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**In the Hands of the User**  
**A Framework for the Analysis of**  
**Online Engagement with**  
**Digital Heritage Collections**

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**A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

**The University of Edinburgh**

**May 2012**

**Dedicated to David and Alice**

## **DECLARATION**

I, Michela Clari, hereby declare that this thesis was composed by me and that it is my own work. I further declare that it has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

Signature:

Date: 14/05/2012

## **ABSTRACT**

Within a context of recent and rapid transformation in authorship and participation practices on the Internet, this thesis explores the implications of an emerging digital culture for heritage institutions, such as museums and archives. Combining insights from internet, education and museum theory it explores different experiences of participation and meaning making around digital heritage collections opened to public engagement and contribution. In particular, the investigation analyses and contrasts the online activities of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS), partner in the research, with alternative approaches. The thesis applies ethnographic research methods to investigate embodied and virtual settings. Based on the empirical findings, it identifies different theoretical models of online engagement with heritage content. It then extrapolates from these models a conceptual framework that could be used by heritage institutions to analyse and re-assess their online practices, intellectual positioning and strategic ambitions in the context of the paradigm shift brought about by digitality.

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

This thesis explores the implications of the recent and rapid transformation in authorship and participation practices on the Internet for cultural heritage institutions, such as museums and archives. It takes the view that digitization and networking practices on the Internet have a radically destabilizing effect on texts, subjects and the act of meaning-making around objects (Poster, 2001), and that this can transform the way users and curators engage with, and learn through, cultural heritage artefacts.

I believe that the opportunities which users now have, individually and collectively, to engage with, manipulate and re-describe digital heritage artefacts as found in new online spaces are ‘a primary source of their educational value’ (Bayne *et al*, 2009b, p. 110). As such, it is important that institutions create the conditions for engaging with ‘the radical, interesting and vibrant opportunities presented by digital technologies’ (Bayne *et al*, 2009b, p. 120) by nurturing genuinely innovative situations of user participation and learning around their collections. It is also important that these opportunities be viewed on their own terms rather than as ways of enhancing or making more efficient established practices in order to deliver existing institutional goals (Parry, 2007; Poster, 2001; Bayne *et al*, 2009b).

Rather than focusing on how digital innovation can be harnessed to ‘support or enhance current practice and provision’ (Parry, 2007, p. 11), my interest, therefore, lies in exploring the possibility and implications of cultural change and creative disruption as brought about by digitality to the experience of engagement with heritage content. In particular, the questions which emerge as being addressed are:

1. To what extent and in what ways does the shift online prompt a re-negotiation of the position of the ‘user’ as traditionally understood in museum practice?
2. To what extent do new forms of engagement stimulate new authorship practices stemming from dialogical forms of discourse and new relationships in digital spaces?

3. To what extent does the shift to digitality contribute to the rise of a new brand of cultural artefact which meshes materiality and discourses, potentially challenging traditional conceptions of authenticity and cultural authoritativeness?

Driving the exploration of these questions is a keenness to capture some of the features of the change and disruption which digitality is liable to bring about, and to reflect on how heritage institutions, as resilient, traditionally constituted analogue organisms may resist or, conversely, embrace these changes and metabolize them as they engage with the creative opportunities they afford.

## 1. Barriers to Change

Many questions arise in the light of new emerging patterns of personal and collective engagement with heritage content online, questions regarding the educational implications of a change in the nature of artefacts which, as ‘volatile amalgams of bits and bytes’ (Bayne *et al*, 2009b, p. 110) can now be manipulated, re-distributed and re-described (Poster, 2001, 2006; Parry, 2007, 2010); about the relevance of traditional forms of display and editorial intervention in the face of new forms of online authorship and content generation (Durbin, 2003, 2009; Manovich, 2010; Bearman and Trant, 2011; Sandhal *et al*, 2011); about the need to manage a combination of institutional and user-generated online content in the context of changing user participation dynamics (Ridge, 2007; Poole, 2009).

Increasingly sharing a sense of unease and uncertainty about users’ motivation and preferences (Hamma, 2004; Peacock and Brownbill, 2007; Russo and Peacock, 2009), institutions are reassessing their strategic aims and practices as their traditional role as author, collector and educator is called into question (Anderson, 1999, 2000; Hooper-Greenhill, 2004; Castells, 2010; Terras, 2011); and questions arise as new institutional partnerships within and outside traditional domains are forged (Bayne *et al*, 2009a; Kalfatovic *et al*, 2009; McGregor and Serota, 2009; Cock *et al*, 2011; Proctor, 2011).

There is little doubt, however, that the opportunities for change and transformation which digitality now affords constitute also a source of difficulty for institutions coming to terms with unfamiliar patterns of ownership, participation and knowledge production typical of the

media age. As discussed in this thesis, issues include a lingering fear of loss of control over content of which institutions are traditional guardians and guarantors, growing external pressure to evidence usefulness and user engagement, employing matrices mostly devised with an analogue mindset (Russo and Peacock, 2009; Bray, *et al*, 2011), the coexistence within institutions of an uneven mix of expertise in, and familiarity with, online practices, and also of different perspectives on digitality which are not always openly articulated. All these elements, combined, can lead to practices which, while employing digital media, might not engage fully with the opportunities which these offer.

As well as cultural and political, there are also barriers of a more conceptual nature arguably facing heritage practitioners grappling with the issues raised by an emerging digital culture. As they endeavor to combine the demands of their public mandate with digital experimentation and innovation, coherent analyses of the meaning and implications of these developments are hampered by the sheer number of questions and issues which they raise. Before attempting to address these questions, an important challenge for institutions lies in establishing how these questions should be approached and framed in the first place.

## **2. A Conceptual Framework**

Extrapolating from findings from empirical explorations of experiences of digitality in cultural heritage contexts, the thesis addresses this complexity by proposing a dynamic conceptual framework that institutions might use to examine and re-assess their online practices, intellectual positioning and strategic ambitions in the context of the paradigm shift brought about by the digital.

The particular usefulness of such a conceptual framework lies, arguably, not in offering specific solutions to the many questions facing heritage practitioners and scholars grappling with an emerging digital culture, rather in encouraging a rethink of how institutions might frame the discourse around digital practices, both at a local and strategic level, from a perspective of transformation.

More specifically, the framework provides a tool for a guided re-assessment of the nature and purpose of the digital environments which institutions create and inhabit or with which

they temporarily interface; of the intended role for the heritage content placed within existing and new virtual environments; of institutional perceptions of users' motivation to participate in the digitally mediated experience they support; of the relationship unfolding in the new spaces between participants and the institution; and, importantly, of the institution's interpretation of the ultimate purpose and value of the experience of engagement with heritage content in the context of an emerging digital culture.

### **3. The Research Context**

The thesis draws on research carried out in the context of a collaborative doctoral award born from a partnership between the School of Education at the University of Edinburgh and the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS), under the umbrella of the AHRC *Beyond Text* research programme (AHRC, 2007).

Established in Edinburgh by Royal Warrant in 1908, RCAHMS is an executive non-departmental government body which for over a hundred years has been charged with the task of recording, interpreting and sharing information on the architectural, industrial, archaeological and maritime heritage of Scotland (RCAHMS, 2010a). RCAHMS is a complex heritage organization: it is an archive which hosts a national record; it has an active survey and recording function; it is a museum, in that it holds collections which, on occasion, are put on display. RCAHMS also has an active education and outreach programme, and its own publishing arm with a catalogue of specialist as well as mass-market publications.

In recent years RCAHMS has been involved in a range of online initiatives aimed at sharing its content with the public through digital media. As the non-academic partner in this doctoral project, in 2008 the institution opened its online activities to practical and theoretical scrutiny, keen to gain insights into the significance and implications of digital innovation for its role and practices as a cultural heritage body. This decision enabled me to conduct my investigation of the topics under study through an exploration and problematization of the online experiences of RCAHMS.

The research involved the application of ethnographic methods to the investigation of embodied and virtual settings. Research activities included a review of online initiatives at RCAHMS, including a virtual ethnography of its digital archive, and an ethnographic study of RCAHMS aimed at capturing the features of the institutional discourse around digital innovation. Also, motivated by an interest to broaden the field of enquiry to different approaches and implementations, the research took the exploration beyond RCAHMS' specific experiences, and contrasted findings from the RCAHMS' study with an analysis of alternative experiences of engagement with heritage content online, in particular through a study of user engagement on the *Commons* on Flickr.

#### **4. A Summary of Content**

The thesis begins with a discussion, in Chapter 2, of theoretical interpretations of digital culture. Drawing in particular from the work of Hand (2008) and Poster (2001, 2006), it sketches out a general trajectory around which social and cultural theories of the Internet have been unfolding over the last few decades. The discussion provides a context for a consideration, in the second part of the chapter, of how the so called 'digital turn' (p. 9) might be informing museum theory and practice at a particular time of re-assessment of heritage institutions' cultural and educational role. In particular, in the context of a reflection on how museum and archive practice may be problematized by an emerging digital culture, a number of questions are identified as worth asking. Inspired by these questions, three potential paradigm shifts are foregrounded as especially relevant to an analysis of museums' experiences of digital innovation from a perspective of transformation. It is through this theoretical lens that the findings from the empirical explorations conducted in the course of the research are examined in subsequent chapters.

In Chapter 3 I position myself as a researcher in terms of my epistemological and ontological perspectives which I locate within constructionist positions, not least because of a particular attention to the role of language in constituting reality. This focus on language also resonates with postmodernist perspectives, as does my interest in observing 'changing ways of thinking' and in studying 'turning points, or problematic situations in which people find themselves during transition periods' (Creswell, 2007, p. 25), such as those which today face heritage institutions grappling with an emerging digital culture. In the second part of the chapter I describe the research activities carried out over a period of two and a half

years to pursue the questions under study. I then explain and discuss the methodology and methods employed in these activities. These involved the application of ethnographic methods to the investigation of embodied and virtual settings, within and outside RCAHMS' experiences. Chapter 3 concludes with a discussion of ethical issues raised by the different components of the research.

Chapter 4, 5 and 6 report on and discuss findings from the three different sets of research activities conducted for the study. Each chapter provides a detailed account of the approach to the enquiry adopted in each activity or set of activities, and the methods employed, complementing the discussion of methodology in Chapter 3.

More specifically, Chapter 4 presents and discusses findings from a virtual ethnography of the *Commons* on Flickr, an initiative which was launched shortly before I began the doctoral research, and which involves an innovative approach to online public engagement with heritage collections.

Findings from the exploration of the *Commons* experience set the scene, conceptually, for the subsequent study and discussion, in Chapter 5, of user experiences in and around *Canmore*, RCAHMS' digital archive, which in 2009 was open to public contributions.

In Chapter 6 the findings from the analysis of *Canmore* and its problematization through the study of the *Commons* on Flickr are located in RCAHMS' wider discourse on digitality as captured through an ethnographic study of the institution. This was conducted over a period of two and a half years. More specifically, in the chapter I report and discuss findings from an analysis of RCAHMS' corporate literature and of texts from staff interviews, and from field notes gathered in the course of my association with the institution.

Finally, in Chapter 7 I step back from the specificity of the particular contexts examined to offer a theoretical reflection inspired by the research. In particular, I extrapolate from the contexts examined different models of online participation and engagement with and around cultural heritage content. I then consider and discuss a set of conceptual dimensions which I see as emerging from, and encapsulating, the different tendencies and tensions encountered in the investigations of the experiences under study. I offer these dimensions as a conceptual



framework and analytical tool to assist in structured re-assessments of institutional online practices and strategic approaches. The chapter concludes with a brief review of some of RCAHMS' early and more recent online initiatives, examined through the analytical framework which the research helped to construct.

Chapter 8 concludes the thesis with a reflection on its merits, its weaknesses, and with recommendations for further research.

## **5. An Observation on Terminology**

It is important to note that in the thesis I often use the term 'museum' as short-hand to refer to museums, galleries and public archives. I believe that this is appropriate in the context of this work as, while I focus on RCAHMS' practices and experiences, the themes and questions I engage with are not specifically related to a particular type of cultural heritage institution.

Museums, galleries and archives are, of course, different in kind and include different types of organizations; they do, however, share a lasting concern with notions of memory, authenticity and, now perhaps more than ever, access. These are concepts which are of great relevance to the discussion of culture in the digital age. Together with other equally important themes, it is with these concepts, rather than more specific aspects of particular institutional concerns, that this study engages.

On this aspect it may be also worth noting that RCAHMS' composite institutional identity, which encompasses an unusual range of different functions and a varied usership, is ultimately productive rather than problematic in the context of this piece of research, as it lends a complexity which usefully contributes to the blurring of established functional roles, allowing the exploration to be, at once, specific and generic.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Digital Culture and Museums**

This thesis explores the implications of digitization and online networking practices for cultural heritage institutions. Relevant to a coherent exploration of these topics are, first, an understanding of the cultural context within which museums operate today in terms of wider perceptions, assumptions, practices and expectations relating to the Internet and digitality; second, the identification of a suitable and meaningful analytical framework to guide the investigation.

I begin this chapter by sketching out a general trajectory around which social and cultural theories of the Internet have been unfolding over the last few decades. For this I draw from Hand (2008), who provides a useful perspective on, and critique of, such theories. At the same time, I also reflect on some important themes which emerge from these debates and which seem particularly significant for, and relevant to, the topics of this thesis. For this I draw especially from Poster (2001, 2006) whose perspective on the Internet and digitality strikes me as especially useful and pertinent to my own exploration. My aim is, ultimately, to provide a meaningful context for an exploration of how the so called ‘digital turn’ (p. 9) might have informed, and continue to inform, museum theory and practice. This is discussed in the second part of the chapter where I explore the features of the discourse around digitization and the Internet in the specific context of cultural heritage practice.

As well as providing an overview of the scholarly discourse around the digital and museums, in this chapter I also lay the foundations for a theoretical and methodological perspective for this doctoral research project, for which I am, again, indebted to Hand and Poster. I sketch this out at the end of this chapter, ahead of more specific methodological considerations which I articulate and discuss in Chapter 3.

#### **1. Narrating the Internet**

The theoretical debates which have accompanied in the last few decades the rise of the Internet and the emergence of a new digital culture have been unfolding against a

background of transformation which is of a material as well as of a narrative kind (Hand, 2008, p. 17). This transformation has involved a gradual but irreversible move away from the tangible, visible hardware of technoculture towards the almost invisible and ubiquitous infrastructure of digital culture, especially as now afforded by web 2.0 applications; it has also stimulated a narrative shift in the scholarly focus on the digital increasingly acknowledged as culturally significant (Hand, 2008, *ibid.*).

Digitality, or the condition of living in a digital culture, has become recognized as ‘a marker of culture’, one which encompasses both the artefacts and the systems of signification and communication that characterize our way of life today (Gere, 2002, p. 12). In some quarters, this shift of scholarly focus is referred to as ‘digital turn’, an expression which remains somewhat undetermined and usefully complex: it acknowledges the cultural importance of digitality and, at the same time, it locates its analysis within post-structuralist and post-modernist traditions which, moving beyond the idea of the Enlightenment subject, privilege a notion of the constructed subject and the centrality of language in the process of that construction. This is a perspective which, as I discuss in this chapter, broadly informs this doctoral study.

Internet studies have been characterized, according to Hand, by three main overlapping ‘waves’ (Hand, 2008, p. 17). First, there was an inclination to conceive the newly-born cyberspace as a separate locus for a new, autonomous form of culture calling for reflections on wider economic, political or sociological implications. Gradually, this trend became complemented by what Hand refers to as ‘bottom-up’ explorations of different uses of digital culture in specific contexts, focusing in particular on the features and properties of technological devices, and on their role in determining practice (Hand, 2008, *ibid.*). More recent efforts have also focused on studying contextualized experiences, viewing these, however, less in terms of technology’s capabilities and more as ‘processes of convergence and ubiquity’ to be examined from a variety of angles (Hand, 2008, p. 18), exploring the ‘rather uneasy alliances between analogue and digital objects, practices and processes’ (Hand, 2008, p. 1). It is, indeed, this latter perspective which is especially relevant to this thesis, which is informed by research conducted in the context of specific institutional experiences, namely those of RCAHMS.

More generally, it is interesting to note how the discourse around digital culture throughout the decades of scholarly research has been characterized, overall, by opposing interpretations of the Internet in terms of how it may benefit culture or, conversely, harm it, or what Hand refers to as alternating and competing ‘narratives of promise and threat’ (Hand, 2008, p. 15). In other words, forms of network idealism, or celebratory positions which have interpreted digital developments as unconditionally positive as well as revolutionary have been consistently met with equally strong dystopian counterarguments.

Early positive interpretations of the Internet tended to cast cyberspace as an autonomous cultural sphere defined in terms of its difference from embodied reality (Rheingold, 1994; Dyson, 1998; Dreyfus, 2001). This perspective saw in the formation of communities independent of geography an opportunity for a new autonomy for culture through a democratized model of communication able to circumvent the traditional institutions of governance. At the positive end of the interpretative spectrum there is recognition, even celebration, of a new, global information culture as now enabled by Internet communications: previously local, temporal and spatial boundaries are transformed, and from this, it is argued, stems an inevitable process of re-organization of modern society, which translates into new possibilities for freedom, equality and democracy.

Conversely, at the opposite end of the spectrum the web is unmasked as potentially treacherous and as fundamentally reinforcing the dominant structures of global capitalism through more granular penetration, manipulation and control. From here stem warnings about the dangers of cyberspace seen not as a liberating space, rather as a potentially isolating and elitist cultural environment. Castells, for example, refers to cyberspace as ‘the space of the upper tier’ (Castells, 1989, p. 228), distinct from highly segmented, often ethnically based, local networks, which must rely on their specific identity as the most valuable resource to defend their interests and, ultimately, their being. From this perspective, as Bauman (2003) puts it, one might see the rise of

two segregated and separate life-worlds... The secession of the new global elite from its past engagements with ‘the people’, and the widening gap between the *habitats* of those who seceded and those left behind...

(Bauman, 2003, p. 17, italics in the original)

These concerns are echoed in more recent discussions of the potential dangers of digitality. Mayo and Steinberg (2007), for example, observe that albeit digital exclusion must be recognized as different from social exclusion, people who suffer from the latter in situations of unemployment and discrimination tend to be also excluded from the digital experience. These situations of deep-rooted social deprivation need to be confronted whether the Internet exists or not; however, the question remains as to whether, while highly empowering to some, in certain circumstances, the digital divide might be further exacerbating the condition of the less privileged.

Similar oppositions of celebratory versus alarmed readings continue to be found in more recent interpretations of digitality, especially in the light of web 2.0 developments and the widespread use of social media, where users are increasingly involved in creating web content as well as consuming it (Beer and Burrows, 2007). Here, as a focus on cyberspace as a different cultural place gradually fades, questions around the web's uniquely granular, connective qualities take centre stage in the debates.

Social media, some argue, are a 'participatory sport', and this new connectivity means that we can all tap into and join in the global flow (Dawson, 2002). Through its interactive applications, the web is, indeed,

extending our collective senses to tens of millions of people around the world who can all report on whatever they are seeing, making that available to anyone on the planet.

(Dawson, 2002, p. 13)

Furthermore, we can now create customized web-based environments that explicitly support our social, professional and learning activities through free and really simple tools and applications. The web is now personal, suited to our needs, tastes and habits. And the range and richness of feedback mechanisms online seems to motivate people to keep on giving, sharing and participating (Hobsbawm, 2009).

The ability to share, and share in, both the mundane detail of everyday living and our most passionate views on anything contributes to what, as Thomson notes (2008), social scientists refer to as 'ambient awareness'. This is,

very much like being physically near someone and picking up on his mood through the little things he does — body language, sighs, stray comments — out of the corner of your eye.

(Thomson, 2008, p. 2)

A kind of social warmth, it is claimed, emanates from this strangely satisfying glimpse into other people's daily routines (Johnson, 2009), a comfortable, if perhaps at times unsettling, experience, which is nevertheless emotionally meaningful.

The potentially revolutionary quality of these experiences lies, in the view of these commentators, in the unprecedented accessibility and nimble quality of technology. Technology is now so easy to handle that it genuinely is within everybody's reach; as Shirky observes (2008), it is not anymore a case of a message being broadcast for an audience, rather one of people actively constructing new environments which can be ubiquitous, as well as easy and inexpensive to create. Indeed, thanks to the latest tools and to what people are doing with them, 'we may well be living through the largest increase in human expressive capabilities ever' (Shirky, 2009). As long as some basic conditions are met, Shirky argues, collaborative online experiences can, indeed, be successful. These conditions assume that participative experiences are based on a 'plausible promise', making it clear why anybody should take part, an 'effective tool' to manage the difficulties of coordination, and an 'acceptable bargain' between those involved in the action (Shirky, 2008, p. 260).

However, these positive readings are met, again, with warnings about the problematic nature of such highly connective technologies. These warnings stem from a variety of concerns. For example, alarm is raised about the arguably relentless and intrusive nature of social media which, for some, are invading social spaces to such an extent as to seriously threaten our ability to relate to each other in the way we were able to do through embodied practices. As Turkle observes,

we have put in place a powerful technology and have not learned to use it in the best way... It is still up to us to make and shape it ... We need to form a more empowering partnership with it.

(Turkle, 2011, no page)

Concerns also persist about possible long-term negative effects which the use of social media might have on people's intellectual faculties, liable to be dulled as the ability for deep reflection, allegedly afforded by earlier technologies such as print, is gradually lost (Carr, 2008, 2010).

From a political perspective, we are also alerted to insidious new forms of complacency likely to result from an over-reliance on Internet activism such as online petitioning, information sharing and denouncing which are, some warn, dangerously less effective than it is often claimed (Morozov, 2011).

Contrasting narratives such as the ones exemplified above can function as useful discursive devices, often raising interesting and pertinent questions. At the same time, they also risk framing the analysis of digitality in a polarity which is not always conceptually helpful.

From this perspective, in this thesis, rather than in a reflection on potential benefits or dangers brought about by an emerging digital culture to the cultural contexts and phenomena under study, I am more interested in exploring common notions and themes which recur in the ongoing analyses of the Internet, and consider their relevance to the particular contexts under study, namely heritage institutions, their cultural role and practices in the media age.

## **1.1 In the Hands of the User**

Hand (2008) usefully identifies a number of recurring concepts, ideas and thematic threads around which, in his interpretation, the different narratives about the digital have been unfolding. First, he highlights what he refers to as

a cultural preoccupation with, and great disagreement about understandings of access to digital culture, what is meant by interactivity, and how notions of authenticity are problematized in digital cultural life.

(Hand, 2008, p. 19)

These are indeed concepts which, as we will see, emerge as highly relevant to a study of museums and digitality.

Hand also usefully foregrounds some recurring themes around which discussions of digital culture have clustered. These relate to the fluid quality of the circulation of digital information around the globe; the nature and texture of the new online territories; and new participation dynamics which are afforded within these territories. In Hand's analysis, these themes respectively evoke discussions of deep transformations in social and cultural organization, of new relations between people and environments, and the rise of new kinds of subjects within changing relations of power (Hand, 2008, pp. 18-19).

It is in Poster's analysis of the Internet (2001, 2006) that these themes are discussed in ways which are particularly persuasive. On the Internet, Poster notes, 'texts, images and sounds... are as fluid as water and simultaneously present everywhere' (Poster, 2006, p. 24). Consequently, in digital environments structure becomes replaced by flow, state with network and a hierarchical knowledge with horizontal information, as digital cultural objects circulate through information networks. These dynamics constitute a break from a hierarchical model typical of modernity and print which was based on production versus reception, encoding versus decoding, human versus machine. Within these networks relations of power, as Lash and Lury (2007) also note, are flattened, and culture ceases to be ideological, symbolic or representational and, now ubiquitous, it is liable to seep out of the superstructure to infiltrate and take over the infrastructure itself.

In other words, by diminishing the hierarchies prevalent in modern society, Poster argues, the Internet clears 'a path for new directions of cultural practice' (Poster, 2001, p. 20).

Poster also stresses the importance of conceiving the Internet not as 'a thing', rather as a space, a territory much as a real-life country might be (Poster, 2001, p. 176). This space is, however, fundamentally undefined:

Cultural objects – texts, sounds, images – posted to the Internet exist in a digital domain that is everywhere at once. These objects are disembodied from their point of origin or production, entering immediately in a space that has no particular inscription.

(Poster, 2006, p. 10)

A new type of object, Poster argues, emerges into social space which, 'structured through multiple contradictory practices', is 'overdetermined' and, at the same time,



‘underdetermined in the sense that it remains an invitation to a new imaginary’ (Poster, 2001, p. 18).

Interestingly for this study, Poster explains his notion of ‘underdetermination’ through the example of engaging with a museum object. In admiring a painting or an installation in a museum, Poster suggests, the viewer will be moved ‘by the sublime, the unrepresentable’ which is in the painting; or, by moving within the installation, she will instigate changes in lighting or sound thus forming the work of art while observing it (Poster, 2001, p. 18). However, when a work of art is downloaded on the Internet, depending on the programme used, it will be potentially liable to be altered, even reconstructed in many different ways, perhaps displaced into a text, or combined with other images or sound. As such, ‘the image on the Internet’ Poster argues, ‘becomes virtual in the sense that it only becomes actual through the countless transformations it undergoes as people copy it and change it’ (Poster, 2001, *ibid.*). Something different, in other words, takes place in relation to these objects in the new digital environments.

Poster is indeed persuaded that ‘there is something new in the world, and we are called upon to account for it’ (Poster, 2001, p. 12), not least in terms of the nature of the relations which can be forged online; and with Turkle (1995), he believes that the first step is to recognize that new media and humans constitute relations that are different from those of human relations with natural objects and mechanical machines on the one hand, and from human-to-human relations on the other hand.

It is important, Poster suggests, that we understand what kind of relations might be occurring and what forms of power configurations might be taking shape between individuals communicating within the confines of such territories. For an interpretation of such power configurations Poster draws from Foucault’s idea of individuals as ‘relays’ in a network through which power passes, rather than either inert or consenting targets (Foucault, 2002, cited in Poster, 2006, p. 37). In Poster’s reading, such individuals/relays are none other than today’s individuals/nodes in a digital network.

When media are deployed, Poster argues, individuals inevitably find themselves within a system of power relations; the subject is thus structured by media in the same way as it is

structured in language, not from the outside, rather in the communication practice itself. It is, therefore, essential to recognize what Poster refers to as ‘the constitutive character of media’:

a space that encourages practices that, in turn, serve to construct new types of subjects.

(Poster, 2001, p. 4)

By ‘subject’, Poster means the modern configuration of the self, which Descartes had expressed as the centre of the individual, separated from material objects and distanced from the world, so as to be able to exercise reason and grasp reality ‘as certain truth’ (Poster, 2001, p. 6). This subject is the cultural basis on which modern society was constituted, inextricably linked with print media which enabled the concept of the ‘subject’ to be born, to be strengthened and to dominate.

The modern subject, Poster maintains, is now rendered obsolete by the digital, whose underdetermined as well as constitutive quality allows for a deconstruction of the producer/receiver model of communication through fluid, many-to-many communication dynamics and networks; the possibility simultaneously to receive, alter and redistribute cultural objects; the dislocation of communicative action from the posts of the nation, from the territorialized spatial relations of modernity; the ability to establish instantaneous global contact; and the insertion of the modern subject into a networked machine apparatus (Poster, 2001, p. 16). From this emerges a ‘more completely post-modern subject... a self that is no longer a subject since it no longer subtends the world as if from outside but operates within a machine apparatus as a point in a circuit’ (Poster, 2001, *ibid.*).

In this perspective, which Poster is happy to refer to as ‘postmodern’ (2001, p. 9), there is no assumption of either an implicit emancipation of the subject or its inevitable de-humanization. The key idea is, fundamentally, one of cultural appropriation and transformation. As Poster puts it:

The magic of the internet is that it is technology which puts cultural acts, symbolization in all forms, in the hands of its participants.

(Poster, 2001, p. 184)

Together with the important themes it evokes, Poster's take on digitality is highly relevant to this doctoral study, whose main concern is, indeed, what may happen when cultural heritage artefacts in digital form 'fall into the hands' of users inhabiting the new online territories, and what the implications of this may be for institutions, for their objects, and for the individuals who come into contact with these objects online.

Importantly, to approach a study of this phenomenon from a perspective such as that set out by Poster will involve, inevitably, a rejection of instrumental approaches, more typical of modernist positions mainly intent on establishing how the Internet might help institutions deliver their traditional mandates or, equally, how these mandates might be undermined or threatened by it.

Rather, the focus of the exploration will be on how the digital might mediate a process of transformation of current cultural forms, in this case museums, their artefacts and their users, and how, as Poster puts it, 'new ones might emerge that do not necessarily improve the position of existing groups as they are currently constituted but that change them in unforeseeable ways' (Poster, 2001, p. 3).

Having said this, as Poster himself notes, 'technical forms are never "independent variables" but always inscribed in social and cultural processes' (Poster, 2001, p. 154, emphasis in the original). I turn to this aspect in the next section.

## **1.2 Culture and Technology**

While in my approach to the research I aim to steer clear of instrumental approaches to the exploration of the online experiences under investigation, with Hand (2008) I am also wary of 'the dualism of revolutionary change versus continuity' (Hand, 2008, p. 9) ascribable to the modern-versus-postmodern models of Internet critique which tend to both underplay locally specific dynamics of enactment and assume a 'definitive transition from analogue to digital culture' (Hand, 2008, p. 44). For some this transition is continuous with modernity, for others it represents a clear break with it; in the former case the unstoppable march of technical domination is seen as invading everyday life within its modern categories of culture and technology; in the latter, the interactive quality of digital machines is found to be

so destabilizing of such categories that an actual revision of our models of technology becomes necessary.

Seen in this light, both positions might be viewed as what Hand refers to as ‘forms of reductionism’ (Hand, 2008, p. 44), whereby a composite range of technologies is collapsed in one idea of technology, which is then analysed as separate from, or even in opposition to, the idea of culture. In fact, Hand points out, ‘the advent of digital technology, involves a ‘reshuffling’, inviting further reflection upon the very idea that there is ‘technology’ and that it is something different than ‘culture’” (Hand, 2008, p. 44, emphasis in the original).

On the contrary, the main feature of our technological culture is, Hand suggests, that social and cultural change is increasingly located within technologies and devices; and given that the range of technologies and devices which make up today’s social and cultural change is, indeed, so varied, and that culture and technology are now so deeply implicated, by evoking models of technology which are, in turn, essentialized or abstractionist, one risks either taking devices too seriously or ignoring them altogether, thus overlooking their varied nature and capabilities.

In other words, Hand suggests, interpretations rooted in a dualism of modernity versus postmodernity contain subtle forms of determinism, and as such they fail to take into account ‘the complexity and reflexivity immanent to sociotechnical processes’ (Hand, 2008, p. 9) and neglect to examine how specific dynamics may become locally enacted and what insights they may offer in terms of a wider theoretical perspective. This view has informed this doctoral study, which indeed focuses on experiences of digitality in a particular institutional context, also examining different combinations of technology and practice.

To define with clarity a theoretical and methodological approach to the study of digitality is, however, still somewhat problematic. Sterne (2006), for example, in his chapter on a historiography of cyberculture, notes how, while scholarly treatments of new media are becoming more nuanced and are now offering more robust descriptions of how new technologies are being integrated in everyday experiences, analytical categories developed over decades ago still persist (Sterne, 2006, p. 24). These categories are becoming crystallized, Sterne suggests, and need to be revisited; better accounts of the relationship

between cyberculture and the larger domains of culture, politics, media and technology are needed, and new methodologies must be developed which make an epistemic break with approaches likely to overlook institutional or personal bias.

At the same time, Sterne also recognizes that these are still early days for a historiography of cyberculture, and that at this point we are very much acting as ‘mirrors of our objects: as we take each step, we carry forward a history that we have not yet fully grasped’ and which ‘in part shapes our action on the present stage’ (Sterne, 2006, p. 18).

While such condition may not be a prerogative of the study of digital culture, rather a challenge historians are liable to meet when engaged in theorizing any contemporary phenomena, there is something peculiar, some claim, about the speed with which digital technologies are developing.

Beer and Burrow (2007), among others, point out the challenges of matching the pace of technological change with the development of a suitably robust theoretical framework. Their concern is that technologies which are endowed with important social and cultural transformative potential are becoming so quickly incorporated within the mundane realities of everyday life that, unless people remain alert to their broader significance, there is a danger that they might sink from sociological view.

Hand’s proposed solution, which I find convincing, is to move away from the essentialism and the abstraction of modern and post-modern orientations to theorizing culture and adopt instead what he refers to as a ‘non-modern’, ‘post-human’ position (Hand, 2008, p. 9).

Drawing from anthropological analyses of technology currently under way in science and technology studies, and in particular from Latour (2005), Hand refers to this ontological stand as ‘relational materialism’ (Hand, 2008, p. 63). This position asserts the idea of reciprocity between design and use and a mediator role for technologies and objects, whereby these operate as ‘inscription devices’ which inform use and practices and, as they are translated into different contexts, transform them. Such a perspective, Hand submits, enables one to sidestep the demands of the modernist-postmodernist dualism, and treat it instead, as we will see later, as a key component in what he calls ‘the materials of digital culture’ (Hand, 2008, p. 43).

There have been other important theoretical accounts which have focused on examinations of different uses of digital culture in specific contexts and on the recognition of the important role played by the specific nature of devices and technologies in determining practice. Manovich (2001), for one, is keen to move the focus of the analysis away from the economic, political and sociological concerns dear to critical theorists, and concentrate instead on the practices and conventions which emerge from the work of media designers and which structure the users' experience. New media objects are cultural objects, and they share some features, Manovich suggests, some specific 'principles' (Manovich, 2001, p. 49). There is, in other words, an invisible architecture of practice which determines from the outset what the user's experience will be and which must not be ignored if one is to understand the nature of the digital culture which evolves from such premises. Digital cultures must thus be accounted for through bottom-up analyses which take on board devices' features and follow cultural objects as they are created through practice.

This perspective, which Hand refers to as 'digital materialism' (Hand, 2008, p. 56), places the responsibility for making digital cultures very much in the hands of media designers and in the objects they create. However, while usefully recognizing an agency in the technologies and devices at work, and the influence of the designers creating them, I agree with Hand when he considers this interpretation as falling short of a wider examination of the specific nature and different qualities and diversity of both digital *and* cultural environments. These, Hand argues, should not be formulated as principles or abstractions; rather they should be conceptualized as 'outcomes of provisional arrangements, associations or 'hybrids' of cultural and technical elements' (Hand, 2008, p. 45, emphasis in the original). Importantly, as Latour suggests (2005), these configurations become explicit when direct attempts to reorder them are made or when, as he puts it, they come to be reshuffled.

The experiences of digitality which are investigated in this study are very much contained within a particular, bounded institutional culture, RCAHMS, and constitute the outcome of, precisely, a reshuffling of institutional practices and roles, at a time of change both of a technological and cultural nature. As such, a perspective which is sensitive to the full range of environmental elements, technological and cultural, is undoubtedly relevant to, and useful for, the development of an approach to the exploration.

Finally, consistent with a textual approach to technology, Hand also believes that the specific nature and different qualities and diversity of both digital and cultural environments are best investigated in the context of bounded institutional cultures, conceptualized

as more or less effective configurations of narrative ideals or positioning, objects and practices.

(Hand, 2008, p. 155)

This is because, he feels, there is no such thing as an unmediated knowledge of technology's capacities and its effects; in other words, technology and discursive power are inextricably linked (Hand, 2008, p. 61). Attention must, therefore, be paid to the ways in which the properties, meanings and uses of the digital are configured through the multiple rhetorics about digital technologies circulating within particular institutional contexts, and how technologies are dynamically constituted within particular contexts independently of ongoing efforts of standardization.

Ultimately, Hand argues in favour of a combination of a relational materialist approach with a textual approach, enriched by a contribution from postmodernist critiques. Such composite perspective, he argues, calls for an analytical approach 'that takes the narrative ideals, objects and users involved equally seriously and for an explicitly local focus upon whether and how' the materials of digital culture 'become arranged, enfolded and stabilized' (Hand, 2008, p. 71).

This approach translates into empirical analyses of how different materials, namely institutions' ideological positions, different technologies and designs and user practices connect, combine, jointly contribute, to the making of digital cultures. In this way, Hand argues, rather than being theorized as the effects of technical upon the cultural or the other way round, the digitization of culture is examined in the context of '*provisional and effective configurations* of human and non-human elements' (Hand, 2008, p. 73, italics in the original), in a dynamic combination of socio-political ideals, artefacts, people, skills and practices.

This approach has informed and guided, both in theoretical and methodological terms, my exploration of the experiences of digitality under study. Indeed, it is precisely on an

exploration of the experiences of a particular institution, RCAHMS, albeit contrasted with others, that the study is focused. This exploration, as I discuss in detail in the next chapter, involves a reading of institutional texts, where narrative ideals and positioning on digitality are inscribed; an investigation of the nature of RCAHMS' digital objects, its key online environments and artefacts; and a study of participation dynamics within and around these objects, in other words, its practices.

## **2. Museums**

The discussion in the first part of this chapter provided a reflection on digitality, both in terms of theoretical interpretations and in relation to an approach to explorations of its meaning and implications for cultural practice.

In the light of the themes discussed, in this second part I move on to consider what might be the particular significance for, and potential impact of, digitality on museums and their users. I do so by contextualizing some of the themes that emerged in my earlier discussion of digital culture within the museum discourse.

