purview of a handful of corporations that collect, analyse and process user data, often side-stepping regulation, fraying the edges of existing policy and disregarding national boundaries. Internet communication technologies are not simply in the service of heritage, or places where people engage with heritage or a new form of culture that prompts new conservation techniques and systems. Instead, internet communication technologies through their increasing restructuring of society, are becoming the crucible for heritage.

In order to illustrate how online engagements with digital platforms entangle us with ‘the big five’ (Apple, Amazon, Alphabet (Google), Microsoft and Facebook), I recount a typical experience of my own (Figure 1). In my hand is an Apple iPhone with the latest operating system installed (iOS 12.0.1) and about 130 apps. Like many others I have a Facebook account and check it daily. Initially, I used this digital platform to reconnect with old friends and with families living overseas. But now Facebook is also a way of keeping abreast of professional news, and as a result I subscribe to several Facebook Pages that relate to World Heritage. Posts made by the Global Heritage Fund to their Facebook Page (2018) regularly appear in my News Feed. One post is an article from The Conversation, an independent news website where academics write for a general audience. I click to read the shared article, which describes the efforts of Syrian architects to rebuild their cities and repair their heritage that has been destroyed by war (Amazon 2018). All of Syria’s World Heritage sites are on the List of World Heritage in Danger. Inscriptions include the Ancient City of Aleppo and Site of Palmyra, both sites that have become targets of political destruction and whose images circulate widely online (González Zarandona et al. 2018). The author of the article on The Conversation, Ammar Azzouz (2018), cites the work of urban design expert Lawrence J Vale to discuss how rebuilding can create more or less inequality for targeted communities. Clicking this hyperlink connects me directly to Vale’s book titled The resilient city: how modern cities recover from disaster on Amazon (2018). The book is available in hardcopy or as a Kindle copy which requires Amazon’s Kindle proprietary e-reader, or an app on a mobile device or a computer. I consider purchasing this item, but am reminded that Amazon has recently created an Australian marketplace and because the link from Azzouz’s article has connected me to Amazon’s UK site, I cannot buy it. I open up the Google Chrome app – to use Google Search (2018a) and find where else I can purchase the book. Google highlights the preview offered through its Google Books service (2018b). I read an excerpt and look up Vale on Linkedin to find out which institution and department he is connected with. Unfortunately, I find he doesn’t appear to have a profile. I find and compare prices across a number of online book suppliers, returning to Amazon and read the user reviews. I buy the kindle version of the book. While reading, I find I can see where other readers have highlighted key passages of Vale’s text.

In a few minutes of web browsing a subject of interest I have passed through Apple, Facebook, Amazon, Google and Microsoft (Linkedin). I have profiles on each of these corporate digital platform services and while I am aware I am sharing data by remaining logged in, I forgo such privacy measures for the sake of efficiency. Multiple passwords are time-consuming. This means that my data, my preferences, my interests, connections and ‘online trajectories’ are captured by each of these sites, whose business models are geared around generating revenue. While this example might seem mundane it does illustrate the ease with which we move across these major digital platforms. It demonstrates the way these digital corporations operate across hardware and software and how they connect us with others, products, purchases and experiences.

The Budapest Declaration

One of the major achievements of the World Heritage Convention has been its success in creating an international community to safeguard places of cultural significance. For the last forty years, the convention has been a ‘visionary instrument of global awareness’ (Rodwell 2012, p. 67). Whilst the convention’s primary goal has been the physical conservation of important places across the globe, it has also developed into a diplomatic tool that operates
at a political level that is increasingly distanced from management and conservation (James 2017; James & Winter 2017), and as a global brand that offers State Parties an internationally authorised means for cultural capital (Hall & Piggis 2003; Lai & Ooi 2015). As part of the evolution of the programme, the Budapest Declaration can be considered to articulate the aspirations of future implementation and development of World Heritage Convention.

