

## **BRAVE NEW WORLDS: TRANSFORMING MUSEUM ETHNOGRAPHY THROUGH TECHNOLOGY—AN INTRODUCTION**

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### *Introduction*

While the internet may have been around—at least as a concept—since the 1970s, it seems that in the museum sector we have reached the tipping-point whereby information and communication technologies (ICTs) have shifted from being an enticing but ultimately optional extra to becoming a core part of museum practice. ICTs now have an impact on almost every area of museum activity, from conservation, research, and collections management to learning, interpretation, and display. There is also increasing evidence of a digital expectation amongst our audiences, whether for social media alerts of museum events, wireless in museum cafes, or for the provision of detailed online collections information.

In the last ten to fifteen years, in particular, there has been a boom in digital activities by museums, which have considered these an easy means by which to widen public access and engagement. Arguably, the mass of project activity undertaken in this period, with all its successes and failures, has created the scope and necessity for a period of sustained critical reflection and evaluation. This is especially true, as Christiane Paul observes in her book *Digital Art*, since ‘technologies often...develop faster than the rhetoric evaluating them’ (Paul 2008: 67).

The need for a moment of pause and reflection is evidenced by a number of recent reports and strategies that have sought to evaluate, assess, and provide methods and frameworks for measuring the impact and sustainability of digital activities conducted by museums. The Arts Council England’s *Creative Media Policy* takes a positive perspective, noting that ‘digital technologies are transforming society, economy and culture’ and that ‘global media networks offer significant opportunities for the UK’s digital content industries including “cultural institutions that foster, create and maintain digital content”, enabling them to reach new international audiences and markets’ (ACE 2012: 1). However, it provides a warning (to archives, although this could also be applied to museums), highlighting the fact that much publicly funded cultural heritage remains inaccessible. It emphasizes the impact of this on audience choice and the

public value of such institutions (ibid.: 8). The policy also highlights particular obstacles to the successful adoption of ICTs by cultural organizations, including a lack of ‘necessary skills and experience’ (ibid.: 7), the limited ‘discoverability’ of ICT resources due to inadequate search, aggregation, and curation capabilities (ibid.: 8), the absence of shared standards, and a lack of understanding of rights and intellectual property issues and of how audiences are using, and might use, these new digital forms. As Felicity McWilliams observes in this issue, ‘it is never as simple as just “putting stuff online”’ (p. 58).

Partly to address the lack of shared standards and of sectoral co-ordination, in 2013 the Collections Trust launched its ‘Digital Benchmarking Tool’ for museums and galleries. Based on the structure of the trust’s well-established ‘Benchmarks in Collections Care’ tool, ‘Digital Benchmarking’ invites organizations to self-assess themselves against eight core competencies (areas in which the digital is likely to impact on the organization)—including ‘strategy’, ‘people’, ‘systems’, ‘digitization’, and ‘engagement’—so as to map the organization’s progression on a journey from “we don’t do that” to “digital, creative media and engagement are fully integrated across every aspect of what we do”.<sup>1</sup> The tool aims to encourage organizations to be strategic in their application of ICTs, and emphasizes the extent to which ‘digital and creative media are not single-issue questions—they are about the interplay between organisational culture, policy, strategy, behaviours, values and kit’. The argument is that an ‘effective digital organisation is one which integrates these elements effectively and harnesses them to the delivery of their core mission in a way which suits the values and behaviours of their audiences’.

Although aimed at higher educational institutions, the report *Sustaining Our Digital Future: Institutional Strategies for Digital Content* includes an ‘exploratory look at how cultural heritage institutions think about and plan for sustaining and enhancing the value of their digital collections’ (Maron, Yun, and Pickle 2013: 3). Primarily, the report recommends that ensuring the long-term value of an ever-growing crop of digital resources means thinking of “sustainability” as something well beyond the preservation of content, data and metadata or a particular website’, and the report sets out to ask ‘inconvenient questions of relevance, take-up and use in an era when grabbing and holding an audience’s attention becomes ever harder’ (Dempster 2013). Notably, the second phase of a three-part examination of this topic aims to include a more focused examination of the cultural heritage sector and, in its proposed inclusion of the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia as a central case study, highlights the pre-eminence of museum ethnography to this debate.