### **2.1 The Museum as Narrator**

For centuries, libraries, archives and museums ... have been the custodians of our rich and diverse cultural heritage. They have preserved and provided access to the testimonies of knowledge, beauty and imagination...

(Niggemann *et al*, 2011, p. 4)

As well as places of preservation, study and display, museums have always been also places of inspiration; in time, they have also become engines of cultural engagement and advancement, playing an increasingly active role in society. At the heart of such evolution has been a shift from a focus on the task of servicing collections of material heritage, to one of serving society by providing the knowledge it needs to survive and progress (MacDonald, 2010, p. 72).

The recent literature on cultural heritage reflects this change in perspective and offers many definitions of museums which are consistent with the notion of a role which goes well beyond one of collector, custodian and curator.



A recurring interpretation of the role of museums as found in the contemporary literature is that of narrator, weaving and telling stories through collections of authentic, unique objects. Each story, importantly, is arguably bigger than its parts:

Museums and galleries tell the story of this nation, its people and the whole of humanity. It is impossible to imagine how else that story could be told ...  
Museums and galleries are... a way for us all to see our place in the world.  
(DCMS, 2005, p.3)

Museums are, indeed, about history: a history of the objects they hold, guard and interpret; a history of the individuals who contribute to their holdings; a history of the buildings which contain such holdings; a history of the institutions, both private and public, which contribute to the common effort; and, importantly, a history of society, whose struggles and imaginings they reflect (Parry 2007, p. 6).

In Castell's words:

museums are repositories of temporality. They constitute an accumulated historical tradition or a projection into the future. They are thus an archive of human time, lived or to be lived, an archive of the future.  
(Castell, 2010, p. 431)

In this perspective, the task of the museum is one of collection, analysis and interpretation, of making sense of and, importantly, of validating historical narratives. In a way, as Anderson notes, museums both 'recover and recharge the past', becoming a space in which the nation can present itself as an 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1983). As such, as well as acting as historical archives and repositories, museums are provide their public with 'a personal compass for understanding history, culture and nature' (Anderson, 2007).

Undoubtedly, the value of a museum's cultural contribution lies in great measure in the quality of the artefacts it holds, in their significance in the wider historical and cultural context, and on the reliability of the information which is provided about them; in other words, in the objects' authenticity. It is on this shared value of authenticity that a museum's authoritative status ultimately rests, a value which also fundamentally legitimizes the institution's 'edifying position in society' (Parry, 2001, p. 102).

In other words, an institution's reputation, its authority and credibility depends on its ability to vouch for the quality and authenticity of its objects as well as on the way it expertly manages and controls the process of sharing them with the public. In this sense, as Anderson suggests, a museum can be defined as 'a framed experience rooted in authenticity' (Anderson, 1999, p. 1).

Parry even suggests that in order to attain authenticity and cultural authority institutions must act as

cultural freezers into which societies drop and trap elements of their world and experience, preserving them as best they can – a 'controlled environment' both intellectually and physically.

(Parry, 2007, p. 102, emphasis in the original)

In this perspective museums are, at once, a reflection of history in the making and a 'metaphor for the kind of society we have, and the society we wish to create' (Anderson, 1999, p. 34). They exist both inside and outside society, in some other dimension, embodying, as Foucault suggests

a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted.

(Foucault, 1986, p. 24)

Foucault's museum is indeed defined as a heterotopia, a space of difference, as well as a space of representation: a space in which the difference between words and things is put on display and made available for public contestation (Lord, 2006, p. 11). And while in the 17<sup>th</sup> century they used to be an expression of an individual choice, museums, like libraries, have gradually become 'heterotopias of indefinitely accumulating time', Foucault suggests, consistent with the 'project of organizing... a sort of perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time in an immobile place' typical of modernity (Foucault, 1986, p. 26).

From these composite perspectives emerges an intriguing combination of fluidity and fixity: on the one hand, a dynamic quality as museums collect, interpret, translate and narrate the past, the present and the future through their artefacts; on the other, a sense of temporarily

suspended animation, necessary so that the stories and the metaphors which they evoke are framed and presented in some coherent, understandable manner.

The question of how clearly told and, especially, how widely shared such stories are has become increasingly important in recent decades as museums' role and expectations about their cultural and social contribution have been gradually changing.

## **2.2 From Collector to Communicator**

As Hooper-Greenhill explains, over the last twenty to thirty years from 'expository spaces' tasked with collecting, caring for, and displaying those objects that symbolize people's feelings and hopes, museums have gradually come to be cast as 'cultural communicators', tasked with making their purpose and aims clear to users, and asked to evidence to funding bodies their wider social, educational and economic contribution (Hooper-Greenhill, 2004, pp. 557-558).

An important re-interpretation of the purpose and role of museums was proposed in the seventies and eighties in the context of a movement which came to be known as 'New Museology' (Rivard, 1984; Hauenschild, 1988; Vergo, 1990; Ross, 2004). Proponents argued for an idea of the museum as 'an educational tool in the service of societal development' (Hauenschild, 1988, no page), focusing on people rather than objects, on achieving social meaning by making a social contribution to everyday life, rather than prioritizing recognition or increased attendance (Hauenschild, 1988, no page). At the heart of the new museum is a focus on the satisfaction of audiences rather than the preservation of collections (Keene, 2005, p. 2). Museums, it is argued,

have a social, educational and cultural responsibility towards their public and for this reason special attention should be given to the satisfaction of the educational and cultural needs of audiences.

(Alivizatou, 2006, p. 48)

Institutions must abandon elitist or isolated positions and actively engage with the community where they are located, acting within a clearly-demarcated territory extending their reach to unfamiliar spaces and previously neglected publics within this territory (Hauenschild, 1988, no page). Informing this approach is a notion of an area's cultural

heritage not as resulting from scholarly interpretations, rather as originating from, and being maintained through, its community's collective memory. Visitor involvement and participation are key, and the nature of the museum's work interdisciplinary and theme-centred, focusing on continuing education and evaluation (Hauenschild, 1988, no page).

Building on the idea of the 'new museum' is the notion, a decade later, of what Hooper-Greenhill (2000) refers to as the post-museum. Breaking with the tradition of the modernist museum which for centuries had prioritized the presentation of 'harmonious, unified and complete' narratives through the display of the accumulated objects (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000, p. 151), the post-museum embraces the postmodern questioning of grand narratives, continuity and objective truth, to enable 'multivocality in terms of displaying artefacts and active meaning-making in terms of audience response' (Alivizatou, 2006, p. 48). In Hooper-Greenhill's words:

One of the key dimensions of the emerging post-museums is a more sophisticated understanding of the complex relationships between culture, communication, learning and identity, that will support a new approach to museum audiences;... the promotion of a more egalitarian and just society;... an acceptance that culture works to represent, reproduce and constitute self-identities and that this entails a sense of social and ethical responsibility.

(Hooper-Greenhill, 2007, p. 1)

Museums, in this perspective, become 'vibrant spaces of creation and discovery of new knowledge, fostering cultural diversity and constructive learning', engulfing 'diversity and dialogue' (Alivizatou, 2006, p. 49).

It was in the context of political change in the nineties, as Roberts (2010) observes in reference to the British context in particular, that this shift in the role and purpose of museums started to become especially evident. It was then, following the eighties' focus on managerialism and the importing of private sector practices and techniques into the public sector, that the original emphasis on museum collections and inventory control came to be complemented by a new insistence on high quality services and greater inclusiveness (Roberts, 2010), and 'the old atmosphere of exclusiveness and intellectual asceticism' gave largely way to a 'more democratic climate' (Ross, 2004, p. 85). These were different times in a number of ways, as Anderson explains:

we live now in a time of changing paradigms: from communicating to [that is, at] the public, to inviting their contribution; from a concept of excellence that is focussed on product [that is, the object] to excellence of process and experience as well as product; from giving prominence to ‘cool’, intellectual spaces to mixing ‘hot’ lived as well as ‘cool’ spaces; from directing to enabling; from linearity to multiplicity; from concern with the profession to concern with the public; from what’s wanted to what’s needed; from site to network; from the conceived to the experienced; from public passivity to public creativity; from data and information to learning.

(Anderson, 2000, no page, brackets in the original)

These developments coincided with the introduction of policies aimed at attracting larger audiences and improving the visitor experience, as institutions’ performance was being measured in terms of their ability to reach out to and communicate with their publics.

This was also the time of the introduction of computerized systems to support a streamlining of procedures and networking, and the availability of standards and information systems (Roberts, 2010). Funding from external bodies for the development of content and access also became available and, with new projects and initiatives aimed at engaging the public, also the determination to know more about who museums’ audiences were and how best to tailor the offer to their tastes. Greater demands were thus placed on staff expertise at a time of change in outlook as well as in systems and procedure. Importantly, this was at a time where the role of the museum as educator became increasingly prominent.

### **2.3 Museums and Learning**

A focus on education and learning constitutes a common denominator to recent re-interpretations of the role and purpose of the museum; having said this, the ‘educational turn’ in cultural heritage practice has been not without difficulty (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007, p. 5). Faced with a lack of a clear understanding of how learning should best take place in a museum environment, until recently educational provision in museums was often found to be patchy or mediocre (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007, p. 6). And while the situation might have improved significantly in the last ten years through government planning and a significant investment of resources, notably in the UK from organizations such as the Heritage Lottery Fund, a more systematic effort toward theory-building and research is arguably still needed to understand and articulate more clearly the educational role of the museum today (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007, p. 7).

Broadly speaking, the way in which museums have been approaching and delivering their educational objectives in recent times reflects developments in pedagogy taking place over the same period of time in the wider educational context.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of this process has been a move from the transmissive approach typical of the modernist period that had traditionally informed the way in which museums communicated with their public, to what is referred in learning theory as a constructivist approach (Hooper-Greenhill, 2004, p. 567), whereby ‘the learning processes of the individual (the subject) are considered to be a more appropriate focus for learning design than the body of knowledge (the object)’ (Bayne *et al*, 2009b, p. 111).

In this perspective, learners are seen as drawing knowledge from experiences that are meaningful to them (Roussou, 2010, p. 249), testing ideas and applying them to new situations, integrating new and pre-existing concepts; they do not copy or absorb ideas from the external world, rather they construct concepts through active and personal experimentation and observation (Mayes and de Freitas, 2004, p. 15). Seen in this way, learning transcends the acquisition of a set of self-contained entities, to involve, instead, the development of a contextualized appreciation of these entities as tools, and of the situations through which these tools have meaning and value (Barab and Plucker, 2002, p. 170).

In the constructivist museum, like in the constructivist classroom, the institutional focus is shifted from content to the visitor/learner (Hein, 1995). From a practice perspective the implications are that, rather than exhibiting their material so as to reflect the implicitly true structure of the subject matter making it as easy as possible for visitors to understand what is being shown, museums instead offer multiple paths through the exhibits and a range of modalities for visitors to develop an understanding or, more accurately, to construct their own meaningful interpretation of the material (Hein, 1995, no page).

Over the years institutions have embraced such vision in different ways and to different degrees, developing hands-on exhibits, multi-media displays and interactive shows, and devising and delivering educational and outreach projects both on museums’ premises as well as embedding them in the community.

Inevitably, a push to promote what Roussou refers to as ‘edutainment style exhibitions’ (Roussou, 2010, p. 250) has been met with some criticism from those who see in these efforts an excessive convergence of cultural heritage institutions’ methods to those found in the entertainment industry (Anderson, 2005, Furedi, 2004; Citati, 2009) a trend which, on the other hand, also shows how museums reflect society as it stands, as well as it aspires to be.

## **2.4 Embodied Spaces**

If museums can be convincingly cast as evolving metaphorical constructs, self-authored through their interpretation of the objects they hold or, as more recently argued, as enablers of visitors’ efforts of knowledge construction through the meshing of institutional narratives with personal experience, they also remain very much physical entities, spaces which contain objects arranged in very specific manners.

The question of museums and their relation to physical space and the use of such space is important, especially in the investigation of their relation with digitality. As Parry notes (2007, pp. 82-86), having been born during the Renaissance within a culture where physical space and the abstract mental realm were profoundly associated, museums have been part of a culture which systematically constructed knowledge through space and expressed it in the shape of buildings, acting as frames containing and structuring thoughts and ideas. The modern museum should thus be interpreted, Parry suggests, as the realization of knowledge made spatial. However much as they might change, he argues,

museums today forever inherit and belong to this classical tradition – the tradition that entwined architectures of thought with the architecture of buildings; that created mental formations in the shape of buildings, and physical buildings formed by mental shapes.

(Parry, 2007, p. 86)

Museums are indeed physical places, buildings which are located within clearly defined geographical, cultural and social boundaries; spaces which, like any other, are ultimately defined by what they contain and, importantly, by those who frequents them and why. As such, they can be seen as safe havens, ideal gathering spaces for social interaction, neutral community spaces where people are offered opportunities for social engagement outside of

private or working life (Pastore, 2009, p. 9). Equally, museums are, as Ross points out, also inherently problematic,

a contested space where diverse social groups seek to assert a right to access and representation; to articulate social and cultural identities, against the long-standing monopoly of the elite, for whom the function of the museum arguably remains as allied to a legislative project.

(Ross, 2004, p. 100)

Barr, too, sees museum visiting as a complex process, a kind of ritual, the successful performance of which depends on the possession of relatively high volumes of cultural capital; cultural policies which aim to encourage visiting are most likely to succeed, she observes, with those people whose prolonged exposure to schooling provided them with the means of successfully decoding museum meanings (Barr, 2005, p. 103). In turn, such exposure to education is correlated with social class; and, as Duncan argues, ‘those most able to respond to the cues of the museum ritual are also those whose identities (social, sexual, racial) it most *fully* confirms’ (Duncan, 1995, cited in Barr, 2005, p. 103, brackets and italics in the original). What people see and do not see, in other words, is ultimately linked to broader questions regarding who constitutes the community, and who defines its identity.

The notion of identity is a key component of the museum discourse, and it is traditionally associated with received interpretations of history (Sandhal *et al*, 2011, p. 82). However, identity is, arguably, also a process of negotiation which in the museum turns out to be complex and problematic. As McLean suggests:

there are three layers to the negotiation of identity in the museum: the identities of those encoding the representations; the identities of those decoding the representations; the identities of those being represented.

(McLean, 2008, p. 283)

The nature and quality of the experience of engaging with a museum, its artefacts and narratives, how meaningful, relevant, inclusive or exclusive such experience might be, will depend, one might argue, on how these different layers of identity are negotiated.



### 3. Museums and Digital Culture

In the first part of this chapter a number of themes emerged from the discussion of digital culture. They concerned the special quality of digital environments and of new online territories of engagement; the nature of digital objects, liable to be altered, displaced and re-interpreted; new opportunities for meaning making; and new kinds of practices and relationships in virtual spaces. In the subsequent discussion, some significant features of the museum as a cultural figure were also identified and foregrounded.

In the light of this analysis, it may be interesting to consider how these different elements might mesh; in other words, how the features of digitality and museums as characterized in this discussion might come to problematize each other.

More specifically, this would involve asking how the smooth quality and fluidity of online spaces, privileging movement over destination, may mesh with the fixity of the museum's framed experience (Bayne, 2004; Poster, 2001, 2006; Parry, 2007), authenticated and delivered through institutional authoring; how the 'hyperlinked' (Landow, 2006, p. 2), 'anti-narrative' (Manovich, 2010, p. 66) quality of the web might problematize traditionally linear approaches to story-telling more typical of museum delivery; how the 'underdetermined' nature of digital objects (Poster, 2001, p. 18) open to re-interpretation within a global public sphere (Bayne *et al*, 2009b, p. 116) might unsettle notions of authenticity permanently inscribed in the physicality of the museum artefact; how the opportunities for new kinds of knowledge creation in cyberspace through collective meaning making and identity co-construction (Wenger, 1998, p. 149) might feed into, and also challenge, the role of museum education and cultural stewardship in the age of the Internet (Bayne *et al*, 2009b, p. 111); finally, how the permeability of online environments' boundaries across disparate social and cultural territories might affect a notion of the museum as a culturally defined container of meaning and knowledge.

These are all questions which, notably, cluster around the notion of transformation as brought about by the encounter of museums and digital culture, where access is re-negotiated, interactivity is re-interpreted and authenticity is challenged in a context of shifting power relations; these are also the questions which ultimately guide the exploration

of the experiences investigated in this doctoral study. Before I move on to these experiences, however, I foreground below what I consider to be some especially important features of such transformation.

### **3.1 Shifting Paradigms**

Digitization and online practices are only the latest stage in a long process of technological innovation in museums, with the relationship between cultural heritage institutions and computing spanning over two generations. The history of this relationship, Parry observes, is one of both ‘incompatibility’ and ‘compatibility’ (Parry, 2007, p. 138).

The modern museum, as a framed experience with its traditions of the ‘creative cabinet’, privileged the material world and ‘emphasised fixity and stability and the authorship and authority of the curator’ (Parry, 2007, *ibid.*). As such, Parry notes, it would definitely hold on to established institutional structures and would resist them being ‘reshaped by a modish technology’ (Parry, 2007, *ibid.*).

Conversely, the compatibility story tells of museums’ willingness to adapt and experiment in order to ‘assimilate new media, not just into their practice but into their very definition and sense of purpose’ (Parry, 2007, *ibid.*). Parry describes these institutions as prepared to be ‘accommodating’ and ‘tolerant’ of computers; some, importantly, might be even willing to be ‘recoded’ in terms of their role, function and provision, of the notion of object, visit and collection, even down to their construction of their authority (Parry, 2007, p. 139).

It is precisely along an axis which goes from tolerance to active engagement, from accommodation to transformation that this thesis explores the particular experiences under study, and the tensions which emerge as institutions grapple with questions such as the ones identified above.

Providing an analytical lens through which findings from the exploration can be examined are three important elements which, inspired by the questions identified earlier, I see as particularly significant at the confluence of the discourses on digitality and museums and, as such, relevant to an analysis of museums’ experiences of digital innovation from a

perspective of transformation. These are, more specifically, three potential paradigm shifts which concern, respectively:

- 1) a re-negotiation of the notion of user-centrality as traditionally understood in museum practice as new forms of engagement with heritage artefacts are enabled in online territories;
- 2) a ‘return’ to authorship practices brought about by new dialogical forms of discourse and new relationships in digital spaces;
- 3) the rise of new types of artefacts emerging from these practices, which mesh materiality and discourses and challenge traditional conceptions of authenticity and cultural authoritativeness.

I discuss each of these elements in the sections which follow.

### **1) Users and Territories**

As touched on earlier, in recent decades museums have embraced a gradual shift from a focus on objects and collections, typical of the modern museum, to a focus on the visitor and his/her experience or, as Bayne *et al* describe it, ‘a shift of focus away from object toward subject’ (Bayne et al., 2009b, p. 111).

Consistent with this ‘turning of the gaze away from the object’ (Bayne, 2009b, *ibid.*) in favour of their visitors, institutions have been striving to attract large audiences into their buildings to offer them engaging cognitive and aesthetic experiences. In this perspective, visitors are placed centre stage, while also ideally ‘displaced’ and captured in the museum space where they become enriched through an encounter with the collections and where the knowledge and narratives inscribed in the museum artefacts and territory mesh with their own.

It could be argued that when the museum, its objects and visitors come together in digital spaces, a potential displacement takes place which concerns not just the visitor, but also the museum itself and its objects, through new and different engagement dynamics. This does not mean that the notion of user centrality is abandoned; rather, that it is potentially re-

negotiated around a different idea of museum visitor and his/her relationship with the institution and its collections.

To briefly explore this point it may be helpful to take a few steps back and look at how the relationship between museums and the digital started, and how it has been evolving over the years.

### ***Back to the future***

As Bearman and Trant note

The artifacts and specimens that comprise the collections of museums are entities, with physicality, existing in three-dimensions, and objectively real. In the early days of the Web, our discussion centered upon the question of how best to represent these real things as virtual entities in online publications. Our objective was to make representations as authentic, as rich in data, and as easy to explore as possible.

(Bearman and Trant, 2011, p. 3)

These were the years of the first museum websites, where institutions, much like organizations everywhere, were busy creating enticing ‘online versions’ of themselves and their offerings.

The Internet was welcome, albeit with some hesitation, as a useful new channel for extending institutions’ reach to the public, supportive of their access-widening agendas. Institutional websites displayed information about the museum and its exhibition programmes; catalogues were becoming available online, so that researchers and academics could access material more easily and efficiently; and sample content was showcased. Increasingly, online activities were also developed aimed at delivering an educational experience for their public. All these developments helped institutions provide a better service to their audiences, enhancing the quality of their experience once they came to visit the physical place and its collections. Furthermore, new tools and systems were now available for measuring audiences and monitoring participation patterns, important for evaluation and accounting purposes.

By and large, museums' websites were rather literal renditions of how institutions saw themselves, fundamentally ancillary projections of the real thing. The results were inevitably mixed, as creative efforts were also complicated by the fact that people from different cultural backgrounds and with different types of skills and expertise, namely museum curators, administrators and IT specialists, were brought to work together in ways which were at times problematic.

As well as structural and procedural, there were also conceptual challenges facing institutions, as this period of experimentation with creating digital versions of themselves was characterized by polarized debates, typical of the time, on the value and function of 'digital copies' compared with the originals, and on the notion of a 'virtual institution' and its relation to its physical counterpart.

### ***The virtual museum***

The polarized discussions which for many years have characterized the discourse of digitality in terms of the original/copy binary have also surrounded the emerging notion of a 'virtual museum', and how such construct might enhance or, conversely, trivialize or dilute, the authority of the real thing. The usefulness of such discussions, however, was soon questioned by those who denounced the very notion of a 'virtual museum' as fundamentally flawed.

Newhouse (1998), for example, argues that too much tends to be made of the digital as a reproductive technology. If by virtual one means simply 'copy', she notes, the use of reproductive technologies within museums has a long history, which saw the idea of the virtual museum being explored and developed long before the web became a familiar tool.

Huhtamo (2002), on his part, traces the origins of a 'virtual museum' back to the 1920s, with the development of exhibition design as a new discipline (Huhtamo, 2002, p. 3). This was based on the idea of integration, where exhibits are no longer seen as separate entities put on display in any space, rather considered as integral elements enveloping the visitor who is thus encouraged into a 'dynamic relationship' with the space and all its dimensions and elements.

More radically, Giaccardi (2005) argues that, independently of any role played by information technologies, all museums are, in fact, virtual. Museums extract each object from an environment which, as their site of origin, holds some significance. The object is then transferred to a new site, the museum, in which the relationships with its original environment and time are recreated. Museums, are, therefore virtual entities, as ‘they collect pieces that work as a switch to ‘something else’; they constitute, Giaccardi reminds us, a ‘nonplace’, as Malraux had suggested at the middle of the past century (Giaccardi, 2005, p. 2, emphasis in the original).

Parry (2007) is also rather keen to move beyond what he refers to as the ‘hysterical polarization’ which has characterized the discourse about digitality for much of the last thirty years, in favour of a more productive exploration of the implications of new technologies and media for museums, their objects and users, away from the trap of binary oppositions (Parry, 2007, p. 61).

However, before more mature readings of changing participation and engagement patterns became possible, institutions had to tackle some daunting challenges which the digital turn was presenting them with.

First, the act of self-representation which was required of museums as they were creating their first websites inevitably called for introspection and self-questioning. Secondly, while the main purpose of all these efforts was, ultimately, to reach out to new online audiences, these were, and continue to be, very much an unknown quantity, a worryingly elusive and moving target.

As a result, while the shared institutional rhetoric in relation to new online opportunities was all about users and their needs, and on how digitization offered new opportunities for greater reach, connection and engagement, for a long period institutions tended to instinctively focus on what they knew best, namely themselves, as complex organizations whose primary role was one of custodian of valuable, authentic, physical objects. The result were very often websites which were rather literal and inward-looking translations of ‘the original’, reproducing complicated internal structures and using familiar symbols and traditional imagery.

However, with the rapid uptake and widespread use of social media and web 2.0 innovations, important changes were taking place in the very digital environments which museums were beginning to inhabit. It would be these developments, all about participation and connectivity, which would arguably force the focus back on the user, albeit in different and interestingly complex ways.

### ***Back to the user***

In their discussion of museums and digitality, Russo and Peacock (2009) argue that meaningful participation in social media space requires precisely a genuine move from an organization-centric view of online participation to a user-centric perspective. This, the authors argue, calls for ‘new methods for understanding the user experience and new ways of relating to individuals and the on-line ‘crowd’. ‘Individual user needs and behavior cannot be understood’, Russo and Peacock suggest, ‘through demographic or ‘technographic’ stereotyping’’. Rather:

Designing and sustaining participation in on-line environments in all its many forms requires an understanding of the complex dynamics of individual motivation, incentive and reward, as well as the processes of group dynamics. In the ecology of the participative Web, there are many different niches and interactions that sustain the system; many of these we are only just beginning to comprehend.

(Russo and Peacock, 2009, no page)

With Durbin (2003), Russo and Peacock see the idea of interaction that the participative web presents as something different, open-ended, ‘shaped more by the user than by the program presets’ (Russo and Peacock, *ibid.*). Therefore, in creating or contributing to social media environments, museums can no longer programme the outcome of the interactions around them or between them and the public. Rather, museums must realize that online spaces are ‘living systems’, an ‘*ecology of attention*’ (Russo and Peacock, 2009, *ibid.*, emphasis in the original), which they must learn to support by:

maintaining the right level of contribution, not seeking to extract too much and working thoughtfully with the other processes of that system; namely, individual motivation and group dynamics.

(Russo and Peacock, 2009, *ibid.*)

Designing for participation, Russo and Peacock argue, means ‘enabling rather than scripting the outcomes’, it is as much ‘an act of faith as a rational planning method. It represents and requires a ‘radical trust’ in the fluid, unpredictable and open-ended dynamics of community’; participation is about relationships, it depends on:

a sustained pact of mutual trust and reciprocity, rather than the pre-scripted and didactic communications more characteristic of museums.

(Russo and Peacock, 2009, *ibid.*)

For too long, Russo and Peacock observe, rather than understanding and nurturing the dynamics of social media systems, museums have been focused on what they themselves might get out of them.

In this perspective the web ceases to be a channel; the institution ceases to be the focus of the experience; users are not an audience anymore, unable to ignore institutional messages or agenda; they are not quite ‘visitors’ either, ‘honoured guests’ (Streten, 2000, no page), drawn to the recreational or educational elements of the experience and, as such, liable to be observed as subjects of ethnographic studies. Arguably, they also cease to be ‘consumers’ whose behaviour can be predicted according to the rules of behaviourist templates and the variables of market forces. Even the ‘client/citizen’ paradigm is challenged, and with it evaluations based on parameters originated in the social sciences and the education sector (Peacock and Brownbill, 2007).

In reality, some argue, there is no such thing as a ‘general visitor, no such thing as someone just browsing through the online collections’ (Hamma, 2004, no page), there is no ‘audience’ for websites, simply people who use the web for their own purposes. Hence, focusing on who these people are is probably pointless: instead, it might make more sense to pay attention to what they want to do online and the context in which they do it.

### ***New territories***

The perspective on digitality which emerges from the above interpretations fundamentally problematizes the notion of user and his/her relationship with the museum in terms of a shift in locus and mode of engagement.



More specifically, the idea of the visitor being granted access to the museum territory off or online, coming through the door and/or online portal to be stimulated, educated and entertained along pre-set pathways and through pre-programmed activities, is contrasted with a notion of user embedded in his/her social and emotional sphere, as that 'node' in a meaning-making network of connections which Poster usefully identifies (Poster, 2006, p. 37), liable to being reconstituted through the encounter with the museum artefact and narratives which, in turn, get re-interpreted, shared, scattered.

In this perspective, while the user remains central to the experience, this is in the context of shifting territories and social contexts. These are territories and contexts which museums are beginning to explore, as Bearman and Trant suggest:

Over the past few years, as the network has become a realm in which people live out their lives, the relationship between the Web and the quotidian world has taken on dimensions beyond the width, height and depth of 3-D space. Museums now seek to situate their holdings both in objective three-dimensional spaces - with geo-location - and in subjective spaces. We strive for the affective sphere of social links, the imaginative sphere of links to alternative realities, and the semantic/semiotic sphere of linguistic-symbolic content links. My museum, my collection and my favourites have meaning to me not just because of what they are, but because of who I am and who I am in contact with socially.

(Bearman and Trant, 2011, p.3, emphasis in the original).

The implications of such shift in access to territories, social contexts and discourses is what, among other aspects, this doctoral research explores, as it investigates different experiences of engagement with digital heritage artefacts in different online environments.

## **2) A 'Return' to Authorship**

A second significant development brought to the museum experience by digitality and web 2.0 innovations concerns a shift in the mode and style of self-expression. As Parry observes:

with the age of standardization and automation behind it (and the flagstone of interoperability in place), collections management today can with confidence (when appropriate) be unpredictable, inconsistent and personalized again.

(Parry 2007, p. 56, brackets in the original)

To understand better what this means it may be useful to look briefly at how the relationship between computing technology and museums has evolved over the last few decades.

### *The 'coding' years*

As touched on earlier, the seventies saw a strong push in museums towards the standardization of cataloguing standards, at national and international level (Roberts, 2010, p. 23). The emphasis was now firmly on documentation, collection management and inventory control, which were increasingly being supported through the introduction of external computer services. Driving these developments were a multitude of factors: the determination to make information more widely accessible to users and other institutions, calls for accountability and transparency regarding institutional holdings and internal organizational structures and, importantly, a desire for more granular and distributed control on content, free from a dependence on curators' personal knowledge, idiosyncratic recording strategies and interpretation styles.

As Parry observes (2007, p. 50-51), these developments translated into an important transformation in the epistemological structure of collections consistent with a system-oriented culture based on standardization and information and with the rationalizing discourse of an industrial production of knowledge. The personalized, nuanced object-oriented descriptions and interpretations of artefacts which had characterized the curator's day book until the last quarter of the twentieth century were now being made to fit into electronic templates where pre-set fields and codes would structure previously unstructured texts.

The triumph of the database over the curator's cabinet heralded a new era for the way in which meaning around cultural heritage material was being created, recorded and shared, with important implications for institutions, curators and users alike. Inevitably, such radical transformations caused, at times, resistance and tensions, as moves to achieve content standardization, homogeneity and transparency were seen by some as potentially stifling authorship and creativity, with structural flexibility overpowering stylistic flexibility.

It was with the spread of Internet use that the benefits of database organization became more obvious to all. Access to the data was now much easier, retrieval faster and interoperability genuinely possible. After the ‘drudgery’ of the coding years, the challenge now was how best to take advantage of such manageable data and reap the benefits of the transition to a database culture. This was a challenge which many institutions embraced with relish.

The task of finding innovative solutions which would fully tap into the new opportunities for re-mixing and re-purposing existing data was, and is, creatively and technically demanding. However, a perhaps more complex challenge facing institutions would be to understand and manage the implications of recent developments for the role of curators as content creators. In a relatively short time, the curator’s role had seemingly changed from one of researcher and author to one of collection keeper and manager (Parry, 2007, p. 26); also, the important job of communicating with the public was being increasingly taken on by staff in the new and expanding education and outreach departments.

It was at this point that things changed profoundly again with the advent of the social web and a fundamental transformation in communication mode which web 2.0 and social media practices brought about.

### ***From interoperability to conversation***

As Anderson notes, the advent of social computing has involved the transition ‘from an input-output era to that of a porous and continuous authoring environment, open to anyone regardless of background, education, or location’ (Anderson, 2007, no page). Indeed, thanks to new, easy-to-use authoring tools and access to digital environments both within and outside the confines of the museum, creative self-expression is now taking centre stage again. In other words, authorship is back, on the web, and in museums.

However, if social media environments allow for, indeed demand, authorial voices and personalization, they also, and this is entirely new, call for active engagement and social interaction. The nature of online participation is, in other words, fundamentally dialogical, involving in the conversation participants from any walk of life. For curators the quality of such engagement is potentially very different from that of the old days when it would take

place inside the museum, and where only its final outputs would be revealed to the visiting public.

The paradigm shift brought about by social media is, therefore, not so much a 'return' to authorship through a process gone full circle via the transition from cabinet to database, arriving again at a more flexible way of engaging with content. Rather, it involves both the recovery of the value of authorship and, at the same time, its problematization through the personalized and dialogical quality which characterizes communication in digital culture.

An important implication of this is the way it potentially changes the nature of the day-to-day job of museum professionals as they enter new relationships with the people who engage with their objects and collections in familiar, as well as unfamiliar, territories and social contexts. Anderson, for one, suggests that, in the light of an emerging digital culture 'the age of the monodisciplinary institution - and the monodisciplinary specialist - is over. In future the key to success... will be integration and ambiguity' (Anderson, 2000, no page).

In other words, faced with 'the inexorable march of digitization and its concomitant demand for rich content, easy access, and open source technology' (Anderson, 2005, no page), museums will keep exploring collaborative solutions, entering into new relationships with their publics. Instead of simply dispensing knowledge, museums will be expected to offer 'a gateway to involvement that begins with scholarly offerings and begins afresh with community editing' (Anderson, 2005, *ibid.*). In this scenario:

The model of the museum curator or educator standing in front of an object interpreting meaning for a passive audience is no longer realistic in a world accustomed to instant access to virtually any kind of information. More important to today's audiences is advice on how to find, interpret, and make their own connections with collections and ideas.

(Johnson *et al*, 2010, p. 4)

The role of the museum appears, without doubt, to be changing in important ways. A significant feature of such transformation involves, some argue, relinquishing some of the traditional control which institutions have maintained for so long, in favour of playing an equal role in new partnerships and collaborations. In future, some argue, museums might well act more like publishers and broadcasters, sharing platforms as multimedia organizations, whose authority will continue to matter as they provide a platform for an

international conversation but who are, however, willing to relinquish their role as sole authors (MacGregor and Serota, 2009).

To conclude, while the move to a database structure heralded a new era of institutional interoperability and the Internet provided the opportunity to share newly networked data and solutions with a wider usership, social media and networking practices on the Internet are taking the process further, changing the mode and quality of creative expression, enabling new forms of communication and supporting new relationships, in ways which, importantly, call for a clarification of what is meant by interactivity in the context of online experiences of engagement with digital heritage objects.

### **3) A New Brand of Artefact**

The final potential paradigm shift which I believe is worth foregrounding ahead of the exploration of the specific experiences under study is the potential transformation in the notion of cultural heritage content brought about by new forms of engagement and dialogical interaction online.

This transformation concerns the original museum collections, as objects can now be re-ordered and re-interpreted by the public; it also concerns, importantly, the quality and nature of the discourse and meaning-making around cultural heritage material.

From this, it is argued, a new type of artefact potentially emerges, one which encompasses the original object, new interpretations as it is re-contextualized and potentially transformed, as well as the digital traces of the dialogical interaction, concluded or ongoing, which unfolds around it.

#### ***Engaging with collections***

In recent years, people have been able not only to look at artefacts and collections on museum websites but also, increasingly, to become personally involved in the act of describing, ordering and feeding into collections (Parry, 2007, p. 55).

Museums have gradually become more comfortable with the idea of users making a personal contribution to their holdings, and more persuaded of the potential value and relevance of what is generally referred to as ‘user generated content’ or UGC. Indeed, as practical issues concerning the storage and management of non-institutional material are becoming less problematic and procedures are put in place to coordinate and streamline user activity, UGC practices, or crowdsourcing, are increasingly being welcomed as a way of strengthening the relationship between institutions and their users, of improving the knowledge and the quality of the interpretation of collections, as well as potentially raising the profile of institutions beyond their traditional confines (Ridge, 2007, no page). In the light of these developments, institutions are ‘reconsidering their relationship with users and the general public... both in the use of digital collections and how users can contribute to increasingly rich digital resource environments’ (Terras, 2011, p. 687).

Institutions have been especially keen on using digital media to create communities of so-called ‘online volunteers’, trusted groups of knowledgeable contributors joining forces with the experts. These practices constitute a relatively safe and attractive solution as, while taking advantage of the new media, fundamentally they reproduce familiar analogue models of public contribution to collections; indeed, while, technically, the challenges involved may be complex, methodologically they are not dissimilar to those which institutions have been successfully managing offline for many years. Importantly, these practices keep the museum at the centre of the interactive process, acting as an interface between users and content at the arriving point of a knowledge transaction. This allows the museum to retain control of the process as it manages its dynamics and outputs.

However, a problem which institutions have encountered is that the creation of vibrant, dedicated online communities, keen to help and spread the word enthusiastically, and inexpensively, is, in reality, rather harder to achieve than originally thought.

Creating a vibrant online community takes, as Bernstein notes (2009, cited in Reynolds, 2009), a lot of commitment and effort to realize; it needs, she suggests, authority, management buy-in and a whole lot of time and attention, and the willingness to change, rather than reproduce, familiar patterns. Now that expertise is distributed, Bernstein

observes, and that user communities have long term value, it is important to use the community, letting it take the responsibility for how to go forward.

Interestingly, Bernstein does not see the web as a place to pick up volunteers whom one then directs. Instead, she suggests, institutions must be respectful of the medium and embrace a process which demands personal involvement. Staff must be prepared to lose their anonymity online, blogs must be personal, authors must be named; at the same time, it is crucial to listen to the conversation and act on it, it is important, indeed necessary, to make mistakes in public, and learn from them. What is called for, in other words, Bernstein argues, is a new type of communication between institutions and users, based on dialogue rather than a transaction.

