

JVC Digital Heritage

INTRODUCTION

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Nearly fifteen years have passed since UNESCO designated the ‘preservation’ of digital heritage to be ‘an issue of worldwide concern’.¹ Since that time, institutions, organizations, and individuals around the globe have applied themselves in establishing standards for the creation, documentation, curation, and – crucially – interpretation of digital artefacts. Such artefacts, of course, include both digitally created (or ‘born digital’) information and materials, as well as ‘surrogate’ materials and information produced through the conversion of non-digital resources into a digital format. The province of digital heritage is thus an immense and expanding one, and so it comes as little surprise that it is increasingly prevalent in the day-to-day concerns of archivists, historians, cultural practitioners, and museum and heritage professionals.²

The integration of digital resources, technologies, and methodologies in the creation and management of historical collections continues to transform how researchers access and engage with the cultural heritage of the Victorian era. Innovative new data collection and digital visualization techniques are capable of capturing and sharing historical artefacts, locations, and information not only faster than ever before, but also in greater detail and amongst a wider community than was previously possible. The digitization of large historical collections from various analogue, digital, and hybrid forms (including digital 3D models of places virtually rebuilt from the textual and archaeological leavings of the dead), are published online and made accessible to a broad range of users. The application of these sorts

¹ UNESCO, ‘Charter on the Preservation of Digital Heritage’ (13 October 2003) <http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=17721&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html> [accessed 11 January 2018]

² Paul Cooke, Laura King, and James Stark, ‘Experiencing the Digital World: The Cultural Value of Digital Engagement with Heritage’, Cultural Value Project, AHRC <http://www.digitalheritage.leeds.ac.uk/files/2014/10/AHRC_Cultural_Value_CR-Experiencing-the-Digital1.pdf> [accessed 11 January 2018].

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of digital surrogates has helped to increase access to nineteenth-century heritage, enabling researchers to engage with source material and information that previously could be obtained only through a physical visit to the museum or archive. The creation of surrogates, moreover, can support the preservation of historical documents and artefacts as well, as the ability to consult digital reproductions decreases the need for access to potentially fragile documents and artefacts. In addition to such issues, the rapid development of new formats of born-digital content invites discussions about the resilience and potential obsolescence of hardware and software, and about how best to preserve and maintain digital content in the future. Digital cultural heritage continues to reshape, then, not only our access to the history and heritage of the Victorian era, but also our engagement with – and perception of – that history and heritage.

But as the cultural heritage sector continues to invest in digitized material, there remains a need to reflect on the ways that content is captured and presented and to interrogate the practices and processes by which those materials were created. In *Digital Ethnography* (2016), Sarah Pink and her co-authors described ‘the digital’ as a ‘field in which we practice as much as we analyse’.³ Taking inspiration from this idea, the present instalment of the Digital Forum considers the benefits and challenges involved in the preservation and presentation of nineteenth-century heritage. In what follows, we feature contributions from three heritage professionals, who each reflect on and discuss current and emerging approaches to digital heritage and its relation to the sustainable collection, management, and dissemination of Victorian cultural heritage. Douglas Dodds, Senior Curator in the Word & Image Department at the Victoria and Albert Museum, provides an overview of the V&A’s approach to digitizing multi-format collections and to maintaining digital surrogates of analogue originals. Building on this consideration of collections management, Peter Findlay, Digital Portfolio Manager at JISC, explores the relationship between physical and digital forms in his discussion of the development of the UK Medical

³ Sarah Pink, Heather Horst, John Postill, Larissa Hjorth, Tania Lewis, Jo Tacchi, *Digital Ethnography: Principles and Practices* (London: SAGE, 2016), pp. 6–7.

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Heritage Library. Finally, Jenny Mitcham, Digital Archivist at the Borthwick Institute, rounds things off with a discussion of the digitization of the archive of the York Retreat and with a few thoughts about the best practices for cataloguing, presenting, and maintaining historical collections online.

Common areas of concern are apparent across all three articles, each of which touches on how institutional imperatives (including the availability of funding and the practicality of choosing what to digitize under time pressures and with scant resources) influence what is – and is not – made available in digital format. In drawing our attention to these issues, the three contributors to this Forum remind us that, even a decade and a half after the adoption of UNESCO’s ‘Charter on the Preservation of Digital Heritage’, there are still significant challenges to be met. Nearly fifteen years have passed since UNESCO designated the ‘preservation’ of digital

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