

Digital media and public engagement in archaeology: an opinion piece

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Zusammenfassung – Die neuen Medien sind schnell ein wesentlicher Bestandteil der modernen Kommunikation in der Archäologie geworden. Diese Tatsache ist bislang nur selten theoretisch beleuchtet worden, und die neuen Instrumente werden meist ohne ein tiefergehendes Verständnis der historischen Zusammenhänge archäologischen Kommunizierens genutzt. Der Autor entwirft eine erste und unvermeidbar noch grobe Skizze dieses Zusammenhangs. Damit verbunden ist die Thematisierung des Konflikts zwischen disziplinärer Exklusivität und einer Demokratisierung von Wissen. Es wird versucht, einen Rahmen abzustecken für künftige tiefergehende Debatten. Aus Sicht des Autors haben Archäologen noch zu oft eine hierarchische Haltung bei ihrer Beziehung zu Anderen, und dies wird sich ändern müssen. Zudem muss die Natur der neuen Medien hinterfragt werden: inwieweit sind sie selbst demokratisierende Faktoren? Wir brauchen ein besseres Verständnis unserer Publikumsgruppen und der Frage, was diese Gruppen von der Archäologie erwarten. Ein solches tieferes Verständnis erzeugt mehr gegenseitigen Respekt und mehr Bereitschaft, in einen produktiven Dialog einzutreten. Damit dies geschehen kann, muss das Feld des Diskurses und der richtigen Fragen abgesteckt werden. Einige dieser Fragen werden am Ende des Beitrags beleuchtet.

Schlüsselwörter – Archäologie, Kommunikation, Demokratisierung, digitale Medien, Hierarchie, Archäologie in der Öffentlichkeit, Forschungsplan

Abstract – New digital media are rapidly becoming an essential part of modern communications in archaeology. This is seldom theorised, and is being used without much understanding of the historical context of archaeological communications. The author provides an initial and inevitably basis scheme for such a context. This is linked to the notion of conflict between disciplinary exclusivity and the democratisation of knowledge. It is an attempt to establish parameters for future debate and discussion. The author's position is that archaeologists too often have a hierarchical view of their relationship to others, and this needs to change. There are also questions about the nature of modern digital media and how far they are themselves democratising agents. We need a greater understanding of our audiences, and what these audiences want from us. With greater understanding will come greater respect and a greater willingness to engage in productive dialogue. To enable this to happen, we need to begin framing the right questions to ask. Some of these are highlighted at the end of the article.

Key words – archaeology, communication, democratisation, digital media, exclusion, hierarchy, public archaeology, research agenda

Introduction

Until the rise of post-processual perspectives in the late 1980s, archaeologists had seldom theorised or discussed their means of communication and the part that these played in the discipline. Shanks and Tilley raised awareness among archaeologists of the role of past remains as carriers of meaning, and the role of archaeologists as mediators of that meaning undertaking communication within the context of the modern society of which they are part (SHANKS & TILLEY 1992). More recently, others like Holtorf have examined the place of archaeologists in media representations and in popular culture (HOLTORF 2007 a), and others have looked at the relationships between archaeology and the media (CLACK & BRITAIN 2007, MOSER 2001, PICCINI 2010). The development of modern communications media has been rapid and it could be argued that the nature of communication is fundamentally changing with notions of transmitter and audience becoming blurred. The need to theorise modern communications is all the more urgent with the advent of new computer-based digital media, whose use in archaeology raises many issues for discussion. For example, we should ask why we communicate with others, whether we truly know our audiences and what they want from us, and whether there is a tension

between maintaining academic authority and democratisation of knowledge production.