The question is that, as Durbin (2003) observes, relinquishing control over content and processes continues to be somewhat problematic for institutions whose authority is defined in terms of authenticity and validation:

for museums, interactivity and participation throw up problems related to expertise. ... As 'seekers after truth' can they allow inaccuracies to appear?  
(Durbin 2003, no page, emphasis in the original)

Having said this, Durbin continues, while not entirely comfortable with inaccuracy, educators:

might argue that the learning experience derives from process not output. In addition observation shows that the ability to express an opinion in such public spaces generates very high levels of motivation and commitment in visitors, which is a highly desirable learning outcome.  
(Durbin, 2003, no page)

A focus on the value of the engagement process, rather than just its outputs, is consistent with so called social theories of learning, which suggest that social participation and collaborative meaning making around shared objects of interest are conducive to the creation of new knowledge, as they support identity play and negotiation (Wenger 1998, p. 5).

In this perspective, the social web presents a powerful combination: the possibility for engagement with objects of interest and the opportunity of making meaning around them within new group situations. In this process digitized cultural heritage artefacts can play the important role of ‘social objects’ (Engeström, 2005) around which conversations happen, functioning as ‘key mediating artefacts’ and engines of different socially networked experiences (Conole *et al*, 2008, p. 188).

It is therefore important to reflect on the implications of different modes of participation and learning around digital cultural artefacts in terms of the opportunities they afford for dialogical interaction, identity construction and collaborative meaning making.

These modes of participation vary: they may involve museum users contributing to official collections using channels and tools designed and made available by institutions; or they may involve more serendipitous types of encounters between individuals and digital objects inscribed with cultural heritage meaning. Interestingly, Bayne *et al* (2009b) see the serendipitous aspect of the digital way of working as one of its most notable features; this involves:

the ability to stumble upon resources, to forge connections between randomly-encountered artefacts, to find ways of making creative sense of the rich turmoil of the digital collection.

(Bayne *et al*, 2009b, p. 117)

Such encounters, whether completely accidental or partly engineered, take place outside institutional boundaries, in different online spaces and within different social context and dynamics.

Importantly, within or outside the museum’s boundaries, all these forms of online engagement are liable to leave behind some kind of material trace, in the form of texts or new objects.



### *New artefacts*

As Poster observes (2001), when downloading the image of a museum artefact any aspect of it can be altered and displaced into a text, adding sound or combining it with other images. Indeed, ‘in the volatile and often anarchic nature of the network’, the digital representation of the museum artefact ‘has a built-in tendency to become ‘free’ of the institution which originally guaranteed its authenticity and status’ (Bayne *et al*, 2009, p. 111, emphasis in the original).

Such new type of artefact is a complex combination of different elements; it includes the object itself, as transformed from museum object to ‘social object’ and, as such, potentially transformed, re-interpreted, transplanted (Simon, 2010); it also becomes enriched with the textual and visual traces of the interaction which has taken place around it, or is still taking place. As Oates points out,

Dialogue around an object becomes an artifact in itself, and the way people imagine connections between objects often results in profound, original insight about relationships between things over time.

(Oates, 2009, no page)

Ridge (2007) includes in her definition of user generated content not only the material which is deliberately or explicitly created, such as comments, blogs, photos, videos, wikis, tags, or the relationships which are formed as people identify their favourite items; but also material which is generated implicitly, and which is only revealed through the analysis of website logs, search terms and user paths.

Key features of an artefact of this kind are, fundamentally, its un-finished, fluid quality, a product of that shift in territory and in expressive capabilities touched on earlier. This a complex artefact created through the confluence of different experiences and re-negotiated relationships, through dynamic processes which are not pre-programmed or unilaterally managed. It is indeed such movement or circulation of digital objects, Lash and Lury argue (2007), that characterizes their value, as

It is not simply that things move, but that their meaning and value is continually altering as a consequence of that movement.

(Lash and Lury, 2007, p. 7)

While such complexity should not claim to be greater than that of the original museum object, itself the result of historical negotiations and interaction dynamics, here the traces of such dynamics are potentially retained and accessible.

From this perspective digitization is a process which, if not more, is arguably differently bound with issues of authorship from its analogue counterpart, as it tends to give permanence to acts which only exist temporarily in the museum (Knell, 2003, p. 138). At the same time, while such traces are captured, there is a possibility of continuous collective re-negotiation which is, however, devoid of claims of immortality, permanence or endurance.

To conclude, through the opening up of museum narratives and collections to public re-interpretation and potential disruption and, importantly, through the practice of social engagement and collaborative meaning-making around artefacts within, and also outside, institutional boundaries, digitality and online participation potentially bring about an important, arguably paradigmatic, shift in the nature and notion of cultural heritage content. This involves the potential emergence of a new brand of heritage artefacts, not originals inscribed with institutionally validated meaning, rather an open-ended combination of materiality and personal discourses.

Such an arguably 'post-modern' artefact problematizes in interesting ways some fundamental aspects of cultural heritage meaning and practice as traditionally understood, in particular the notions of preservation, endurance and permanence and, most importantly, the notion of authenticity, which is at the root of that 'framed experience' which museums traditionally seek to offer (Anderson, 1999, p. 1). Indeed, in this perspective, as Bayne *et al* note, the authenticity of the original artefact and the conventional apparatuses which guarantee its value become 'matters of mere secondary concern to the user' (Bayne *et al*, 2009b, p. 111), as we are able to engage with 'a more nuanced definition of what constitutes the 'object' and its value' (Bayne *et al*, 2009b, p. 113, emphasis in the original).

As Sandhal *et al* suggest (2011), networking practices 'in a digitalized and globalized world' challenge museums to

move from epistemological approaches and exhibition practices that are grounded in an assumption that collections hold some kind of absolute truth, to a place where collections are seen as layers of accumulated knowledge in which the museum audience actively participates.

(Sandhal *et al*, 2011, p. 81).

An important issue relating to the negotiation of this move, however, is that of copyright restrictions on data and objects, and institutions' obligation to their protection and securitization in adherence to legal frameworks which reflect the analogue practices of the traditional museum. In the absence of valid alternatives, this inevitably translates into the locking down of users' potential to re-use and remix artefacts in the digital spaces where they can now be encountered.

These are important aspects which this study touches on, as it specifically looks at the traces and objects left behind by individuals engaging with cultural heritage artefacts online in different environments, both in the context of a structured contribution by members of the public to an institution's digital collections and archive, and through more serendipitous encounters between individuals and digital objects in environments which, as we shall see, are outside institutional boundaries and free of legal restrictions.

## **4. Conclusion**

In this chapter I set out to provide a theoretical context for an exploration of the implications of digitization and online networking practices for cultural heritage institutions.

The chapter began with a discussion of theoretical interpretations of digital culture, which, drawing in particular from Hand (2008) and Poster (2001, 2006), sketched out a general trajectory around which social and cultural theories of the Internet and of emerging digital cultures have been unfolding in the last decades.

In the discussion a number of recurring themes were identified as significant within the discourse on the digital. They relate to the potentially temporary, permeable and ubiquitous nature of digital environments and the fluid quality of communication dynamics therein; the underdetermined nature of digital objects, liable to be transformed, transported, translated, and re-interpreted; the possibilities for meaning making and identity construction within the

new environments and around pliable cultural objects; the opportunity for new kinds of practices and relationships emerging through such processes.

In the second part of the chapter I explored issues of digitality in the specific context of cultural heritage practice, at a particular time of re-assessment of heritage institutions' cultural, educational and social role.

I began with some considerations on the nature and aspirations of museums as contemporary cultural figures, drawing on a range of literature sources.

Consistent with a perspective on the digital as transformative, a number of questions were then identified as worth asking in the context of a reflection on how museum and archive practice are problematized by an emerging digital culture. These questions cluster around the notion of transformation as brought about by the encounter of museums and digital culture, where access is re-negotiated, interactivity is re-interpreted and authenticity is challenged in a context of shifting power relations.

Inspired by these questions, I foregrounded and discussed three potential paradigm shifts which I consider as particularly significant at the confluence of the discourses on digitality and museums, and relevant to an analysis of museums and online practices from a perspective of transformation. These concern, respectively: a changing notion of user centrality in the museum experience in new online territories; a 'return' to authorship brought about by new dialogical forms of discourse and new relationships in digital spaces; the emergence of a new brand of cultural heritage artefact stemming from the rise of objects in digital environments which mesh materiality and discourses.

It is through this composite theoretical lens that the findings from the empirical explorations conducted in the course of the research are examined in subsequent chapters.

As well as providing an overview of the scholarly discourse around museums and the digital and foregrounding a number of conceptual and thematic threads, in Chapter 2 I also introduced as part of the general discussion some preliminary considerations on research methodology.

In particular, drawing from Hand (2008), I declared a preference for a contextualized approach to the exploration of the themes emerging from theoretical reflections. This, I anticipated, will translate into a study of institutional experiences which looks at how narratives ideals are being articulated, at the objects which are inscribed with such narratives and ideals, and at the practices which they inform (Hand, 2008, p. 71).

The next chapter brings together the analytical perspective discussed in this chapter with further theoretical and methodological considerations, as it discusses the overall approach to the research, the focus of the enquiry and how this was carried out.

## Chapter 3

### Theoretical Perspective, Methodology and Methods

As discussed in the earlier chapters, this thesis explores the implications of the material and cultural shifts brought about by digitality to the experience of engagement with cultural heritage artefacts in online settings, starting from the assumption that digitization and networking practices on the Internet have a radically destabilising effect on texts, subjects and the act of meaning-making around objects (Poster 2001).

I set out to explore these topics mindful of their complexity and also, with Hand (2008), of the fact that particular ideological positions, different technologies, designs and user practices will connect, combine and jointly contribute to the making of digital cultures in specific ways depending on the particular institutional settings (Hand, p. 71). In this perspective, the exploration will be best conducted in ways which lend the analysis a local focus, remaining alert to the particular cultural environment in which digital innovation is taking place, not least in order to recognize and contextualize potential tensions and barriers, internal and external, which may stifle genuine innovation. RCAHMS, and its experiences as a cultural heritage institution grappling with the opportunities and challenges presented by digitality, provided such local focus for the investigation.

In this chapter I present and discuss my overall approach to the enquiry. I begin by positioning myself as a researcher, starting with a brief discussion of my background and motivation to investigate the topics under study. I then discuss the ontological, epistemological and theoretical perspectives which informed my approach to the investigation. This is followed by a description of the different research activities carried out, and a discussion of the methodology which guided these activities, of the methods employed, and of the procedural and ethical issues raised in the course of the research.

It is important to note that more specific aspects of methodology are also discussed in each of the three chapters which relate to each specific set of research activities, namely Chapters 4, 5 and 6. This chapter, however, offers a hopefully useful overview of what constituted a

composite and varied piece of research, and some reflections on some of the overarching issues which it raised.

## **1. My Background**

This thesis is informed by a qualitative research paradigm. Whatever the choice of methodology, it is arguably important that the way in which a researcher's personal experience is reflected in the investigative approach and how it might influence the interpretation are openly discussed (Richardson, 1990; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Creswell, 2007). The considerations which follow are made in such spirit of research reflexivity, seen as the researcher's awareness of being 'part of the social world that is studied' (Robson, 2002, p. 171). This recognizes the importance of extending the reflective and recursive process that is qualitative research to the researcher's own positioning in relation to the phenomenon being researched, whereby the researcher uses her own experience to introduce complexity into the process of qualitative methodology viewing the subject matter from different angles and mindful of the broader context in which the research project is located.

The research which informs the thesis draws on insights from a range of disciplines, including museum studies, education, internet theory and cultural studies. My own original academic background and professional career, located outside the fields of cultural heritage and education, bring yet another perspective to the research. I was born and educated in Italy, where I studied modern languages and literature and linguistics, and my professional career of over 20 years has been in the UK, in the field of bilingual and ELT lexicography and dictionary publishing.

There is little doubt that an emerging digital culture has been raising important questions for those operating in the creative and publishing industries. Now that, as Dawson puts it, 'you can tap into what any of a vast army of people are seeing and thinking, or contribute yourself to the global flow' (Dawson, 2002, p. 14), different forms of authorship and meaning making are taking shape, and multiple perspectives provide 'richer, more complex mental models and ways of thinking about the world' (Dawson, 2002, p. 17). As the traditional roles of author/editor, publisher/broadcaster, and reader/user are called into

question by the participatory nature of today's digital media and environments, concerns emerge which are, in many ways, not dissimilar to those found in the fields of education and cultural heritage.

My motivation as I embarked on this doctoral research was to try to explore the long-term implications of these developments for digital content users, institutions and content itself; implications which, I believe, call for more than a mere updating of tools, formats and channels, or the devising of new commercial strategies. As somebody engaged both in the process of content creation and strategic planning in my original area of professional activity and expertise, I was keen to conduct such an exploration moving beyond familiar contexts to investigate experiences in other domains which, under different conditions, are nevertheless tackling similar conceptual as well as practical challenges. This doctoral project offered a valuable opportunity for such a shift in perspective.

A further incentive to engage with the research was that, while mindful of important differences, in approaching the topics under investigation I also found intriguing conceptual correspondences between my own original area of interest and expertise and the cultural domains under study for this PhD, namely cultural heritage and education.

Lexicographers and dictionary editors are, in many respects, 'curators of language', in this context the artefact, which they capture, interpret and lay out on behalf of its users/speakers. In this perspective the physical, printed dictionary is comparable to the original curator's cabinet: within it words and their meanings or, in the case of bilingual dictionaries, instances of equivalence across different languages are laid out within templates designed to accommodate the constraints of the analogue display. Also, like teachers who, in an analogue academic context, arrange and present narratives around original content offering navigational and/or interpretive support within the structured containers that are courses and curricula, lexicographers too act as 'knowledge editors', providing users with a map to understanding and using language. Finally, across the different contexts, be it museums, universities or the publishing house, it is a strong brand which, as a testimony of an institution's particular history, heritage and prestige, ultimately lends authenticity and authority to the respective artefacts on display, and inspires trust in their users.



There are also interesting parallels across the different areas regarding the history of the relationship with computing technology. As the process of capturing, coding and standardization of linguistic data took up much of the energy and resources in dictionary publishing houses for the best part of two decades, I witnessed how, just as it was in heritage and educational institutions, the new vision of transparency, efficiency and interoperability of the database era were met with caution and resistance on the part of content creators and editors concerned about the way in which authorship and creative expression might be stifled by the constraints of new, often inflexible, templates.

Finally, and perhaps most intriguingly, the different areas arguably share the experience of an evolution in the figure of their respective user. As a new focus on the visitor-learner in the museum echoes the so-called ‘self-regulated’ student taking centre-stage in the education experience, similarly, in the field of lexicography, the role of the dictionary user has changed in important ways. This is because from a traditional position of reliance, indeed reverence, towards authoritative prescriptive rulings on what constitutes correct language use, the focus has turned on language usage as a source of normative patterns. In other words, dictionaries today set out to describe how language is used, rather than prescribing how it should be used. In this perspective, the language user gains a pivotal role and greater authority as an important source of evidence, as statements on meaning and usage must now be tested through the analysis and interpretation of linguistic patterns as identified in a variety of spoken and written sources, collected and stored in large electronic corpora for easy retrieval and investigation (Sinclair, 1987, 1991, 2004; Moon 2009).

There are, of course, crucial differences across these fields of practice which cannot be overlooked. These are mostly to do with the different accountability methods, funding models, performance indicators, and validation systems to which the different organizations are called to adhere. Having said this, as this study also observes, there is currently a convergence toward corporate models which brings institutions and organizations across the different areas closer than they might have been in the past.

While mindful of important differences, overall I found that, in relation to the topics and themes examined in this thesis, the conceptual similarities between the cultural domains under study for this PhD and my original area of expertise outweighed the differences in

ways which were useful and stimulating. Also, if a relative newcomer to the particular practices and experiences under investigation, I feel that, from a culturally parallel perspective, I have brought to the study the experience of playing, in different cultural settings, each of the roles under examination in the research, namely that of content author/editor/mediator and, indeed, user.

## **2. Ontology, Epistemology and Theoretical Perspective**

As Crotty (1998) explains, in approaching a project of enquiry, the researcher needs to establish, first of all, what methodologies and methods will be employed in the research, and then provide a theoretical justification for her choices (Crotty, 1998, p. 2). This involves the articulation of the theoretical perspective which lies behind the chosen methodology, and the ontological and epistemological assumptions informing such theoretical perspective.

If the clarification of a researcher's philosophical assumptions is, indeed, the starting point to any inquiry, then the making of 'these assumptions, paradigms and frameworks explicit in the writing of a study' (Creswell, 2007, p. 15) is a key feature of good research. This is what I attempt to do in this section.

This thesis works with data generated through qualitative research. This, Creswell notes,

begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens... qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is inductive and establishes patterns or themes.  
(Creswell, 2007, p. 37)

For the doctoral student, seen as a trainee researcher, the choice of a methodology, and the recognition and declaration of her worldview and consequent allegiance to the theoretical perspective which best represents it, is an effort which can be fraught with uncertainty; it is, indeed, a tentative and complex process of refining the understanding of one's own assumptions not only through the familiarization with established research traditions and methodologies as laid out in an extensive body of literature but, also, importantly, through

the actual experience of beginning to engage with the object of the research. As such, it is a dynamic process, involving doing as well as thinking, self-questioning and re-assessment.

It is after going through such a relatively 'messy' process that I now venture to state the ontological and epistemological assumptions which informed the theoretical perspective underpinning my research, and the methodology and methods which guided its design and execution.

Ontology is 'the study of being' (Crotty, 1998, p. 10). As such, it asks the question: what is the nature of reality? (Creswell, 2007, p. 17) Epistemology, in turn, deals 'with the nature of knowledge, its possibility, scope and general basis' (Hamlyn, 1995, p. 242). Hence, in a research context, the declaration of a researcher's epistemological stance is about clarifying her relationship with what is being researched (Creswell, 2007, p. 17).

A researcher's ontological and epistemological assumptions, in other words her understanding of '*what is*' and '*what it means to know*' (Crotty, 1998, p. 10, italics in the original), combine to inform the theoretical perspective guiding a particular project of enquiry. They also determine the choice of methodology and methods employed to carry it out.

Having reflected on these questions, I am comfortable with stating that, ontologically, my position is underpinned by a conception of being as fundamentally implicated with the forging of identity. Consistent with a postmodern perspective, I see individuals as born into ongoing discourses which structure the world and, at the same time, structure their subjectivity, providing them 'with a particular social identity and way of being in the world' (Alvesson, 2002, p. 49), as they engage in on-going dialogical interactions.

In this perspective, the existential question of self-identity becomes bound up with the fragile nature of the biography which the individual supplies about herself. As Giddens (1991) observes:

A person's identity is not to be found in behaviour, nor... in the reactions of others, but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going. The individual's biography, if she is to maintain regular interaction with others in the day-to-day

world, cannot be wholly fictive. It must continually integrate events which occur in the external world, and sort them into the ongoing 'story' about the self.  
(Giddens, 1991, p. 54, emphasis in the original)

In this perspective, the researcher who explores the world around her will pay attention to unfolding narratives and to possible clues pointing at the way in which individual and group dynamics are affected by modes of interaction, environments and shared objects; the focus of any investigation will be on utterances, discursive exchanges through social engagement and instances of meaning-making as opportunities for identity construction.

This perspective on being as an on-going construction of the self through interactive and discursive practices is complemented, in my approach, by a view on knowledge building which finds echoes in social constructionist positions.

Crotty (1998) defines constructionism as an epistemological perspective informed by the view that:

*all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context.*

(Crotty 1998, p. 42, italics in the original)

In a social constructionist perspective reality is socially constructed and meanings are, at once, objective and subjective. Rather than on 'the meaning making activity of the individual mind', a stand more typical of constructivist readings, the focus is on 'the collective generation [and transmission] of meaning' as influenced by the cultural context in which it is located (Crotty, 1998, p. 58, brackets in the original). Meanings are, in other words, 'taught and learnt in a complex and subtle process of enculturation' (Crotty, 1998, p. 79).

Another important aspect which characterizes constructionist positions, also differentiating them from constructivist readings, is a particular attention to the role of language and its function in constituting reality (Gergen and Gergen, 1991). Consistent with postmodernist interpretations, this involves a rejection of a representational view of language seen as

mirroring reality or the mindset of individuals, or having a universal or fixed quality. Instead, language is seen as precarious, fragmented and local, and language use as ‘active, processual and outcome-oriented’ (Alvesson, 2002, p. 63), fully context-dependent, not illuminating, rather itself calling for illumination and deconstruction.

This perspective resonates with my personal inclination towards an alertness to multiple meanings of language, stemming from many years of practice in the field of lexical analysis. Both as a language learner and lexicographer I am keenly aware of the fallacy of pursuing the elusive aim of identifying, capturing and conveying instances of linguistic equivalence across different linguistic systems. The complexity of the task of identifying absolute ‘meanings’ within one language, to then seek points of correspondence in another, reveals the fundamental mobility of the linguistic utterance and the instability of the context in which it is embedded. And while some degree of success can be achieved and functioning bridges are routinely established both within mono and multi-lingual contexts, the limited nature of such success is only too apparent to the language analyst and translator tasked with the building of such bridges.

At the same time, however, as Poster (2001) notes, drawing from Chow (1996):

when we translate we learn new things about ourselves, not simply about the other we encounter. To translate is not to copy an original, represent it, appropriate it as our own, or fail to do so. It is the chance... to enhance our experience of our own culture.

(Poster, 2001, p. 149)

Similarly, the work of the researcher through an involvement with texts and utterances will not lead to the illumination of absolute truths; it might, however, contribute original glimpses, worthwhile insights into the context under study, building temporary but useful bridges across different domains.

In my approach to the research work there has been no expectation of eventual truth discovery, of a lasting characterization of a cultural phenomenon, or grand theory; rather, a sense that from the investigation of contexts of engagement a flickering image might emerge of patterns of interaction as made possible by changing conditions, by new stimuli, as those afforded, on this occasion, in the virtual environments under observation; these are

environments where, in turn, language manifests through what Hayles refers to as ‘flickering signifiers’, tending toward ‘unexpected metamorphoses, attenuations, and dispersions’ (Hayles, 1993, p. 76).

By flickering image I mean no objective, if brief, mirroring of the external world, rather still a highly interpretative and interpretable capturing of some of its facets.

Such doubting that ‘any method or theory, discourse or genre, tradition or novelty has a universal and general claim as the right or the privileged form of authoritative knowledge’ (Richardson, 2000, p. 928) finds resonance with aspects of a postmodernist perspective, its willingness to embrace the indeterminate, the unfinished, the liminal, and its intolerance for the received, the adamantly stated, the dogmatic. Consistent with such perspective is also the interest, which motivated this research in the first place, in observing ‘changing ways of thinking’, in studying ‘turning points and problematic situations in which people might find themselves during transition periods’ (Creswell, 2007, p. 25).

The task of the researcher, in this perspective, will be that of offering a personal interpretation of ‘the multiple social constructions of meaning and knowledge’ (Robson, 2002, p. 27), setting any resulting claims within the conditions of specific group affiliations, mindful of hierarchies, power and control dynamics. Neither description nor narration can be seen as ‘straightforwardly representational of reality’ (Crotty, 1998, p. 64); the former is about reporting on how, within a particular cultural and social context, something is seen, reacted to, indeed, constructed; the latter is about the voice, or many voices of our culture, being heard through individual stories which, in a research context, include that of the researcher.

To conclude, sharing the ‘grave difficulties with the notion of an objective reality which can be known’ (Robson, 2002, p. 27), my approach to the research informing this thesis does not assume the existence of an underlying phenomenon which I aim to uncover; nor do I set out to generate a grand theory which I hope to extrapolate from the analysis of single specific events or of one individual’s personal story.

Rather, I remain interested in instances of participation by different individuals as they come together to engage with digital artefacts, with the institution which holds them, with each other. I see these as important opportunities for identity performance and testing, as individuals share an experience and construct meaning through interaction around objects. At the same time, I explore the institutional discourses surrounding the process of creating, or 'coming to terms' with, a particular digital culture in the making, as values and practices are challenged, as well as invigorated, by a re-shuffle of a technological and cultural nature.

### **3. The Approach to the Enquiry**

As anticipated at the beginning of this chapter, in this thesis I focus principally on the experiences of RCAHMS, whose 'configurations of narrative ideals or positioning, objects and practices' (Hand, 2008, p. 155) I investigate in relation to the opportunities and challenges brought about by digital innovation. As I also mentioned earlier, the investigation is framed around an exploration of digital artefacts and environments being generated by RCAHMS, the practices which could be observed around these, and the narrative ideals concerning digitality which could be glimpsed as emerging from the institutional discourse.

It would be accurate to say that in my exploration of RCAHMS and the way it engages with digitality I set out to 'describe how a cultural group works and to explore the beliefs, language, behaviours and issues such as power, resistance, and dominance' (Creswell, 2007, p. 70) in relation to the particular phenomenon under study. This is, indeed, Creswell's definition of the work of the ethnographer. To what extent such methodological label is appropriate to describe the approach to the enquiry pursued in this research project is discussed in the sections which follow.

Before moving on to these, however, I provide below a summary of the research activities which informed the thesis.

### 3.1 Research Activities

Work began in late 2008, when my non-academic supervisor for the PhD, Head of Education and Outreach at RCAHMS, introduced me to the institution and to relevant staff members.

From here a process of familiarization with the institution began. I was given access to project and corporate literature, I joined the institution's email, and was made aware of meetings or events which were relevant to the research. In the course of my association with RCAHMS, which lasted some two and a half years, I visited the institution regularly, followed online developments, attended project meetings and was able to observe discussions of new strategic initiatives. Throughout this period I kept field notes and recorded my reflections on the different encounters and conversations in a journal. More formalized research activities, beyond the gathering of field notes from visits and meetings, included a thematic and visual analysis of RCAHMS' newly published five-year strategy, which I also contrasted with the previous edition. This was followed by fourteen semi-structured interviews with RCAHMS staff chosen from different areas of the institution.

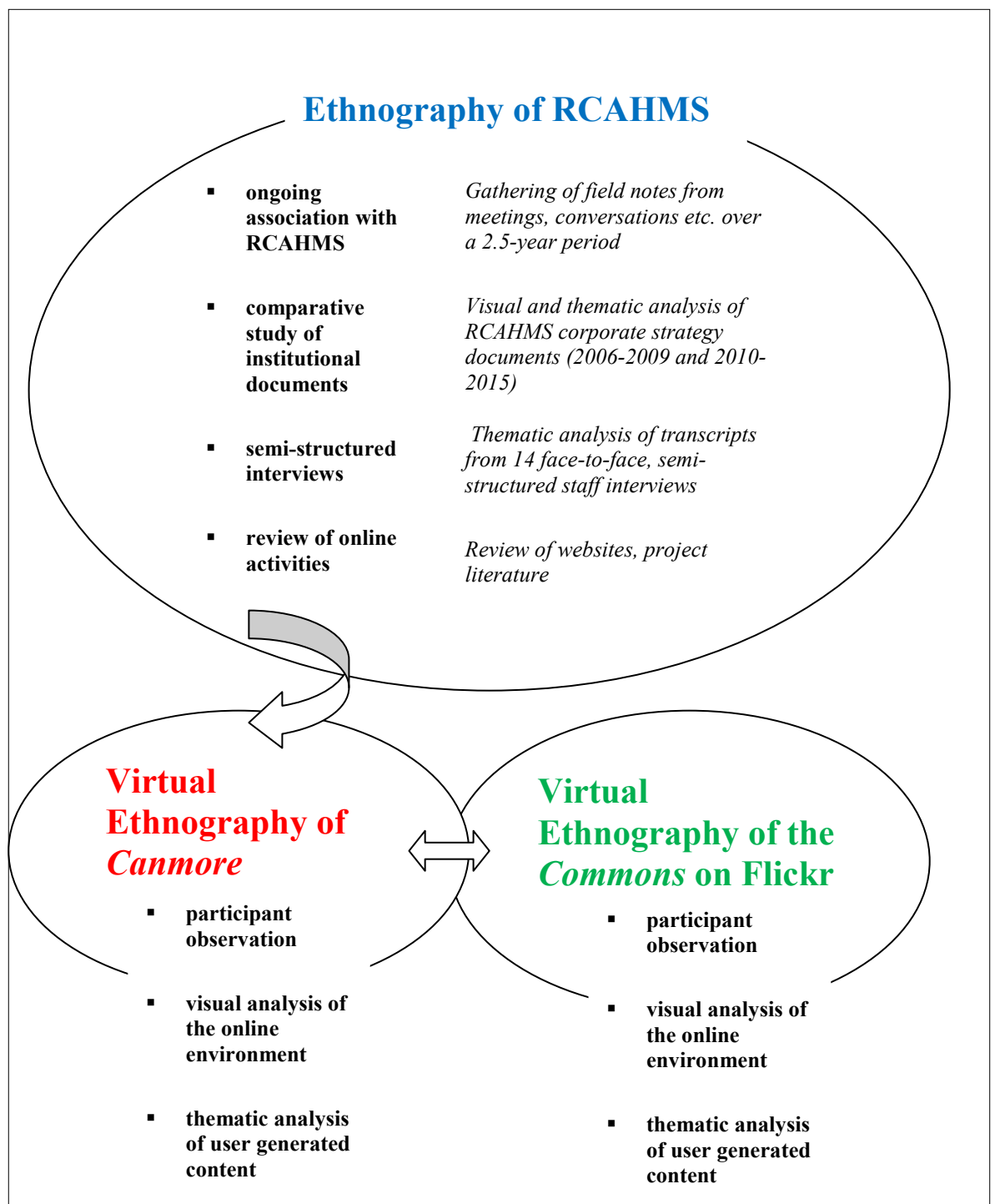
It was established early on in the project that *Canmore*, RCAHMS' digital archive, would be a main focus of my investigation of the institution's online practices. Originally created in the 1990s, when the research began *Canmore* was being upgraded to be transformed from electronic catalogue to web-based interactive environment, also linked to the photo-managing site Flickr. The site was officially launched in the summer of 2009 with new web 2.0 features which, for the first time, allowed the public not only to access RCAHMS' collections and data online, but also contribute comments and new images. This was a very important departure for RCAHMS, and a valuable opportunity for me to explore how participation patterns around its collections would be affected by the introduction of the new user interactive facilities. Once *Canmore* was re-opened to the public, I observed user activities for some fifteen months and carried out a detailed study of public contributions to the site.

I had always been keen, however, to include in my research alternative experiences of user engagement which might provide an interesting contrast to the RCAHMS' approach. In particular, I had become interested in the *Commons* on Flickr initiative, which had been



launched in early 2008. I decided to conduct a parallel study of this site, which I also used as a preliminary testing ground for the analytical approach which I was planning to use in the research. The purpose of this temporary switch of focus away from RCAHMS was twofold: it reflected my interest in broadening the field of enquiry to different approaches and implementations; it was also a way of ensuring that the overall analysis would transcend interpretations based on a single institutional context as a frame of reference, and steer clear of mere historical reviews of digital innovation at RCAHMS, or of instrumental assessments of whether technology was being successfully harnessed for the delivery of particular institutional objectives.

It may be useful, at this point, to illustrate in schematic form the different components of the research study, and the methods employed (Figure 1):



**Figure 1** Research activities

While the different components of the research can be presented schematically as in the figure above, the patterns of activity throughout the study constituted a rich and complex

process, made up of overlapping and interlinking phases, which combined to feed into the overall interpretation of findings.

From a conceptual point of view, insights into the institutional discourse around digitality gathered in the course of my association with RCAHMS, combined with the study of institutional documents and interviews with staff members, helped build up a picture of the institution's evolving experience of digitization and online practices at that point in time; it is here that we mainly catch a glimpse of what Hand refers to as the different 'narrative ideals' (Hand, 2008, p. 155) circulating at the institution with regard to digital innovation, and of the practices into which these ideals are translated, which both reflect and influence institutional thinking.

The emerging institutional picture, as captured in the study's interpretation, offered, in turn, an evolving backdrop to the investigation of *Canmore*, RCAHMS' online archive, not driving, however undoubtedly colouring its interpretation. At the same time, as one of the institution's most representative digital objects, and itself a locus of practice, *Canmore* constituted a key source of insights for an arguably richer interpretation of the institutional mindset and vision, as well as contradictions and tensions, complementing the exploration of narratives and ideals gleaned from the institutional study.

The exploration of *Canmore* as a self-contained site of interaction and meaning-making is, indeed, conceptually central to the study; at the same time, as we see later in the thesis, it is also contained in, and functional to, an interpretation of RCAHMS' approach to, and experience of, digitality. In other words, what we learn by listening to the institutional discourse sharpens the focus of the exploration of its key digital object, *Canmore*; at the same time, what we observe once inside *Canmore*, feeds into, and indeed helps to challenge, our interpretation of RCAHMS.

In this zooming in and out of different contexts of investigation, interesting conceptual parallels emerge. As with the institution, the exploration of *Canmore* too involves looking at narratives and ideals, objects and practices, if of a different kind: the narratives and ideals are glimpsed here through an exploration of environmental texts, namely the visual and textual elements inscribed in the design of the archive's environment, resonating, as well as

contrasting, with the institutional discourse; the objects are, in this case, the digital artefacts in the archive, namely the texts and images which users engage with and contribute; the practices are the different modes of participant interaction, users and staff, within the digital environment.

The exploration of the *Commons* on Flickr, however - and more specifically of instances of online engagement with some of the digital photographs released onto the site by the Library of Congress, Flickr's original partner in the initiative - serves a different purpose: it provides an example of a contrasting approach to engaging with heritage artefacts online, and an opportunity to explore the themes of interest to the study from a different perspective and under different conditions. Importantly, the study's exploration of the *Commons*' online environment is not set in the context of an examination of the Library's wider institutional context; rather, it is discussed in relation to the online community hosting the initiative, Flickr. As such, this component of the study remains fundamentally functional to the investigation of RCAHMS' experiences, as it offers the opportunity to problematize the model of online user engagement which *Canmore* embodies by providing a usefully contrasting perspective.

#### **4. Methodology: an Ethnographic Study**

Methodologically, the research was largely consistent with an ethnographic approach: it involved the identification and selection of a particular community, the researcher's observation of and/or participation in such a community, the collection of a body of data, the analysis of the data and the iterative interpretation of insights from the analysis, reported and discussed in terms of theoretical and policy implications (Kozinets, 2010, p. 61).

As mentioned earlier, however, the process of investigation and analysis was far from being a neatly sequential examination of different sources. If anything, it was characterized by overlapping stages of enquiry against a background of evolving discourses and shifting perspectives. Also, the employment of different methods across different data types raised interesting methodological and ethical questions. These are discussed in this chapter, and also in the chapters which report on each specific component of the study.

First, however, it is important to consider, more generally, how the overall research approach employed in the study can be legitimately aligned with an ethnographic tradition, and how the different brands of ethnography employed to investigate the different environments, online and offline, co-existed and combined to serve the overall project of enquiry.

Ethnography was originally a method favoured by anthropologists keen to develop ‘an understanding of cultures in distant places’ (Hine, 2000, p. 41). However, in the 20th century, the application of ethnographic method by Western anthropologists and sociologists to the investigation of their own societies became an important feature of social science, not least because, as well as discovering pockets of traditional culture on the peripheries of society, researchers also recognized the existence of diverse cultures within their metropolitan centres (Atkinson and Hammersley, 1994).

In its adoption within sociology and cultural studies, rather than on the formulation of holistic descriptions, the focus of ethnography has been increasingly placed on the exploration of particular topics of interest and of people constituting specific cultures in particular roles (Hine, 2000). In recent times, the rise of a digital culture and the emerging of diverse online communities have added to the opportunities for investigation in new and engaging ways.

Hammersley (1985) suggests that, whatever the context under investigation,

ethnography is a form of research in which the social settings to be studied, however familiar to the researcher, must be treated as anthropologically strange; and the task is to document the culture – the perspectives and practices – of the people in these settings.

(Hammersley, 1985, p.152)

Agar (1996) defines ethnography as a product as well as a process of research, involving prolonged observation of a group. In ethnographic studies, researchers collect descriptions of behaviour through observation and interviews, but also through the examination of documents and artefacts (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Spradley, 1979, 1980).

Common features of ethnographic studies include, in Atkinson’s and Hammersley’s analysis, a strong emphasis on exploring the nature of particular social phenomena, rather

than setting out to test hypotheses about them; a tendency to work with unstructured data, namely data that have not been coded at the point of collection on the basis of a closed set of analytic categories; detailed investigation of a small number of cases; data analysis involving explicit interpretation of the meanings and functions of human actions, resulting into verbal descriptions and explanations, with quantification and statistical analysis playing a subordinate role at most (Atkinson and Hammersley, 1994, p. 248).

These are all features which, broadly speaking, characterized the approach to the enquiry adopted in this research project: a specific phenomenon was identified, namely the impact of digital innovation on cultural heritage practice; while also considering alternative experiences, the investigation focused on one particular case, namely RCAHMS' experiences of digitality; this led to the identification of broad themes through the analysis of unstructured data; insights from the investigation were then reported through descriptions and explanations, with quantification and statistical analysis elements playing a near-insignificant role.

Importantly, rather than seen as enabling the researcher 'to gain a detailed and nuanced understanding of a social phenomenon, and then capture and convey its cultural qualities' (Kozinets, 2010, p. 55), in a constructionist perspective such as the one informing this study, ethnographic approaches have relinquished earlier assumptions of producing an authentic understanding of culture as observed in its 'natural state'. In Hine's words:

ethnographies have been reconceived as written and unavoidably constructed accounts of objects through disciplinary practices and the ethnographer's embodied and reflexive engagement.