### *Museum Ethnography and New Technologies*

As the April 2013 annual MEG conference held at Brighton Museum & Art Gallery revealed, museum ethnography has had a close relationship with the

application of ICTs.<sup>2</sup> The potential ability of ICTs to connect ‘here’ with ‘there’, ‘now’ with ‘then’, and ‘us’ with ‘them’ has supported the proliferation of web resources (in particular) that aim to reveal the social networks, as well as the dialogues with(in) ‘home’, ‘diaspora’ or ‘source’ / ‘originating’ communities, that can gather around collections of material culture. Significant among these is the website associated with the Great Lakes Research Alliance for the Study of Aboriginal Arts and Cultures, which seeks to ‘digitally reunite Great Lakes heritage...currently scattered across museums and archives in North America and Europe with Aboriginal community knowledge, memory and perspectives’.<sup>3</sup> Other key initiatives include the ‘Material Histories: Scots and Aboriginal Peoples in the Canadian Fur Trade’ web resource, which tells a historical narrative through artefacts, images, and personal stories;<sup>4</sup> the ‘Sierra Leone Heritage’ site, which digitally reunites dispersed collections of historic Sierra Leonean cultural heritage with new digital assets documenting their contemporary manifestations;<sup>5</sup> and various initiatives of the University of Oxford’s Pitt Rivers Museum, including ‘The Tibet Album: British Photography in Central Tibet, 1920–1950’, which presents more than 6,000 photographs spanning thirty years of Tibet’s history and invites users to create their own albums,<sup>6</sup> and ‘The Relational Museum’ project, which aims to ‘explore the mutually constitutive history of people and objects through the analysis of the collections of the Pitt Rivers Museum for the period 1884–1945’.<sup>7</sup>

As a part of the museum sector with a long engagement in the use and application of ICTs (see Pavement, this issue), museum ethnographers are well-placed to comment on the possibilities as well as the limitations of such technologies, and have an important role to play in a wider culture of critical thinking that aims to analyse the possibilities and challenges posed by communications technologies (see, for example, Cameron and Kenderdine 2010: 3). Indeed, MEG itself, as a subject specialist network, continues to develop its engagement with ICTs, including, most recently, a successful application for Arts Council England funding to develop the MEG website to become a portal for key resources for the practice of museum ethnography, including ethics guidelines, training resources, and case-study information. What is clear from the recent reports and strategies described above is that, as a group of subject specialists, we need to become more self-conscious about the use of technology within our practice, to think beyond models of implementation, to question how, as Fiona Cameron and Sarah Kenderdine have posed more widely (*ibid.*: 3–4), ICTs ‘might be used purposefully to transform institutional cultures, methods, and, most importantly, relationships with audiences and stakeholders—into the future’. As far as is possible, we also need to ensure that the application of these is made ‘future proof’.

Source or originating communities are prime stakeholders, playing an important role in how technology is being used within museum ethnography, as Lucie Carreau, Felicity McWilliams, and Alison Clark demonstrate in

their papers in this issue. The September 2012 special issue of the *Journal of Material Culture* on ‘Digital Subjects, Cultural Objects’ also highlighted how many of the originating communities that work with museums in the UK are leading the way in the use of ICTs in cultural heritage programmes: Māori stakeholders, for example, have been particularly active in considering the practicalities and possibilities of digitization, and how the use of ICTs can align with indigenous protocols governing the care and use of *taonga* (Salmond 2012: 211–28, Ngata et al. 2012: 229–44). Moriori in New Zealand are also drawing upon software systems (such as the Australian Traditional Knowledge Revival Pathways programme) that prioritize indigenous voices and views, as well as developing their own databases of cultural landscapes, elders’ stories, traditional practices, and digital records of *taonga* (Solomon and Thorpe 2012: 245–63). As Lucie Carreau explores below, while the particular form of technology she used as a research tool in Fiji was provided by the museum for which she was working, her iPad was actually conducive to the Fijian context, particularly in the ways in which it replicated Fijian social divisions, ideas of place, and codes of hospitality. Despite her initial wariness of the iPad, Carreau found that it provided ‘a type of sensual engagement with the landscapes that no other medium could have offered’ (p. 42). Similarly, in the process of researching the Yirandali, an Indigenous Australian group, and using Flickr to capture and share the process, Alison Clark found that she had also created a resource for the community’s own historical research and an evidence base for a native title claim then being pursued. All these forms of engagement—made possible through technology—demonstrate the new scope for activity created by ICTs, while reminding us that issues of ownership, intellectual property rights, and cultural sensitivity remain ever pertinent.

What may seem distinctive about current manifestations of technology, such as their ability to transform the ways in which audiences can access information, but also allow stakeholders ‘to share and shape museum knowledge about collections’ (McWilliams, p. 46), is perhaps less distinctive than would first appear. As Peter Pavement notes, technology has long served as the handmaiden of museums and museum ethnography; indeed, the photograph, the film clip, and even the diorama were all once projected as radical new ways of seeing and of engaging with originating communities and museum audiences. However, as recent scholarship has shown, indigenous agency was often key to the success of these (see, for example, Pinney and Peterson (eds) 2003, Sen 2009, Maxwell 1999). Moreover, the self-assumed authority of these ‘historic’ forms of new media has been revealed to be more mutable and open to interrogation than was assumed. In 1891 a commentator in the *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society* was able to observe that, ‘where truth and all that is abiding are concerned, photography is absolutely trustworthy’ (Thomson 1891: 673). Today, of course, we understand the naivety of such attitudes, and the constructed nature of the photograph (and film); we understand that these media have been used from

the start to validate preconceived (often spurious) notions of their subject matters (see, for example, Edwards (ed.) 1992, Ryan 1997, Maxwell 1999). Such historical precedents surrounding the use of interpretative technology in museums should guide our engagement with the comparable tools of today.

