Using social media technologies to engage people in archaeology
Introduction to the session at the 18th EAA Annual Meeting 2012 in Helsinki

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Social media and hand-held devices are powerful and readily available technologies that have the potential to engage archaeology with new and wider audiences. The pace of technological change can be frightening, but also offers new opportunities. Archaeologists have always been keen adopters of new technology, from aerial photography through radio-carbon dating to the latest geophysical sensing equipment. Such technologies are useful tools for investigating and recording archaeological remains. They are an extension of our trowels and shovels, and we see them as tools we use to achieve a certain aim. We know as much as we need to about them and happily rely upon specialists in their use to make sure they are used appropriately. Some archaeologists have also understood the need to communicate with wider audiences as part of our work, and have likewise embraced the latest communications technologies. Deliberate courting of newspapers was augmented by the exploitation of radio, newsreel film and more recently of television and the Internet. Yet many who use these communications media have often been attacked by colleagues for valuing entertainment over 'serious scholarship' or of 'dumbing down' to the masses. We also think that because we are trained to write academic texts and speak at conferences that we are therefore skilled communicators and prefer to take direct control over communications technologies ourselves rather than rely on media specialists. Communications technologies are therefore unlike other technologies that archaeologists use. Our understanding of these media and the nature of communications is only just beginning. We need a deeper and more nuanced understanding of communications as a process and of our role in mediating between the remains of the past and people today.

Social media are more than simply tools. Their use involves making choices of data, visuality and literacy that both reflect what we do and how we think, and help to shape what we do as mediators between past and present. Archaeologists have been trained to think about the materiality of the remains of the past as their primary focus, for both study, conservation and interpretation. We have come to believe that it is what we say that matters; the knowledge we convey about the past or our particular ideas about that past. As a result, we see media simply as carriers for information. This is profoundly wrong. As always, archaeologists are slow to catch up with conceptual developments in other disciplines. Marshall McLuhan had already highlighted the interdependence of medium and information with his well-known phrase *"the medium is the message"* nearly half a century ago (MᴄLᴜʜᴀɴ 1964). Archaeology was never only a technical exercise in recovering the remains of the past. It was always concerned with communicating and making the past live again in the present. New media force us to reinvigorate this aspect of our discipline and rethink our role within a world shaped by two-way and multi-vocal media.

The session organised by CASPAR at the European Association of Archaeologists annual conference in Helsinki in 2012 was an attempt to establish a debate about these issues as well as highlighting examples of current practice in using social media and digital technologies. We defined these technologies as including online excavation blogs, email discussion lists, Facebook pages, Twitter accounts, Skype communications, interactive websites, online magazines, online events, contributory photographic archives and hand held device software for on-site interpretation. We posed a series of questions around which papers could be framed.

- Do we know what our audiences want and why?
- Are we giving them what they want or what we want to project?
- Who uses social media?
- Can it really empower people and can it be used to undermine traditional authority structures?
- How representative of the wider population, or of archaeologists, are those who do use social media?

- Does the ephemerality of social media mean we are in danger of losing our own archive for the future history of our discipline?
- Can digital technologies allow us to overcome language barriers?
- Can we use modern media to reach out to new, non-traditional audiences for archaeology?
- What constitutes successful communication?

The papers presented addressed some of these questions, and left others for future discussion. Issues raised in discussion (but unfortunately not captured for record) included the nature of audience creation, the maintenance or undermining of archaeological authority, the credibility of authorship, multi-vocality and whether the use of new technologies is changing how we conceptualise the past and our relationship to archaeological remains. Don Henson's paper is an opinion piece aimed at setting the scene for the session and looked at the historical context of communications in archaeology. It raised the issue of the widening audience for archaeology made available with changes in media technology while maintaining disciplinary authority. Is there a need to challenge the notion of academic hierarchy as the basis for archaeology, or would this lead us into too dangerous waters where archaeological evidence can be misused? His paper ends with a look at what questions we need to ask and explore for the future for archaeological communications. The paper by Isto Huvila examines the bi-directionality of social media through a look at the representations and re-appropriations of archaeology in four different social media: Facebook, Twitter, Secondlife and Pinterest. It is hard to separate archaeology as communication and archaeology as an object of communication. This paper highlights the the importance of understanding and working with the context and nature of the digital medium, and raises important theoretical issues. The paper by Lone Ritchie Andersen and Tinna Møbjerg presents a case study of the use of smartphone apps in helping to interpret archaeological remains and landscapes to visitors. This helps to place the museum objects into their context and makes visits to the sites themselves more meaningful through the use of augmented reality. A key to getting this right is to consult potential audiences and accept the users of the devices as co-creators of the content. This ensures that content is shaped to be appropriate to the audiences' needs. The paper by Peter Insole and Angela Piccini presents a case study from the city of Bristol, where the city's online historic environment record has been opened up to the public through a web-based tool that engages local communities in shaping the stories of their neighbourhoods. Although the driving force behind the project is to enable better public involvement in urban planning and conservation, it crowd-sources data enhancement by allowing members of the public to upload images and information about heritage places. The residents of Bristol can give a significance to heritage assets that goes beyond that given to them by archaeologists. Archaeological remains and people are connected to help create a real, more personal sense of place.

References

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