(Hine, 2000, p. 42)

In this perspective, writing in the context of ethnographic research becomes a constructive act rather than a reflection of some pre-existing reality (Denzin, 1997). As such, there can be no notion of intrinsic authenticity in accounts which are born from cultural explorations (Hine, 2000); standards of authenticity are viewed, instead, as situationally negotiated and sustained, rather than absolute, as

a search for truly authentic knowledge about people and phenomena is doomed to be ultimately irresolvable.

(Hine, 2000, p. 49)

While texts may be regarded as the basis for understanding history, at the same time they are seen as not more than opaque constructions through which no such thing as a 'real' past can be retrieved, only the outcome of interpretations by differently prejudiced individual readers (Boyce, 2000, p. 329). No underlying meaning can ever be revealed in empirical manifestations; instead, these must be understood simply as 'possible products of discourse in action' (Alvesson, 2002, p. 146). The ethnographer, like Trihn's anthropologist, 'does not find things; s/he makes them. And makes them up' (Trihn, 1989, p. 141).

Hence, if in a constructionist, postmodern perspective, ethnographies continue to be about story-telling, they are not, however, judged in relation to their truthfulness as faithful accounts of a particular culture, rather as reality textually constructed (Van Maanen, 1995; Atkinson, 1990); in other words, fiction crafted by authors and shaped by literary devices (Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Geertz, 1973, 1988). In this newly opened up relationship between research subjects, ethnographers and readers, ethnography is thus embraced as 'a textual practice and as a lived craft' (Hine, 2000, p. 43). It is this perspective which has informed the ethnographic approach adopted in this study, and its investigation of different online and embodied environments.

While I concur that there may be no such thing as a single true understanding of a cultural context, I do, however, share Hine's view that 'the ethnographer is', nevertheless, 'uniquely placed to give an account of the field site, based on their experience of it and their interaction with it' (Hine, 2000, p. 46). In other words, ethnographers will have been somewhere in ways which will be unique to their experience, and will have returned and brought back accounts of what was observed in ways which will have been uniquely informed by their interpretation. As such, there is value in their effort, and authority in their particular accounts.

I see these accounts as 'cultural translations'. As to what might make some translations better than others, as with all translations, this will depend on the criteria chosen for the evaluation. These might be based on an idea of faithfulness to the original text, or on comprehensiveness and the detailed nature of the rendering or, perhaps, on the work's aesthetic merits or evocative power. What is generally expected of a translator, however, is the ability to tune into the different cultural contexts between which the mediation occurs,

and a commitment to the creation of a new original which is honest, respectful, consistent, plausible and, ideally, engaging.

It is in this relative sense, namely in the authority to interpret, rather than in a vision of absolute truth discovery that I recognize a usefulness and methodological integrity to the ethnographic effort, whether online or offline. I see the ethnographer's task, in essence, as one of mediation between different contexts or, more specifically, as Hine suggests, 'a translation task between the authenticity standards of two different discourses' (Hine, 2000, p. 50). These discourses are that of the cultural context being observed and the discourse of academia which the doctoral research project ultimately serves.

In the case of a collaborative study such as the one informing this thesis, there is, arguably, a further discourse to be considered, namely that of the institutional partner in the research who, as an equal stakeholder, has invested in the project of enquiry and declared an interest in its findings.

#### **4.1 A Composite Ethnographic Approach**

Looking at the study as a whole, in my approach to the investigation, whether online or offline, I sought to adhere to some general criteria, such as those put forward by Creswell (2007) as a guide to evaluating ethnographic work.

Creswell defines ethnography as process which involves:

the clear identification of a culture-sharing group... the specification of cultural themes that will be examined in light of this culture-sharing group... a detailed description of the cultural group... themes that derive from an understanding of the cultural group... the identification of issues that arose 'in the field' that reflect on the relationship between the researcher and the participants, the interpretive nature of the reporting, and sensitivity and reciprocity in the co-creating of the account... an explanation of how the culture-sharing group works... a self-disclosure and reflexivity by the researcher about her or his position in the research.

(Creswell, 2007, p. 218, emphasis in the original)

Broadly speaking, all the above criteria are reflected in the study's methodology.



However, the study did present some particular issues and challenges, especially as the ethnographic effort became engaged on two different fronts, namely the virtual spaces of the digital environments under observation, and the embodied context of the institution with which I associated for a period of over two years. It is therefore important to reflect on the methodological implications of this split focus, so to speak, and reflect on how the different brands of ethnography employed to investigate the different environments co-existed and combined to serve the overall project of enquiry.

To this end, it may be helpful to structure the discussion of methodological choices and methods along two parallel, if mutually implicated, strands: one concerns the exploration of RCAHMS as an embodied community of practice, involved in the conceptualization and creation of its 'digital objects', but also embedded in a specific historical and cultural discourse; the other concerns the approach to the investigation of the different online environments as loci of engagement with digital cultural heritage artefacts and as cultural contexts for their specific community members.

## **4.2 RCAHMS: an Ethnography**

The investigation of RCAHMS as a heritage institution embracing digitality was an important component of the overall study, providing a context to the insights from the exploration of the digital environments and opportunities for further reflection on the topics under study.

The main purpose of the study was to try and capture the nature of the discourse around digitality within the organization, as expressed through the narratives and the ideals present in its literature, as expressed by individuals working at the institution, as embedded in its practices and as embodied in its digital objects, of which *Canmore* was considered to be the most representative example.

The investigation involved a period of planning and entrée, data collection, data analysis and interpretation and representation. Overall, in its approach it reflected Creswell's criteria for ethnographic research mentioned earlier in the chapter (p. 70), in ways which I illustrate below.

#### **4.2.1 The identification of a culture-sharing group**

RCAHMS can be certainly described as a culture-sharing group with, broadly speaking, common patterns of values, behaviours, beliefs and language (Creswell, 2007, p. 68), and whose common purpose is the creation, preservation and sharing of a lasting record of the Scottish built heritage.

It must be noted, however, that, as RCAHMS acted as a partner in the original conception of the doctoral project, its identification as the focus of the research preceded my involvement. What became part of my research was, rather, a gradual process of familiarization with the institution's history and role as a cultural heritage body in Scotland.

While forming a working body committed to the delivery of the overall institutional brief and objectives, RCAHMS consists of a composite range of different highly-specialized teams. The institution operates through six main departments which include: Survey and Recording, Collections, Education and Outreach, Enterprises, Information Systems and Corporate Affairs. Some departments are further split into different units. Survey and Recording, for example, has teams specializing in different types of recording activities, such as Architecture and Industry and Landscape, as well as functions, such as Data and Recording, Project Development and Communities.

It was important, as part of the ethnographic work, to gain an understanding of how the different parts of the organization fit together and complement each other, not least as the mix of functions and skills would partly explain the co-existence, found in the study, of different perspectives on the role and merit of digital innovation in an institution like RCAHMS.

An interesting consideration in focusing on RCAHMS for an ethnographic study on museums and digitality is that the institution is not, in fact, a museum, rather a composite cultural body which combines different functions and a mix of holdings, including archival documents, photographic collections, maps and drawing, material gathered in over a century of surveying, recording and interpreting the Scotland's built heritage. Today these collections consist of some 14.5 million items, including architectural and archaeological

data, photographs, maps, drawings and documents. There are four main collections listed on RCAHMS' website at the time of writing:

- *The National Collection of Aerial Photography*, which since 2008 also includes *The Aerial Reconnaissance Archive* (TARA) previously hosted at the University of Keele. One of the largest in the world, the collection contains 1.6m images of Scotland and, in TARA, tens of millions of aerial photographs from around the world, declassified and released by the British Ministry of Defence.
- *Photographic collections*, featuring photographs from the 1850s to the present date as taken by independent investigators and RCAHMS photographers.
- *Drawings Collection*, dating from the 17<sup>th</sup> century to the present day and containing the work by artists, draughtsman, architects and archaeologists, as well as RCAHMS' own staff
- *Digital Collections*, which contain material created through digital recording methods. The kinds of content cited include GIS Data (Geographic Information System), Laser Scan Data, 3D Modelling, Digital images, Text Documents and more.

It is also important to note that RCAHMS has its own publishing arm and holds Independent Research Organization status, which means that the institution plays an active role in academic research.

#### **4.2.2 The specification of cultural themes, and themes emerging from the investigation**

The main cultural themes which the doctoral study would explore, namely the impact of digitization and online media practices on museums and their users, had been broadly identified and articulated in the original project proposal and in my submission, ahead of the ethnographic exploration of RCAHMS and of its digital environments.

The ethnographic study of RCAHMS, however, offered the opportunity to locate the investigation of the topics under study in a concrete institutional setting and, in combination with the other components of the research, further refine the themes originally identified as worth investigating and also identify new ones.

#### **4.2.3 The relationship between the researcher and the participants**

The study of RCAHMS raised a number of interesting issues in relation to, as Creswell puts it, ‘the relationship between the researcher and the participants, the interpretive nature of the reporting, and sensitivity and reciprocity in the co-creating of the account’ (Creswell, 2007, p. 218).

As in any ethnographic study, the investigation of RCAHMS included an initial phase of planning and entrée, which involved, after the necessary arrangements, a formal introduction to key staff members in different departments by my non-academic supervisor. It was agreed that for the duration of the project I would be considered a quasi-staff member, with access to relevant areas in the building, to general email, and would be welcome to approach staff as appropriate. I would, however, be based at the University of Edinburgh, rather than at RCAHMS.

Overall, it would be accurate to say that my ethnographic experience at RCAHMS resonated more with what Hine refers to as ‘a process of following connections’ rather than ‘a period of inhabitation’ (Hine, 2000, p. 60). From within the Education and Outreach department, with which I had a closer connection because of the link with my non-academic supervisor in charge of the unit, I set out to establish what Hine calls, with Olwig and Hastrup (1997), a ‘field of relations’ (Hine, 2000, p. 60) across the institution and its different ‘sub-cultures’. As such, my role at RCAHMS was more consistent with that of an observer/critical friend, rather than temporary employee or member of the community.

I was introduced to the institution as a mature student of topics which were of interest to many of the staff but which, reportedly, were as yet located outside most people’s area of expertise. As such, it became soon apparent, very much in the spirit of a collaborative doctoral project, that the learning process would involve me, the researcher/ethnographer,

learning about the organization and, at the same time, the organization, hopefully, benefiting from the ongoing research. The latter aspect was facilitated through the organization of workshops and talks where I shared insights from the research with selected RCAHMS staff.

#### **4.2.4 An explanation of how the group works**

An interesting challenge presented by the study of RCAHMS concerned the selection of sources to prioritize and individuals to engage with in order to produce a useful explanation/interpretation of how RCAHMS functioned as a heritage institution grappling with digitality at that particular time. As it is always the case in qualitative research, such selection would, of course, play a crucial role in the nature of any findings and, ultimately, determine the nature of my account and explanation of the context I had studied.

Whatever my choices, I was always mindful of the fact that, rather than an explanation, the outcome of the research could only constitute an interpretative snapshot of the institution's experience at a particular time, one which would not remain fixed, rather would change as people's views at RCAHMS were changing and perspectives shifting. The research would investigate aspects of a rapidly moving phenomenon such as technical innovation within a changing organization like RCAHMS, in turn located within a sector in turmoil as is the cultural heritage sector today. Its challenge, therefore, would be to remain specific in its focus and, if possible, original in its investigation, at the same time, however, in ways which would support a degree of extrapolation so as to be able to make a contribution of a theoretical nature.

#### **4.2.5 Self-disclosure and reflexivity by the researcher**

As Bauer and Gaskell put it:

the consideration of reflexivity flows from the simple fact that the analyst's discourse is no less constructive, action oriented and rhetorical than the discourse being analysed.

(Bauer and Gaskell, 2000, p. 362)

Indeed, in a post-modern perspective, the research narrative calls for deconstruction, ‘as a contested terrain that cannot be understood without references to ideas being concealed by the author and contexts within the author’s life’ (Creswell, 2007, p. 179).

Consistent with this view, and with the tendency in contemporary qualitative research to self-disclosure, in the accounting of the ethnographic research process, I sought to maintain an element of reflexivity, sharing details of my personal and professional history as partial explanation of potential biases, interests and theoretical and methodological focus. Having said this, I was also keenly aware that, as Coffey notes, the ‘boundaries between self indulgence and reflexivity are fragile and blurred’ (Coffey, 1999, p. 133), and that the question of how much of herself the researcher ought to reveal is one which must not be overlooked. With this in mind, I tried not to cross such fine a line or, at least, hopefully, not in ways which would undermine the quality of this piece of doctoral research in terms of its scholarly aspirations.

### **4.3 Online Ethnography**

In this section I move on to a discussion of methodology in relation to the investigation of online contexts as conducted for this study.

As I explained earlier in the chapter, the study’s investigation of patterns of participation around digital cultural heritage artefacts focused on two main online environments, RCAHMS’ digital archive *Canmore*, and the *Commons* on Flickr. While I will discuss in detail the particular genesis of, and approach to, each investigation in Chapter 4 and 5 respectively, in the sections which follow I reflect on some of the broader questions which the project of ethnography in online environments raised for me, the researcher, as I approached the task.

#### **4.3.1 A virtual ethnography?**

An important question concerning this component of the study was to what extent the research I was embarking on could be justifiably aligned to ethnographic methodology. While I consider this question worth exploring, I also share Hine’s view of online environments as methodologically rich with their own possibilities, offering interesting

‘opportunities for interrogating and understanding our methodological commitments’ independently of whether ‘old methods can be adapted to fit new technologies’ (Hine, 2005, p. 9). In other words, if there is, indeed, something special about online environments as ethnographic research settings, I have been generally interested in exploring what is now methodologically possible which was not possible before, rather than in considering to what extent techniques of face-to-face ethnography can be successfully transferred to particular virtual settings so as to prove them qualitatively and culturally worthy of particular methodological approaches.

Virtual ethnography, to use Hine’s term for ethnography conducted in online settings (Hine, 2000), can be defined on the basis of a number of general ‘principles’ (Hine, 2004, no page). Firstly, Hine suggests, virtual ethnography can be used to investigate the ways in which the use of the Internet becomes ‘socially meaningful’ (Hine, 2004, no page). It could be argued that a study such as the one conducted for this thesis, which set out to explore ways in which the Internet supports new contexts and dynamics for engagement with cultural heritage content, could aim to be socially meaningful, assuming that such activities are deemed culturally valuable.

Next, Hine notes, in virtual ethnography the Internet ‘can be understood as both culture and cultural artefact’ (Hine, 2004, *ibid.*). In the study, the virtual environments explored certainly performed such a dual role: they constituted places where individuals were seen engaging with digital heritage artefacts and each other; as such they constituted environments which, while not entailing face-to-face communication, were nevertheless culturally meaningful and, as such, ‘ethnographically available’ (Hine, 2000, p. 50). At the same time, as repositories of texts, the same spaces constituted sources of research data, thus acting as cultural artefacts.

Virtual ethnography, Hine notes, requires researchers to be ‘virtually and physically’ mobile, conducting investigations not only in specific field sites but also following ‘field connections’, in ‘a process of intermittent engagement, rather than long term immersion’ (Hine, 2004, no page). Again, this resonates with my experience as a researcher in this study, where I alternated the observation of user engagement on *Canmore* and the *Commons* environments with periods of reflection and analyses of lexical and visual texts.

As for Hine's description of virtual ethnography as 'necessarily partial', the ethnographic effort in this study definitely resulted in accounts which would be inevitably based, as Hine puts it, on their 'strategic relevance to particular research questions' rather than as 'faithful representations of objective realities' (Hine, 2004, no page); in other words, my interest in what online users of these spaces did, and my choices as to what I focused on as I examined the different online contexts were informed by the particular research questions and perspective informing the study. Having said this, I would not necessarily ascribe the reasons for this to the virtual nature of the investigation, rather to a more fundamental difficulty in representing 'objective realities' through any research effort, whether online or offline.

Hine also suggests that 'intensive engagement with mediated interaction adds an important reflexive dimension to ethnography' (Hine, 2004, no page). That was certainly my experience in the study, although it is difficult to say to what extent this might have been due to my lack of familiarity with the Internet as a research medium as well as setting. It certainly called for reflection, also requiring the development of new skills. In this respect, I certainly concur with Hine, when she suggests that virtual ethnography is 'ethnography *of, in and through* the virtual – we learn about the Internet by immersing ourselves in it and conducting our ethnography using it, as well as talking with people about it, watching them use it and seeing it manifest in other social settings' (Hine, 2004, no page, italic in the original). As such it is a complex and rich experience, one which requires both reflection and the honing of new skills.

Finally, Hine describes virtual ethnography as 'an adaptive ethnography which sets out to suit itself to the conditions in which it finds itself' (Hine, 2004, no page). Again this was my experience in the study, where the different nature of the online environments explored and the dynamics observed within them called for different approaches to the investigation. As Chapter 4 and 5 illustrate, the experience in the *Commons* had, for me, an almost theatrical quality, while that in *Canmore* had a very different, more technical as well as academic flavour, each leading to different insights and considerations, also calling for different styles in their articulation.



### 4.3.2 Communities online and offline

An interesting question relating to online research concerns the relationship between online environments and possible embodied referents to such environments.

In his discussion of ‘netnography’, Kozinets’ term for ethnography of online environments (Kozinets, 2010), the author offers an interesting distinction between different types of online investigations. In particular, he urges researchers to clarify whether what is being investigated is what he refers to as a ‘community online’ or, instead, an ‘online community’ (Kozinets, 2010, p. 63).

Research into the former, the author suggests, examines social phenomena ‘whose social existence extends well beyond the internet and online interactions, even though those interactions may play an important role within the group’s membership’ (Kozinets, 2010, *ibid.*). A researcher who is interested in this type of study will be keen to see how the communications dynamics within that group may inform an understanding of ‘the wider social phenomenon, behaviour, its participants, their values or beliefs’ (Kozinets, 2010, p. 64). In this case, Kozinets notes, although it might well sharpen the researcher’s wider understanding of a particular focal construct, the ‘*online component may well be considerably less important* to the theoretical orientation of the investigation than other aspects of the research (Kozinets, 2010, p. 64, italics in the original).

Conversely, research on ‘online communities’, Kozinets suggests, examines phenomena which are ‘directly relating to online communities and online culture itself, a particular manifestation of them, or one of their elements’ (Kozinets, 2010, p. 63). As such, online human interactive elements, such as online identity, sociolinguistic patterns, emerging relationship and so on ‘*will be central, core constructs that the research tries to explain*’ (Kozinets, 2010, p. 64, italics in the original).

The purpose of such a distinction, which Kozinets himself recognizes as possibly overly stark if helpful to his argument, is to help the researcher reflect on the role played in the wider research context by the online ethnographic element: in the former case, the author

suggests, this will be ancillary to the main research effort; in the latter it will constitute the primary focus of the research.

I am slightly dubious, like the author himself, of the value of such a blunt distinction between types of internet users, especially now that offline and online experiences are increasingly co-occurring and often mesh in interesting and complex ways. Indeed, as Miller and Slater suggest (2000, p. 5), one might argue that Internet media inevitably happen ‘within mundane social structures and relations’. As such, they ‘cannot escape into a self-enclosed cyberian apartness’ and should always be treated as ‘continuous with and embedded in other social spaces’ (Miller and Slater, 2000, p. 5).

Kozinets’ distinction, however, offers nevertheless a useful prompt for clarification of the general methodological orientation of this study as a project of enquiry, both conceptually and in relation to the environments under investigation.

In relation to the investigation of *Canmore*, I was certainly mindful of the fact that there was a community of RCAHMS’ users who had a well-established relationship with the institution and who had been using its resources not only offline, visiting RCAHMS’ search room, but also online, for a considerable period of time; after all *Canmore* was created as an electronic catalogue some fifteen years ago. Having said this, the aim of my investigation was never to establish how new technological features might now be enhancing the experience of such community of users through an examination, for example, of the advantages and disadvantages of new forms of user engagement with RCAHMS’ collections as now made possible on *Canmore*; nor was I especially concerned as to whether the individuals observed in the chosen spaces constituted a community online or an online community, to use Kozinets’ distinction.

Rather, underpinned by a trust in the contingent meaningfulness of texts, visual as well as lexical, and their value as sources of insights for useful, if always subjective, interpretations, my interest was in exploring what might happen when digital artefacts were allowed to fall into the hands of online users in the particular way in which RCAHMS was making this possible, and reflect on the broader significance of such phenomenon. An understanding of the cultural context where the *Canmore* experience had been devised and brought to being

was useful, indeed, crucial to further extrapolations. However, the important element of contrast was secured not through a comparison of analogue and digital practices within RCAHMS or, in this case, of pre- versus post- web 2.0 approaches, rather through a study of alternative forms of engagement with and around heritage content, as found, in this case, on the *Commons* on Flickr space.

Similarly, in exploring instances of participation around the Library of Congress' photographic collections on the *Commons* on Flickr, I did not start by asking who might have looked at these items in a physical, embodied context, and in what way they might have done so. Rather, I set out to observe what happened when online users of Flickr came across the Library's digital images in the particular environment of the *Commons*. Here too, an understanding of how the initiative came about, what inspired it and how it was received was, again, useful to the exploration, but still in the context of the centrality of the online experience.

#### **4.3.3 Participation versus observation**

It is important to note that in the investigation of online environments conducted for the study I opted for an observational rather than participative role, relying on the analysis of lexical and visual texts produced by participants without my prompting. I looked at the textual traces left behind by the individuals who had been on the scene, taking time to reflect on the nature of the utterances, their tone, underlying tensions, and looking for emerging themes. As such, my approach to the study of the environments could be described as 'post-event ethnography', combining the observation of participant activity with an analysis of textual traces once this activity was concluded.

This approach is consistent with a perspective which sees using the Internet as 'a process of reading and writing texts' (Hine, 2000, p. 50) in this perspective, the ethnographer's job is 'to develop an understanding of the meanings which underlie and are enacted through these textual practices' (Hine, 2000, *ibid.*), focusing on the reality which texts construct and the identities which authors create and perform through their postings. This is a reality, it is argued, which texts construct and which, therefore, is open to being evaluated on its own terms, without recurring to an external, pre-textual reality.

A preference for observation over participation in the context of ethnographic research can, however, be controversial, as it is often argued that in such situations a higher level of personal interaction with informants leads to a deeper understanding of the cultural context under investigation. Kozinets, for example, maintains that removing the participative role of the ethnographer 'removes the opportunity to experience embedded cultural understanding. Without this profound knowledge and experience of the cultural context', he suggests, 'the interpretation is impaired' (Kozinets, 2010, p. 75).

Hine too, in discussing online research, notes that the ethnographic approach can be seen as coming 'to a full stop in situations where the technology no longer promotes interactions in which the ethnographer can play a part' (Hine, 2000, p. 51).

Pratt also, in his discussion of ethnographic accounts versus travel writing (Pratt, 1986), challenges the value of an approach which comes short of a researcher's deep involvement with the subjects under study, as he notes how

in almost any ethnography dull-looking figures called 'mere traveller' or 'casual observers' show up from time to time, only to have their superficial perceptions either corrected or corroborated by the serious scientist.

(Pratt, 1986, p. 27)

It is only the latter, it is argued, who by participating and interacting with 'the natives' can really gain a deep understanding of their culture, begin to feel what they feel.

While I agree about the importance of an intensive exposure of the researcher to the context being observed, I do not share the view that a highly participative approach will inevitably result in greater authoritativeness of findings or more meaningful interpretations of an observed cultural phenomenon. I remain unconvinced, in other words, that by stepping into a field of research and interacting with the individual members of a community, prompting reactions or eliciting comments is, by default, more conducive to a researcher gaining a deeper understanding of a cultural context because better able to put herself 'in the shoes' of fellow community members (Kozinets, 2010, p. 96).

On the contrary, I would argue that, in the presence of a rich legacy of textual traces, such as that found in the digital environments under study, the researcher is still engaging with the spaces in ways which are liable to change her, she is still acquiring a form of ‘socialized competence’ (Hine, 2005, p. 22), and is still experiencing what happens in the environments in different ways. Importantly, however, because of the particular conditions afforded by digitality, she is able to do this without influencing the social dynamics being observed.

My favouring, where possible, an observational approach over personal interaction with the individuals involved in the action is not, however, based on an assumption of greater objectivity, or an impartial eye of the researcher as ‘the dispassionate investigator’ (Crotty, 1998, pp. 175-176) looking on from afar. On the contrary, I consider the influence of the quiet observer’s own interpretative baggage potentially just as significant as that co-constructed in a dialogical relationship with informants. An assumption of greater objectivity is not, in other words, the reason behind my preference for observation over active participation.

Rather, this preference is, arguably, likely to stem from my experience as a lexicographer, language observer and reporter. It is indeed by observing, listening, paying attention, ‘noticing’ native interaction in different contexts that the lexicographer begins to spot patterns which might have some claim of broader significance and, as such, turn out to be worth reporting in relation to the particular focus of the analysis. This process, supported today by multimedia tools, has, however, little to do with ‘counting mentions of a particular word, or noting how many times it is modified by terms like ‘good’ or ‘great’’, Kozinets’ somewhat dismissive characterization of content analytical approaches (2010, p. 75). On the contrary, it is a solitary, quiet and absorbing effort, made up of epiphanies and puzzlement, discoveries and contradictions, not necessarily devoid of that ‘eureka-yielding gestalt for which’, again according to Kozinets, ‘ethnography is famous’(Kozinets, 2010, *ibid.*).

## **5. Some Considerations of Ethics**

I conclude this chapter with a reflection on some ethical issues which required consideration in relation to different research activities.

In the course of my ethnographic study of RCAHMS I was given access to institutional literature and internal project documentation. This aspect of the work did not raise particular ethical issues, as the documents which I analysed were in the public domain; hence, in referring to their content, I would not be disclosing any sensitive information which had not been already published. I was, however, also involved in a number of meetings and informal conversations with staff members, both at senior and junior level. Also, as I mentioned earlier, I conducted a number of more formal interviews.

The collaborative nature of the doctoral project meant that there was a rich exchange across the parties, with stimulating opportunities for discussion and feedback. Interestingly, two of my three supervisors had personal links with RCAHMS: my academic supervisor has a family member working at the institution; my non-academic supervisor holds a senior position as RCAHMS' Head of Education and Outreach. It was this latter aspect which, in many ways, lent an element of interesting complexity to the research from an ethical perspective.

At once research informant, evaluator of progress and also potential interpreter/disseminator within RCAHMS of insights from the unfolding investigation, the non-academic supervisor acted as facilitator in my entrée into the field and, at the same, privileged interlocutor, committed both to support the research effort and to ensure that this would bring some benefit to the institution.

In the circumstances, it was very important to maintain from the outset, and consistently through the research work, a regime of confidentiality in relation to all the informants involved in the ethnographic study.

I had originally planned to keep a blog of my interaction with RCAHMS staff. I decided against this, however, opting instead for an offline journal which, independently of the implicit trust I had in their ethical conduct, I did not share with the supervisory team. I also refrained from reporting on specific conversations with staff members or attributing statements to any particular individuals in the course of supervisory meetings, or in the interim research papers which I produced.

Also, I took care not to reveal, at any point, the identity of the interviewees eventually selected. I contacted each potential respondent individually by email, with an introductory letter which explained the purpose of the interviews and detailed the conditions under which meetings would take place. I then set up a schedule and met with individual respondents at the RCAHMS offices, in a pre-booked location away from other staff members. In the interview process I adhered to standard ethical procedure: confidentiality agreements were signed by all parties and assurances were made that there would be no attribution of statements or comments to named individuals in subsequent written accounts. Also, while I had been sharing with the supervisory team papers or accounts of the ongoing analysis work for other components of the research, I took care not to share interim reports on the interview process which might have revealed more than what I would eventually choose to include in the final thesis.

Overall, I found that the particular nature of the research project called for a degree of caution as I operated, in a way, across different agendas, academic and institutional. This is liable to have contributed to my decision to remain more detached in my dealings with RCAHMS than I might have done had I approached the institution independently of any of its members. Having said this, the same need for caution also arguably heightened in interesting ways my awareness of different discourses within the institution, alerting me to possible tensions and contradictions, and encouraging me to pay attention to nuances and details which I might otherwise have missed.

Overall, I believe that through the research project I remained faithful to my commitment to RCAHMS' staff of maintaining complete confidentiality. It is nevertheless difficult to judge to what extent people's responses might have been influenced by their awareness of my close association with RCAHMS' management.

Moving on to the investigation of the online spaces, for the study of *Canmore* I was granted Administrator access to the RCAHMS database which records all user contributions. This includes all comments by members of the public, hyperlinked to the corresponding records, and details about contributors which are not in public view. It also offers the ability to filter items by date and contributor and to edit records. For the study of user-contributed images,

I accessed the material both in *Canmore* and on the RCAHMS' space on Flickr, where photographs are hosted.

Contributions made by users to *Canmore* and Flickr are of a public nature and subject to the terms and conditions published on the sites. In accordance with these I have felt able to use some of the users' text comments and images in my discussion of findings in the thesis. I have made sure, however, that any personal information to which I had access when analysing the data in Administrator mode, but which were not displayed in the public areas of *Canmore*, like for example contributors' email addresses, was not disclosed anywhere in my account of the analysis. Also in my account of the study of the *Commons* on Flickr I quote short extracts from texts as found on the site, exclusively, however, from the public comments area.

*Canmore* contributors whose photographs are stored on Flickr hold full copyright of the material they contribute to the archive. Where I have used material for illustration purposes in my account of findings, I have kept images' captions and copyright notices as found on Flickr, in adherence to copyright agreements; also, at no point have I modified the content of any of the contributions in the archive or in the items used as illustrations in the study, except for using shorter extracts rather than full entries when these were especially lengthy.

In both studies, as already explained, I combined the observation of participants' interaction with a thematic analysis of the textual traces which these left behind. I did not, at any point, interact personally with users of the sites.

As Rutter and Smith note (2005), the negotiation of absence and presence is, indeed, an important ethical issue in online investigations. As Sveningsson (2004) suggests, the ease with which one can lurk online offers the potential for researchers to truly distance themselves from their research subjects. This is especially true for those involved in ethnographic studies for which the opportunity 'to become a 'fly on the wall' is often too seductive to pass up' (Sveningsson, 2004, p. 49). This, however, still raises some important ethical questions: should the researcher make herself known and negotiate informed consent by the participants whose captured interaction she goes on to analyse? Or should this text,



since the analysis is carried out only after the action is concluded, be considered open to any kind of investigation?

Researchers' views on this aspect are still rather mixed. Rafaeli (1995, quoted in Paccagnella, 1997), for one, is quite relaxed about the nature of public discourse in computer mediated communication, or CMC. To him public discourse is, indeed public; perhaps personal, however certainly not private. Rutter and Smith (2005), however, disagree. They argue that, just because it takes place in public, it does not mean that that talk is public. In their view the same distinction should apply online as the one we would make offline between the talk of politicians or celebrities at open meetings, and what is said among friends in a café, during social chitchat. To them this is not public discourse and as such it is not ethically available to the online researcher.

Offering an alternative perspective which moves beyond the traditional face-to-face versus online, and written versus spoken, dichotomies, Mann and Stewart (2000, p. 182) describe CMC as a new kind of discourse which combines characteristics of both oral and written language and exists as an important development in the long-standing debate regarding the use of oral communication versus written communication. The acceptance of the development of a unique internet discourse could, in their view, ease the limitations associated with research which utilizes CMC as a data source.

All in all, no definite position seems to emerge in the literature on the question of what might be the appropriate degree of active participation and consultation by the researcher in virtual environments; the choice is very much left to the individuals and their sensitivity to the specific setting and its inhabitants. As Hine notes 'virtual ethnography is, ultimately, an adaptive ethnography which sets out to suit itself to the conditions in which it finds itself' (Hine, 2004, no page). In my case, I share Mann and Stewart's position (2000), which recognizes the original nature of the online discourse, and I choose to interpret it as available to scrutiny and reflection. As I did not contribute to, or influence, in any way to the generation of any of the utterances I examined in the environments I studied, I consider them as public texts published by a range of authors fully aware of the written legacy left behind. Also, who these authors might be beyond their online personas is of no particular

interest to me in this study, as I consider their online identity, as textually constructed, the only one which is relevant to the enquiry.

## **6. Conclusion**

In this chapter I have provided a discussion of the theoretical and methodological perspectives informing this doctoral thesis. I have positioned myself as a researcher in terms of my epistemological and ontological perspectives, broadly locating my stand within constructionist positions. I have declared a particular focus on language, a legacy of my experience as a linguist, which resonates with postmodernist perspectives. In the second part of the chapter I have articulated the main question guiding the enquiry, and set out and described the research activities which were conducted pursuing this question. I have then highlighted and discussed some broad issues of methodology which the particular mix of research activities and settings raised. I concluded the chapter with a discussion of some ethical issues raised by different components of the research study.

Some aspects of methodology are, however, explored further, and in greater detail, in each of the three next chapters which follow and which present and discuss findings from the three components of the overall study, as laid out in Figure 1 above (p. 64) starting, in Chapter 4, with a report on the study of the *Commons* on Flickr, followed in Chapter 5 by an account of the exploration of *Canmore* and, finally, in Chapter 6, by a discussion of insights from the ethnography of RCAHMS which brings together the various threads emerged in the different components of the study.

## Chapter 4

# A Virtual Ethnography of the *Commons* on Flickr: Data Analysis and Discussion

This chapter reports on the study of the *Commons* on Flickr conducted for this PhD. I begin with an explanation of the background and genesis of the *Commons*' initiative. I then describe my approach to the investigation and discuss the suitability of the online environment under study as a site for ethnographic exploration. Next, I move on to some considerations of environmental features, both visual and textual, worth noticing ahead of an account of the analysis of participants' engagement within the particular space within the *Commons* chosen for the study. I conclude with a discussion of how insights from the analysis resonate with the broader themes foregrounded in the discussion of museums and digitality in Chapter 2.

### 1. The *Commons* on Flickr

In January 2008 the Library of Congress and the photo-sharing site Flickr jointly launched a pilot project called the *Commons* on Flickr (Raymond, 2008; Springer *et al*, 2008a, 2008b; Library of Congress, 2010).

The Commons is a dedicated space on the photo-managing site Flickr where heritage institutions can display material from their photographic collections that have no known copyright restrictions. Flickr visitors and members can view the images and, importantly, they are also invited to help describe them by adding tags, notes and comments.

In the words of the team from OSI, the Office of Strategic Initiatives at the Library of Congress leading the project, the purpose of the initiative from the institution's perspective was to increase the general public's awareness of the collections and, more specifically:

- To share photographs from the Library's collections with people who enjoy images but might not visit the Library's own Web site.

- To gain a better understanding of how social tagging and community input could benefit both the Library and users of the collections.
- To gain experience participating in Web communities that are interested in the kinds of materials in the Library's collections.

(Library of Congress, 2010, no page)

At the time of the launch it was declared that the duration of the experiment would depend on the amount of user interest and tagging activity in relation to the materials. Some eight months later, a report by the Library of Congress team (Springer *et al* 2008a, 2008b) offered an analysis of user engagement on the site and an institutional perspective on the initiative, which it recognized as successful and overall worthwhile; as, indeed, did other early members, like the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney, the first museum to join the *Commons* in 2008 (Chan, 2008; Bray, 2009), and many institutions since.

Today, some four years later, the *Commons* initiative is still thriving, its impact on the sector being described as none less than 'monumental' (Bray *et al*, 2011, no page). At the time of writing, over fifty institutions have joined the site which now boasts tens of thousands of photographs from many different collections.

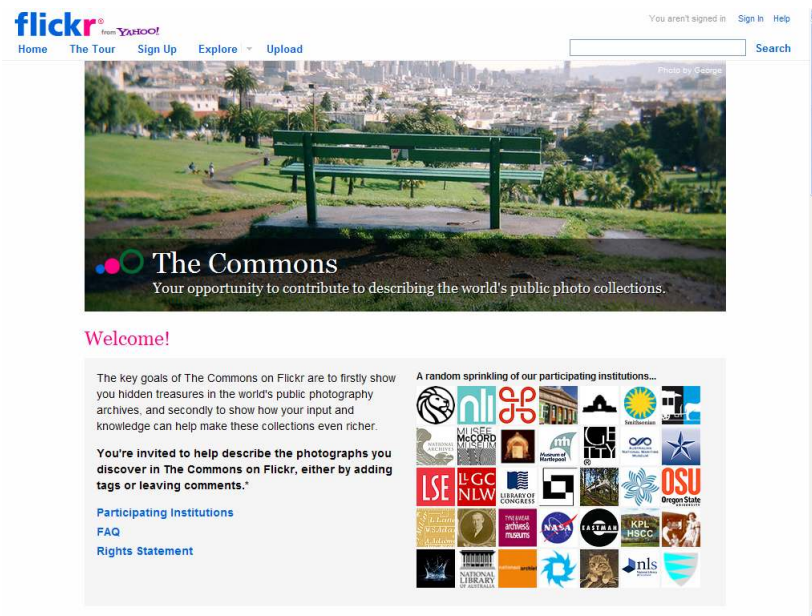


Figure 2 The Commons homepage

There is now a body of literature on the *Commons* on Flickr, both by heritage professionals and academics (Oates, 2008; Chan 2008; Saunders, 2008; Bernstein, 2008; Cox, 2008; Johnston, 2008; Bray *et al*, 2011, Kalfatovic *et al*, 2009). Online groups, like *indicommons* (<http://www.indicommons.org/>), have also formed around it to monitor, report and comment on the site's progress.