The Budapest Declaration articulates four strategic objectives to guide the programme: to encourage and ensure the geographic and representative ‘credibility’ of the World Heritage List; the effective ‘conservation’ of World Heritage properties; the development of effective ‘capacity-building’ measures; and increase public awareness, involvement and support for World Heritage through ‘communication’ (UNESCO 2002b, pp. 6-7). As noted above, ‘communities’ was added in 2007 to articulate the interconnectedness with the existing strategic objects and to reinforce the importance of communities in the implementation of the World Heritage Convention (UNESCO 2007, p. 7).

These strategic objectives were reinforced in the Strategic Action Plan and Vision. The plan recognised the opportunities that new technology brings and how it ‘enables faster and more efficient awareness raising and knowledge sharing’ (UNESCO 2011, p. 4), and at the same time aspires to ‘harness civil society support’ for the World Heritage programme (UNESCO 2011, p. 4). Yet, there is little mention or critique of the way in which digital platforms, such as Google, Facebook, Amazon, Microsoft and Apple are larger structures that now control or at least frame much of the online engagement taking place every day around World Heritage. At present there is no strategy that considers how connectivity, prompted by interest and support for heritage, is being harnessed for corporate gains.

Examination of recent projects that contribute to the implementation of the fourth and fifth ‘Cs’ – communication and communities – frame communication primarily as awareness raising and the dissemination of information, and projects aimed at engaging communities are targeted at including and harnessing local communities around specific World Heritage properties (UNESCO 2017, pp. 33-7). Communication and communities are largely seen as distinct strategic goals. But communities are also defined as a group of people who share a common interest (Lewi et al. 2010). Digital notions of communities tend to be defined through ‘the minds of participants rather than the geographical spaces they occupy, and defined by the subjective experiences and associations…engender[ed]’ (Waterton 2010, p. 6). Such experiences include fleeting online engagements as we move across the digital terrain created by ‘the big five’. Further, ‘digital’ and (because of the internet’s power to connect) ‘global’ communities are therefore regularly ‘(re)constructed through on-going experiences, engagements and relations and not all of these need be consensual’ (Waterton & Smith 2010, p. 8). While Google, Facebook, Amazon, Microsoft and Apple are not specifically aimed at heritage or World Heritage, inscribed places and their broader public valuation are nevertheless entangled in their algorithmic mechanisms. Each search query, Facebook post shared, hyperlink followed and purchase is a node in an online trajectory of connectivity. How people are informed, connect with others around heritage or engage with places and their online representations is fundamental to the way they value and support the conservation of such places. As my earlier recounted experience demonstrates, these dominant digital platforms, are the connective tissue of what might be understood as the ‘global online communities’ of World Heritage. The very reason I subscribe to the Facebook page of the Global Heritage Fund is because it connects me with organisations, groups and individuals who share my personal and professional interest in heritage, where I can keep up with new ideas, relevant literature and political events. If such entanglements matter for the accuracy of world politics, why not for World Heritage?

A platform society

Recent work by eminent media scholar Jose van Dijck explores the way in which public values are being transformed by dominant digital platforms. In her 2013 book, The Culture of Connectivity, van Dijck provides the first critical history of social media, and in doing so, reveals the underlying cultural, political and economic implications of mediating culture. This book builds on earlier work, particularly her concept of ‘mediated memories’ in which she
dissolves the divide between the ‘real’ and the ‘digital’ versions of artefacts by reframing them as enabling technologies (van Dijck 2007). In Mediated Memories, van Dijck argues that digital and analogue photographs, music, videos and diaries are all artefacts that mediate personal and collective identity, the past and the future, and embedded and embodied practices. I have previously proposed that this offers heritage a framework in which the tangible, the intangible and the digital can be conceptualised together, where rather than being discrete ‘types’ of heritage, significance can be understood as networked and entangled across sites, representations, practices and engagements (Garduño Freeman 2018, p. 188). In The Culture of Connectivity, van Dijck expands her view to explore the co-constitutive relationship between social practices and technological affordances of social media platforms. She situates ‘connectivity’ as a key characteristic of socio-technical interaction where people, sociality and algorithms are intertwined. She explores how, regardless of our individual knowledge and political position on the co-opting of participation (ie. data) by transnational corporations that are ‘social media’, it is extremely difficult to opt-out without losing off-line connectivity from personal or professional colleagues and friends. This serves to show how pervasive digital interaction and ‘connectivity’ have become in everyday life.

