FORUM

Social Media and Heritage Preservation

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What is the role of social media in conversations about heritage and heritage preservation? In conjunction with traditional forms of media, social media has captured and critiqued the deliberate destruction and tragic reality resulting from the armed conflict in the Middle East. This reality became even more tragic in August (2015) following the murder of prominent Syrian archaeologist, Khaled al-Assad, after his refusal to reveal the location of hidden artifacts to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). In addition to the invaluable cost of human life, cultural heritage assets have also become targets for militant groups, such as ISIS. Multiple videos have surfaced over the past months and through various media formats of ISIS members destroying museums, archaeological sites, historic centers, libraries, and other heritage resources. The integration of social media has introduced new elements into heritage discourse. Using new mechanisms to record and discuss the destruction of heritage has also raised questions that consider ways in which heritage is preserved. Such as: How can a broader range of options for addressing the crisis of heritage destruction in Iraq be solicited, particularly at a local level, and possibly incorporated? What can enhance public discourse on heritage in the face of loss of life and destruction of tangible resources?

There have been international and national responses in the wake of this devastation and tragedy in many affected countries, including Iraq. The United National Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) added Ashur (Qal'at Shergat) and Samarra Archaeological City, two of Iraq's World Heritage Sites, to the World Heritage in Danger list in 2003 and 2007, respectively. The Director General of UNESCO, Irina Bokova, has also publically condemned the destruction of these locations, going as far as to classify these actions as "war crimes" (Ferran and Williams 2015). In addition to UNESCO, many other organizations have joined the conversation. The International Committee of the Blue Shield (ICBS) and The Antiquities Coalition are two of the many nonprofit organizations that have organized action against the heritage destruction in Iraq and throughout the Middle East. These groups have collaborated with various experts and local military forces to promote global awareness and organize action against this crisis. These agencies, as well as UNESCO, have utilized social media platforms to extend their messages to a wider audience. Smaller, more localized initiatives have also organized campaigns around Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, as a counter-narrative to the official discourse created by UNESCO and other heritage authorities.

One way to combat the issues associated with heritage destruction is by reframing the discussion or the focus of the discussion. Before focusing on the issue of the destruction of Iraqi heritage, I propose the question: 'what is heritage?' be answered first. The word heritage has become a 'hot topic' in public discourse, yet the varied and complex meanings of the term have not been consistently addressed, and in public discourse the term has not been publically defined by those employing it. Heritage scholars have defined heritage as a *journey* (Jackson 2012: 21), a *tool* (Lowenthal 1996: 26), an *interpretation* (Herbert 1995: 30), or an *experience* (Smith 2006: 45). This is because the meaning is dependent upon the context in which it is used. Heritage studies benefits from being an interdisciplinary academic field, since different disciplines each offer a unique perspective that helps expand the discourse. The aim of discussing the meaning of heritage is not to develop a single, cohesive definition of the term—this feat would be impossible. Discussing what is meant by the term heritage can begin to facilitate communication among different local, national, and international agencies and bring to light varying ways of recognizing and preserving heritage even in the face of acts of war. Social media, for example, offers platforms for examining ways of thinking about what is preserved and how, including offering possibilities for countering destruction by using documented acts of destruction as part of the activity of heritage preservation through digital exposure.

ISIS has utilized social media platforms, such as YouTube and Twitter, as a multifaceted tactic. They initially began posting images and videos as a means to recruit members across the globe. By continuing to chronicle the destruction, they now expose the international community's inability to effectively intervene. This shock value has been referred to as a 'systematic cultural cleansing' by stakeholders devoted to protecting these heritage assets. As ISIS actively works to erase history and culture through the destruction of artifacts and features, they too work to produce counter-narrative that privileges their ideologies.

The various narratives presented via social media by ISIS and others do not exist independently of one another. All

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posts offer different perspectives, which can be used to create a multivocal representation. I propose we begin to think of ways to utilize these videos and images to acknowledge the complexity of heritage and show how heritage extends beyond a tangible state. Incorporating aspects of social media can offer alternative mechanisms for the continued preservation and acknowledgement of heritage assets in the Middle East, for example.

An extended understanding of heritage can begin to frame potential solutions. For example, ISIS has engaged in the destruction of heritage assets as an attempt to erase local Iraqi history. These attempts are based in an ideological perception that the value of these sites and structures is solely based in their unaltered, tangible attributes. What is not discussed are the multiple ways heritage has changed or is constantly being changed by natural and cultural forces. Although reframing the current conversation to be more inclusive of alternative definitions of heritage and alternative solutions for what constitutes preservation cannot end the destruction of heritage, it can open the discussion regarding what it is we are trying to save and what role can and does social media play in heritage preservation. Can continuing to integrate social media platforms give a greater voice to a broader range of communities on a local and national level in preservation efforts? I look forward to debating this question in the forum of scholarly heritage discourse.

Competing Interests

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