Quantitative analyses carried out by participating institutions and by Flickr, as well as user groups like *indicommons*, have yielded comprehensive sets of statistics. In many cases these show that visits to the *Commons* by users interested in the displayed collections significantly exceed the number of visits to individual institutions' websites. Indeed, if the aim of the institutions joining the *Commons* on Flickr was to increase public awareness of their collections, there are strong indications that this goal has been not only achieved but, in many cases, surpassed.

For example, in 2008 the Library of Congress reported that some eight months since the launch of the pilot project, over 31,000 Flickr members had made the Library of Congress a 'contact' and created their own 'photostream' of Library photographs on their personal accounts. It is through these contacts and through RSS feed subscriptions that the Library is now able to continue to alert users to new uploads and sets (Springer *et al*, 2008a).

Many of the comments from users have been found to include expressions of appreciation, but also observations leading to a useful exchange of information. For example, the Library of Congress team was able to report that, by early 2011, almost 2,900 records in the Library's Prints & Photographs Online Catalogue had been enhanced thanks to contributions by the Flickr *Commons* community, which the Library duly cites as the source of the new information in their own online collections (Bray *et al*, 2011), in a move which promotes a healthy two-way traffic between the institutional website and the Flickr online community.

The Powerhouse Museum has also reported some sizeable benefits deriving from their involvement with the *Commons* site (Bray *et al*, 2011). While curatorial staff have not engaged in a systematic upgrading of records, favouring instead a slow review and manual processing of users' comments, they have, however, incorporated user-generated tags into

the collections on their website; this has, in their view, enhanced online searching and the discovery of photographic material. Interestingly, the Powerhouse Museum's team also reports 'significant organizational effects' brought about by the institution's involvement in the *Commons* on Flickr initiative. These include the conversion of photographs in their collection from an 'archive' status into 'collection' status within their catalogue, as the museum searched for more interesting photographs to upload to the *Commons*', and the fast-tracking of exhibitions and photographic competitions (Bray *et al*, 2011, no page).

Furthermore, it was generally felt that the experience on the photo-managing site has had an impact on public perceptions of the museum's brand which, up until now, had very rarely been associated with photography.

The Smithsonian Institution also reported benefits from the experience on the *Commons*. These include increased numbers of visits to the original collections, the enhancement of data through crowd-sourcing, and an increase in the Archives' ability to describe collection images at item-level. Also, the institution was pleased to report that participation in the *Commons* prompted a significant donation to the Smithsonian Archives (Bray *et al*, 2011).

The New York Public Library also reports, among other interesting data, how *Commons* users had contributed to the information on some of the photographs by formulating original and interesting questions which other users were surprisingly able to answer.

Finally, Cornell University Library, another participating institution, commented on how, while their main goal had not been to solicit user-generated descriptive information about the photographs, rather principally to increase the visibility of the collections, they had been impressed by the many tags, notes and comments added to their photographs by visitors to the site; so much so, that they advocate pursuing the developing of 'metrics that reflect this new landscape' in order to gain a better understanding of how users are interacting with the collections, providing 'the necessary resources to engage with that community' (Bray *et al*, 2011, no page).

Indeed, Bray *et al* (2011) argue in their joint report on the *Commons* on Flickr three years since its original launch that the significance of the type of web 2.0 collaboration which the *Commons* so powerfully embodies cannot be meaningfully understood through mere hit counting. In the light of 'the myriad ways users interact with images', the authors suggest,

new evaluative metrics must be developed for the qualitative investigation of experiences such as the one on the *Commons*, where user behaviour is not only ‘rich’ but, importantly, ‘ever changing and unpredictable’ (Bray *et al*, 2011, no page).

Much as I concur that the devising of new evaluative methodologies of the kind which Bray *et al* call for is not only important but indeed urgent in the light of the *Commons* experience, it was not the intention of this study to make a particular contribution to such effort. Rather, as anticipated in the methodology chapter, my primary interest was simply to observe closely the kind of participation patterns in an environment like the *Commons*, where heritage artefacts are placed ‘in a highly visible space outside the institution’s traditional confines’ (Bray *et al*, 2011, no page) in ways which represent an important, and in my view, useful disruption of traditional institution/user/content interaction dynamics.

## 2. The Approach to the Analysis

I began the study of the *Commons* in late 2008. I started by familiarizing myself with the *Commons* environment in general, observing over a period of time how Flickr members were engaging with the artefacts on display.

I decided early on that I would focus my attention on the Library of Congress’ photographic collections. In particular, I had noticed a high level of activity around a set of photographic portraits of Abraham Lincoln, published on the *Commons* in early 2009. This is a selection of 22 images spanning over twenty years, from early portraits in 1846, through the U.S. 1860 presidential campaign and the Civil War years. The collection also includes views from Lincoln’s funeral in 1865 and portraits of his immediate family.

Flickr users had shown particular interest in the first item in the set. I decided to zoom in on this particular item for a more detailed exploration of how visitors to the site were responding to the object and to the environment where it was placed. As I did this I was mindful of the fact that this was a particular image, namely a presidential photographic portrait, which was part of a particular collection, released by a particular institution, at a very particular time, namely not long after a high-profile US presidential election at the end of 2008. As such, the activity within this space might well be untypical and not necessarily

constitute a statistically representative example of participation patterns across the site; nor did I feel that this mattered for the purpose of my investigation. This involved a thematic analysis of the texts generated by individuals interacting with and around the digital artefact, also in the context of a reflection on visual features of the space where the engagement took place.

Before I report and discuss findings from this analysis it may be important to reflect, briefly, on the suitability of the space under study as a site for ethnographic research.

## **2.1 The *Commons* on Flickr as a Site for Ethnographic Research**

Two main aspects need to be considered in approaching the *Commons* as a potential setting for ethnographic research, namely whether the space can be legitimately described as a ‘cultural environment’ and whether the individuals encountered therein qualify as members of a ‘culture-sharing group’ (Creswell, 2007, p. 218).

It is important to note, as a general consideration, that the *Commons* site is located within Flickr, a site which arguably represents a successful example of web 2.0 good practice, offering a robust and persistent combination of social interaction around shared objects of interest, photographs, in environments which are designed to be friendly, flexible and safe. Flickr has been described as supporting many sub-cultures simultaneously, through group formation and through a range of networking tools which support members’ self-profiling as well as indirect profiling through personal collections, favouring activities and more (Cox, 2008). Flickr has also been studied as a productive online learning space (Davies, 2006), and for its significance from a digital literacy perspective (Barton, 2010).

As such, Flickr is widely recognized as a rich cultural setting, one which has proved highly researchable and which has yielded important insights not only for the computer science community studying the use of image corpora, but also for those keen to research how individuals may be building up their own image-based collections and also, more broadly, for students of community building and social meaning-construction in online spaces (Terras, 2011).



Being embedded in Flickr, the *Commons* site arguably shares its host's credentials as a cultural setting and its potential as a successful catalyst for online user engagement; in other words, a focus for like-minded people, a space where a culture-sharing group will gather. Having said this, it is also important to recognize that a special brand of object is found on the *Commons*, namely photographs inscribed with the authority and meaning attributed to them by the heritage institutions which are their historical custodians. Each image is, indeed, institutionally branded, endowed with a particular official interpretation and given a designated place within a collection. As such, a particular brand of users, a particular sub-culture among the many on Flickr, might well gravitate towards the site.

As for the question as to whether *Commons*' users constitute a community, and what kind of community this might be, the answer will depend, of course, on the definition attributed to the term community in the first place (Paccagnella, 1997).

Hamman (1997) defines the sociological term community simply as a group of people who share social interaction and some common ties between themselves and other members of the group, and share an area for at least some of the time. In this perspective, participants on the *Commons* site would appear to perform as a community: they definitely are a group of people, albeit one is mindful of the fact that, intriguingly, at any time it might be one individual impersonating different 'characters'; individuals do share some social interaction, as evidenced by the traces of their engagement with the material and with each other; they share some common ties with other members of the group as, at minimum, they all are Flickr members; they certainly share a space for at least some of the time.

Although definitions of community vary (Guimarães Jr., 2005), a key aspect remains their relational nature. Cohen (1985), for one, suggests that reality of community lies in its members' perception of the vitality of its culture, and its assertion of its identity in relation to others' social entity. In other words, people construct community symbolically, making it a resource and repository of meaning, a referent of their identity. From this process of identity construction derives the social construction of boundaries that characterizes a community.

Guimarães Jr., in turn, prefers to define community as ‘a set of shared meanings in the life of its participants that provides them with symbolic resources to build up their collective identity’ (Guimarães Jr., 2005, p. 146). In this perspective, the author suggests, the quest for an exact definition of community might well lose its meaning: every social and cultural context will be able to perform ‘community’ in its own specific way; consequently, the question one should ask shifts from ‘whether’ a group might constitute a community to ‘how’ they might do so.

In many ways, this latter perspective is the one I find most relevant to the study of the *Commons* on which I report in this chapter. I have not been particularly concerned with the way in which the participants I have observed on the *Commons* might relate to each other outside the particular context of engagement in the spaces explored; whether they are, or are not, for example, members of a particular community elsewhere online or, indeed, offline. Instead, I have drawn from the texts produced in the particular situation observed, as individuals interact with the objects they have encountered and, at times, with each other, to reflect on ‘how’ they might constitute a culture-sharing group, even a community, in the environment which, even if only temporarily, they inhabit. In this sense, to me they constitute the same type of group which, for example, might cluster around one particular object or collection in a museum at any given time. It is what happens within and around this particular space, at this particular time, and in relation to the object, the space and the other people involved, that interests me.

### **3. Entering the *Commons***

On accessing the *Commons* one is struck by the photograph which appears on the opening page. Taken by George Oates, one of Flickr’s original staff members and driving force behind the *Commons* initiative, it shows a park bench overlooking a cityscape (Figure 3).



**Figure 3** The *Commons*' homepage

Below the title is the following caption:

Your opportunity to contribute to describing the world's public photo collection

Below the picture, the text continues (emphasis in the original):

The key goals of the *Commons* on Flickr are to firstly show you hidden treasures in the world's public photography archives, and secondly to show how your input and knowledge can help make these collections even richer.

**You're invited to help describe the photographs you discover in the *Commons* on Flickr, either by adding tags or leaving comments.**

Both in the choice of the site's name, which has been used in a number of other contexts in relation to online content sharing, and in the positive message to potential visitors, the *Commons* is presented from the start as an opportunity for a worthwhile collaborative effort: institutions, starting with the Library of Congress, will share with the public their 'hidden treasures', a resource which is thus implicitly deemed to be 'more valuable if freely shared than if restricted' (Edson and Cherry, 2010, no page); the public will be able to enjoy such treasures and show how they could make them even richer.

Visually as well as in the choice of name, the site's purpose and aspirations are communicated through the powerful metaphor of the commons, a piece of land shared by the people of a town, inscribed with positive, democratic and comforting connotations; this is a welcoming space, a good place to be.

Perhaps not surprisingly, as Basset and O'Riordan observe (2002), the use of spatial metaphors is prevalent in discussions and representations of the Internet. In talking about virtual environments, Habermas, for example, does indeed resort to a place metaphor when he equates the spaces where Internet communities exist with 'medieval European hamlets' (Habermas, 1989, p. 411).

Guimarães Jr. also chooses a spatial metaphor in reference to the Internet; however, as it is often hard to specify a single location in cyberspace where a 'group' lives, the author feels that social life in cyberspace would be better described as having:

features similar to large urban centres, where the use of a particular urban space is not necessarily associated with being part of a specific social group.  
(Guimarães, 2005, p. 148)

In this perspective, online environments are seen as maintaining their continuity thanks to the social and interpersonal networks that bind group members; it is social interaction that makes it possible to even try and identify specific research settings online. Consistent with this view, Guimarães opts for referring to these online locations as 'social environments', symbolic spaces created in cyberspace through programs which allow communication between two or more users (Guimarães, 2005, p. 149).

I rather like Guimarães' 'urban space' metaphor for online spaces: it challenges the idea of isolation conjured up by Habermas' mountain hamlet image, and stresses the social interaction aspect and the gravitational pull of objects or situations online. Interestingly, Flickr itself has been described as a city with distinctive neighbourhoods, a community of communities (Perez, 2007). The metaphor also resonates with the notion of individuals clustering around an object of interest, such as museum visitors admiring an artefact, which I touched on earlier in the chapter.

From an ethnographic perspective it is as tempting as it is useful to resort to spatial metaphors to define and refer to an online research setting. However, I would agree with Basset and O'Riordan (2002) when they suggest that when conducting online research one should move beyond the purely spatial metaphor. The Internet should be viewed not only as a virtual space, the authors argue, where one can observe human actors, but also as 'a

medium through which a wide variety of statements are produced’; in other words, as ‘a cultural production of texts’ (Basset and O’Riodan, 2002, no page).

In this perspective, the Internet and its different online contexts of engagement become, for the researcher, a fusion of spatial and textual elements enabled by digitality in ways which were, arguably, not possible before, and under temporal conditions which are variable, unpredictable, and potentially disruptive. At the same time, while people come and go, their discursive legacy remains. It is from this perspective that I ultimately approach the environment under investigation, as I look at visual and textual traces and how they mesh to produce an interpretable, if composite, narrative.

As we move beyond the opening page of the *Commons* the photograph collections take centre stage. In the image below is a view of the Lincoln photographic portrait which opens the Library of Congress photostream (Figure 4):

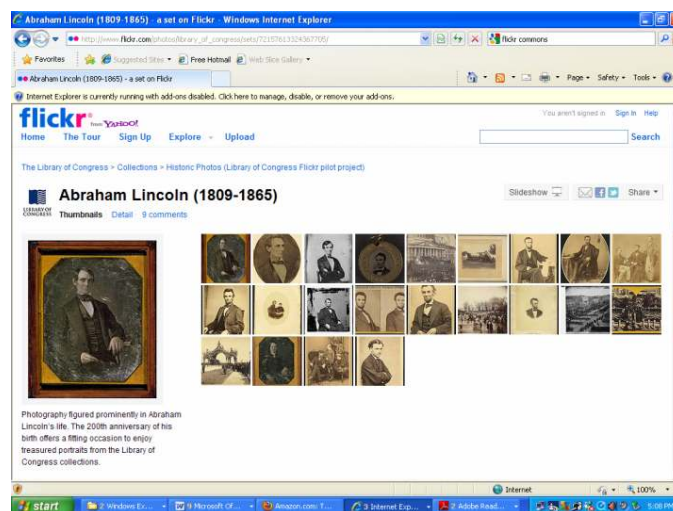


Figure 4 The Lincoln’s collection on Flickr

Clicking on the main image, the chosen photograph appears surrounded by a scattering of data, information and links to other pages, in a layout that is consistent with other spaces on Flickr (Figure 5):

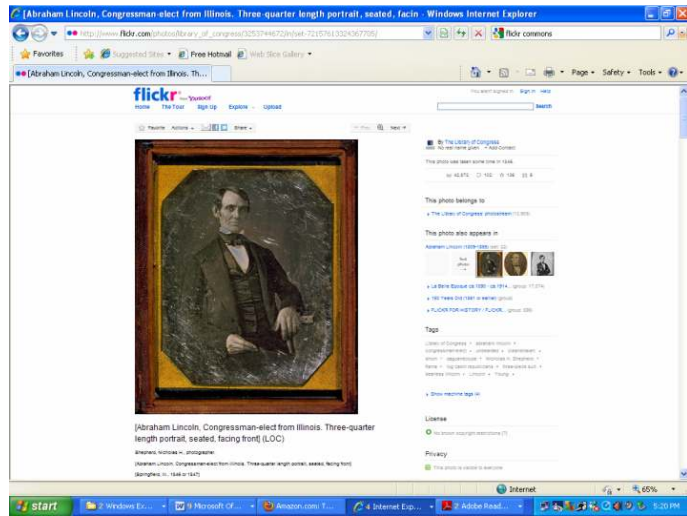


Figure 5 The first item in the Lincoln collection

On the photograph fine white lines appear, forming overlapping rectangular shapes. When touched by the cursor, these turn into small green captions containing short texts, the ‘notes’ which visitors to the site added to the photograph (Figure 6). These are the first visible traces left by people who have visited the site and have actively engaged with the photograph.

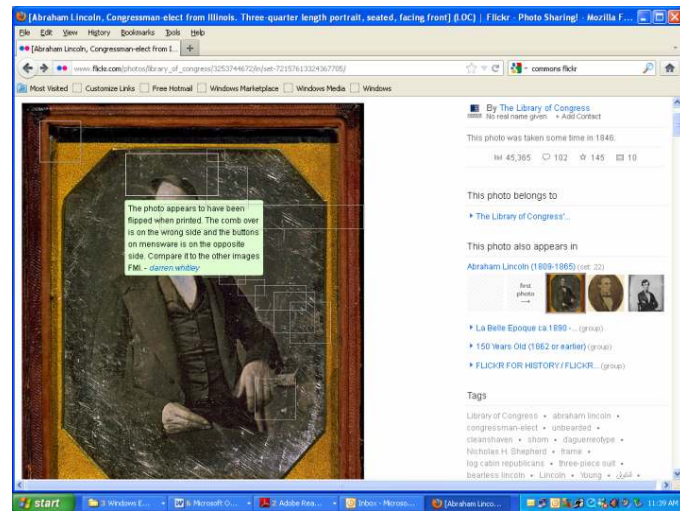


Figure 6 User note on the Lincoln’s portrait

Moving down the page, beyond captions and more technical information about the artefact are all the comments left by visitors to the site (Figure 7).

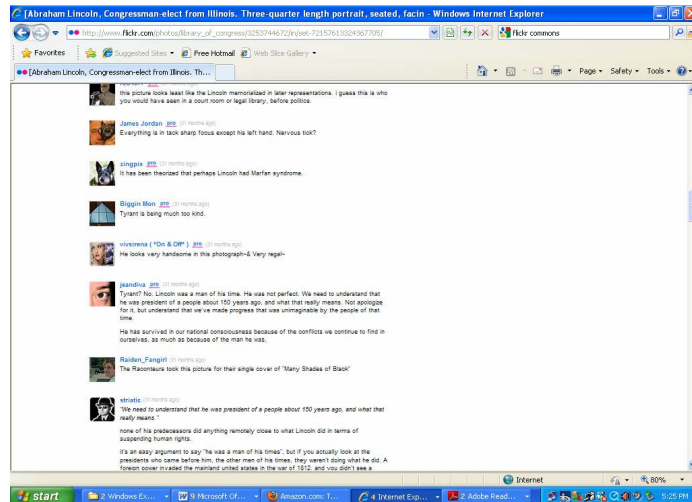


Figure 7 Flickr users' comments

Scrolling down to the end of the last page of comments, the ending is left open, offering the opportunity to add more: the story captured so far is not necessarily concluded (Figure 8).

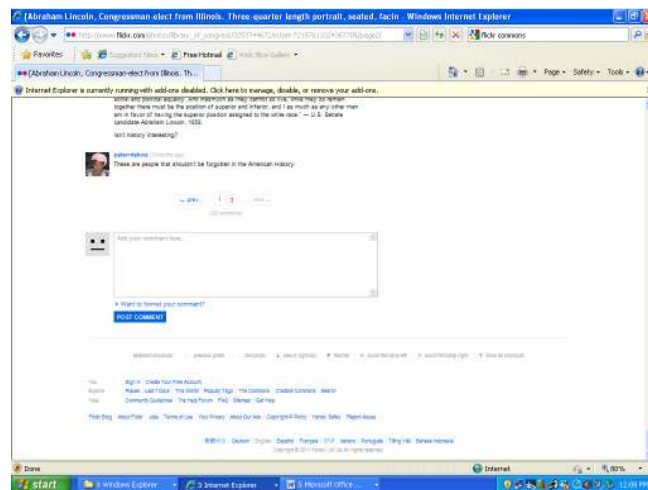


Figure 8 End of comments' stream

At the time of the analysis, the Lincoln page was made up of the following types of text:

- *Design-embedded text*: this includes metalinguistic elements, such as layout features, captions, branding, links and various other props which make up the standard house style across the Flickr site (Figure 9).

<b>Activity</b>	Around You   In Your Groups   From your friends
<b>You</b>	Your Photostream   Organize   Upload   Your Account   Do More, Order Prints
<b>Explore</b>	Places   Last 7 Days   This Month   Popular Tags   The <i>Commons</i>   Creative <i>Commons</i>   Search
<b>Help</b>	Community Guidelines   The Help Forum   FAQ   Tools   Sitemap   Help by Email

**Figure 9** Design-embedded text

- *Institution-issued text*: this includes the digital version of the Lincoln portrait photograph and information about it as provided by the Library of Congress, for example:

1 photograph : quarter plate daguerreotype ; plate 4 1/4 x 3 1/4 in.

**Notes:**

This daguerreotype is the earliest-known photograph of Abraham Lincoln, taken at age 37 when he was a frontier lawyer in Springfield and Congressman-elect from Illinois. (Source: Ostendorf, p. 4)

Attributed to Nicholas H. Shepherd...

- *User-generated text*: this is any text contributed by participants to the site. This falls broadly into the following categories:
  - participants' 'signatures'*
  - tags added to the photograph*
  - notes on the photographs*
  - comments*





discussion to the participants' own iconic representation. This is not unusual on social media sites which support active user participation through commenting facilities. However, it is especially interesting, I would argue, in a context such as the *Commons* where a strongly iconic item, such as the Lincoln portrait here, is at the centre of the experience.

By this I do not mean that the discussion will eventually turn its focus on the participants' icons; rather that these partly redress the balance between the visually powerful photograph and the participants' presence which would otherwise be confined to the written text that they generate. The use of icons, in other words, complements the text as a powerful tool in establishing each speaker's identity as performed in the exchange.

This is, however, a visual identity which is liable to change; as I returned to the Lincoln site on a number of occasions, I found that some icons had been replaced by new ones as Flickr members updated their visual profile, a common practice in social media environments. So, while the verbal utterances originally captured remained the same, speakers' visual identity has, in many cases, transformed.

#### *b) User-contributed tags*

An important motivation for institutions joining the *Commons* on Flickr is to gain new information about their images from members of the public, including people who, albeit sharing a passion for photography, might not necessarily seek out their collections.

An important feature of the *Commons* site, common to the wider Flickr environment, is the opportunity it offers participants to add their own tags to individual photographs: Flickr users can assign to a picture any number of tags in the form of keywords; they also have the opportunity to see how other users apply the tags in the context of other images (Clayton *et al.*, 2008).

As McGregor and McCulloch explain (2006), in digital environments content tagging enables the organisation of information both within personal spaces and in shared ones, thus allowing others to browse and search the tags attached to information resources. Tagging is indeed a simple but highly effective way of creating new links between digital objects

independently of their history, of location and of features which have been traditionally deemed as most important. Online users who tag museum objects can thus become novel ‘curators of meaning’ who ‘seamlessly use tagging and folksonomies to animate and explore the multilayered meanings of pictures or collection objects’ (Pratty, 2006, no page).

Pictures are then liable to come up in keyword/tag searches as part of sets which contain items linked by traits which might be very different from those which would normally identify them. In this way, through new and original folksonomies, which complement ‘top-down taxonomies familiar to the communities of practice within the museums’ (Parry, 2007, p. 55), images become enriched with new interpretative potential, as they fall into the hands of untypical users who get to enjoy them and, perhaps, might choose to follow them back to their original collection.

Hammond *et al* (2005) report how the use of collaborative tools such as social tagging to create distributed knowledge has become increasingly important to museums as they seek to engage the wider community. Institutions can benefit from user input in terms of original information and insights, and also in terms of ideas for different ways of organizing it. As Clayton *et al* explain,

user tagging allows us as the custodians of national collections to: interpret collections more broadly; balance technical description with common language; engage and create communities from afar; and give the public a sense of ownership of our collections

(Clayton *et al*, 2008, p. III)

In other words, the benefits of the social tagging of cultural heritage content are, arguably, manifold. They include a greater number of access points to digital collections and objects, the development of a stronger sense of community, greater opportunities for establishing a personal connection with an artefact and valuable contributions to the knowledge about collections, especially when users contribute to the identification of images and to the enhancement of descriptions through their own knowledge and perspectives (Trant, 2006; Golder and Hubermann, 2005; Matusiak, 2006).

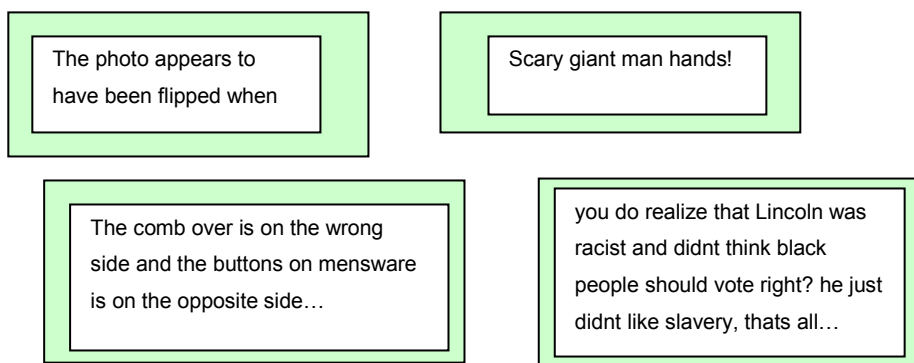
In the example under study the Lincoln’s portrait tag-list includes the original Library tags and tags contributed by users. Below are some examples:

Library of Congress  
abraham lincoln  
congressman-elect  
unbearded  
cleanshaven  
shorn  
daguerreotype  
Nicholas H. Shepherd  
frame

It is interesting to note how in the list above tags refer to the physical object (daguerreotype, frame), to Lincoln's role as a politician (congressman-elect), but also to some physical characteristics of the man (unbearded , cleanshaven , shorn), bringing out different perspectives on the object, in ways which are typical of the mix of technical and amateur discourse around heritage collections increasingly flourishing on social media sites (Terras, 2011).

c) *User-contributed notes*

On the Commons site participants can attach to the images small captions, to point at particular features, ask questions or make a comment. In this instance comments range from the size of Lincoln's hand or the style of his hair to questions about his character and stature as a politician, as reproduced below:



Being able to place a comment on the actual image can strengthen the immediacy of an observation, especially when a barely noticeable detail is highlighted and brought to everyone's attention. It certainly introduces a much closer, more personal and informal element to the way people relate to the artefact. It is also an example of users 'touching', as it were, the artefact, arguably one of the most original features on this site, which breaks with the taboo of the object as out of reach and untouchable: the 'please do not touch' rule, commonplace in museums, is broken here as participants are able to get their hands on the object and leave their mark.

Interestingly, however, at least in this instance, not everybody seems happy with this feature: as we will see later, how the note tool is being used, or indeed 'abused', becomes the subject of a heated discussion which both unites and divides participants.

#### *d) Participants' comments*

As well as suggesting tags and placing notes, visitors to the *Commons* site are able to comment on collections and on individual items within them.

As Springer *et al* observe (2008a), like notes, user comments differ in kind and tone and, while statistical data on number of hits per image may point to trends in user preference and interest, it is also important that a more focused analysis of their content informs an overall evaluation of the environment and of its significance as a place of engagement with heritage artefacts.

While qualitative investigations show that the pattern of user activity which characterizes Flickr is generally reflected in the *Commons* environment, some have observed a different quality to the nature of user engagement on the site. For example, some three months from the release of photographs by the Powerhouse Museum, Chan commented as follows:

I'm not sure how the other institutions who are contributing to the *Commons* are finding it, but we've noticed that there seems to be a difference in behaviour and social norms in tagging and commenting on our *Commons* images versus our other images. Presumably the obvious 'historic' nature of the images combined with the fact that the institutions aren't the photographers has an effect on this.

(Chan, 2008, no page, emphasis in the original)

This impression was confirmed in the project report produced by the Library of Congress team some eight months into the initiative (Springer *et al* 2008a). Here the authors also offer an interesting categorization of the different types of user activity around the Library's material which include:

- contributing specialist knowledge...
- adding value through links, comparison, notes...
- sparking memory and conversations about history...
- sparking creativity and memory...
- looking from all over the world and reflecting on related experiences...
- being prompted to new awareness of history through the photos and the conversations and investigations they spark...
- looking closely...
- helping each other to understand the images and data we provided, and the
- historical context of the original descriptions...
- offering visual humor...

(Springer *et al*, 2008a, pp. 37-39)

My own exploration of user activity across different collections on the *Commons* certainly confirmed such variety of user input. However, a more detailed analysis of instances of participation about one individual artefact, in this case the Lincoln photographic portrait, brought out some further interesting themes and insights.

#### **4. An Analysis of User-generated Text on the Lincoln site**

In approaching the Lincoln portrait collection and, more specifically, the first item in the set which had attracted significant user attention, an important decision had to be made with regard to participants, namely, whether I should start by learning more about each individual beyond their involvement in that particular space. This could be done in a number of ways: by researching their profiles on Flickr; by contacting them directly and asking to interview them about their experience on the *Commons*; or a combination of both. As anticipated earlier in the thesis, however, I resolved to do none of the above.

Goffman (1959) suggests that in every context of social life actors play different roles consistent with the respective contexts that are dynamically negotiated with other actors. Hence, rather than aiming at finding the truth behind the social masks, we ought to recognize that individuals must behave according to the environment's meaning framework,

thus revealing the culture of the group. From this it follows, it is argued, that the social sciences should not necessarily look at persons as individuals, but as subjects of situated social relationships.

In turn, in his discussion of online engagement, Poster (2001) observes that

in on-line, synchronous communication... individuals type messages... each individual is a character, and participation is successful to the extent that the character is believable for others.

(Poster, 2001, p. 75)

In other words, it is argued, digital authorship is about the performance of self-constitution as participants invent themselves online. In this perspective, the subjects of an online ethnography are indeed the personas that create the social environments in cyberspace: the character online is true to his/herself and, to all intents and purposes, it is the only one which is relevant to the enquiry because specifically connected to the culture of the environment.

While mindful of warnings against the arguably ‘unsupportable conflation of the Internet user with their textual output’ (Basset and O’Riordan, 2002, no page), my decision was, ultimately, not to follow participants beyond the context observed, and instead keep my analysis firmly rooted in textuality. Furthermore, I would rely solely on the text produced and on the performances enacted there and then, in that particular space.

Interestingly, in reading the textual traces on the Lincoln page, the flow of individual utterances punctuated by the alternating of icons in an intriguing fusion of texts and images and the intertwining of monologue and dialogue reminded me strongly of a theatre performance, unfolding in front of an audience. This is an audience, which, intriguingly, is at any time potentially present as well as absent.

In so doing, I too resort to a place metaphor, the theatre, in approaching this particular online environment; however, this is a metaphor which combines spatial elements, a performing stage, with the textual element of participants’ utterances. From this perspective, in my reading of the texts, I was happy to suspend disbelief as long as I felt that the outcome was sufficiently convincing and engaging. My loyalty, ultimately, remained with the action

as performed in that particular environment, around that particular artefact, by those particular characters. To them I granted full identity as inscribed in their own iconic representation, their name and their utterances. What interested me was, first and foremost, the nature of the engagement around the artefact and the narratives collectively produced, rather than individual interpretations or accounts of the experience: in other words, the play, rather than an actor's take on it.

In the next section I share my interpretation of the experience, my 'translation', as it were, of it. Especially when the focus is on participant dialogue, I use what van Maanen (1988, p. 7) refers to as an impressionistic style of writing, a 'scenic method in which the writer shows rather than tells' (Alvesson, 2002, p. 136). In other words, I include visual elements which I comment on, and present extracts from user generated text interspersed with my own comments and observations, rather than the other way round. User comments are thematically grouped and presented in order of posting within their respective grouping. Although I returned to the web page on a number of occasions and noticed that participants' icons had changed, I include in my text the icons which were used by participants at the time of my original analysis.

The risk is that, because of the way I present the setting, rather than being 'fairly' or 'faithfully' portrayed, participants emerge as particular characters in a story, one which is inevitably part of my, the researcher-author's, narrative (Alvesson, 2002). All in all, I am quite comfortable with such risk, as I believe that any effort to provide an insight into social dynamics carries an inevitable element of bias and projection on the part of the observer. What is important is, however, that such bias is recognized and declared.

#### **4.1 Abraham Lincoln, Congressman-elect from Illinois. Three-quarter length portrait, seated, facing front**

Shortly after its publication on the *Commons* site in early February 2009 more than 40 users had made a contribution to the Library of Congress' collection of photographic portraits of Abraham Lincoln. While a small number of remarks concerned the overall set, most of the comments, just over 90 at the time, related to the first image; some two and a half years later, this was still the case: of some 430 comments left by users across a set of 22 images, 102 still concerned the first item (Figure 11).





**Figure 11**

[Abraham Lincoln, Congressman-elect from Illinois.  
Three-quarter length portrait, seated, facing front] (LOC)  
Shepherd, Nicholas H., photographer.[Springfield, Ill., 1846 or 1847]

While these figures are interesting, what is particularly striking is the mixed nature of contributions: these start off with general comments of appreciation, and observations about the photograph; however, quite soon the focus moves onto Lincoln the congressman and politician and his role in history. A politically-charged discussion soon begins, with more general comments occasionally cropping up and interrupting the flow of the debate. Quite quickly, a rather heated debate among a small group of participants takes over and dominates the action, to then reach a conclusion.

Overall, comments on the site can be described as falling into three main groups which, of course, often overlap:

- Group 1:** comments about the digital object as a photograph
- Group 2:** comments about the ongoing interaction and on participants' behaviour on the site
- Group 3:** comments on the subject of the photograph, i.e. Lincoln the man and politician.

Below are some extracts from participant's comments as found at the time of the analysis which took place between March and June 2009.

### **Group 1: 'So that's what a daguerreotype looks like...'**

Comments in this group include expressions of appreciation:



**internetincomebox**

I think this is a very nice picture of president Abraham Lincoln. He looks great in this picture. We must thank Shepherd, Nicholas H., the photographer for taking this picture of the president. The picture of the president is a great memory of a great man!



**BBroadway**

Great collection



**zosxavius**

so that's what a daguerreotype looks like....  
they are as beautiful as they say.....



**www.stickerklub.com**

the wastecoast is real nice



**Randy Haddock**

Amazing!

There are notifications that the image has been moved elsewhere:



**PINTOR DE SOÑOS**

Hi, I'm an admin for a group called [FLICKR PARA LA HISTORIA](#) , and we'd love to have this added to the group!



#### [whatsthatpicture](#)

Hi, I'm an admin for a group called [150 Years Old](#), and we'd love to have this added to the group, plus any other images taken in 1859 or earlier

...and input from 'experts' adding to the information about the image:



#### [woodpainter](#)

The image is the frontispiece of Lincoln, Abraham. Lincoln on Democracy. Rev. ed. New York: Fordham University Press, 2004. This is a revision of an earlier edition



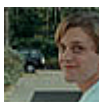
#### [madjer33](#)

Of course the image is flipped. Daguerreotypes are direct positive images, there is no negative. You see what the lens sees, the image is reversed and upside down. Look at the image on the ground glass of a view camera and you will see what the daguerreotype saw. Sometimes this was corrected with the use of a prism or mirror, but more often not.



#### [ISO1977](#)

this picture looks least like the Lincoln memorialized in later representations. i guess this is who you would have seen in a court room or legal library, before politics.



#### [Raiden\\_Fangirl](#)

The Raconteurs took this picture for their single cover of 'Many Shades of Black'

Overall, participants in this group are engaging with the object as a photograph, contributing to the meaning making around it in different ways. They share their appreciation of its aesthetic and historical value, and contribute their personal expertise by adding to the collective knowledge of the object, its history, its technical features. Interestingly, there is no reference here at all at this being a reproduction of the original: it feels as if to them this is the original thing to which they have now been granted access. The suspension of disbelief is very much complete.

## Group 2: 'You'll be missing out sometimes...'

Participants' comments in Group 2 constitute a kind of meta-commentary to the unfolding action, pointing out aspects of participant behaviour and commenting on them:



### **Chicago Wedding Photographer, Wes Craft**

The 'add note' feature isn't intended for sticking flaming debate tags regarding the politics of lincoln all over the photo.



### **ELCore**

Ditto Wes Craft. Only one comment, as of now, is actually about the photograph.



### **gibbermagash**

How the hell do you get rid of those dam little white box outlines?



### **xtrarant**

as gibbermagash said, is there any way to get rid of those damn box outlines for the notes? LoC should turn off the ability to leave notes on its pictures as everyone and their brother feels the need to pepper pictures with them and ruin looking at them.



### **jrohen**

will you please at least move the boxes off him and onto the side of the photo? that way we can still read the notes without having them be annoying. thanks.



### **Whiskeygonebad**

... Stop tagging the picture itself

A number of users have been placing notes on the photograph which comment on Lincoln's role in American politics. The above statement suggest a consensus among a group of participants regarding the correct use of the note tool, which they feel should be employed solely to add important comments about the actual photograph and not about other topics, such as Lincoln the man, his political standing and so on. Excessive or inappropriate use is criticized and challenged.

This is an interesting example of a group which is engaged in enforcing self-regulation to preserve what they might perceive as the integrity of the artefact and of the site's overall

purpose. In other words, a number of participants seem intent on managing the territory and the action, reacting strongly to what they find irritating, or even 'illegal', behaviour.