Most recently, van Dijck has developed her line of argument in collaboration with colleagues Thomas Poell and Martijn de Waal in a new publication titled The Platform Society2 (2018) where digital platforms including Apple, Google, Amazon, Microsoft and Facebook are positioned as a ‘global ecosystem of online platforms, driven by a set of platform mechanisms that is penetrating every sector of society while bypassing local and national institutions that traditionally anchor public values.’ (van Dijck 2017, approx 2 mins 10 secs). The key argument of this research is that society is no longer driven solely by social forces, but that algorithms steer desires and frame knowledge. For example, there is now substantive research on ‘search culture’ which explores the implications of normalised and often neutralised practices on Google’s platforms as instances of data collection that can offer insights into society (Stephens-Davidowitz 2017) or that critically analyses and theorises the geopolitics search, the monopoly of Google as a search service, the co-option of keywords to specific search results (König & Rasch 2014), and even the way Google is affecting the way we think (Vaidhyanathan 2011).

The implications of a platform society are that ‘algorithms have come to punctuate everyday social acts’ (van Dijck 2013, p. 157), and in doing so take past behaviours as data and convert them to future performance. This is clearly exemplified in the few ‘clicks’ it can take to move from a shared post or recommendation on social media, to viewing a video clip or reading an article, to making a purchase using stored credit card systems such as Apple or Google Wallet. For van Dijck (2013), code is a new common language, one that enables the interchange of data that underpins social, cultural, political and economic arguments. But platforms are never neutral, they are business models that combine content, metadata and behavioural profiling, making connectivity a resource for profit (van Dijck 2013, p. 161).

So, what are the implications of this societal transformation for heritage, and in particular for World Heritage? How are the aspirations of World Heritage, as articulated in its strategic objectives, challenged by a new societal structure determined by corporations and algorithmic mechanisms driven by a quest for connectivity? Arguably, World Heritage is a public value, and a process ostensibly driven by a set of public values articulated through the future-focused Strategic Objectives. Laurajane Smith’s provocative arguments against heritage as an inherent material quality and her repositioning of heritage as a process that ascribes significance to places also supports the idea that essentially, World Heritage (and heritage for that matter), is a public value.

To date, much of the discourse on engaging people with heritage has focused on the dichotomy between communities and audiences/visitors (Bärenholdt et al. 2003; Perkins & Thorns 2001; Urry 2007/1990, 2007/1996; Waterton 2010; Waterton & Smith 2010; Waterton & Watson 2009). For World Heritage, this issue has tended to focus on the importance of involving local communities in the nomination and management of inscribed properties (Díaz-Andreu 2016), or around incorporating social and community values within new and more holistic concepts, such as ‘cultural landscapes’, ‘historic urban landscapes’ and the ‘rights-based approach’.
The difficulties around the inclusion of broader community values are clearly evidenced in the decades long debate on subjective values or the inscription of ‘associative values’ through criterion (vi) – which is arguably a means for recognising intangible, subjective and related values of properties as opposed to those that might be understood to be evident in the physical attributes of the property itself (Beazley 2009a, 2009b; Beazley & Deacon 2007; Cameron & Herrmann 2018; Herrmann & Cameron 2015).

These shifts towards engaging people and their values are not just limited to the World Heritage Convention. The increasing motivation for recognising the importance of heritage for communities through social values, a concept more widely recognised in Australia and the UK, extends to the adoption of UNESCO’s 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (Intangible Heritage Convention) and is at the centre of the Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society (FARO Convention). But, like many of the discussions and forays within the context of the World Heritage Convention, again, these are often centred on local or defined communities and in this way, side-steps the underpinning concept of World Heritage as significant to all humankind.