Why is communication so important? I believe that the essential role of archaeologists is as mediators between the past and the present. That is, archaeologists bring the remains of past human lives into the present to be witnessed, enjoyed and consumed by people today. We help people link hands across the ages, not literally but metaphorically. In the words of Sir Mortimer Wheeler, "*the ultimate appeal across the ages, whether the time-interval be 500 or 500,000 years, is from mind to intelligent mind, from man to sentient man*" (WHEELER 1954, 17). Robin Collingwood, a major philosopher of history as well as an archaeologist, made the same point, "*the history of thought, and therefore all history, is the re-enactment of past thought in the historian's own mind*" (COLLINGWOOD 1946, 215). The connection between people today and the people of the past is a form of engagement between them, mediated by the archaeologists' manipulation of the remains of the past. Archaeologists talk about public archaeology, and public engagement, as a form of dialogue or communication between themselves as the experts and the public as consumers of their expertise. This is to misunderstand their role; forgetting their function of mediation. True public

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archaeology should involve the archaeologists facilitating an engagement between people (people living now with people who once lived in the past) directly through the archaeological evidence. Communication is a means to this end.

Widening the media focus

Digital media are simply the latest in a long line of media that archaeologists have used to communicate their work. The early archaeologists in Britain in the 16th and 17th centuries, such as John Leland (1503-1552) and John Aubrey (1626-1697), used privately circulated manuscripts, circulated among a small group of like-minded scholars. Other scholars of that time published printed books, like William Camden (1551-1623) with his *Britannia* of 1586, but these too would circulate only among the small scholarly community of the time or the wealthy. The same is true of the early journals, such as *Archaeologia*, founded in 1770, but again read by only a scholarly few.

Paper publication was an ideal medium for presenting data and illustrations such as early surveyed plans and drawings of monuments. A body of knowledge could be built up, and ideas presented for consideration. Communication through print was largely didactic, serving to support the more creative exchange of ideas between researchers who would meet and discuss their work face-to-face. Several groups of early archaeologists are known, e.g. the Students of Antiquity (*Antiquitas Rediviva*) formed in 1638 by Sir Edward Dering, Sir William Dugdale, Sir Christopher Hatton and Sir Thomas Shirley. These early groups would be the forerunners of the Society of Antiquaries of London, formally established in 1717. The face-to-face meetings of such groups were the main discursive communications networks of the day.

Early communication was not all verbal however. There were also a few audio-visual means of communication. The Cabinets of Curiosities, which developed later into museums, existed for a higher class of interested and curious visitor. These early cabinets would include natural history as well as antiquities, and slowly developed a more organised form. The Ashmolean Museum in Oxford was formed in 1683, incorporating earlier collections and cabinets, such as that of John Tradescant (open to visitors by 1634). These allowed communication beyond the small circles of scholars, but it would

be a while before museums developed the idea of attracting the masses. The British Museum when it opened in 1759 restricted entry to small groups on a conducted tour. Admittance was by a ticket which had to be applied for in writing. Only in 1810 did it abolish the tickets and open its doors to all, and therefore fulfil its statutory purpose of general benefit of the public.

The circle of people involved in archaeology would widen considerably in the 19th century with the founding of the county archaeology societies from the 1840s onwards, supported by the ability to travel afforded by the early railways. These societies appealed to the leisured professional classes (such as clergy and doctors) and rural landowners (HUDSON 1981, 15-21). The Great Exhibition of 1851 and smaller, more local county shows from 1853, brought displays and exhibitions to a mass audience of all classes, and encouraged the foundation of many local museums with an educational mission to bring culture to the new urban working classes (HUDSON 1975). However, although these early ideals would soon be watered down from the 1880s onwards with a shift in the role of museums away from education towards connoisseurship, with education being marginalised as a specialism within museums, dealing mostly with children (ARNOLD 2005, 176-177). Hill (2005, 148-149) has noted how, during the late 19th century, the working classes visited museums less as other forms of commercial leisure expanded and that by 1914 museums had become the domain of professional curators and civic elites, aiming less at a popular audience and providing instead a new form of middle class cultural capital.