At the same time, there are instances of mediation, with participants offering solutions to technical problems:



**pschwens**

You can change who can add notes to pictures here:

[www.flickr.com/account/prefs/photoprivacy/?from=privacy](http://www.flickr.com/account/prefs/photoprivacy/?from=privacy)



**striatic**

*'is there any way to get rid of those damn box outlines for the notes?'*

just wait a few seconds after the page starts loading and they'll disappear, so long as you don't hover over them first.; you can also click part of the photo that doesn't have a note, and then click off the photo, and the notes will vanish; notes can be very useful on other photos for identifying individuals in group portraits, for example.

Interestingly, the comments extend to questioning the idea of cyberspace democracy, through defiant or, perhaps, ironic statements:



**ISO1977**

perhaps the thinking goes something like this:

i have an opinion and access to the internet, therefore you are obligated to hear my opinion.

... the response to which is both confident and conciliatory:



**jeandiva**

we all have the right to express our opinions, and the equal right to turn down the volume individually should we so choose. obviously Lincoln continues to generate dialogue about many issues!

Being cranky about lines on the photo, or people expressing their opinions that you happen to disagree with is futile. There is an easy method to avoid the lines. Thanks striatic! Click on all sizes if you want to avoid both opinions and lines. But you'll be missing out sometimes...

A number of roles seem to be emerging from the participants' interaction so far: there are 'fans', 'experts', self-appointed 'site police' and 'mediators'. As we will see, these roles

develop, change, evolve, evidencing an ongoing process of identity performance by individuals.

Castells (1997) proposes an interesting distinction between ‘role’ and ‘identity’: while ‘roles organize the functions’, the author suggests, ‘identities organize the meaning’ (Castells, 1997, p. 7). Castells also argues that the social construction of identity always takes place in a context marked by power relationships. In the example above the theme of power arguably emerges in the tension between users of the site involved in different actions and those who feel seemingly empowered to censor such actions and demand a change of behaviour, thus enforcing a code of practice.

Interestingly, at the beginning, few of those reprimanded seem to rebel, or maybe they have simply moved on, and the censors get instead pacified by mediators, solution providers.

Also, action from the Library of Congress is requested in order to fix some technical issues, in this case the position of the notes which some find irritating and disruptive. The request is expressed in rather strong terms:



**xtrarant**

... LoC should turn off the ability to leave notes on its pictures as everyone and their brother feels the need to pepper pictures with them and ruin looking at them.

Indeed, the tone used in addressing the Library of Congress is not particularly reverential: rather it is that of someone who feels entitled to request an improvement to a service from a service provider.

Overall, a sense of ownership emerges rather strongly in the text observed so far: ownership of the territory, of technical expertise and of a shared code of behaviour which some assume enforceable. A strong sense of group identity also transpires from the interaction, in spite of the lack of face-to face engagement and the assumed identity of participants.

Spears *et al* (2002) argue that anonymity can, in fact, increase the salience and impact of contextually relevant group identities: even more than in face-to-face interaction, self definition and social behaviour in anonymous online interaction may enhance the impact of

group identities. In contexts such as the one under observation, however, the term ‘pseudonymity’, rather than ‘anonymity’, better describes participant’s self-presentation, as the latter requires unlinkability which, because of self-profiling options and other forms of publishing on the site, is not always possible. It is also likely that many of the participants in the site will have met elsewhere on Flickr, and established a relationship of mutual knowledge and trust through other activities.

While a sense of group-membership and shared ownership arguably transpires from the interaction, it is also interesting to see how the empowering and essentially democratic qualities of the Internet as a space for action are invoked and reclaimed as soon as attempts at enforcing rules and restrictions are being detected. This raises interesting questions regarding ways in which power relations are reinforced as well as transcended in online social situations such as the one observed (Spears *et al*, 2002), especially as the focus of participants moves to and from the main object, the photograph as a heritage artefact, to linger on other aspects which gradually emerge in the discussion.

An interesting question is, at this point, what meaning may be being constructed in the environment under study as identities form, perform and interact.

First of all some knowledge about the original object of interest, the photograph, is shared, increased and challenged to the benefit of both users and providers of the artefact; also, expertise regarding site-related technical issues is shared and reinforced through clarification and advice; finally, and importantly, assumptions about the use and purpose of the site are expressed, challenged and discussed.

As a spectator/reader of the text, exploring the environment after the event, all areas of activity struck me as useful – i.e. exchanges about the picture, about the tools, about the purpose of it all – and gave me pause for thought as I found myself looking at the picture in different ways, sharing in some of the notes-related irritation, and reflecting on rights and duties of participants.

Rose (2007, p. 23) suggests that the ‘social’ is perhaps the most important modality for understanding the audiencing of images. On the *Commons* the meta-discussion on the

purpose of the place, on ways of making things work better and on what participants should or should not do, definitely heightens the experience of coming into contact with the photograph. And in turn, no such discussion would be taking place without the objects falling into the hands of the participants in the first place.

For sure, the experience here feels very different from one of staring at a portrait such as this on a museum wall, or just admiring it on a museum website: something else is happening, something that engages all concerned, observers like me included, and prompts the asking of new and different questions.

Let us now turn to Group 3 for a different kind of action.

### **Group 3. 'It's the times that create the man!'**

Against the background of appreciative comments about the photograph, contributions about its technical, artistic and historical significance and the odd squabble about what might be the correct use of tools and applications, rather quickly a very different discussion takes hold on the Lincoln site. It starts almost immediately with a provocative reply to an appreciative comment:



**internetincomebox**

I think this is a very nice picture of president Abraham Lincoln. He looks great in this picture. We must thank Shepherd, Nicholas H., the photographer for taking this picture of the president.

The picture of the president is a great memory of a great man!

The response is sharp and uncompromising:



**idswart**

Lincoln was a tyrant.

This comment marks the beginning of a discussion which moves the focus sharply away from the photograph as an artefact towards questions of a political, historical and philosophical nature.



Overall, around eight participants take part in the debate that follows; however, quite quickly, a smaller group appear to take over as they launch into a rather heated exchange about Lincoln's role as a politician, his responsibilities as a congressman at a highly sensitive point in American history and, more generally, about moral issues around war and how justifiable killing is in the name of any value.

It is not the place here to dwell on the merits of the discussion from a political or historical perspective. Instead, it is interesting to analyse some themes emerging from the exchange.

From that first, arguably provocative, statement a discussion begins and progresses for a while, in an exchange of views between participants who seem both reasonably informed and clearly interested in the topic:



**striatic**

...

Lincoln violated the rule of law, the constitution, the human rights of thousands - to a much greater extent than any president that came before him.

the very troubling thing is that out of this tyranny, and perhaps even because of this tyranny, the even greater tyranny of slavery was ended. when we look at Lincoln we see an incredibly complicated figure who challenges our ideas of what is just and what is right from many different directions.



**jeandiva**

Tyrant? No. Lincoln was a man of his time. He was not perfect. We need to understand that he was president of a people about 150 years ago, and what that really means. Not apologize for it, but understand that we've made progress that was unimaginable by the people of that time.

He has survived in our national consciousness because of the conflicts we continue to find in ourselves, as much as because of the man he was,

Slowly, however, the tone of the debate becomes more heated:



**striatic**

... these questions shouldn't be dismissed because of some glib notion that people in the 'olden days' didn't know any better.



#### **Biggin Mon**

Tell that to the 650,000 Americans he slaughtered...how's that for human rights? How about jailing and deporting even Congressman who were opposed to the war? Sherman's march to the sea ring any bells?

Interestingly, as a somewhat stormy discussion is slowly brewing, here and there appear comments like the ones below:



#### **[ M O D E L ] In The Making ツTinka B ツ**

Lincoln, Wow My fav President. Sadly his life was cut short.



#### **Through\_Hawaiian\_Eyes**

Great man who had a vision.



#### **Stieglitz65**

He looks a little bit like Cary Grant in this photo.

These interjections appear quite separate from the more heated debate and suggest that some participants may not be reading through the comments as a story, just enjoying making their own contribution; or that they might just not care to join the debate, happy to state their view in a personal, non-dialogic manner.

To the post-event reading these comments add a light, and sometime humorous, quality which reinforces the idea that overall the group interaction is quite fluid, with participants forming different groups, at times separate, at times intertwining.

It is quite important, in my view, to pay attention to the marginal when carrying out an analysis of this kind, especially in a setting where a main event takes over the action: neglecting these secondary elements would risk, as Fine *et al* warn, the construction of narratives 'spiked only with the hot spots' (Fine *et al*, 2003, p. 187).

Indeed, individual utterances, away from the main dialogues, provide an important counterpoint to the main action. If one thinks of this as a theatre stage, it is quite easy to picture different groups of characters in different parts of the scene contributing to the

overall story; a story that is multi-faceted, and combines intense and lighter elements and is also enriched with genuine or accidental humorous touches.

One such 'marginal' interjection is especially effective as it appears after somebody else's long and rather intense posting, right in the middle of the heated political discussion:



**thespark17**

As some have said, his hands do look oddly large in this picture. His left hand almost looks as big as his head. It must have been the angle.

'If killing is okay, nothing is safe.'

You apparently have a deep lack of understanding regarding the nature of war.

By turning the attention again to a detail in the picture, the first part of the comment above breaks the tension of the discussion, almost in a humorous way if, as I was, the reader is caught up with the main debate; however, this is followed unexpectedly by a rather charged statement which adds more fuel to the political discussion. The participant here is interestingly straddling two groups, Group 1 and 3, engaging in different strands of discourse at the same time in an interestingly conciliatory and, at once, challenging tone.

Soon, however, as the other plots and subplots seem to fade away, one main discussion takes over, with three participants taking centre stage and launching into a heated and, at times, rather emotional and heartfelt exchange (the underlining in the reported text is mine):



**- julia -**

...

.... The idea of business as usual, in a time when a major chunk of the country was trying to secede, violating the Union? Ridiculous.

Funny how people can't understand that in times of war, normal 'rights' are removed. ... This idea that there's an honorable way to conduct wars is asinine and shameful.

...

Jesus help us, people are stupid. There are times when war is called for. But if you believe that, and enter into it, don't have on blinders.



**PopKulture**

And whilst I rant from those aforementioned corridors of leisure and food aplenty, I am curious: for those who would brand Lincoln a tyrant, who among the American pantheon do you admire?



**striatic**

you're defending Lincoln by saying that rights are luxuries. unbelievable.

saying that America's constitutional ideals were born of leisure and peace is also unbelievable.

Gradually, as the discussion continues, alliances form:



**- julia -**

'They are merely ideals, and not at all immutable, given form or verse simply by those in concert willing to make difficult choices to, above all else, protect themselves from material harm.'

Beautifully stated.

'I would assert further that idealism is at its heart a peacetime proposition ...'

Absolutely.



**PopKulture**

So markedly right, Julia. I hold all of the aforementioned in utter esteem, by the way, for making the difficult choices they made.

And then the discussion begins to turn into a full-out argument:



**striatic**

I don't particularly care about satisfying your curiosity.

oh please... don't be glib...



**PopKulture**

...

.Ahhh, it's much easier to criticize, isn't it?

How sad a retreat....



**striatic**

'I'm being a little difficult'

more than

...



**striatic**

i don't enjoy it one bit. i'm rather surly and upset right now, and i don't think of it as a 'ping pong ball' in any way whatsoever. if you're finding this entertaining, great. live it up.



**- julia -**

I'm sorry you weren't having fun. I think it's fun to banter ideas with obviously reflective, intelligent people, even if their conclusions are not my own. Isn't that one of the freedoms you hold most dear? It's certainly one of the most important freedoms our founders wanted for themselves. To me, exchange, debate, and so on, is the hallmark of our democracy.

You needn't bother making a snide reply. Since you've now decided to start insulting me rather than using your brain to talk about the ideas at hand, I'll permanently adjourn.



**striatic**

*'To me, exchange, debate, and so on, is the hallmark of our democracy.'*

yes, but it isn't always Fun, and i don't do it to 'score points'.

And so the discussion goes on, with one participant leaving the scene, or at least stopping his/her contributions, and the other two eventually reconciling, mainly through 'julia's' effort to return the discussion to more conciliatory tones:



**- julia -**

And look, there's no 'winner.' What would that look like? Me saying, 'I think you're right in all your reasoning, and where you place your priority in the interpretation of history?' Or you saying same, to me? Do you think you have not provoked me into thought? I win because you made me examine my own opinions and ideas -- as do you, if you take the opportunity.

'julia' is also mediating on behalf of a participant who has, apparently, left the scene:

... And I believe in asking you who you idealized, PopKulture was wanting to understand more about your values. And not to denigrate them, either.

My questions, as numerous as they were, were not meant as challenges to you...Many were rhetorical, and yes, I'm too verbose. I apologize if my style hindered any pleasurable exchange..

At this point the debate closes, at least for a while, with a final contribution from another participant, a rather theatrical epilogue-like statement:



**Michael Popowski**

It is the times that create the man!

It is also interesting to zoom in on the timing of the exchanges, which are recorded after each contribution, thus showing the time gaps between postings.

The majority of comments appeared to have been left on the site in February 2009, shortly after the release of the Lincoln collection. However, after a gap of over two months the discussion picks up again, with an intervention that questions again the purpose of the site and what people should and should not do (again, my underlining):



**staciex**

Anyone who is looking at a 200 year old image of anything and not appreciating that fact alone is on the wrong website. We are photographers here. We're sharing our eyes to the world with everyone so that they might have a larger understanding, a moment of inspiration, a connection, or a rejection. But, even if it is a rejection, this community is generally supportive, constructive, or silent. We're photographers here - not politicians. Can you imagine if you posted a photograph that anyone would care at all about in 200 years, regardless of subject matter? Politics don't belong here.

The observation resonates with an earlier comment, one which had been rather more snappily put:



**Whiskeygonebad**

... Please stop with all of your 2009 P.C. mush-brained comments

Interestingly, two of the participants who had been engrossed in the main discussion, 'Julia' and 'Striatic', return on the scene, as it were, and respond with one voice:



**julia**

It is an amazing photograph. But it wasn't taken back in 1847 as a celebration of photography, nor is it shared here as such. It was significant then as it is significant now: as a piece of material history, specifically important because of the *subject*.

I have discovered in the last four years here that flickr is not merely a place to discuss photography. Many of us also routinely discuss issues or feelings that are inspired by the photographs we see posted. Taking part in those discussions is completely voluntary.

In this case, the discussion was prompted by an image of a politician; it was absolutely topical. And I disagree -- we are all politicians, or so Solon intended: we live in a democracy, where it is our right (some might say our responsibility) to actively discuss our political beliefs. One needn't take advantage of that freedom, or fulfill that responsibility, but I don't think it is appropriate to tell others to refrain from such interaction.

...If you mean you wish flickr comment threads were only ever about the art and science of

photography, then you are in luck: when you see a series of comments that seem to diverge from that course, you are only one click away from relief.



**striatic**

*'We're photographers here - not politicians.'*

you don't know who flickr is for and who it isn't for. you've made an assumption that it is a website devoted *\*solely\** to photographic art, and are wrong.

*'Politics don't belong here.'*

of course they do, and you just shared yours very plainly with us.

The reaction seems to hit home:



**staciex**

After I thought more about it the comments in the boxes all over the photo are what set me off. I took it as very intrusive and interfering with the photo. I am fascinated with the artifact itself, and the politics were distracting. ... My appreciation for your thoughtful comments (and striatic's) is sincere.

The conversation goes then on to how to deal with annoying notes on the picture, and, one might say, all are friends again.

Again, just over a month later, another positive comment is added to the exchange, where a different participant thanks Striatic, Julia, and PopKulture as follows



**Okinawa Soba**

Striatic, Julia, and PopKulture --- most interesting exchange of comments. That was some of the best "flickr reading" I've had in a while...

However, almost a year and a half after the original flurry of comments, a new, rather striking posting appears:



**ronghualu**

yah, interesting photo, as a photo.

Anybody must be judged by his words and actions. Lincoln's actions were to create a civil war, to continue subjugation and theft of wealth. He effected this by blatantly contravening the constitution, and by so doing set the precedence for the mess we have today. His words and speeches are many, but I find his pre-presidency stage to be most revealing. To anyone who thinks Lincoln was an advocate of freedom and equality, well pls read this quote....

"I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races, that I am not nor ever have been in favor of making voters or jurors of negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office, nor to intermarry with white people; and I will say in addition to this that there is a physical difference between the white and black races which I believe will forever forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality. And inasmuch as they cannot so live, while they do remain together there must be the position of superior and inferior, and I as much as any other man am in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race." — U.S. Senate candidate Abraham Lincoln, 1858.  
Isn't history interesting?

This comment is followed, five months later, by what is, at the time of writing in early 2012, the concluding remark on the site:



[peterntekwa](#)

These are people that shouldn't be forgotten in the American History.

Like in the previous two groups, members of Group 3 appear to be performing a number of roles as they interact with each other and construct meaning around the main artefact; these are roles which reflect their identity as citizens, Americans, political and social actors, historians, sociologists, philosophers, pacifists and so on; and, of course, as members of the Flickr community.

They clearly wish to share their knowledge, and discuss in depth a range of topics. They challenge or provoke fellow participants, they form alliances, and then pacify, apologize, mediate. Power relationships form, as two participants appear to unite, if temporarily, against a third one who, from an initially confident and comfortable stand, appears to be gradually shifted into defensive positions from which he/she is rescued through the mediating efforts of a conciliatory and seemingly slightly repentant former opponent.

Interestingly, influenced by the name, I found myself instinctively recognizing in 'julia's' mediating behaviour, in her empathy and readiness to find a conciliatory solution to the argument, more typically feminine traits. In reality, from where I was standing I had no way of knowing for sure what julia's actual gender might be, and it was interesting to see how easily I had been drawn to rather stereotyping conclusions.



All in all, participants' comments in Group 3, like those in previous groups, show a strong sense of ownership towards the subject matter and of their cultural identity. A strong sense of ownership also transpires towards the space participants inhabit online and their right to make of it what they wish. And when this right is put into question by another participant keen to 'keep politics out of flickr', former opponents unite in reasserting their shared vision for a space they clearly see as their own.

## 4.2 Summing up

A reading of the textual traces left in the Lincoln site yielded some interesting insights for an interpretation of the nature of user interaction coming together around a digitized cultural artefact in an environment such as that of the *Commons*; also, a number of themes emerged which usefully feed into the thesis' broader discussion.

First of all, looking at the exchanges, it is interesting to see the different ways in which participants engage with the object, the site, and each other. I refer back to the initial distinction between interaction around the artefact as an object, a photograph, and interaction around the subject represented in the object (p. 111).

If, borrowing from linguistics theory (de Saussure, 1916), the main object here, the historical artefact, is the 'sign', the participants' focus seems to be split between the form which the sign takes, the 'signifier', and the concept it represents, the 'signified'; while the two aspects may be seen as indissolubly part of one and the same unit, it is interesting to see how most participants' attention becomes polarized, with contributors falling into fairly distinct camps: those who remain firmly anchored to the object and its intrinsic qualities, and those who engage with the meanings that emanate from the artefact, re-creating it, its value and significance, through differing viewpoints.

Whatever role they play, whether participants come on the stage as photographers, Flickr experts, art critics, historians, political commentators, site police, mediators or fans, the virtual environment and the object around which they engage appear highly conducive to reflection and self-expression.

As well as the participants' comments about the artefact, what stands out as particularly important, in my view, is the meta-discussion about the purpose of the occasion, its significance and value, and the participants' effort to define and assert their role in it.

Some participants appear to feel so strongly about what they understand to be the primary purpose of their presence on the site that they feel compelled to censor exchanges which they do not see as consistent with such understanding.

The emergence of 'the group within the group' taking responsibility for what is perceived as the well-being and correct functioning of the group is arguably a common feature in successful online communities. As Shirky notes:

as a group commits to its existence as a group, and begins to think that the group is good or important, the chance that they will begin to call for additional structure, in order to defend themselves from themselves, gets very, very high.  
(Shirky, 2003, no page)

When seen as benevolent self-policing such behaviour can be reassuring, for example when it translates into safeguarding the quality of content or the well-being of vulnerable participants; it can, however, be more unsettling in situations where, as Shirky observes, the core group appears to have rights that trump individual rights (Shirky 2003, *ibid.*). Behaviour of this kind, Shirky observes, pulls against the libertarian views commonly held on the network, and militates against any notion of one person/one vote.

Also, in situations where the software does not support the aims of the core group, the author notes, the group is likely to seek novel solutions. In the case examined, for example, some people were seen calling for changes to the annotating tool to discourage what they considered an inappropriate use of it.

While on the online stage all participants are potentially equal, in the exchanges witnessed on the Lincoln site the impression is that some do turn out to be somewhat 'more equal' than others. As a heated debate takes over and escalates, the action concentrates around a small group of participants against what, in a continuous reading of the text, feels like a silent background. Are other participants just watching, feeling intimidated or excluded? Or have they simply moved on, irritated or just not interested? There is no answer to this

question in the text itself or in its absence and, in some ways, I do not believe it matters. What is more important, in my view, is that the legacy of what was arguably an interesting, if intense, exchange does remain there to be seen and engaged with again in the future, by anyone and at a time of their choosing.

To conclude, what is certainly striking as one reads the text on the Lincoln site is the overall confidence and shared sense of ownership which participants have of the object, of its complex and controversial significance as a piece of heritage, as well as the degree of control which participants seem to exercise over the territory where the encounter takes place.

In this sense, there certainly appears to be a shift in traditional power dynamics away from the institution to the user: here the Library of Congress, prestigious owner and authoritative custodian of the artefact, becomes just another participant, vouching for the authenticity of the original object but also, when necessary, expected to carry out tasks to improve the experience for all. It is the users, into whose hands the object has been released, who generally appear to act with the confidence of the legitimate inhabitants of the space and protagonists of the experience. How this might compare with the sense of belonging and empowerment normally experienced by visitors to a physical museum certainly calls, in my view, for further reflection and investigation.

## **5. Discussion**

Moving on from the specificity of the analysis, it may be interesting to reflect on how insights from such a reading of user experiences on the *Commons* such as the one proposed above resonate with some of the themes which I discussed in Chapter 2. In particular, these themes cluster around three potential paradigm shifts foregrounded as significant at the confluence of museum practice and digitality: a shifting notion of user centrality within online territories where new forms of access to, and participation around, digital heritage artefacts are enabled; a renewed focus on authorship emerging from new opportunities for interactivity, individual and collective meaning making and creative expression; and the rise of new types of artefacts emerging from these practices, which challenge traditional conceptions of authenticity and cultural authoritativeness.

## 5.1 Users and territories

As discussed earlier in the thesis, one of the more interesting ways in which digitality could be seen to affect heritage institutions as currently constituted is in its potential impact on the notion of user centrality as understood in traditional museum practices (p. 33).

On the *Commons* the user is, arguably, at the centre of the experience; ‘a common’ is, by definition, a place designed with people in mind, as individuals and collectively. Users of the online site come and go, moving within a territory which, while robustly structured and fundamentally ‘legitimized and contained’ by the institutions which support it (Bayne *et al*, 2009, p. 113), has nevertheless a rather fluid quality to it: artefacts are released in a context which is dynamic and where objects are liable to migrate to other places, to other collections or spaces within and outside Flickr. It could thus be argued that the otherness of the traditional museum and its collections, self-authored as a rightful place of objects, is replaced by the otherness of a composite space online; one, however, which is far less easy to contain and control.

The pattern of participant interaction observed on the site appears consistent with a many-to-many engagement model, rather than a one-to-one or one-to-many mode more typical of the way in which traditional museums approach their visitors, whether online or offline. In this environment of collective meaning making around shared objects of interest all participants, including the institution, arguably act as subjects in a networked configuration, where many voices, from different quarters, combine together with the objects to potentially construct, as Poster suggests (2001, p. 4) new forms of subjectivity.

Importantly, from the perspective of the institution, in this case represented by the Library of Congress, the *Commons* visitor is not there to be understood and categorized as a new type of museum user, whose behaviour should now become predictable and, as such, easier to cater for in the future. On the contrary, people’s motivation in coming to the site is rooted in different and more complex dynamics, understandable in the context of their membership of the Flickr community, as web users, photographers and so on, rather than in relation to a museum. Traditional usership metrics are, therefore, unlikely to apply; nor can new ones be easily devised. In other words, while users on the *Commons* remain firmly at

the centre of the experience of engagement with cultural heritage content, they do not act in the capacity, so to speak, of museum users.

In this perspective, the approach embraced by the institutions participating in the experience reflects a move away from museum-centric positions or, indeed, museum-user centric positions, in favour of an approach which, as advocated by Russo and Peacock (2009), is based on an understanding of online environments as living systems which institutions must learn to support, rather than control. This involves, as the authors suggest, ‘maintaining the right level of contribution, not seeking to extract too much and working thoughtfully with the other processes of that system; namely, individual motivation and group dynamics’ (Russo and Peacock, 2009, no page).

It could even be argued that it does not matter, ultimately, who the users on the *Commons* really are. The institution has gone to them with its objects and its expertise. The rest is up to them. What matters is that they are there and that their interest has been ignited. This might well have happened through a purely serendipitous encounter; however, as Bayne *et al* suggests,

the serendipitous aspect of the digital way of working might be viewed as one of its most notable features – the ability to stumble upon resources, to forge connections between randomly-encountered artefacts, to find ways of making creative sense of the rich turmoil of the digital collection.

(Bayne *et al*, 2009, p. 117)

To conclude, the user on the *Commons* is at the centre of the experience; however, its centrality is differently constructed from the way it might be understood in traditional museum practice; the user is not anymore the ‘honoured guest’, ‘client’ or ‘consumer’ (p. 38), rather a partner in a relationship with the institution and its collections which, not anymore pre-scripted and didactic, can be re-negotiated as a sustained pact of mutual trust and reciprocity (Russo and Peacock, 2009).

## 5.2 Authorship

A second paradigm shift which I foregrounded in my discussion of digitality and museums concerns the notion of authorship.

To borrow again Anderson's wording from his discussion of the nature of online spaces, the *Commons* could be described, in many ways, as a 'porous and continuous authoring environment' (Anderson, 2007, no page), where the nature of the discourse is composite and dynamic, involving individual utterances as well as dialogical exchanges and instances of original creativity.

The focus is on users, their enjoyment of the artefacts but also, very much, on what they can actively contribute to the experience. Indeed, institutions have been impressed with what has been referred to as the 'sheer inventiveness of Flickr members' (Bray *et al*, 2011, no page), who have taken the material in different directions, creating original historically contrastive sets, combining photographs with timelines and maps, creating photograph-inspired paintings, using the images in their blogs or articles and much more.

The style of the textual components as observed on the Lincoln site seems to combine in interesting ways a linear quality typical of analogue practices, with tendencies towards the 'anti-narrative' logic of online discourse (Manovich, 2010, p. 66).

On the one hand, the environment is framed within the inscribed textual architecture which makes it consistent with the standard Flickr layout; the captions which carry information about the artefacts are also fixed, and can be modified only by the originating institution. Also, it is possible to follow, as I did in the Lincoln site, a linear narrative in the unfolding discussion among some of the participants.

However, at the same time, as pointed out earlier, right in the middle of the 'story', comments and statements are made which, together with notes, tags and linking suggestions, disrupt the flow, creating different discursive or visual strands which lead into many different directions. An intriguing hyperlinked cacophony thus ensues, one which invigorates, at least in my view, rather than undermines, the experience.

As such, while certainly carefully structured and highly regulated, the *Commons* environment appears nevertheless to embody a successful example of that transition from interoperability to conversation in museum practices which, as discussed earlier in the thesis (p. 41), web 2.0 technologies now support. This transition involves a move beyond the database and the caption, and a change of authorship mode from monologue to a multi-vocal, scattered and dialogical affair, one which accommodates the integration of new information and knowledge, but also the ambiguity of interpretation through community editing.

The quality of the engagement on the *Commons* is not, of course, accidental; as any website, it reflects the architecture of practice envisaged by its original designers. However, it is also the result of the inevitable reciprocity of design and use whereby any scripted action gradually takes a new, unforeseen quality as user practices take it in new. As mentioned earlier, there appears to be indeed something else, something different happening around the photographs on the *Commons* which does not happen elsewhere on Flickr (Chan, 2008).

Importantly, while the authoring function is clearly held by the users through the many ways in which they interact with images and with each other, an original voice is also given to institutions and their curators, called to participate as interlocutors in the collective experience.

While admittedly still carefully shielded by a rather impersonal and strongly branded ‘signature’ in the form of the institutional logo, in order to suit the environment the institutional voice cannot, however, indulge in corporate tones: while expected to remain authoritative and consistent, it also needs to be personal, timely and relevant to the occasion; especially since the rise of Twitter, this is a skill which institutions have certainly had to hone in recent times to engage as credible participants on social networking sites.

Below are some examples of comments authored by the Library of Congress in response to user activity around its different collections on the *Commons*:



### The Library of Congress

The title is changed to reflect your identification of the location. Thanks also for all the additional stories you recalled from seeing this photo...

Thanks! It does appear to be "three" children. We'll need to change the source data so that we can keep the information we show here in Flickr and in our own catalog ...

My colleague Carol Johnson checked the ancestry.com service and found a likely name, given the birth date and middle name "Sharpe." Not proof, but another clue. Very nice recreation! Thanks for your interest in the collection....

Many thanks for the firm visual confirmation from several old photos! Also, appreciation for explaining the limitations of photochrom color techniques, which can make such usually reliable clues like a flag deceptive. ...

Interesting. This looks like a case where the title on the negative "Louis & Lola ? - Titanic survivors" is the best choice to reflect the temporary loss of their real names. Will add a note to provide that info and a bit of the circumstances.

The comments above tend to confirm implementation of changes following users' suggestions, provide information which corroborates contributors' hypotheses, or simply express admiration about users' creative endeavours. The institution, in other words, joins in the conversation and in a collective effort which is not, however, exclusively about knowledge gathering.

This is not to say that the institution is seen as camouflaging as 'any other' participant; it clearly maintains its identity as a cultural referent; however, it is also there as commentator and, often, as the grateful and intrigued recipient of useful new knowledge.

On this last point it is interesting to note that the Library of Congress has created an original 'collection' on the *Commons* called 'Great Comments! THANK YOU!' especially designed to 'make the depth of contributions more visible through examples' (Bray *et al*, 2011) and 'to let people know how much we appreciate their participation' (Orbach Natanson, 2012).

The collection contains the images which received especially interesting comments by users, contributing new facts or insightful observations. In the words of the Library of Congress:



To celebrate our second anniversary of joining Flickr, we're sending a loud "Thank you" to all the wonderful people who have contributed comments, tags, and notes.

Your identification work has made thousands of historical photos far easier for everyone to find and use.

Many, many other pictures are enriched with your personal memories, links to news accounts, and imaginative re-mixing...

(Library of Congress, 2012)

This, one could argue, is a small but telling example of precisely the type of creative opportunities the loss of which had been lamented by curators in a pre-web 2.0 era, where occasions for original authoring had to be sacrificed on the altar of the database record template.

### **5.3 A New brand of Artefact**

The last paradigm shift foregrounded in Chapter 2 in relation to how digital practices might problematize traditional museum practice concerns the notion of the artefact, understood as a cultural object inscribed with authenticity and authoritatively endorsed meaning.

While charged with their original historical and cultural significance, there is no doubt that the artefacts released on the *Commons* site become, as digital objects, liable to be altered, re-distributed and reinterpreted as, through user intervention, they enter new territories and reach different users again.

The *Commons* is, in other words, a repository of objects which are, on the one hand, institutionally branded and inscribed with the authenticity and authority lent by their status as museum artefacts; at the same time, free of copyright restrictions, the same objects are implicitly declared, with the blessing of the institution, as potentially unfinished. Indeed, by asking users to make a contribution through tagging, annotating, commenting and so on, institutions open up their artefacts to the possibility of change, transformation, enrichment, but also, potentially, disruption and ambiguity.

Chan observes that in the *Commons* environment:

images lose the boundaries placed on them by collecting institutions. They take on new contexts and meanings, and they become malleable.

(Chan 2008, no page)

This is important, the author argues, as ‘re-use of heritage materials radically asserts their relevance to contemporary society’ (Chan 2008, *ibid.*). This, however, involves a transformation.

What kind of cultural artefact is seen emerging from an experience such as the one examined? The Lincoln photograph in our example appears to get enriched with comments, notes, fresh information and insightful observations; or, according to some, violated, covered with graffiti-like, inappropriate marks. In any case, it is undoubtedly transformed, as it is challenged, celebrated, further explained or simply used as a catalyst for a highly charged discussion which, in turn, charges it with new meaning. It is also moved, displaced, re-used.

Altogether, the artefact gradually transforms into a textually enlarged version of its former self, an example of that cultural production of texts which, in a different context, Basset and O’Riordan (2002) refer to in their discussion of meaning making on the Internet. This is mix of visual and lexical traits, which carries both original knowledge and new interpretations, liable to go back to its original place with some of its new features, or continue to travel, enriching and being enriched.

As discussed earlier in this thesis, it is indeed the movement or circulation of objects online which, some argue, characterizes their value. As Lash and Lury observe,

it is not simply that things move ... but that their meaning and value is continually altering as a consequence of that value...

(Lash and Lury 2007, p. 7)

Importantly, as is very much the case for the institution participating in the *Commons*, the objects’ original producers and designers, very much intend ‘consumers’ to send objects back with their preferences and practices now inscribed within them (Lash and Lury *ibid.*).

What may be the implications of this for the supposed educational role of cultural heritage institutions, original custodians of the artefact?

Users on the Lincoln site, as we have seen, not only add to the information originally provided, they also challenge it, confirm it, individually and collectively construct other ways of knowing the object. This makes the result potentially chaotic, ambiguous. To what extent this might be useful or valuable to the institution as the original custodian and curator is difficult say; all this new material, as perhaps in the case of the discussion on the Lincoln site, might indeed represent that unnecessary noise which institutions opening up to online engagement often fear generating, the crowdsourced noise which, as Cebula puts it, ‘overwhelms the signal of useful historical information’ (Cebula, 2009, no page), and which ‘may not be useful or deemed necessary to be ingested into the collection records’ (Bray *et al*, 2011, no page).

A better question might be, however, how useful the experience itself, the process, might have been for those who took part in it and for those who were able to witness it as it unfolded or, as in my case, at a later stage.

There is certainly no doubt in my mind that in following the discussion on the Lincoln site I was given to learn not only about the photograph, but also about its subject, about different perceptions of a particular historical time and more. Importantly, the recollection of this is arguably more vivid in my mind than that of many captions I might have read in relation to a historical portrait in a museum or on a museum website; and it is, perhaps, precisely the multi-faceted quality of the knowledge shared, and the personal perspectives expressed and collectively reinforced, that combined to add a particular lasting quality to the learning experience.

So, in a perspective which, as Durbin notes (2003), locates the learning experience in the process rather than the output, the opportunity for people to express an opinion in public spaces such as that on the *Commons* can be seen as conducive to high levels of motivation and commitment which, in themselves, constitute a highly desirable learning outcome for all concerned and, I would argue, in those who get to share it.

## 6. Conclusion

To conclude: the *Commons* experience as observed in this study appears to resonate in interesting ways with those paradigm shifts identified in earlier discussions in this thesis as liable to occur at the confluence of digitality and traditional heritage practices, affecting, in particular, the role of users in the experience, the nature of authorship and the features and meaning of artefacts.

The site's ecology combines analogue and digital elements within a robust structure and a carefully engineered and regulated architecture of practice. Having said this, in terms of its position on an axis which, as discussed earlier in this thesis, goes from tolerance to active engagement, from accommodation to transformation, I would argue that the *Commons* experience places participating institutions arguably closer to the active and transformative ends of the spectrum; at the same time, by preserving the written traces of participation, it gives permanence to interpretative acts which only exist temporarily in museums.

Mindful of the above I move on, in the next chapter, to the analysis of *Canmore* as a space for engagement with heritage content, and on the insights which emerged from such analysis. This is a different environment from the one analysed above, one which, as we will see, involves a different negotiation of space, content and discourse, and which raises interesting questions on how the institution which created it, and which it represents, is negotiating digitality and all that it brings about.

## Chapter 5

### A Virtual Ethnography of *Canmore*: Data Analysis and Discussion

In this chapter I report and discuss findings from a study of RCAHMS' digital archive *Canmore*, opened in 2009 to public comments and contribution.

I begin by locating *Canmore* in its broader institutional context, reporting on a number of online projects and initiatives which were taking place at RCAHMS at the time of the study. Next I discuss my approach to the study of *Canmore*, which I conducted over a period of fifteen months following the re-launch of the digital archive with new web 2.0 functionalities in August 2009. I then report on and discuss findings from the different components of the investigation. As in the *Commons* study, I conclude with a discussion of how insights from the study of *Canmore* resonate with those themes identified earlier in the thesis, which relate to a potential shift brought about by digitality to user dynamics, authorship practices and the notion of heritage artefact.

#### 1. *Canmore*, RCAHMS and the Internet

Earlier in the thesis, I provided a description of RCAHMS, and some general observations about its role and activities as a cultural heritage institution (p. 72).

It is important to distinguish two main ways in which digital technology has been relevant to the work of RCAHMS over the years. One relates to the institution's surveying, recording and archiving activities; the other to the way in which the material is made available to the public. It is with the latter that this study is principally concerned, although the two aspects are inevitably interlinked.

