



The Political Nature of Digital Cultural Heritage

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Abstract

Collecting organizations such as libraries and museums are vehicles for shifting paradigms of knowledge and power. Digital technologies are also implicated with historical transformations in language, society, and culture. To discuss the digital is to engage simultaneously with an impressive array of simulacra, instantaneous communication, ubiquitous media, and global interconnectedness (Cameron & Kenderdine, 2007). Digital cultural heritage can be viewed as a political concept and practice, the relations between communities and heritage institutions as mediated through technologies, the reshaping of social, cultural, and political power in relation to cultural organizations made possible through communication technologies, and the representation and interpretation of digital cultural heritage. The following paper will address each of these concerns, outlining current scholarship on the topic and critically engaging with the content.

Key Words: cultural heritage; politics; digitization

Introduction

Cultural heritage refers to the cultural legacy inherited from previous generations, a legacy which we often want to identify and preserve because it reinforces our cultural identity or sense of who we are as a people. Due to its social nature, physical and virtual cultural heritage will be influenced by politics and guided by social forces. The same issues of authenticity, vocabulary control, image control, and ideology control that arise with the curation of physical cultural heritage objects are also present with digital ones.

Cultural information standards, those that guide determining authenticity, ideology, etc, that facilitate and extend access to cultural heritage objects are often socio-political in nature. Once an object is preserved, it must be labeled to be cataloged. In other words, to be properly displayed an object or collection needs to be interpreted. This important task is relegated to our cultural heritage institutions. It is this action that promotes a discussion of interpreting digital cultural heritage as a political act. The social nature of information, its relationship to data and knowledge, and its ability to be shaped, organized, and well-managed is what makes it political. Any political agenda that sets in motion and/or funds digitization inherits mixed perspectives. Challenging traditional cultural engagement and proximity in the configuration of new knowledge spaces means a move away from that which has become intellectually rarefied to new political spaces for interpretation.

Museums, libraries, and archives have long held institutionalized authority to act as custodians of information and culture in Western societies. Such institutions hold a considerable part of the intellectual capital of our society. Digital archiving has the potential to activate, engage, and transform that social capital. Conversely, as the institutions appropriate, adapt, and incorporate digitization, they often transform the technologies they adopt. Cultural heritage staff can enable the development of displays that emulate new societal concepts and theoretical ideas that they share and sometimes promote. Such curation has the ability to develop a variety of other uses beyond those initially conceptualized. As a result, collecting organizations such as libraries and museums are vehicles for shifting paradigms of knowledge and power, for constructing contested political identities, objects, and information.

Digital technologies are also implicated with historical transformations in language, society, and culture, and other overtly political acts. But, to discuss the digital is also to 'engage simultaneously with an impressive array of simulacra, instantaneous communication, ubiquitous media, and global interconnectedness' (Cameron & Kenderdine, 2007). Digital technologies are cultural creations, and to some extent they may be used purposely to transform institutional cultures, methods, and relationships with the audiences of cultural heritage organizations. The challenges of the incorporation of digital technologies into cultural heritage organizations are not the result of the digitization process, but rather in the interpretation process. Cultural heritage

institutions are engaging with more than just the past, rather they are engaging with present researchers and visitors in the creation, presentation, and interpretation of digital objects/collections.

The Representation and Interpretation of Digital Cultural Heritage

Representation and interpretation are inherently political issues. People must be negotiated, systems understood, ideologies uncovered. New media and new networks to disseminate the information have impacted the process and the methodology of interpretation and representation of cultural heritage to the public in many ways, some of which will be discussed in the later sections. The dominance of unalterable images within computer visualization of cultural heritage (for example creating virtual displays or digitizing ancient texts/codex) has resulted in a lack of flexibility in interpretation and a limited sense of place. Frischer *et al.* noted that most virtual cultural heritage projects have been developed as offspring of technical research with specific tools, and without impute from historians, archeologists, and humanists (Frischer *et al.*, 2000). Champion finds photorealism also suggests an authoritative knowledge of the culture that the cultural institution may not possess (Champion, 2005).

It is now generally accepted that many heritage institutions provide interpretations and representations of the world, rather than the actual objects themselves. As this trend grows, the audience is moving from passive to active. This move mirrors similar developments in literary criticism, media and cultural studies, and digital humanities where the viewer is placed into an active participatory role and forces a retool of the producer or author role. Deeply engaged participatory visitors may develop a discursive relationship with the medium, delving further into the interpretation of a digitized heritage display beyond the surface 'flashiness' of a virtual display or digitization. Lowenthal notes that the more realistic the representation the more cemented into the present that object is (Lowenthal, 1994). Molyneaux argues that each representation can only be seen from the perspective of the present and that inevitably time-bound perspective is what makes every generation's vision of the past so valuable to the present (Molyneaux, 1997). The time-bound perspective represents present consciousness about a heritage object.