It was only with advances in communication technology in the 20th century that archaeologists could at last reach out to major audiences. The growth in newspaper readership was an opportunity that some archaeologists were eager to grasp. Sir Mortimer Wheeler won financial support from the Daily Mail in return for exclusive coverage of his excavations at Caerleon in 1926. Wheeler was a keen advocate of publicising archaeology. His excavations at Verulamium from 1930 were featured on the Pathe Newsreels shown to cinema audiences, and likewise archaeology often featured on British Movietone News. However, a real mass market only appeared in the 1940s with the advent of archaeology programming on radio and in the 1950s with the arrival of television in most people's homes.

As might be expected, Sir Mortimer Wheeler was an early pioneer of archaeology on television, as was Glyn Daniel, and both were castigated by their colleagues for appealing to the masses and extended archaeology outside the scholarly clique. Daniel was advised by an academic colleague that “*you must begin to extricate yourself from the media if you are going to exist as a respectable archaeologist*” (STODDART & MALONE 2001). However, archaeology programmes were a clear hit with audiences, and both men were voted by the public as TV Personality of the Year in 1954 (Wheeler) and 1955 (Daniel). Television has a continual hunger for good visuals and dramatic narratives. Archaeology can supply both in abundance. It is a medium which allows archaeologists to reach a mass audience, but is also a medium distrusted by many since the archaeologists’ work has to be interpreted by media professionals. The archaeologist feels less in control of the message and archaeologists who do embrace the medium are often accused of ‘dumbing down’ or somehow selling out their discipline by being populist. The traditional place of television in the media landscape before the modern digital age was as a ‘theatrical’ medium, displaying content to a disconnected and largely passive audience. Direct feedback from viewers leading to a conversation with the archaeologist was seldom possible and television was a largely didactic medium, excellent at imparting a narrative about the past or providing glimpses of how archaeologists work in snapshots of aspects of their work. The televisual work of Sir Mortimer Wheeler or Brian Hope-Taylor was largely in that tradition. Many archaeologists still see the medium as a means of conveying information. Hence, criticism among archaeologists of how the subject is portrayed on television often focuses on the minutiae of detailed knowledge of the past, falsifying the ethical values of the discipline or reducing archaeology to entertainment (e.g. Peter Fowler and Tim Schadla-Hall as reported in GATHERCOLE, STANLEY & THOMAS 2003, 150-153). Jim Mower makes the point that many archaeologists feel that the nuances of archaeological interpretation and the politico-social context of archaeology are often missing in television depictions of the subject (MOWER 2000, 3). Mower also notes that despite being a hit with the general public, there are those within archaeology unhappy with what they feel is the televisual presentation of their discipline as entertainment. An anonymous author once described the popular Time Team series on Channel 4 television as ‘anodyne pap’ (ICHNEUMON

1996). Of course, most archaeologists are not familiar with media studies or communication theory, and have little notion of the active audience and debates about the active or passive reception of media by viewers (e.g. PHILO 2008). Television now sits within a multi-media and interactive landscape, that is necessitating a shift in attitudes towards the relationship between author/presenter of media content and audience/consumer and commentator/re-user of that content. Some in archaeology have welcomed this, for example, the Time Team series, which eagerly adopted the possibilities of the Internet to establish a relationship with its audiences.

The arrival of digital media with modern style personal computers in 1977 and the World Wide Web in 1990 has revolutionised communications. We can now deliver immense amounts of information, and through Web 2.0, encourage interaction between users, and between users and providers. The transfer of computing technologies to portable, hand-held devices and the arrival of the smartphone, the IBM Simon in 1994, and its more modern successor, the Nokia 9000 in 1996, has produced a world of social media, where barriers between scholars and others can seemingly be broken down. Not only can scholars communicate with wide audiences, they can now enter into true conversations with these audiences.

Widening participation?

So, the media of communication have changed over the last 600 years since John Leland and the early antiquarians. What has also happened is a widening of the archaeological community. Private circles of scholars sharing information led to scholars sharing their information with a wider interested public through publications. This then became an attempt to communicate with an even wider public through television using entertainment and now a more modern attempt to construct an interactive dialogue with the public through digital media.