RCAHMS' extensive and varied collections have been traditionally made available to the public through the institution's Search Room in Edinburgh, through publications and, on

occasion, exhibitions. Importantly, however, for over a decade, RCAHMS has also been taking advantage of online solutions to help users consult its record.

RCAHMS' first forays into online activities were in the late nineties with the launch in 1997 of the organization's first official website. During the same period the institution also developed *Canmore*, the Scottish national online database of monuments, an integrated computerized heritage information system. A pioneering initiative at the time, *Canmore* offered then, as it does today, free online access to a wealth of data from older and recent surveys and research, and to an integrated catalogue of RCAHMS' collections. The archive is also networked with other online resources, and constitutes a comprehensive and authoritative reference point for anybody with a scholarly, professional or personal interest in the Scottish built environment. Over the years *Canmore* has grown to contain more and more material which, at the time of writing, includes information on over 300,000 archaeological sites, ancient monuments and buildings, maritime and industrial sites throughout Scotland, as well as around 150,000 digitized images from the collections.

In summer 2009, following the re-design of the RCAHMS' website, aimed at improving its functionality and achieving a more contemporary appeal, *Canmore* was upgraded and re-launched. Most notably, the new version included what was referred to as a 'Web 2.0 facility' which, for the first time, would enable members of the public to make contributions to the site in the way of comments and digital images.

### **1.1 *Canmore* and *Treasured Places***

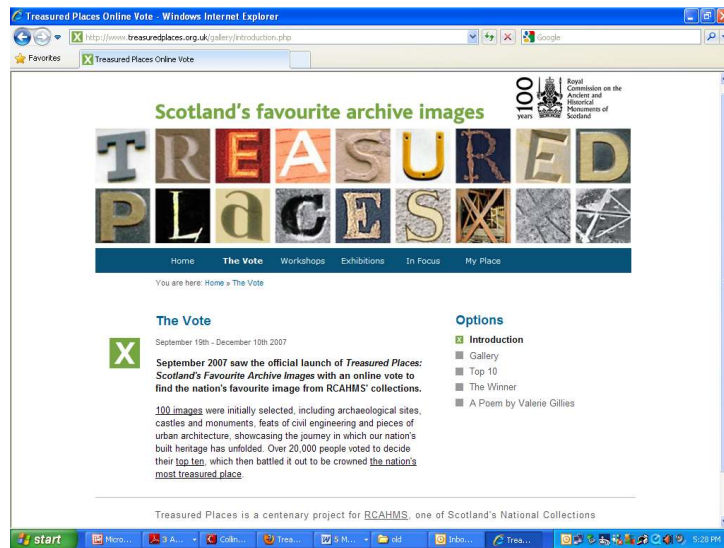
The plan of opening *Canmore* to online public contributions was conceived as part of the *Treasured Places* project, a Heritage Lottery-funded initiative which began in 2007 in preparation for the institution's Centenary celebrations the following year.

As RCAHMS' Head of Collections explains in the publication *Treasured Places: A centenary*, the project set out to explore people's relationships with buildings and archaeology, 'from the everyday vernacular to the great anchors of our past'. 'These relationships', the author notes, 'form an integral part of our personal identities, as much as the places themselves construct the identity of the nation' (Ferguson, 2008, p. 3).

The *Treasured Places* project set out to ‘stimulate and attract public interest’ through a number of coordinated initiatives; these would help enhance RCAHMS’ profile as a reference point for the Scottish heritage sector at an important point in its history and also, hopefully, help the institution gain a better understanding of public perceptions of the national built heritage (Scottish Cultural Enterprise, 2008, p. 3).

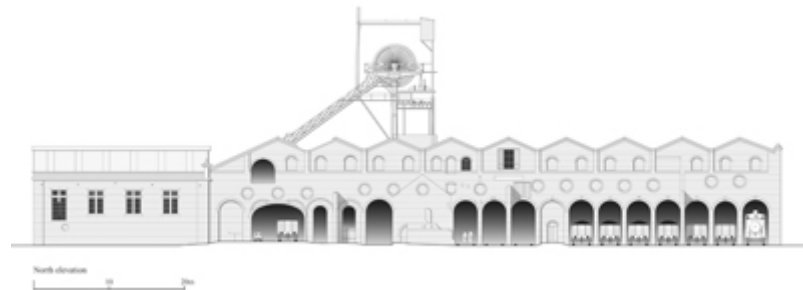
To this aim, a series of workshops was held in various locations in Scotland where participants were invited to provide creative interpretations of drawings and photographs of local places and buildings from RCAHMS’ collections. A touring exhibition was then organized, called *Creative Connections*, where, over a period of six months, eleven venues showcased artworks created by community groups in the course of the workshops.

An especially innovative aspect of the *Treasured Places* project, however, was the decision to ask members of the public to vote for the place which they treasured most in Scotland. To this aim, 100 images were selected from RCAHMS’ archives and displayed on the *Treasured Places* website (Figure 12). Images related to archeological sites, monuments, feats of civil engineering and urban architecture. People were then invited to cast their vote for their favourite place or, if they wished to do so, suggest alternative locations. They were also encouraged to add their comments to the site, explaining the reasons behind their choice.



**Figure 12** The *Treasured Places* website

20,000 votes were cast, well in excess of the 1000 which funders had set as the required target for the project. The top ten places most voted by the public were identified and a winner was finally declared the nation's most treasured place. This was the Lady Victoria Colliery in Newtongrange, Midlothian, as depicted in a survey drawing (Figure 13):



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**Figure 13** Lady Victoria Colliery

RCAHMS' Centenary celebrations culminated, in October 2008, with a final exhibition at the Edinburgh City Art Centre called *Treasured Places: 100 years of RCAHMS*. Over 200 images were put on display for the occasion, including the ten finalists as voted by the public and comments and observations from people who had taken part in the online voting.

The *Treasured Places* initiative was deemed successful, and the unexpectedly high level of involvement by the public in the voting process a welcome surprise.



A quantitative as well as thematic analysis of online visitors' comments carried out by independent evaluators yielded some interesting findings. Around 450 comments had been uploaded to the site by members of the public, their tone overwhelming positive. Interestingly, however, while there were some remarks and additional information of an historical or technical nature, personal memories and experiences seemed to have influenced voting more than any other considerations; also, very few observations were found to relate to buildings' or sites' practical or social function, and hardly any contributions had commented on the actual archive images (Scottish Cultural Enterprise, 2008, p. 5).

In the words of the evaluators, 'voters did not usually make an objective choice based on careful consideration of the merits of each individual archive image'; instead 'personal connections to places influenced the voting pattern greatly'. 'However', the authors observe,

given the fact the project plan vision stated RCAHMS wanted to 'help people recognise the value of their own places and spaces' and 'to share them with others online', it is clear the online vote has proven a genuine success.  
(Scottish Cultural Enterprise, 2008, p. 37, emphasis in the original)

The report concluded that the *Treasured Places* public vote 'successfully stimulated and engaged a large number of people in Scotland and further afield', and that the project ultimately demonstrated a clear public interest in Scotland's built environment (Scottish Cultural Enterprise, 2008, *ibid.*).

It is important to note that in the period during which *Treasured Places* was taking place RCAHMS was experimenting with digital innovation through other projects and initiatives.

One such example was *The Sir Basil Spence Archive Project - Celebration of a modern architect*. This involved, together with a series of exhibitions and community and school activities, the creation of a dedicated multimedia website. The site provides access to images and information about Spence's work and showcases the project activities. A selection of contemporary views and comments from artists, architects, designers and commentators is made available in a multi-media section called 'Responses'; this also includes audio contributions from members of the Spence family, which bring a personal, warmly anecdotal element to the experience. Interestingly, within each section the website also

offers a space called ‘Memory sharing’ for the public to contribute their thoughts and comments.

Another important and influential initiative taking place at that time was the award-winning *Scotland’s Rural Past* project. Started in 2006 with funding from a range of national organizations and completed in 2011, the project involved a rich programme of activities for the training of Scottish communities in the identification and recording of rural settlement remains. These activities were also supported by a project-dedicated website where trusted and trained user groups were able to input original data from their work. This secured the systematic capturing of new information and also extended the scope of the training beyond more traditional fieldwork practices.

Importantly, in 2008 RCAHMS also took over responsibility for *Scran*, the Scottish Cultural Resources Access Network, a charity and online learning resource base which provides subscribers access to over 360,000 resources relating to heritage and material culture.

Against this background, where traditional analogue methods, tried-and-tested online subscription practices and web 2.0-inspired innovation were beginning to combine in new and interesting ways, plans were being finalized for the second phase of the *Treasured Places* project, involving the integration of new interactive functionalities in *Canmore*. This was seen as a timely development, especially in the light of the success of the first phase of *Treasured Places* and the public vote initiative. So, in August 2009, RCAHMS’ digital archive was re-launched featuring *MyCanmore*, a new facility which would let users customize the environment and, more importantly, for the first time, allow them to make original contributions. Interestingly, RCAHMS had also put in place a partnership with the photo-managing site Flickr for the storage of user-contributed images.

The rationale behind the decision to open up *Canmore* to contributions from members of the public was articulated in RCAHMS’ press release at the time of the launch as follows:

We know from the work that we do and the people we meet while doing it, that many people have a wealth of information they would like to share with us that will add to our knowledge of a building’s past or images that will help tell a story.

We decided that our determination to be as accessible as possible meant making it as easy as it could be for people to contribute their information, stories or reminiscences in a way that could be retained, shared and added to.

Since we have already developed a responsive digital web archive, it seemed a logical and exciting step to open it up to the public in this way.

Your contributions can be added on <http://canmore.rcahms.gov.uk/>. Entering information is as easy as adding to an online conversation.

The interactive elements will be self-monitoring. We expect that the majority of entries will come from people who are enthusiastic about Scotland and its culture, and how its story is told through our built heritage.

(RCAHMS, 2009)

The study which I discuss in this chapter looked at what happened in the first year of opening *Canmore* to user contributions, at the nature of the material which people uploaded and at how users and the institution engaged with the new environment, its content and each other.

## **2. The Approach to the Analysis**

When this doctoral research project began in late 2008, the *Treasured Places* project was still in its first phase. In my ethnographer's role, I was therefore able to follow, to a degree, some of the development activities which preceded *Canmore*'s upgrade and re-launch. I had access to project reports, held informal conversations with staff involved in the project and was also able to observe at meetings where aspects of the initiative were discussed in the context of RCAHMS' evolving digital strategy. During this phase I was also invited to take part in some of the testing of the beta site and provide feedback on functionality and design aspects.

Throughout this period I did, however, take care to remain faithful to an observer role. The study of *Canmore* involved an initial stage of familiarization with the online environment, followed by the observation of user activity over a period of fifteen months, from late spring 2009 till September of the following year. As in the *Commons* study, I decided not to pursue individual *Canmore* contributors in person or online through meetings or interviews. Rather, I chose to rely on the observation of user engagement on the site, and

on the analysis of the textual and visual traces, looking for insights into the nature of the interaction around the digital content as enabled in the environment.

For an analysis of users' comments I was granted Administrator access by RCAHMS to the database which records all public contributions. This includes all comments, hyperlinked to the corresponding records, and details about contributors which are not in public view. It also offers the ability to filter items by date and contributor and to edit records. For the study of user-contributed images, I accessed the material both in *Canmore* and on the RCAHMS' space on Flickr, where photographs are hosted.

The contributions made by users to *Canmore* and Flickr are of a public nature and subject to the terms and conditions published on the sites. In accordance with these I have felt able to use some of the comments and images uploaded by users to illustrate findings from the analysis. I have made sure, however, that any personal information to which I had access when analysing the data in Administrator mode was not disclosed anywhere in my account of the analysis.

*Canmore* contributors whose photographs are stored on Flickr hold full copyright of the material they contribute to the archive. Where I have used material for illustration purposes in my account of findings, I have kept images' captions and copyright notices as found on Flickr, in adherence to the copyright agreement; also, at no point have I modified the content of any of the contributions in the archive or in the items used as illustrations in the study, except for using shorter extracts rather than full entries when these were especially lengthy.

## **2.1 *Canmore* as a Site for Ethnographic Research**

From a methodological perspective the study of *Canmore* raised an important question, namely to what degree the context which I would be investigating could be deemed to meet ethnographic criteria such as those discussed earlier in the thesis (p. 70) and, more specifically, to what extent it would be appropriate to describe the investigation of the digital archive as 'online ethnography'.

As I observed the environment over time, my conclusion was that, albeit in its infancy, *Canmore* and the users who actively engage with it do meet some of the basic community requirements which I discussed in earlier chapters. Independently of their particular motivation and history, *Canmore*'s online visitors can be generally considered a culture-sharing group. Whatever their background or expertise, they share an interest in aspects of Scottish cultural heritage; all of them are registered *Canmore* users and, as such, they share a space online for some of the time; they speak a common language, English; in some cases, they also share a particular set of skills as amateur photographers, archaeologists or historians; certainly, in all cases, they share the skills which allow them to interact with *Canmore* as an online environment; they may also share, at least potentially, some social interaction.

Having said this, as with the *Commons* study, my investigation would focus not so much on 'whether' the group of people engaging with *Canmore* would stand the slippery test of being a community, rather 'how' they might go about being or, indeed, becoming, one. I would look for answers to this question in the texts, visual or lexical, which make up the environment as a combination of inscribed architecture and unscripted contributions, and in the interaction dynamics between users, content and the institution, which emerge in these texts; I would also ask what might be influencing such dynamics and, importantly, how the overall experience ultimately resonates with those themes of transformation which were identified and discussed earlier in this thesis.

### **3. *Canmore* as a Visual Object**

Consistent with a perspective whereby the rendering of the world in visual terms is 'never innocent... images are never transparent windows onto the world. They interpret the world; they display it in very particular ways' (Rose, 2007, p. 2), the study of *Canmore* includes a critical examination of the visual, as well as textual, elements inscribed in the environment.

As Bayne observes, the choice of interface in digital environments must be always considered, as 'a creative act constitutive of a particular mode of visibility, a particular ontology and a particular series of ideological choices' (Bayne, 2008, p. 396). Consequently, in exploring an online setting it will be important to remain alert to the

implications of such choices and the way they may create, or indeed occlude, particular ways of seeing information space; as well as to the way they open, as well as close off, particular ways of being and acting online (Bayne, 2008).

Considerations of *Canmore*'s visual features are broadly supported by an analytical framework borrowed from Rose (2007). This is informed by an approach which, in Rose's words,

thinks about the agency of the image, considers the social practices and effects of its viewing, and reflects on the specificity of that viewing by various audiences including the academic critic.

(Rose, 2007, p. 26)

Rose argues that, once we acknowledge that 'visual imagery is always constructed through various practices, technologies and knowledges' (Rose, 2007, *ibid.*), it is important to reflect on the role which images may play from a range of perspectives, including, for example, in making social differences visible or, indeed, invisible (Rose 2007, p. 7). These considerations are especially relevant, one could argue, in a study of a digital environment like *Canmore* which, as well as an independent digital archive, seemingly functions as a complement to the embodied reality of a publicly accountable institution, RCAHMS, acting as its online object and visual and narrative extension.

It may not be sufficient, however, simply to examine images themselves; rather, one should also consider the particular way they may be looked at by particular spectators, in other words, taking into account what Berger refers to as different 'ways of seeing' (Berger, 1972, in Rose 2007, p. 8). Hence, in the case of *Canmore*, for example, one should be mindful of the fact that the online archive has been used for a number of years by researchers, historians, in other words, experts, who by now might well be comfortable with, even oblivious to, any of the site's technical or visual complexities, being more directly focused on the data it holds; however, there is now also a wider public who is invited to approach *Canmore* and make original contributions. It is not unreasonable to assume that the site's visual impact on these new users is liable to be rather different from that on more traditional ones.

Rose also stresses the importance of recognizing that an image is always seen within a particular social context which will mediate its impact on its viewers (Rose, 2007, p. 8-10); in other words, each audience of a particular image will bring its interpretation to bear on its meaning and effect, unable or, at times, unwilling to respond to it in the way it is invited to. In the case of this study, for example, visual elements of the site are examined from a researcher's perspective and, as such, their interpretation will inevitably be informed by the researcher's own ontological and epistemological position.

Finally, independently of its creator's intentions, one must also be mindful of images' own agency, namely what they can do, beyond the way they look, by virtue of their intrinsic 'multimodality', that is their presence within a composite context, be it textual or visual, and their making sense, generally, in relation to other things (Rose, 2007, p. 11). Mindful of this, my considerations of *Canmore*'s visual features are formulated in the context of the broader environment in which the site is located, namely the RCAHMS' website. Also, in reporting on the use of imagery which constitutes the permanent elements in the environments' design, I examine, when relevant, the interplay between the visual elements and the texts inscribed in the environments which, combined, produce an effect potentially liable to transcend the designers' original intentions.

In my visual analysis of *Canmore*, again drawing from Rose, I consider images also mindful of the different 'sites' from which their meanings originate (Rose, 2007, p. 13). This includes their 'site of production', which concerns the origin of an image, its technical aspects and whether it belongs to a particular genre; the 'site of the image' itself, namely what an image is about, what it portrays, whether there are interesting compositional elements which contribute to the way the image may be seen and the way it may be framing a particular cultural thought; and, the 'site of audiencing' (Rose, 2007, p. 22), which relates to what the viewer may bring to the viewing by contributing to the experience a particular perspective, type of knowledge and experience.

While considering images from this perspective, I also reflect, when relevant, on what Rose refers to as images' different 'modalities' (Rose, 2007, *ibid.*), namely different technological, compositional as well as social aspects. These include, respectively, the implications of technical aspects of images in terms of their effect; the specific material

qualities of an image and the different elements which make up the image; and, finally, the economic, social, political, institutional context surrounding the images and the practices within which the images are used. In different measure depending on the specific nature of the images and their contexts, these different modalities inform considerations, Rose suggests, of all three 'sites' of an image.

While the exploration of *Canmore* as a visual object is loosely informed by the critical approach described above and guided by the analytical framework based on it, it is important to remember that *Canmore* is, indeed, a virtual space, involving, as such, further levels of complexity.

As a website, *Canmore* consists of a combination of elements: each single page is an image, made up of different components, both visual and textual; in turn, every image on any page will carry its own set of technological, compositional and social elements. A website is also the combination of its pages, ever changing depending on the way it is navigated, a three-dimensional, dynamic visual object, the effects of which will depend on a complex range of factors. As Kress observes (2005), the order of a webpage, and of a site, is fundamentally open, because 'even though the site and its potentials are constructed and structured and the designers of the site imagine the possibilities of reading, they are not enforced and the possibilities are large'. In what he refers to as 'this new semiotic world', it is the readers, Kress notes, 'who fashion their knowledge, from information supplied by the makers of the site' (Kress, 2005, p. 10).

In the sections which follow I explore *Canmore* in relation to some of these aspects. To set a context for the investigation I begin with a description and visual analysis of the RCAHMS' website, in which *Canmore* is embedded; I then move on to *Canmore* itself, reflecting on its features and potential effect as a visual digital object.

Before I begin I must point out that the data reported here are consistent with findings which relate to the environments as they were found at the time of the analysis in 2009/2010. Images which were captured then are used, as are texts. A recent review, conducted after the original analysis was concluded, confirmed that overall the sites under examination have not been affected by any major change. Some things, however, have changed. Hence, while in



my account I remain faithful to my original findings, I will occasionally refer to the site as it is today, when I feel that a contrastive take can make a useful contribution to the overall interpretation.

### **3.1 The RCAHMS Website**

As Shroeder notes (2006, p. 304), while there are many ways of approaching the analysis of a photograph, a work of art or some other visual object, most would agree that ‘interpretation begins with a description’ and, although the relationship between the two is, indeed, an intricate one, interpretations ultimately emerge from descriptive details.

I begin, therefore, with a brief description of the RCAHMS’ institutional website, the online environment which visually, structurally and, also, conceptually, contains *Canmore*.

#### **3.1.1 Design and Functionalities**

Upgraded and re-launched in 2008, the RCAHMS website was redesigned to be technically more agile, easier to use, clearer and more contemporary in look and feel. An important aim of the website re-design was also to achieve a more consistent projection of the institutional brand identity, which in the earlier version had been found to be rather weak and fragmented.

Below is an illustration of the site’s homepage after of the re-launch in 2008 (Figure 14):



Figure 14 RCAHMS' homepage

The page is made up of fixed structural and navigational elements, and items which are replaced over time to reflect particular events, projects or news which RCAHMS wishes to foreground.

On the left-hand side the page is framed by a vertical side band in solid royal blue, headed by the RCAHMS logo and listing links to other pages. These links are grouped into three main clusters:

### Resources

- Search Resources
- Visit Our Search Room
- Order Images and Data
- RCAHMS Publications
- Guides for researchers
- Press and media

### Collections

- What we Hold
- Latest Accessions
- Collection Highlights

## Work

News

About Us

Survey and Recording

RCAHMS Projects

Jobs

Links

The different links lead to information relating to collections, projects, events and so on, carefully organized and nested at different levels within the site, showing a preference for static navigation and the display of data holdings rather than for more dynamic content.

Along the top of the homepage runs a horizontal band featuring a strap line. Under this band is the *Canmore* search box which gives direct access to the archive.

The central area of the page is divided into five sections, featuring images with links to other pages, and showcasing on the right-hand side recent RCAHMS publications.

The images featured in this area, as examined at the time of the analysis, included a larger black and white photograph from the collections and two more recent images featuring people engaging in some kind of survey activity and studying archive material. This is a template which, while not necessarily fixed, is certainly recurring: below is the image of the RCAHMS homepage captured in 2009 next to how it looks at the time of writing in late 2011 (Figures 15 and 16).



Figure 15 RCAHMS' Homepage in 2009



Figure 16 RCAHMS' Homepage in 2011

In both instances, the pages feature historical and contemporary photographs.

On the bottom of the page, a horizontal band carries further links to general information on copyright, on how to contact the institution, a statement of Terms of Agreement and to institutional literature which must be made publicly available under the Freedom of Information Act.

At the time of the study there was no social media sign-up links on the site; this was not surprising as RCAHMS in those days was not active on social networking sites like Twitter and Facebook. These links, now commonly featured on many cultural heritage institutions' homepages, are still absent from the RCAHMS site at the time of writing, although staff have been much more active in those environments in recent times.

### **3.1.2 A visual analysis**

It might be interesting to begin a visual analysis of the RCAHMS website by reflecting on the role of the institution as its 'site of production' (Rose, 2007, p. 14); in other words, reflect on the implications of RCAHMS as its source and cultural originator.

In terms of 'technological' modality as defined by Rose (2007, p.13), the first consideration to be made is that the website is a digital object which was created to co-exist with, as well as complement, the embodied reality of the institution which authored it. It is also reasonable to assume that, from its originator's perspective, the site constitutes a projection of the way the latter perceives itself and of how it wishes to be perceived; in other words, a visual and textual translation of its identity and aspirations, and a dynamic statement to its stakeholders of its purpose and relevance.

RCAHMS is a complex mixture of different functions and brands of expertise, with a composite set of priorities, addressing different users and a varied range of stakeholders: it is an archive, it has an active surveying and recording function, and can be also considered a museum; it also has its own publishing arm, and is increasingly focused on the delivery of its education mandate. All of this makes RCAHMS a combination which is liable to make

the task of creating and presenting a coherent and meaningful online identity somewhat challenging.

The RCAHMS' website has, arguably, two key purposes: one is to tell stakeholders about the institution, about its purpose and activities, presumably presenting them in the best possible light; in other words, to inform, while also performing a marketing function; the other purpose is to offer users a gateway to RCAHMS' content.

As Shroeder notes, 'marketing relies on a strong visual identity... many battles of the brand take place in the visual domain... the Web mandates visualizing almost any aspects of corporate strategy, operations and communications, bringing visual issues into the mainstream of strategic thinking' (Shroeder, 2006, p. 303). From this perspective, it is interesting to reflect on how the visual choices apparent in the RCAHMS site reflect on the institution's aspects of its strategic thinking.

From a compositional perspective, in terms of its visual architecture, the design of the RCAHMS website is an interesting combination of contrasting elements (Fig. 17).



Figure 17 RCAHMS' homepage

First, a strong element of formality appears to combine with softer elements: the institutional logo (Figure 18), together with the institution's rather forbiddingly long name displayed against a royal blue background, convey a strong patronage element which lends the page a quality of authoritativeness and solemnity.



**Figure 18** RCAHMS' logo

This impression, however, is somewhat mitigated by the imagery on the rest of the page, starting with the photograph in the permanent top banner. This features a Scottish landscape with the strapline 'exploring Scotland's places' (Figure 19).



**Figure 19** RCAHMS homepage top banner

Overall, the page offers an enticing glimpse into what promises to be intriguing and valuable material, 'contained', however, within an authoritative and strongly branded institutional frame.

Another striking feature of the page is its gridlike structure: attractive images appear on the page, combined with texts and captions; all elements are, however, carefully displayed within a grid, which lends the page a highly structured and orderly quality. This suggests, arguably, the intention to convey a message to stakeholders which is clear, unambiguous and speaks of efficiency and control. If one reflects on this in terms of the wider cultural and political environment in which museums operate today, with its greater emphasis of accountability, transparency, public service and content delivery, it may not be too hazardous to suggest that the highly structured, businesslike presentation of the information on the site resonates with such corporate requirements.

The role and purpose of RCAHMS as a cultural heritage institution has been under scrutiny in recent times. As both a symptom and an outcome of this, the institution has re-formulated

its corporate identity through a series of interventions. I return to this later in Chapter 6, where findings from the ethnography of the institution are discussed in detail. It is worth anticipating here that in its new five-year strategy, published in 2010, RCAHMS opted for a reformulation of its corporate statements, where it expresses its vision as one of

connecting people to places across time

(RCAHMS, 2010a, p. 3)

While this was not as yet articulated on the RCAHMS website at the time of the study, some of the visual choices as observed in the specific choice of imagery in the site do resonate with this overarching vision of connection.

Indeed, zooming in on the ‘site of the images’ themselves (Rose, 2007, p. 19), we find that the notion of a bridging role between people and places and between past and present is well expressed through the interestingly literal, if abstract, mix of visual elements which, complemented by the textual components, make up the website’s pages. This combination of photographs, some constituting the pages’ permanent frame, some more temporarily displayed, includes both contemporary colour photographs and historical images, in an interesting counterpoising of old and new, past and present.

Also, the photograph of a rural landscape in the top banner (Figure 20) captures the idea of RCAHMS’ reach into the open territory; on it a solitary figure carrying out a surveying task points to the expert work that RCAHMS’ teams are doing to capture the history of the territory and, in so doing, establish a connection between people and their built heritage.



**Figure 20** RCAHMS’ homepage top banner

This message of activity on the ground further is reinforced by the image in the top banner on the ‘Work’ page which features a team of experts at work outdoors, silhouetted against a blue sky (Figure 21).



**Figure 21** RCAHMS’ homepage: Work page top banner

On this latter point, it is interesting to observe that there is, in fact, no strong single physical referent for RCAHMS as an embodied institution, no particularly iconic public building or exhibition space. In fact, apart from its collections, which users can access by visiting the institution’s Search Room, RCAHMS as a cultural body exists very much outside its building, it is mobile and ubiquitous, as its teams travel around Scotland surveying the territory, hovering in the sky photographing it from above, and engaging with local communities.

RCAHMS is, in this sense, an interesting example of a cultural heritage institution which, as a ‘cultural technology’, to use Hand’s term (2008, p. 8), encompasses physical places which lie very much beyond its own physical boundaries, as it seeks to foster and nurture cognitive as well as emotional connections between people and the Scottish built environment across a combination of physical spaces and territories of the mind.

The composition of the website homepage (Figure 22), which combines images from the past with contemporary photographs of individuals actively engaging with artefacts from the archive, arguably weave together, almost literally, the different elements which define RCAHMS’ vision, namely, people, places and the understanding of the built environment across time.





**Figure 22** RCAHMS' Homepage

And yet, at the same time, this composite message remains contained within the grid-like layout of the page and framed by the authoritative royal blue vertical banner, headed by RCAHMS' prestigious logo, which lists hierarchically all contents, designed to guide users every step of the way. This is a combination of elements through which RCAHMS is seen, one could argue, as asserting its ultimate cultural authority and control over its collections and their users.

Who are, however, RCAHMS' users? Who does RCAHMS expect to come and engage with the site and the material it showcases? And how might their visual effect resonate with different audiences?

One can look for clues on this regard in the choice of imagery in the 'Resources' and 'Collections' pages (Figure 23).

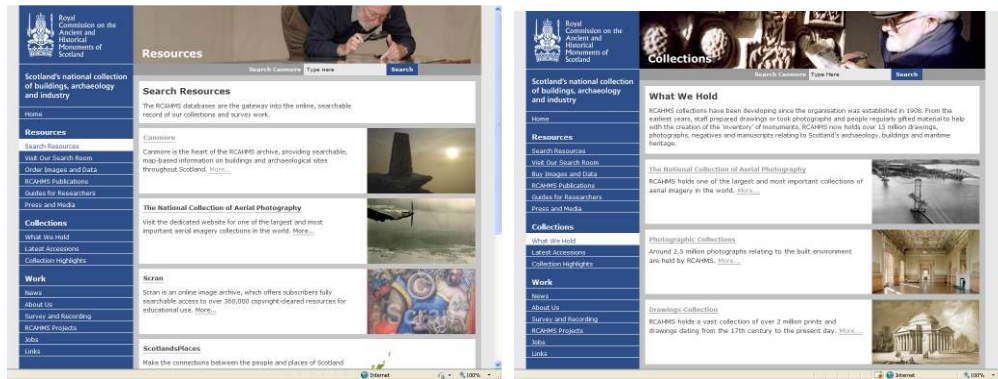


Figure 23 Canmore Resources and Collections pages

Both pages feature a top banner showing, respectively, a white, mature gentleman, with a beard and glasses, scrutinizing a document holding a magnifying lens, and an elderly man taking notes next to an historical building (Figures 24 and 25).



Figure 24 Top banner on the Resources page



Figure 25 Top banner on the Collections page

Even if chosen independently of a deliberate agenda, these are nevertheless highly connotated images: they arguably suggest institutional assumptions about the general user constituency, while projecting a particular set of values such as, possibly, expert interest, academic pursuit, maturity and dedication.

As is often the case in online environments constructed to address a particular audience, the photographs on these pages were probably selected with an assumption that they would

make visitors to the site feel comfortable. Indeed, inscribed rather bluntly in the imagery itself are, arguably, assumptions on who may be doing the viewing of these images, or their ‘site of audiencing’ (Rose, 2007, p. 22). Equally, it could be argued that, as Bayne puts it in her discussion of visuality in virtual learning environments (Bayne, 2009), these images implicitly require visitors to the site to, ‘identify with, and take up the subject position of, the dominant group’ (Bayne, 2009, p. 5), in this case, typically white, mature, middle class, educated and committed users.

It is important to stress that elsewhere on the website many different images are used. They are beautiful, striking, exciting and sometimes humorous or daring. However, it is equally important to note that up to the access point to individual collections or resources every single page is headed by one of the images above, arguably sending a strong message in terms of who the site, and indeed RCAHMS, is meant to address, and what may be expected from them.

Having said this, as I formulate an interpretation which carries some critical undertones concerning a potential element of elitism or, at least, selectivity in the way RCAHMS usership is represented through the choice of visual imagery on its website, I remain mindful of the fact that my own reaction to the material examined is bound to be coloured by my own particular circumstances and perspective. Although a researcher of RCAHMS, I am no archaeologist, architect or historian; nor am I a teacher, or a member of associations or groups traditionally affiliated with RCAHMS or involved in the type of work done by its staff and associates. As such, I am more likely to empathize with the user constituency which such strongly connotated imagery might be seen to exclude, than with the one which it successfully and unambiguously welcomes.

For an in-depth discussion of the other main purpose of the RCAHMS site, namely that of offering users a point of access to institutional content, I refer to the next sections where this aspect is discussed in detail in relation to *Canmore*.

More generally, however, it may be interesting to note here how, drilling down to the pages which relate to specific projects, datasets and collections, starting with *Canmore* and including, among others, *The National Collection of Aerial Photography*, *Scran* and

Scotland's Places, the choice of imagery and design features becomes noticeably more varied (Figure 26):

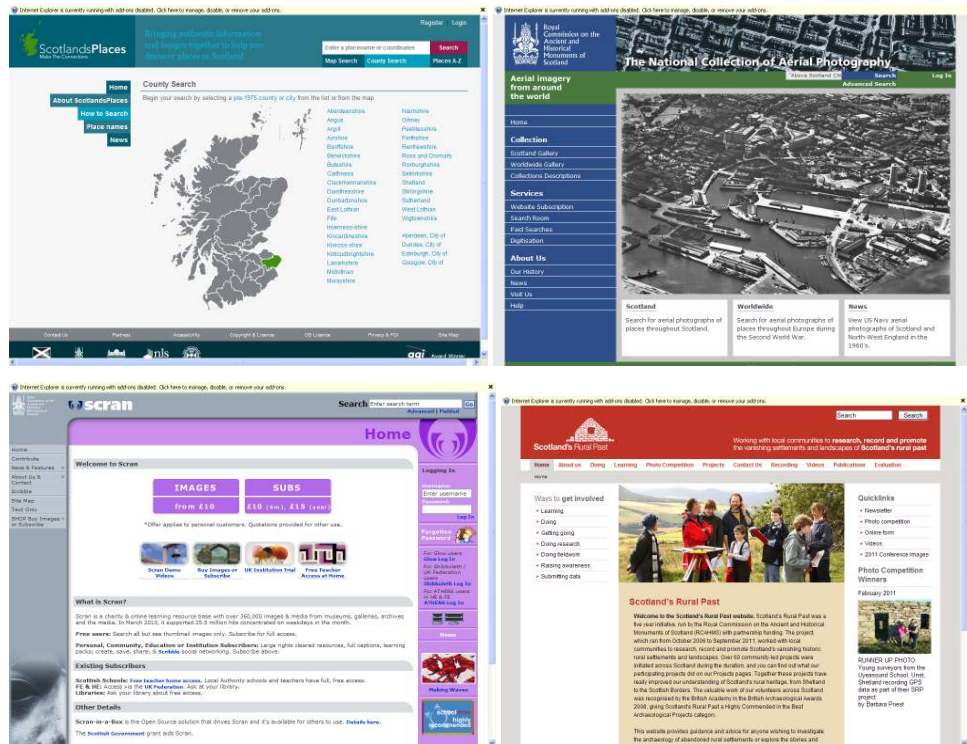


Figure 26 Project pages

While a detailed description and critique of each of these sites is beyond the scope of this discussion, it is important to note that the varied nature of these pages reflects the genesis of the individual projects which underpinned, over time, the creation of the various datasets.

If, on the one hand, such diversity tells the history of RCAHMS' ability to respond creatively to funding opportunities through different initiatives and innovative partnerships, the unevenness of design and the lack of brand uniformity which exists in some places points to the still slightly fragmented quality of RCAHMS' overall online presentation, an aspect which the institution is actively addressing.

Having said this, as it stands, with its combination of new, highly structured and consistently branded sections containing earlier, very different, strikingly un-branded project pages, the RCAHMS' website is, in fact, an accurate reflection of the institution's

ongoing evolution, and of its continuing effort to reconcile in meaningful ways its historical legacy and influences with a more outward-focused outlook and corporate ambitions.

The question here is, of course, what may be sacrificed on the altar of standardization and brand consistency and, together with greater clarity and efficiency, to what extent opportunities for rich forms of engagement and meaning-making as now afforded by digitality are also tapped into.

### 3.2 Canmore: Design and Functionalities

*Canmore* is located within the RCAHMS' website and its layout is consistent with the site's overall design. The online archive can be accessed from two main entry points: through the search box at the top of the page or by following the link featured on the 'Resources' page (Figure 27).

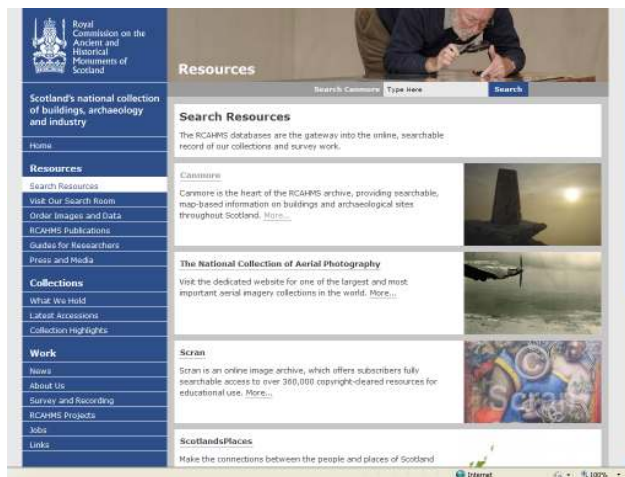


Figure 27 Resources page

Here, *Canmore* is the first resource listed. It is introduced by the following statement:

Canmore is the heart of the RCAHMS archive, providing searchable, map-based information on buildings and archaeological sites throughout Scotland.

Interestingly, the wording above implies a certain amount of insider knowledge is needed in order to appreciate what *Canmore* is and its value, as the site is described very much as a part of RCAHMS rather than, for example, more broadly, as a national historical resource.



Clicking on the More... link, the text continues as follows:

Canmore is the window into the RCAHMS database. It brings together the results of the survey and collections material into one place and combines location information, site details and images on more than 300,000 archaeological, architectural, maritime and industrial sites throughout Scotland.