The papers in this volume testify to the diverse ways in which technology is transforming museum ethnography, through new possibilities for field research and documentation (Carreau, Clark), for sharing and generating collections knowledge (McWilliams) and—through the creation of digital models or surrogates via 3D scanning—for supporting the development of collections knowledge and conservation practices (Arnold and Kaminski, Viscardi et al.). The papers hint at the potential scope of ICTs to change the way collections knowledge is generated and shared, to create new ways of understanding, preserving, and conserving collections materials, and to create new models of cultural ownership and new audiences. But the papers also raise questions about the limitations of ICTs; whether these lie in the capabilities of the existing digital tools and software, staff knowledge and skills, or the time and resources acquired to properly engage with ICTs and to make them sustainable. McWilliams, for example, notes the sense of frustration felt by the project team on ‘A Sense of Place’ about the fact that Historypin’s foundations in documenting photography collections would not allow ‘pinned’ objects to be dated to before 1840; the absence of a 3G signal in much of Bucklebury, the focal point for the museum’s new app, was also a significant challenge. What is clear is that, whatever their current limitations, the use of ICTs within museum ethnography is creating new ways of seeing, knowing, and sharing objects.

This issue includes two papers that discuss the challenges and opportunities created by various scanning technologies. David Arnold and Jaime Kaminski outline the potentially high costs and resource-demands of these before noting the as yet underexplored opportunities offered by their outcomes: new digital assets are ‘easily reproduced, readily mobile, can be easily recontextualized and shared’ and have the potential to ‘exist in spaces outside of the traditional museum’ (p. 91). Like Arnold and Kaminski, Paolo Viscardi et al. salute the ability of scanning technologies to better understand, via non-intrusive or destructive means, the internal structure of an ethnographic object, how it was made and what of. Viscardi et al. also note the value of these technologies to the facilitation of successful interdisciplinary research. Of course, as alluded to above, these new ways of seeing and knowing inevitably raise new ethical concerns. As museum ethnographers we must remain mindful of how the needs of source or originating communities are factored into such undertakings, via, for example, integration with indigenous knowledge and harmonization with indigenous intellectual and cultural property protocols (Talakai 2007, Sullivan 2002). If, for example, the physical opening of a consecrated Tibetan bronze Buddhist statue and the examination of the relics, sacred writings, and sacred images it may contain amounts to ‘a desecration that cannot really be rectified’

for Tibetan religious teachers (Reedy 1991: 13), then what significance does an X-ray or 3D scan, conducted to ascertain the bronze's contents, have for Tibetan and Buddhist stakeholders?

Much will rely on the increasing use and ownership of ICTs by agencies beyond the museum. At present, as these papers reveal, many digital initiatives in the field of museum ethnography are museum-driven and thus essentially museum-serving. Suggestions that the growth of ICTs in museums will—through user-generated content, including via 'crowd-sourcing' mechanisms, and the increasing availability and reducing expense of software—begin to undermine traditional knowledge elites and promote the wider ownership of knowledge are yet to be fully realized or substantiated (McTavish 2006).<sup>8</sup> As with the use of historical 'new technologies', we might consider whether ICTs simply add new (inter)faces to existing structures of power.

Moving forwards, issues of legacy and sustainability will become even more important and will concern both our newly digitized assets, which we will have to learn how to (appropriately) store, conserve, and care for, as well as the new networks and frameworks we use to share these. Arnold and Kaminski outline a future in which 'scholars will access and analyse geographically dispersed primary sources through digital surrogates, allowing access beyond normal traditional scholarly activities' (p. 89). Text search on the basis of word recognition will be overtaken by semantically based searches that look for particular meanings within sources that search on the basis of content. The future success of the Semantic Web will require a mindful, collaborative, and consistent approach to programmes of digitization, as well as more nuanced understandings of objects and their meanings.

Following media theorist Marshall McLuhan, Cameron and Kenderdine (2010: 1) suggest that 'new ways of perceiving the world, embedded in knowledge structures and societal transformations, enable the development of tools that emulate new social and theoretical ideas'. Accordingly, our eager application of these tools to museum ethnography is perhaps unsurprising. They go on to suggest that, 'these tools, through technological innovation, have the ability to offer a range of possibilities beyond those originally imagined' (ibid.). As museum ethnographers, it could well be our role in the future to manage the unexpected dialogues, events, and processes that emerge from the influence of these tools on our practice.