Cultural heritage is now often represented and interpreted as commoditized objects to be used by present-era consumers. Such consciousness is promoted by our institutions themselves. Heritage sites and archival collections, recognized by present-era bureaucrats and interpreted by present era officials, become present-era leisure sites and potentially lucrative tourist attractions. The interpretation is already completed, and patrons need only become passive users. Rippel describes the 'bookstore model' for library design where marketing dominates display construction; this can also be seen in the modern-day museum 'routing' into storefronts that sell mock collections (Rippel, 2003).

This new contemporary outlook on the past is bringing cultural heritage dangerously close to for-profit driven ventures rather than preserved cultural heritage or institutions of learning and dissemination. The process itself is fairly insidious. At first there are merely licensed guides and informational panels, accessories to the object or place. As tourist money increases, and the institution sees the value of increasing the volume of paying visitors, public presentations expand to include historic representations and reconstructed buildings. Soon there emerge theme-park techniques of promotion and marketing. Attendance figures and accounting books grow to dominate the institution, rather than authentic representation or individualistic interpretation. If the main objective of heritage institutions is to attract consumers of its product and extract from them profits, interpretation can rarely afford to offer the kinds of serious and troubling historical reflections that are likely to drive vacationing visitors away. As a result, all too often the past is being represented like a theme-park, a theme-park where the worries and uncertainties of the present can be cast aside for the comfort and stability of a 'scientifically' imagined past. As digitization becomes more and more common-place, and cultural heritage sites become commoditized, the possibility of for-profit ventures taking over digitized sites is present.

The digitization of cultural heritage objects includes print materials from humanity's past. The Google Books project is perhaps the most well-known of the library digitization projects, and promises to open up a vast amount of older literature for virtual use. However, three main problems seem to have arisen. The quality of the scans is sometimes poor, the information about the books (often known as 'metadata') is sometimes erroneous, and the notion of public domain seems to be curiously restricted. Poor scan quality generally means double-scanned pages, pulled-in pages, and cut-off pages. Faulty

metadata is a more significant problem. This is particularly evident in the serial publications, where having the proper citation of a publication is extremely important. Contracting public domain is the last major problem. For example, Google has not granted free access to all government documents published after 1922. However, United States copyright law clearly states 'works by the U.S. government are not eligible for U.S. copyright protection'. Libraries providing the content must be concerned about the potential costs of creating a 'universal library' that is filled with various mistakes. While the materials Google is digitizing remain in the public domain for now, the potential for gatekeeping tactics by a for-profit company are, I believe, very real.

A last question to ask when discussing digitized cultural heritage is: can digitization in any way capture the essence of the heritage object? Can it ever be any more than a digital representation? Both the nature of authenticity and the role of interpretation are being reexamined and redefined. The former emphasis on the conservation and preservation of heritage objects is now supplemented by recognition of the value of intangible traditions and the social history they represent. Preservation denotes the carefully planned arrangement of information and physical access to a cultural heritage site. This largely one-way mode of communication is formulated by scholars, design firms and heritage professionals. Interpretation denotes the totality of activity, reflection, research, and creativity stimulated by a cultural heritage object. It also should take into account the impute and involvement of visitors, local and associated community groups, and other stakeholders of various ages and educational backgrounds who are essential to the interpretation and the transformation of cultural heritage from the static into places and sources of learning and reflection about the past. At its root, interpretation is a social attempt to understand where we are in time, what brought us to this point, and what things we should be passing down to our children. Digitization allows this to be a co-creative process, it facilitates stakeholder involvement. There develops a difficulty in identifying the way in which digital tools provide an environment of cultural heritage where we might consider an artifact as no longer being an object, but rather as a temporal or experiential occasion. A linear approach to the interpretation and packaging of heritage objects and the past is popular, simple, and easy to package into a tangible 'bite' for a visitor. Distinctions can be drawn between using digitization as a technological tool with which to represent the artifact itself or as a mode of interaction to extend the engagement of the viewer's experience of the artifact.

The necessity to compare a digital representation against the original to confirm the representation's authenticity and integrity devalues the ability of the digital repository to serve as a research resource for scholars who are unable to access the original or if the originals are destroyed. Repositories with research-oriented goals must provide researchers with assurances that the resources provided have maintained their integrity and authenticity. Sites that do not intend digital repositories to be used for research purposes should specify this intent clearly. Because the nature of digital representations requires that the researcher trust the institutions that guard and present historical and cultural heritage, the researcher must know if those institutions cannot guarantee the accuracy of the information provided. Institutions that intend to provide research-quality content must ensure that the content is accurate, complete, and remains unaltered.