However, what we have is not a simple case of linear development from narrow circles of scholars to ever wider circles of knowing and interested members of the public. The earlier, more restricted circles still exist within the wider landscape of participation in archaeology. Private cliques of scholars still exist, hiding behind the academic practice of peer reviewing publication. This acts to exclude dissident views and divergent

ideas, establishing a closed circle of people whose writings are considered worthy. It is based on a publishing model of expensive print media and learned society journals that is ill at ease with modern digital access to information and democratised publication of ideas and opinions through social media. Traditionally published literature remains important as a repository of data and scholarly articles, but is often hidden behind academic walls of library rights and restricted online access (e.g. through Jstor or commercial pay-walls).

This differential access to information and debate is the result of the hierarchical nature of archaeology as a disciplinary practice. In theory, archaeology in the United Kingdom is open to all. There is no licensing of archaeologists. Anyone can legally undertake excavation and the UK has a thriving amateur sector of local societies and individual researchers not employed by professional organisations. This amateur sector can work to standards equal to those of the professionals and has an equal right to belong to the national archaeological associations like the Institute for Archaeologists. On the other hand, professional archaeology is almost entirely dominated by university archaeology graduates (AITCHISON & EDWARDS 2008). Even those who do the manual labour of excavation and survey for field units will have an archaeology degree (often at Masters level), and are counted as archaeologists. But, professional archaeology is itself deeply fractured into different sectors, each with its own organisation. These organisations include the Society of Museum Archaeologists, the Federation of Archaeological Managers and Employers, the Association of Local Government Archaeologists and the Subject Committee for Archaeology (representing university archaeologists). The amateur sector can belong to the Council for Independent Archaeology. These will all have their own conferences, publications and circles of discussion. They would form separate circles of communication. In the pre-digital age, these could be isolated silos pursuing their interests independently of each other, notwithstanding the attempts of bodies like the Council for British Archaeology to coordinate wider discussions.

The great benefit of digital communications is to transcend time and space, and bring disparate communities together through the broadband cable or wireless transmission. Professional or disciplinary communities find it hard to maintain their boundaries. While many archaeologists have welcomed the new communications

landscape, there are also many who do not. The context of archaeological practice often leads to a reinforcement of hierarchies in which open communication and dialogue may be seen as dangerous and potentially destabilising. These hierarchies are often unspoken but underlie behaviours. Academic archaeology lies at the peak of prestige and definition of archaeology, at the cutting edge of theory and analyses on the past, and producing the labour force for the other sectors. Local authority and national agency curators safeguard the archaeological record and determine the work done by the field units, whose finds end up in the museums (areas of work often defined as heritage management and seldom included in archaeology degrees and therefore somehow outside a strict academic definition of archaeology). These professionals in turn act as guardians of the archaeological record from destruction by those deemed not to be suitably qualified. The amateur sector lies uncomfortably between the professionals and the rest, not 'properly qualified' yet recognised as carrying out good work. These relationships represent the hierarchical work flow in archaeology in which instructions should proceed in a linear direction between self-contained, mutually reinforcing communications silos. If this is so, we need to ask how far archaeologists really want to enter into a dialogue with the public through modern digital media.

Knowing our audiences

There is a public eager for knowledge about archaeology. It is a subject with a mass-market appeal. A survey by the Council for British Archaeology (CBA 2010) found more than 2,000 voluntary groups and societies engaging with heritage, representing more than 215,000 individuals. Membership of heritage organisations is high, for example, English Heritage with more than 1 million members and the National Trust with more than 4 million. Archaeology has been a staple of television schedules in the UK since the 1950s, regularly pulling in audiences of up to 3 million viewers, even in today's fragmented broadcasting landscape. Occasional programmes, especially those on ancient Egypt, could attract up to 6 million viewers. Two series have had the kind of lengthy run that allowed them to influence whole generations of viewers: the BBC's *Chronicle* from 1966 to 1991, Channel 4's *Time Team* from 1994 to 2014. A more active engagement with