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*Note*

1. The tool can be downloaded at <<http://www.collectionslink.org.uk/discover/sustaining-digital/1608-digital-benchmarks-for-the-culture-sector>>.
2. The full list of papers given on 15–16 April 2013 is as follows. First session, ‘Digital Dialogues: New Spaces, New Voices’, chaired by Chris Wingfield: ‘Contact Networks for Digital Reciprocation’, by Carl Hogsden (Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge); ‘Speaking for Ourselves: The U’mistá Cultural Centre’s Potlatch Collection and the Role of (New) Technologies in the Joint Exhibition Project “The Power of Giving” at the Kunsthalle Dresden, Germany’, by Sylvia Wackernagel (GRASSI Museum of Ethnography, Leipzig); ‘Tropenmuseum and Engaged Museology’, by Hans van de Bunte (Tropenmuseum, Royal Tropical Institute, Amsterdam; paper read by Wayne Modest); and ‘The Museum in Mogadishu: Developing a Digital Collection’, by Bill Tunstall (independent researcher). Second session, ‘Digital Tools: Transforming the Objects of Museum Ethnography’, chaired by Sarah Posey: ‘Negotiating Knowledge: “Facebooking” Problematic Object Narratives in Sierra Leone’, by Johanna Zetterström-Sharp (Horniman Museum); ‘Mermaids Uncovered’, by Paolo Viscardi (Horniman Museum) and Anita Hollinshead (consultant); ‘The Contribution of the Imaging 3D Scan to the Conservation of Twelve Kanak Masks’, by Olivia Bourrat (Musée du quai Branly); and ‘Informing Museum Practice: The Potential and Challenges for 3D Scanning of Ethnographic Collections’, by David Arnold and Jaime Kaminski (Cultural Informatics Research Group, University of Brighton). Third session, ‘In and Beyond the Museum: New Participative Opportunities’, chaired by Catherine Harvey: ‘Taking the Museum on to the Street: Digital Interpretation in Macau’, by Michael Hitchcock, Vincent Cheng, and Pai Chen Kuo (Macau University of Science and Technology; paper read by Michael Hitchcock); ‘Touch: Collective Conversations at Manchester Museum’, by Nicola Ashmore (University of Brighton); ‘Twittering, Chanting, and Befriending Witches: Generating Community in the Museum of Witchcraft’, by Helen Cornish (Goldsmiths College, University of London); and ‘See How I See It? Museum Ethnography through the Eyes of the Museum Visitor’, by Megha Rajguru (University of Brighton). Fourth session, ‘Work in Progress and Short Reports’, chaired by Rachel Heminway-Hurst: ‘What Happens Next? Using Technology to Sustain Relationships’, by Alison Clark (British Museum and King’s College London); ‘Pacific Collections in Scotland: A Review’, by Chantal Knowles (National Museums Scotland) and Neil Curtis (University of Aberdeen); ‘Who Cares? The Material Heritage of British Missions in Africa and the Pacific and its Future’, by Chris Wingfield (Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge); ‘Dynamic Exchanges: Objects and the Relationships between Northwest Coast First Peoples and Scots’, by Kaitlin McCormick (University of Edinburgh); ‘The Museum in Movement: Routes, Sounds, Senses’, by Dafni Tragaki (University of Thessaly, Greece); and ‘Historic World Objects at Reading Museum: Work in Progress’, by Ollie Douglas (Museum of English Rural Life, University of Reading). Fifth session, ‘Integrating Technology into Museum Practice: Past and Present’, chaired

by Wayne Modest: 'Gramophones in the Gallery: Charting the Museum's Adoption of Media in the Gallery and Beyond', by Peter Pavement (Surface Impression); "'Let Your Fingers Do the Walking": Exploring Fijian Landscape with an iPad', by Lucie Carreau (Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge); 'Private and Public: Increasing Access to Museum Histories through Research Websites', by Alison Petch (Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford) and Dan Burt (freelance database and web developer); and 'A Sense of Place: Digitally Mapping Museum Collections', by Felicity McWilliams (Museum of English Rural Life, University of Reading).

3. See <[https://grasac.org/gks/gks\\_about.php](https://grasac.org/gks/gks_about.php)>.

4. See <<http://www.abdn.ac.uk/materialhistories/>>.

5. See <<http://www.sierraleoneheritage.org>>.

6. See <<http://tibet.prm.ox.ac.uk>>.

7. See <<http://history.prm.ox.ac.uk>>.

8. See also the discussions that took place at 'Connecting the Dots: Virtuality, Technology & Feminism in the Museum', a conference held at the Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, 23–24 September 2011; see <<http://feminismandcurating.pbworks.com/w/page/44129643/Smithsonian>>.

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