Digitization and the Community

In examining the role of digitization in the cultural heritage institution, a question arises concerning whether it modifies the relationship between the institution and the visitor in any meaningful way. A valid criticism notes museums and libraries are not as hospitable as would be expected. As an example, I will explore two aspects of the museum experience (which is also shared by libraries, archives, etc) that often lead to this kind of interpretation: the physical settings of the collections and intellectual access to the collections. The buildings and collections are beyond the stated mission of the institution, but nonpolitical and even minor details such as the architecture of the building, the classification and juxtaposition of artifacts in a collection, the use of glass cases, or even interactive mediums such as the voice of a recorded narration triggered by the approach of a patron interpreting the artifact for the user, all act to reinforce particular narratives. The necessity of security also serves to produce power relations that sometimes act to alienate the visitor. Such power relations are also expressed in the way visitors are conceptualized. One perspective views the public, at best, as strangers, and at worst as intruders. When institutionalized, this perspective can result in a scenario where the public is expected to acknowledge that, by virtue of being granted access, he or she is being given a special privilege. Many museums act to awe the visitor with the sheer magnitude of the treasures contained within their walls. For some libraries, this awe is inspired via the splendor of the structures rather than the collections themselves.

Libraries and museums can be described as ideological institutions, where the hegemony of the dominant culture is articulated behind the institutions' closed doors. This results in a problematic reading of the institution by the public (museums as patronizing, libraries as gatekeepers), and even by those who never make it to the physical location. Political discourses of power and knowledge flow through them, but most are concerned with 'inoculating bourgeois civic values that serve the needs of the emerging nation-state and the dominant interest within it' (Witcomb, 2003, p. 14). Visitors are subtly tuned to absorb politically driven narratives, and staff are not complacent. Museum and library employees are often highly educated professionals who have been fully indoctrinated in the civic values of the state, and convey those values to the visitor through exhibits, presentations, and multimedia installments.

Of course, visitors are not passive users either. They often come to the institution with the expressed intention of learning something new. They come seeking new narratives and are open to new interpretations. As Foucault noted, power depends on our active participation in the discourse offered and regulated by it to maximize its effect and minimize alternative outcomes (Foucault, 1977). This need for engagement means power has a relational character. As a result, staff and visitors participate in the construction of ideology through such shared discourses.

The institutions themselves tend to send out mixed messages to the public. They want the public to be interested in the museum/library/etc on the one hand, but on the other they tend to demand visitors accommodate the institution (by being versed in the narratives of the cultural heritage housed at the institution). The reified mission of the library denotes a separation between knowledgeable staff and ignorant public. This is because cultural institutions promote themselves as places of life-long learning, but where it is felt the institution is controlling knowledge, expertise, and learning. This patronizing attitude can go against an agenda of a self-directed individual who has, literally, almost any piece of information at his/her fingertips. The attitude of 'we know and we want to share' can be expanded through digitization and the notion of user-directed learning. The agency of information training must be transferred from the institution to the individual, opening up the potential for active participants and coauthored narratives.

Reshaping Power Relations through Communication Technologies

How can cultural heritage institutions address these issues? Digital heritage, as with heritage in general, has been, until recently, largely untouched by critical discourse. Solutions can be found both within traditional practices as well as from innovative new media interfaces that open up intellectual access to the institutions in new and novel ways. New iterations of traditional strategies of display and interpretation may serve to confront some of the criticisms noted in this article without displacing the material object as the central pivot of the cultural heritage institution.

Power relations can also be challenged through digital access. Digital access can offer new subject/object relationships for the remote visitor, and new visitor/staff relationships. The connoisseur can savor his or her own cultural delights, while the uninitiated can enjoy the culturally enriched narratives from the safety of their home. In this way remote access can work to make the unfamiliar familiar, and offer a method for the uninitiated to be able to reset his or her own cultural compass in a reciprocal and co-created schema. Gone are the imposing buildings, the thick marble walls and the gleaming tile floors. Gone are the abrasive guards, the pretentious patrons, the demeaning docents.

Digital access gives the institution a playing field where the users can generate content, or at the very least make their own decisions about where and how they experience the collections. Shifting the point of entrance to the personal narrative away from the physical institutions to the home, the office, or the school, may entice those who feel lacking in the cultural capital necessary to critically engage the cultural heritage objects. Such situations may cause visitors to realize that, through virtue of being indoctrinated in western culture, they already have been initiated into the institution. Through remote access visitors may also discover a place for co-created and reciprocal activities, and may realize the institution values their knowledge and is aware they too have something of value to contribute. Such new and innovative scenarios open up innovative avenues of connectivity between the heritage institution and its audiences.