the past through visiting heritage sites is even more popular. More than 5 million people visited English Heritage sites in 2012. Even larger numbers made use of their online resources; nearly 10 million (ENGLISH HERITAGE 2012). The Taking Part Survey for the government shows that nearly 75 % of the population visit a heritage site at least once a year. An early attempt to poll public opinion on heritage (MORI 2004) found that over 80 % had visited a historic building or museum during the last year, an impressive 82 % thought that heritage was fun, 86 % thought that local heritage was worth saving while 94 % of people thought that it was important for children to be educated about heritage. This chimes well with Darvill's identification of existence value as an important part of the value systems applied to archaeological remains, where the mere existence of heritage is comforting to people who may not themselves visit or use it in their own lives (DARVILL 1995). The potential audience for archaeologists is therefore very large.

On the other hand, we have hardly begun to communicate with the whole of this potential audience. The mass market is harder to reach than we thought. If a good TV programme on archaeology attracts 3 million viewers during its transmission, that means that over 57 million will not see the programme. Of these, there will be some who may watch a repeat, or will pick up knowledge second hand from those who have watched it, or be aware of it through other media, such as the Internet. Nevertheless, the vast majority of the population will remain unaware of what was broadcast. The kinds of programmes watched by viewers cover a variety of subjects related to archaeology. Although 98% of people watch at least one heritage TV programme in a year, the top ten programmes are dominated by the commoditised heritage of antiques, rather than archaeology (PICCINI 2006, 5). There are major differences in how people from different socio-economic groups engage with the past through heritage. People from lower socio-economic groups are less likely to visit museums than others, as revealed by figures collated by a group of directors of the major UK museums showing that only 25 % of visitors come from socio-economic groups C2, D and E (ANON 2004, 8). While local archaeological societies have long been dominated by university educated middle classes, a much higher proportion of working class groups will belong to metal detecting clubs. This was noted early on by Tony Gregory, who pioneered inclusive approaches to archaeology

as County Archaeologist in Norfolk, noting that archaeologists were overwhelmingly from the university educated middle class, while the metal detectorists they stigmatised were mostly of non-university, working class origins. He felt archaeologists were inherently exclusive and elitist (GREGORY 1986). While much has changed since Gregory's day, the broad outlines of archaeology as an educated middle class activity still remain true. If only 25 % of museum visitors are from C2, D and E socio-economic groups, this same set of the population provide 47 % of people reporting finds to the Portable Antiquities Scheme, mostly from metal detecting (PORTABLE ANTIQUITIES SCHEME 2006, 5).

Understanding our audience must involve a more open acceptance of the place of the past in society, and how the public experience that past. Holtorf, among others, has written about the place of the past in society today and has encouraged archaeologists to take notice of its role in popular culture (HOLTORF 2007b). He has noted that people experience the past in many ways: sensually, cognitively, socially, culturally, and emotionally. The past signifies meaning, can be part of a lifestyle, and be taken as part of identity. These are not necessarily the same ways that archaeologists experience the past, and the meanings, lifestyles and identities that archaeologists derive from the past. We need to step outside our comfort zone to truly communicate with the public.

Interacting with our audiences

The kind of interaction we have with our audiences deserves closer scrutiny. Are we really interested in a constructive dialogue with non-archaeologists rather than expecting them to passively consume what we experts produce? Archaeologists produce a lot of data in the form of sites and finds. It is often new finds that are reported as news stories. It is finds that dominate displays in most museums. Artefacts themselves are, of course, a good source of stories. The phenomenally successful *A History of the World in 100 Objects* exhibition at the British Museum in 2010, with its linked series broadcast on BBC Radio, was a great narrative hook to allow the telling of stories of human experience across the centuries (http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/a_history_of_the_world.aspx). The very success of the exhibition and series belies the lack of deep story or narrative behind much of