This last idea – the global significance that is implied in the very act of inscribing places to the World Heritage List – is particularly pertinent to the discussion here, of a global society that is increasingly structured by connectivity. On the one hand the World Heritage Convention has been criticised for its universalising notions of value for all, conceiving ‘the world’ as a homogenous global community. On the other, the World Heritage programme pits State Parties one against the other in a quest for cultural status, where heritage is an object for diplomatic negotiations (James 2017; James & Winter 2017). The platform society and its corporate players are arguably a new entity. Digital platforms, for better or for worse, operate in a distinct paradigm by eroding national boundaries, creating new ones and connecting millions of people through systems set up for commercial gain. Through their fleeting points of datafication of each of our daily online engagements they are transforming, harnessing, and perhaps, eroding the public values of World Heritage.

The implications of the growing power of a few corporations in everyday experiences and concepts of communication and communities have yet to be fully realised. My view is that online engagement is already the primary way people engage with World Heritage, and it is critical to begin to understand how our global valuation of heritage is affected by the role of platforms and connectivity. Implicit in this proposition is the need to recognise the role of experiences beyond the sites themselves. The acts of searching for information, sharing articles or images, and purchasing books about heritage are all forms of engagement. Google’s algorithm structures what information is found, Facebook’s algorithm decides which shared posts we see, and Amazon’s predictive mechanism suggests what other books are relevant – and this is increasingly affecting what we understand as World Heritage. Each algorithm seeks to privilege specific aspects all geared by their business model based on advertising revenue. Additionally, as the global profile of World Heritage sites increases, so too does the pressure they experience from tourism, while simultaneously framing them as potential targets for political destruction.

Cornelius Holtorf provocatively argues, that in ‘50 years, it is likely that much of what we today preserve as cultural heritage will have been redefined and rewritten as something else. And other things we cannot even imagine today will have arrived, rendering part of our present world into heritage’ (Holtorf & Högberg 2015, p. 515). New understandings of engagements and community are needed, ones which take account of the way social connection, algorithmic mechanisms, corporations and a widespread culture of participation are framing heritage.

**Conclusion**

In the last decade society has been transformed by digital technologies and World Heritage, like all forms of culture has been implicated and changed by these technological shifts. Whether we agree with it or not, most people’s understandings of World Heritage will be influenced and framed by digital platforms, ones which are never neutral and which shape society.
Conventions, Declarations and Charters are written in response to contemporary conditions and therefore can become outdated quickly when considering the speed of technological developments. The Budapest Declaration needs to take into account the way digital platforms now convert culture and online activity into data, transforming everyday fleeting interactions into user data; a new kind of currency that raises ethical questions about privacy, ownership and control of information. The algorithms that underpin platforms are also selecting results for search queries, where collective actions are analysed individually and processed to create customised profiles. This entanglement reaches out into the physical and social domain making it very difficult to opt-out. Each keyword, each click, like, share, purchase and download is a data point that is a commodifiable product imbricated in an opaque process. The world is no longer structured into a simple dichotomy of online and offline, material and digital. Instead, all heritage exists and is a tradeable commodity within a platform society that seeks to harness hot topics, communities of sentiment that emerge in response to mass media collectively engaging with culture, imagining and feeling things together (Appadurai 1996, p. 8). Potentially, we need to consider a sixth ‘C’ in the World Heritage Strategic Objectives to capitalise and/or protect the public value of World Heritage in an age of digital connectivity. The implications of the internet and the issuers it raises are larger and more intricate that the space afforded here, but I hope to have situated the critical need to harness, understand and be aware of the implication of a digital society in which all heritage exists.

References


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Endnotes

1 In 2013 the Sydney Opera House had a global online community of 128 million. These digital engagements outnumber in-person visits 16:1 and have been estimated to have an economic value of $59 million AUD.

2 The publication was originally published in Dutch, but the updated English edition was made available in October in 2018. The English edition focuses on the consequences for Europe in contrast the Dutch version focuses on The Netherlands. Jose van Dijck has given several public lectures that are available online outlining the findings of the forthcoming publication.

3 I would like to thank both reviewers for their considered and detailed feedback which contributed to the final development of the paper. This research is part of a larger project which is investigating how Google as one major digital platform is transforming the public value of World Heritage.