This brings up the potential for convergent new media technologies that connect cultural institutions to new audiences through community co-creation

programs. These connections require more than the provision of a convergent technology infrastructure. The cultural institution itself must provide the cyber-infrastructure and training programs, and communities can provide original content in the form of narratives, which the community itself produces. For example, a cultural institution may develop an outreach tool (a mobile multimedia facility) to visit communities and hold workshops. Such workshops have powerful cultural outcomes: they empower communities to create their own 'digital stories', short personal narratives constructed from pictures and memories. A collection of such stories can serve as a snapshot of a community's cultural identity. Stories that are supported by the institution are given a level of authority and have a high level of authenticity because they are created by community members themselves. Livingstone argues there is much work to be done by information professionals to establish a relationship between the reception and production of content in the new media environment (Livingstone, 2004). This includes identifying the benefits for the various stakeholders in the group — learning, cultural expression, civic participation, etc. Shedroff notes that a continuum of interactivity can provide a simple yet effective model of how the new literacy can shift the audience experience from cultural consumer to cultural producer (Shedroff, 2001).

As I have shown, digitization and the internet offer an opportunity for visitors to experience, first-hand, the new networks of cultural institutions and to interact with narratives. This allows visitors to create unique experiences not solely derived from the values articulated by the cultural institution. The interaction transforms the ways in which audiences access and navigate cultural information. Networked information can provide new methods of cross-institutional collaboration that have the potential to create shared and trusted cultural heritage networks. This remediation of network, narrative and experience makes use of multiple mediums to communicate the values and priorities of the institution. It can also free the institution from historically colonialist collecting methods.

This is not to say networks will replace earlier practices. A library website gives a taste of the physical site, while offering in-depth information about the institution that may not be accessible during the physical visit. These new networks and new methods of access allow cultural institutions to be seen not as centers of knowledge (and all the problems discussed earlier), but rather as facilitators of networks of reliable, validated information.

The whole chain of author to publisher to consumer can be altered where anyone can become the author or creator of knowledge. This has come to be a major concern for cultural institutions as evidenced by the large number of co-creation programs. These programs can act to mediate the perception that the cultural institution, as a gatekeeper of knowledge, is closed, and acts to construct knowledge from an elite perspective. Establishing communication systems that facilitate two-way interactions between community and institution can provide a reality that acknowledges and values not only the information coming from a community, but also the community from which it comes. By connecting communities to resources, and through allowing advanced Web 2.0 interfaces, cultural institutions are enabling communities to interact with existing content to create new content through co-creation projects.

Summary and Conclusion

This paper discussed the political aspects of digitization and cultural heritage, discussed issues of collaboration, discussed issues of interpretation and authenticity, and concluded with a dialogue about these issues. The function of heritage sites changes over time, and digitization, like many events prompting society to become information-oriented, is quickening those changes. As events lead cultural heritage sites to become more and more dependent on visitors for funding, the fear of economics determining content grows. Libraries and museums are vehicles for shifting paradigms of knowledge and power, for constructing contested political identities, objects, and information. Digitization can assist in developing shifting paradigms. Access changes, interpretation changes, proximity changes, etc, are mediated by a political process. Digital technologies can facilitate this process by providing instant, anytime access to stakeholders. These new tools and new processes are prompting changes in the way we perceive, and think about, the items that have been digitized.

Stakeholder collaboration is found to be extremely useful in the development of successful digitized culture. Cultural heritage institutions are limited by the visitor's perspective that they control knowledge, experience, and learning. Resistance to changing this perception from within the institution, and reified 'missions', limit staff from being able to make changes. Some of the

assets people respect can be liabilities to that institution. For example, trusting the accuracy and authenticity of a collection leads to doubts as to whether the institution can provide multiple perspectives. The same can be said of digitized print, as collections become digital content-orientated. The institution's self image as educator is not fully endorsed by the public, as the action of 'instructing' can be seen as demeaning or patronizing by the visitor.

It is now generally understood that many heritage institutions provide interpretations and representations of the world, rather than the actual objects themselves. As the trend spreads, the audience is moving from passive, reading and taking in, to active, participatory and reflective. The viewer is placed into an active participatory role and forces a retool of the producer or author relationship to the data.

Digitization of cultural heritage has political aspects that limit its interpretation, community dissemination, and authenticity. These aspects have been understood by various scholars as challenging to modern cultural heritage institutions. The primary method to address these challenges is through redefining access, furthering collaboration, and co-creation of the digitized object. Like any ethnographic work, co-creation of digitized cultural heritage will provide deeper interpretation, thicker description, and a more authentic representation. Co-creation of digital materials and community collaboration in the digitization process will address many of the problems of authenticity and interpretation that are currently plaguing digital cultural heritage today.

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