the shop front for archaeology provided by most websites or TV programmes. Providing artefacts in museum cases for the admiring gaze of the public is now being augmented by the digitisation of collections and historic environment records, such as those provided through the Heritage Gateway website (<http://www.heritagegateway.org.uk>). While this is worthy in itself, it is not necessarily a deep and meaningful form of public engagement, merely the simple provision of information. The provision of information to the public is bound up with notions of authority; the authority of archaeologists as guardians of the nation's heritage. The power of guardianship often conflicts with the desire to democratise and may well serve to exclude genuine dialogue and participation. The Heritage Gateway itself explicitly sets itself against inviting comment or contribution from non-experts (CLUBB 2008, 41). There are examples of engagement online in which archaeologists do invite public response and comment. The Know Your Place website produced by the City of Bristol (<http://www.bristol.gov.uk/page/planning-and-building-regulations/know-your-place>) provides access to information about the history and heritage of Bristol and invites contributions of information, memories, responses and photographs from the city's residents (PICCINI & INSOLE 2013). While contributions are moderated, the information contributed is added to the historic environment record and helps to enhance knowledge of the city's past. This is a two-way communication leading to true engagement.

Archaeologists can all too easily fall into the role of the high priest, guarding the arcane secrets against the masses of the uneducated and defending their authority with a high-minded seriousness. The twenty years long run of the television series *Time Team* has helped to revolutionise public knowledge of archaeology and led a revival of archaeology programming on British television. However, it has always faced criticism from some archaeologists who dislike its popular idiom, and the fact that the main presenter, Tony Robinson, is – shock, horror! – not himself an archaeologist and therefore ‘not one of us’ (CLEERE 2000, 91). The assumption of a serious academic pedigree and an authoritative public service role by state and local historic environment professionals is understandable in a profession that is relatively young and only recently established. On the other hand, it sits ill alongside the long-standing contribution of the voluntary sector to archaeological knowledge

and research in the UK, a contribution far longer and far more widely spread than the small and ill-funded archaeological profession. While widening the circle of communications, we seem to have reinforced the hierarchies that separate us from the people whose past we uncover and protect.

The advent of modern communications media gives us many new opportunities to break out of the disciplinary boundaries we create, enter into dialogues with others and open our minds to alternative ways of thinking about the past, but it also should lead us to some searching questions that we need to ask of what we do. Why do we seek to communicate with others? We love what we do; we love archaeology. Like all devotees and enthusiasts, we want to share our excitement with others. But, there is more than this. Some of us feel that we have important things to say about the human condition and that the past can help to inform the present. Others realise that our profession ultimately relies on public money, and the public are entitled to a return on their investment. Yet others, feel that in times of financial hardship or economic recession that we need to build greater public support for what we do. We also know that we need enthusiastic young people to help renew our discipline by being attracted to study it at university. A growing number of archaeologists also see archaeology as having a physically and mentally beneficial purpose as an activity in the lives of individuals and communities and seek to help people engage with this (for example, see the inspirational Defence Archaeology Group website: <http://www.dmasuk.org/>).

But, do we really understand the nature of the interaction we have with our wider audiences? Do we know what people want from archaeology, and from us as archaeologists? What kinds of knowledge, understanding or experiences can we provide? Are there limits to the capabilities of digital media? Are we merely servants of popular taste and demand or do we have wider responsibilities to help guide people's explorations of archaeology? Can we create a real partnership of archaeological practice and public understanding? Does the use of digital media really enable us reach millions and new audiences? There are many questions to be explored about the use of digital media in archaeology. Thankfully, there is a new, younger generation of researchers actively engaging with these questions (for example, see the crowd-funding and crowd-sourcing of archaeology

by the Dig Ventures team, <http://digventures.com/>, and researcher Lorna Richardson's blog, Digital Public Archaeology, <http://digipubarch.org>). The debate has only just begun.

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