Canmore offers you the ability to:

- Conduct searches and advanced searches to find information on specific sites
- Identify where types of site are located
- Search for digital images on sites or locations throughout Scotland
- Collect direct references to specific sites from a wide range of textbooks and journals
- Know which of these we hold in our Search Room
- NEW - You can now share your own information and images with the national collection

A programme of development to Canmore is ongoing and RCAHMS will continue to bring forward a series of new developments to enhance its usability.

In line with the RCAHMS' website layout, the *Canmore* homepage presents a gridlike quality, as its opening page is split into a numbers of sections (Figure 28).

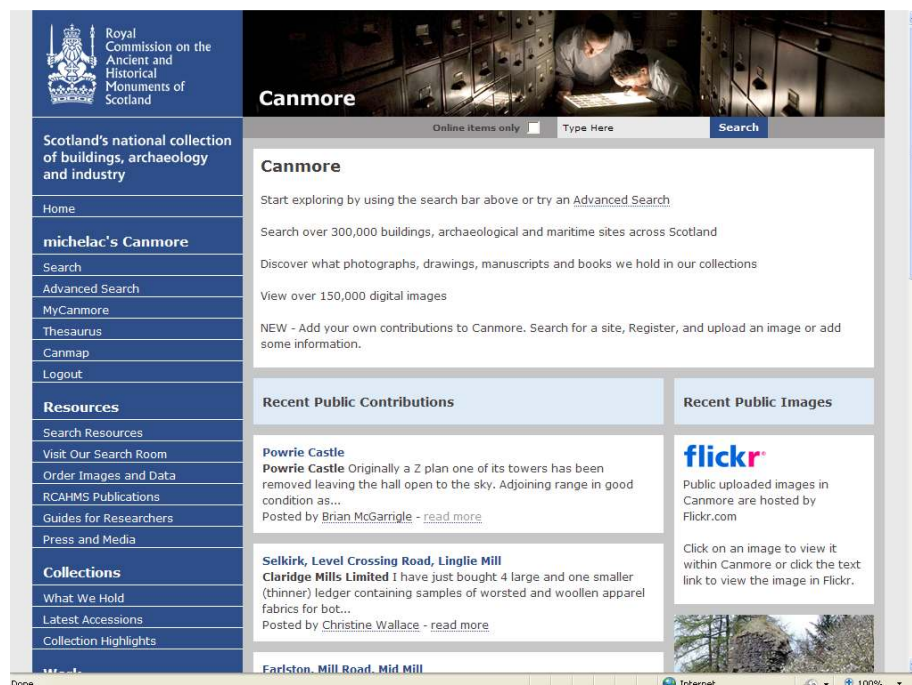


Figure 28 *Canmore* homepage

On the left-hand side and at the top appear, again, the logo and listing of links to other pages. A top banner featuring an image runs at the top of the page, and just below it the *Canmore* search box is located.

The rest of the page is split into a top section featuring an introduction to *Canmore*, and a bottom section. This, in turn, is split into three main components: a section headed ‘Recent Public Contributions’, which displays text entries recently contributed by *Canmore* users; below this is a section headed ‘Public Recommended Contributions’, showing comments which other users flagged up as especially interesting or useful. On the right-hand side, a section headed ‘Recent Public Images’ features some examples of user contributed photographs.

When *Canmore* was opened to public contributions a decision was made that all the comments from visitors to the site would be stored in the RCAHMS’ Oracle database and called into *Canmore* from there. All digital images added by users would, instead, be stored externally, on the photo-managing site Flickr, and made available through the publicly available Flickr applications programming interface (API). This is clearly stated on *Canmore*’s homepage under the ‘Recent Public Images’ heading, where the Flickr logo is also displayed; on this section of the page, all photographs featured can be also viewed on Flickr simply by clicking on the link which is provided below each image.

### **3.2.1 Contributing to *Canmore***

*Canmore* does offer a useful and relatively efficient way into RCAHMS’ wealth of historical material. Users can carry out basic or advanced searches without registering (Figure 29), and find out information about a given site and also what documents might be available in the archive which relate to it.

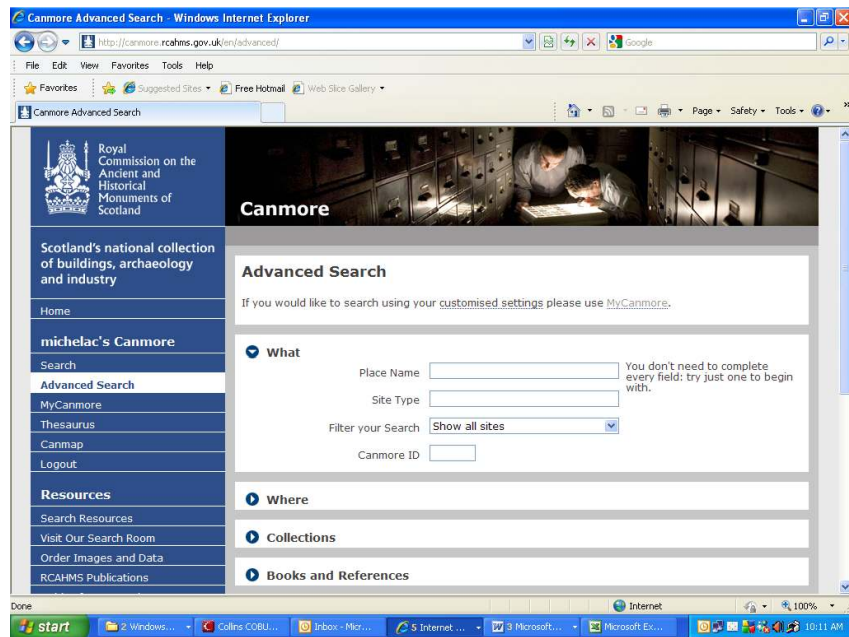


Figure 29 Advanced Search screen

By registering, users gain access to the new *MyCanmore* facility (Figure 30), which allows them to customize searches and make a contribution.

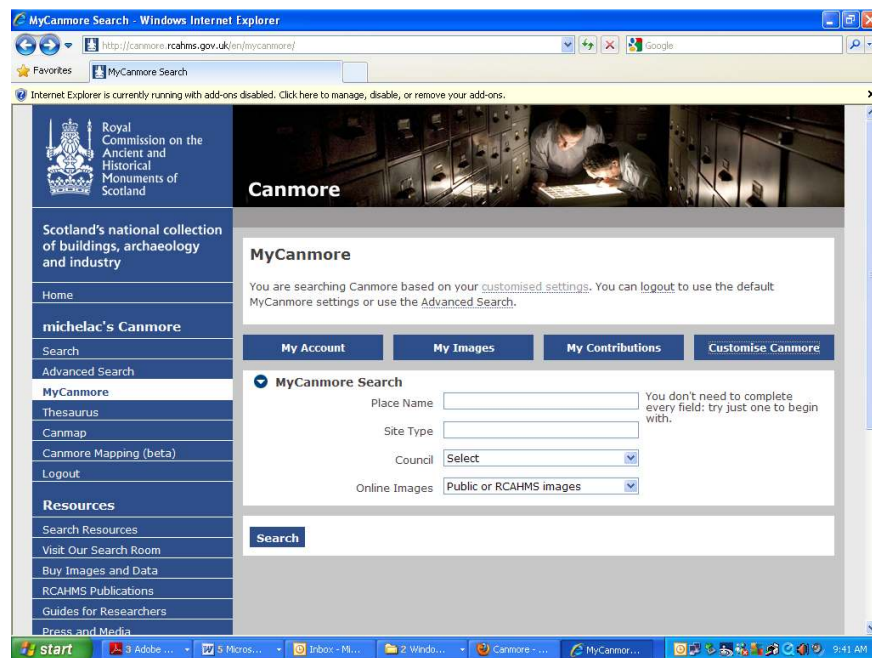


Figure 30 MyCanmore



It is important to note that *Canmore* is site-based, which means that all information relating to a particular place or building is organized around that particular item's record; users who wish to make a contribution to the archive can upload material to existing records; however, they cannot create new ones. Uploads are accepted subject to stated terms and conditions and are not vetted by RCAHMS staff before publication; users are, however, invited to report contributions which they consider inappropriate; RCAHMS reserves the right to remove any material which has been identified as unsuitable or which represents a copyright infringement.

Once they have uploaded comments or new images, users can review their past contributions and edit or delete images they have uploaded, although, interestingly, text contributions cannot be edited. Users can also subscribe to receive email updates when other users have commented on a specific site which they may be interested in, or recommend a text contribution to other users.

After logging in, users can search for the particular record to which they wish to make a contribution; this means that from the start a decision needs to be made as to which particular site-record that contribution should be allocated. Figure 31 below shows a typical *Canmore* record:

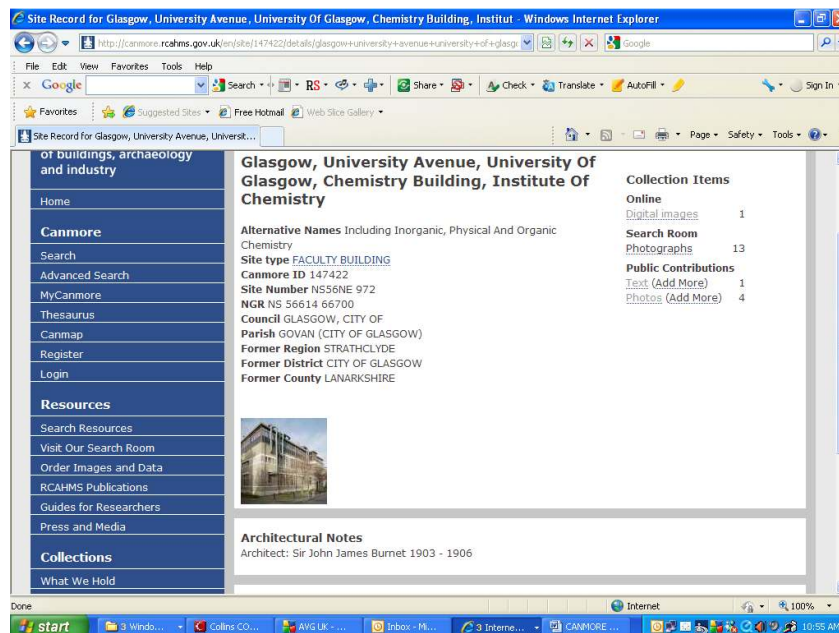


Figure 31 *Canmore* site record

Under the site's name, location details and archival references are provided; more information is shown further down the record.

On the right-hand side of the page the holdings to date for a particular site are listed under the relevant headings. In the example above, we learn that RCAHMS holds 1 'digital image', 13 'photographs' (negatives and/or prints) and one manuscript relating to the site. There are also 1 comment and 4 'photos' which were uploaded by users. The wording on the record can be slightly confusing, at first, with the synonyms 'images', 'photographs' and 'photos' used to differentiate between print and digital formats.

To add a 'comment' or a 'photo', users click on the (Add More) link next to the 'Texts' or 'Photos' links under the 'Public Contributions' heading on the top right-hand side of the record. This brings up either the 'Add Text' screen or the screen for the uploading of images (Figures 32 and 33).

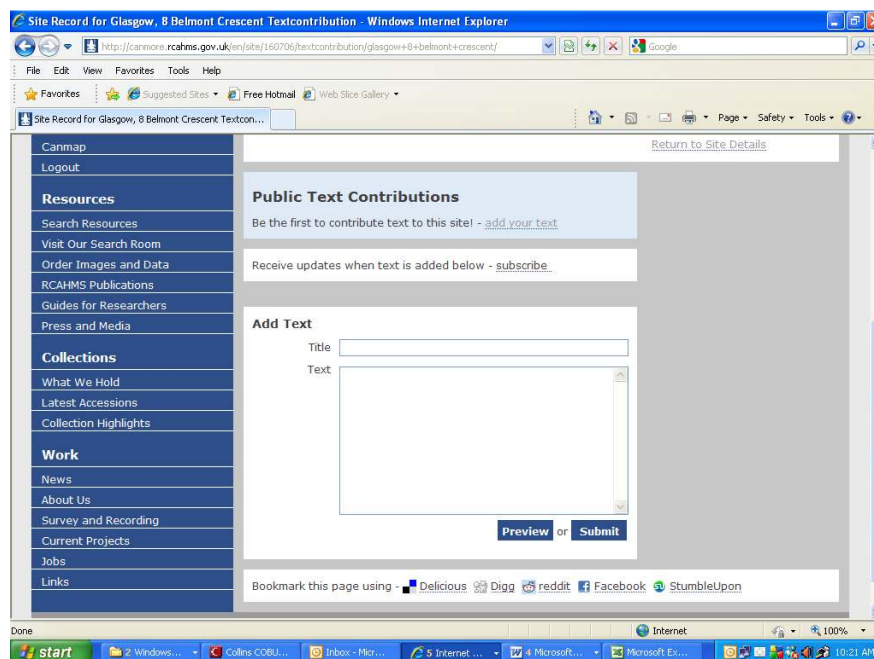


Figure 32 'Add Text' screen

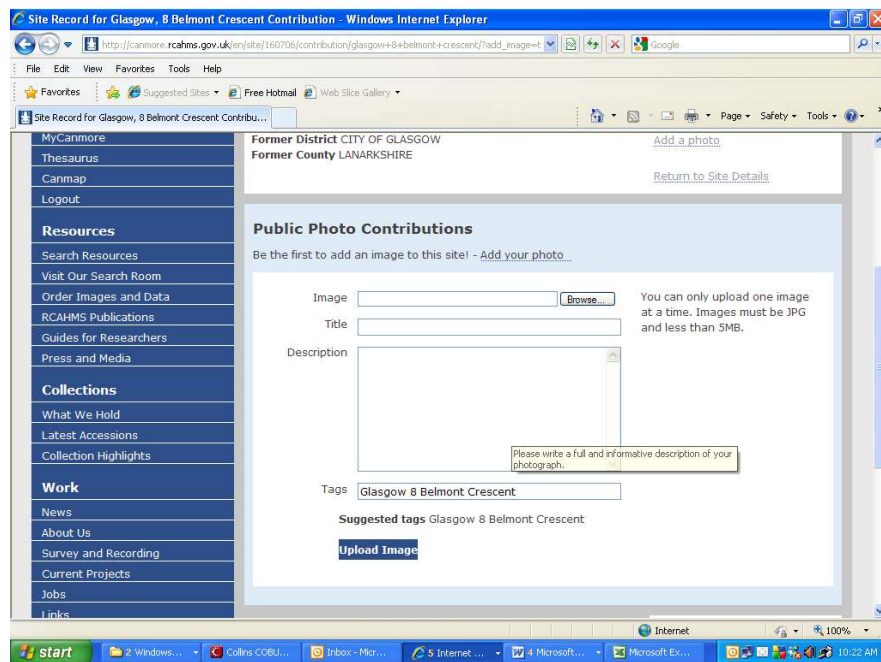


Figure 33 Image uploading screen

New text entries can be given a 'Title' and can be previewed before posting. Images can be uploaded from folders of choice, and be assigned a caption and also tags.

It is possible to view any user contribution to a particular site by clicking on the 'Text' or 'Photos' links under 'Public Contributions', again in the top right-hand side of the record (Figures 34 and 35).

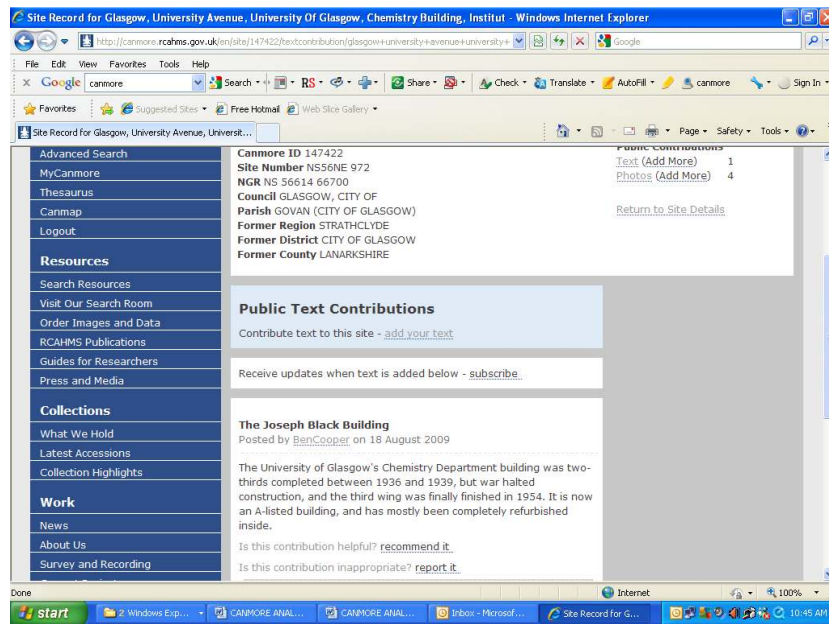


Figure 34 Text contributions to a record

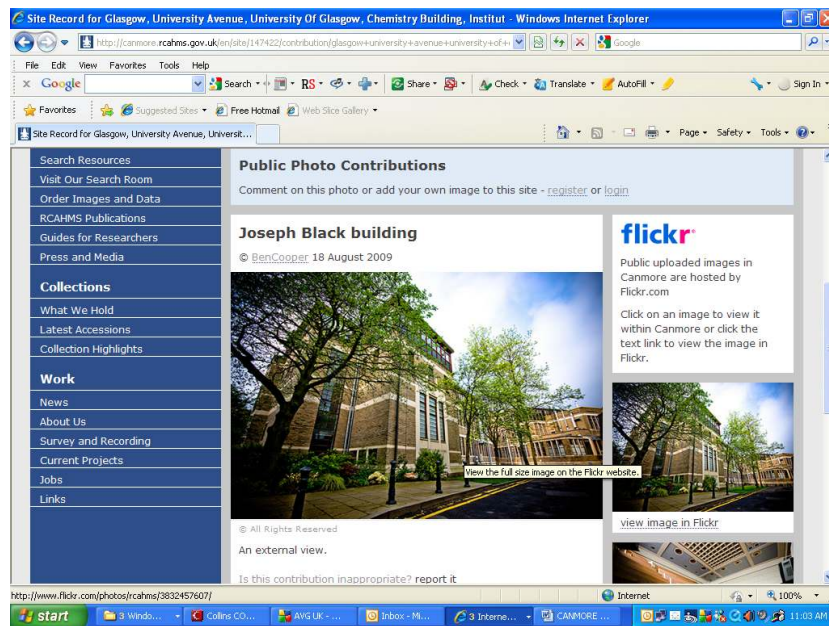


Figure 35 Image contributions to a record

While comments and images cannot be viewed simultaneously on a site record, it is possible to see all text and images contributed by an individual user by clicking on that user's name.

This gives access to that user's 'Account activity' page (Figure 36) which shows all contributions, both comments and photographs.

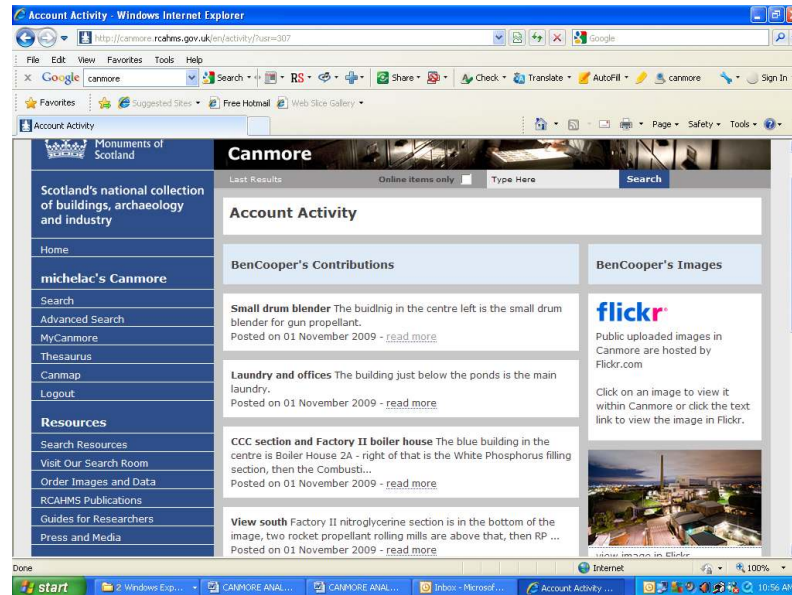


Figure 36 'Account Activity' page

An important limitation of *Canmore* as an image repository is that, due to its site-centred structure, it offers no image browsing facility. This has been increasingly seen as problematic, especially in view of the growing number of digital photographs in the archive. In recent months RCAHMS has been compensating for this by creating and displaying on its website thematic image collections. Figure 37 next shows a screen shot taken in October 2011.



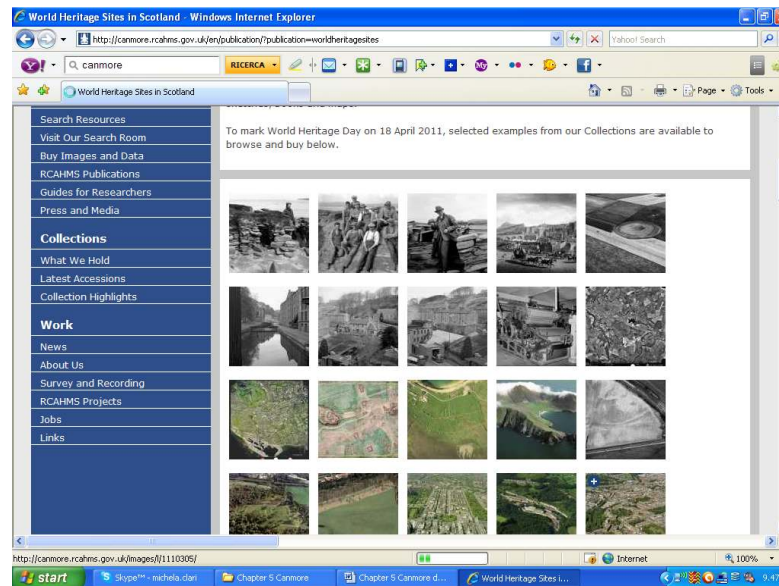


Figure 37 Image gallery: World Heritage Sites in Scotland

User-contributed images can, however, be browsed in the Flickr environment, which is accessed by clicking on the ‘view image on Flickr’ link which features under each user-contributed image. Here all photographs contributed by *Canmore* users are stored as part of ‘RCAHMS’ photostream’ (Figure 38) and can be viewed using Flickr tools and functionalities.

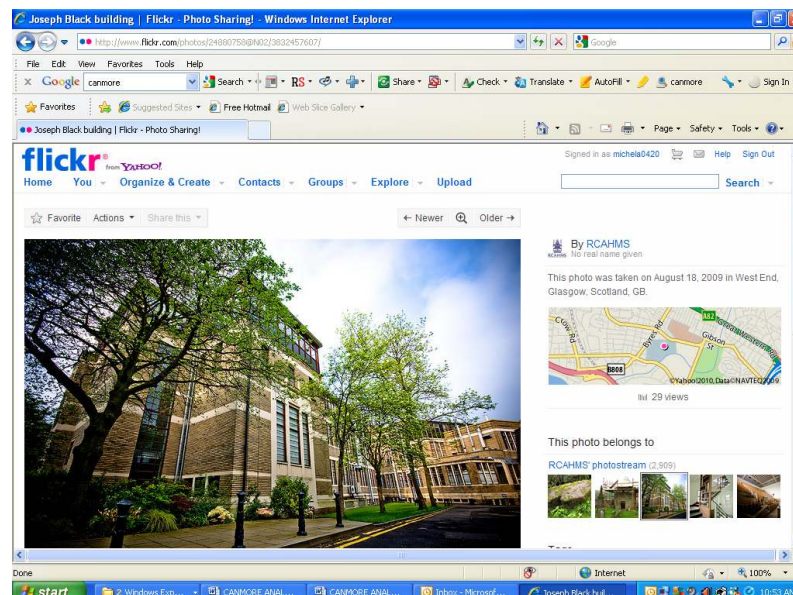


Figure 38 Flickr view

The Flickr interface is a useful feature, especially since, both visually and from a functionality perspective, *Canmore* is not an environment which makes for effortless browsing or navigating. Like the RCAHMS' website, *Canmore* is, indeed, highly structured; inevitably, its carefully layered offering means that, as a whole, it can come across as rather demanding of the user, as it requires several steps to get to its different components. The reality is that *Canmore* was designed for specialist use, and it requires a certain amount of knowledge and some practice to be able to use it efficiently. My own experience of interacting with the environment as a lay person proved somewhat laborious and frustrating on a number of occasions.

When engaging with the *Canmore* environment the unevenness which characterizes the RCAHMS' collections, both in terms of the amount of information available for individual items and the style in which this information is presented, emerges rather strongly. This is indeed an aspect which has reportedly raised concerns and which the institution is keen to address in future upgrades of the site.

The public contributions facility is also not supported, one might add, by particularly sleek tools, or user-friendly interfaces, due to the presence of a number of structural barriers and a general lack of flexibility for accessing or navigating the material. This is, however, to be expected as, rather than being part of a comprehensive redesign, the web 2.0 facility had to be integrated into a mature system and, as such, had to comply with its original structural constraints.

In many ways all this makes *Canmore* an interesting example of combination of old and new reflecting, again, change in progress, and the opportunities and the complexities which this inevitably brings about.

### **3.3 *Canmore*: A visual analysis**

Two metaphors are employed on the RCAHMS website to describe *Canmore*, combining, one might say, passion and functionality: *Canmore* is the 'heart' of the RCAHMS archive, what keeps the institution alive; at the same time, it is a 'window' into the collections, an opening through which users can look at the information (p. 164). Visually, such a condition

is confirmed, with *Canmore* deeply embedded within the larger visual object which contains it, the RCAHMS website, but also offering a structured glimpse into its riches.

Many of the considerations expressed on the visual features of the RCAHMS website apply also to *Canmore*, both environments having been ‘produced’ by the institution.

Like the rest of the site, *Canmore*’s pages are characterized by a gridlike layout (Figure 39).

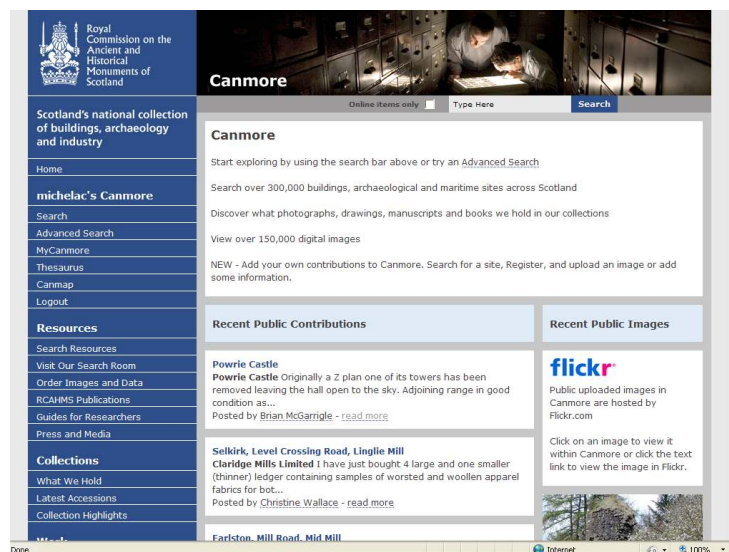


Figure 39 *Canmore* homepage

From a compositional perspective the clear separation on the opening page between references to original content at the top, and to public contributions below, point, on the one hand, to a strong compartmentalization which takes care of any danger of contamination between authenticated and new material, or even between users’ text contributions and images. On the other hand, the user-generated material is highlighted and given equal billing on the page, showing that RCAHMS is keen to foreground and showcase public contributions.

The Flickr logo appears like an extra element added to the whole, used to ‘brand’ the image contributions contained in the smaller boxed area in the bottom right corner.



Narrowing the focus on to the actual imagery used on the page, in particular in the banner, a pattern identified earlier in the RCAHMS site is found to recur (Figure 40 ).



**Figure 40** Top banner on the *Canmore* page

The photograph used in the banner shows two people in a darkened room, among filing cabinets, scrutinizing a light box; in other words, the image is that of a typical scene in a traditional archive, rather intense and atmospheric.

As observed earlier about the images used in relation to RCAHMS users, this choice of image could be seen as RCAHMS' way of reassuring visitors to the site: on this occasion, the message is that users are about to enter a space which, while 'virtual', is equally safe, and indeed exciting, as the one they are well-acquainted with in physical settings. While there is no strong iconic physical referent for RCAHMS as an institution as a whole, it is possible, on this occasion, to present the negative store in the archive as the clear and unambiguous original physical referent for *Canmore*, cast as 'the virtual equivalent' of an embodied and highly recognizable place.

The tendency to try and establish a reassuring connection between a familiar physical place and an online space through the use of literal references to embodied places or situations is not uncommon in the design of virtual environments. As Cousin explains (2005, p. 121) this aims to facilitate a more stable transition between media paradigms, in other words, the move from the analogue experience and the digital one. Having said this, while undoubtedly effective in defining and communicating the projected features and purpose of the online environment, the use of such literal imagery inevitably casts the virtual space as an 'alternative' to the embodied original, what Bayne refers to as a 'shadow of its 'real', analogue other' (Bayne, 2009, p. 5, emphasis in the original).

In this case, the visual introduction of *Canmore* points to a wish to anchor the online space to its embodied referent, with the reassurance that what awaits visitors is the online equivalent of a familiar and excitingly *effortful* experience of searching walls of cabinets – see the uncomfortable position of the people seen hard at work in a dimly-lit room. In reality, compared with a search in the physical archive, *Canmore* is unquestionably a quicker and more dynamic way into the RCAHMS collections, allowing users to access the material and explore a wealth of data, information and images in a number of different ways; not surprisingly, today the vast majority of searches of RCAHMS resources are indeed conducted online. As such, the choice of imagery, if reassuring, also offers a somewhat reductive interpretation of the latter's scope and capabilities.

How such an image may be perceived will depend, of course, on who does the viewing. Experienced archive users new to the online environment might feel reassured; however, casual online visitors to *Canmore* might feel intimidated, while expert users of *Canmore* will probably not mind either way, knowing their way around the record. What the choice of imagery reveals, for sure, is the site's designers' preference for a literal representation of *Canmore* as an alternative to the RCAHMS' Search Room.

Again, in offering this critical interpretation of the mix of visual and textual components on the *Canmore* site, it is important to recognize that it stems from one particular 'site of audiencing' (Rose, 2007, p. 22), namely my perspective as a researcher. Inevitably, given my own interest in digital culture in terms of its disruptive qualities and transformational potential, a highly structured online environment which privileges static progression rather than more fluid dynamics and where rather literal imagery is used to translate the texts it accompanies will make me wonder whether the way in which digitality is performed in the studied environment might be symptomatic of an approach which is excessively rooted in analogue thinking, whatever 'excessively' might mean in this case.

I am equally aware, however, that a rather different site of audiencing to the researcher or casual online user might well be assumed by the site's designers; inscribed in the imagery itself are, indeed, assumptions of an audience who might well find the use of the familiar images anchoring the virtual to embodied contexts useful, comforting and reassuring. In

other words, the way *Canmore* is designed might well work very well for its current users. An interesting question may be how it might work for anyone else.

### 3.4 Summing Up

To conclude this discussion of *Canmore* as a visual object examined in its broader environmental and cultural context, a number of observations may be worth foregrounding.

*Canmore*, and the RCAHMS website more broadly, do seem to achieve successfully a literal visual translation of the institution's overarching purpose and vision: the stronger, consistent branding points to a determination to project a clear, coherent corporate identity; the use of high quality images testify to the high technical standards of which RCAHMS prides itself; images of landscapes and expert activity in the field point to the institution's active presence on the open territory; and the mix of historical and contemporary photographs evoke a mission of connection between past and present.

At the same time, as a product of RCAHMS, its cultural and technological originator, *Canmore* appears to reflect an interesting mix of, perhaps even a tension between, different tendencies: an intention to open up to the public, to let people in, appears combined with a determination to continue to control the environment and the material exchanged, thus ensuring that the institution maintains its role of authoritative custodian of authentic content. This is evidenced by the gridlike, highly compartmentalized quality of the environment, which support the micro-managing of the interaction on the site and does not support, for example, a blurring of boundaries between the institutional online space and the, arguably, very different Flickr territory.

Similarly, while opening up to new online users, visually, *Canmore*, and its surrounding spaces, choose to employ analogue referents to explain functions and services – the survey field, the negative store – and arguably, also to define its assumed audiences. Indeed, on the question as to whether the imagery used on the site may contribute to making social differences visible or invisible (Rose, 2007, p. 13), the analysis suggests that, overall, the choice of some of the images might be seen as projecting some rather definite assumptions

about users' social membership. While possibly reflecting current practice and associations and, as such, appropriately addressing existing RCAHMS users, in a context where the institution is seeking to open up to larger and more varied user constituencies, not least through the creation of opportunities for online engagement, such choice of visual elements might prove over-defining and, potentially, unnecessarily inhibiting to newcomers.

Having said this, it is only by observing what use people ultimately make of such an environment over time that one can try and infer, as Bayne notes (2008), how such visual choices, and the way they come together, might open or, conversely, close off, people's way of being and acting in these particular online spaces, and what the implications of this may be.

In the next section I report on the findings from a study of precisely such activity, namely the observation over a period of time of the ways in which users interacted with and around *Canmore* and its artefacts, reflecting, specifically, on the way in which people made use of the new opportunity to contribute to the archive, on the nature of such contributions and on the significance of the experience for all concerned.

#### **4. An Analysis of User Contributions to *Canmore***

While quantitative data on user generated content have been produced by RCAHMS in the form of reports and statistics on a regular basis since the opening of *Canmore* to public contribution, no systematic qualitative analysis had been carried out previous to this study. The work involved analysis of all the comments which users contributed to *Canmore* and an examination of the photographic material which people uploaded to the site over a period of just over a year since re-launch.

Two main questions guided the analysis of user contributions to *Canmore*. They concerned, first, the nature of the material which users uploaded to the environment; second, the quality of the contributors' engagement with the original and new content, with other users and with the institution. Inevitably, findings from a qualitative analysis like the one carried out for this study, however systematic and rigorous the work aimed to be, are highly dependent on

the researcher's personal interpretation of the material and environments being observed. Having said this, in the light of some interesting aspects in the nature of the items examined and in the dynamics observed, the study did arguably yield some insights on how *Canmore* users tended to engage with the archive and its content in the first year since its opening up to the public. From these insights interesting themes emerge which are worth exploring in the wider context of this research project.

In the sections which follow I report on the analysis and its findings. I begin with an account of the analysis of the comments which users contributed to *Canmore* in the period under study. This is followed by a report on a study of user contributed images. The chapter then concludes with a summary and a discussion.

#### **4.1 User Comments**

In the period from early summer 2009 to September 2010 *Canmore* users contributed around 450 comments and some 2800 images to the archive. It is important to note that, as established by RCAHMS, although significantly fewer in number than the images contributed by users over the same period, text entries were more evenly spread amongst contributors and across sites.

For the analysis of text entries contributed by the public I was granted Administrator access to the site. This allowed me to view all comments and filter them by date and contributor, switching to the corresponding records as appropriate.

The analysis involved three main stages. First, I read all contributions, switching to the live *Canmore* record as appropriate, and annotated them for content, tone and style. As I did this, I developed a preliminary set of descriptive codes, which I continued to refine through several iterations. My approach to the coding process was both iterative and interpretative. Consistent with Charmaz's code for coding (2006), I sought to 'remain open', letting different aspects of the text emerge, such as tone and style; I stayed 'close to the data', looking at it both holistically and from different perspectives, for example in relation to structural aspects; I tried to 'keep the codes simple and precise', by revising codes to clarify differences, avoid duplications and create hierarchies; I sought to 'construct short codes',

often renaming codes to make them clearer; I took care to ‘preserve actions’, keeping notes on the analysis process by recording different aspects of it as it progressed; I also compared ‘data with data’, as I switched observation environments from *Canmore* to Flickr, moving ‘quickly through the data’, quickening the pace of the analysis when I felt it was losing its freshness or immediacy (Charmaz, 2006, pp. 123-150).

The process eventually yielded a final list of codes which reflected the nature of individual entries in relation to a number of broad types. Next, I proceeded to review all entries once again, this time allocating one or more codes to each item depending on its content. It was often necessary to use more than one code as many entries did not fit a single pattern. Once I finished coding individual entries, I created a chart containing a list of all code-sets, i.e. all single codes, or clusters of codes, resulting from the analysis.

At the end of this process I had a final list of code-sets and an electronic document containing all text entries individually coded and annotated. This allowed me to examine the entries by different type and look for patterns in the data.

Based on the analysis described above, five different main types of entry were identified. They are listed in the table below, which also shows their relative prominence:

<b>Text Contributions</b>	
Technical or semi-technical contributions	48.5%
Comments to images	16%
Direct references to family history	9%
Entries offering links to other sources or references	8.5%
Personal experiences, memories, observations	7%
Technical contribution more informal in style	6%
Corrections to existing records	5%

**Table 1** Text contributions to *Canmore*

As the table shows, the analysis found that the majority of the text items uploaded to *Canmore* during the period under study are, in fact, not so much ‘comments’, but entries which are fundamentally aimed at contributing additional historical or technical information or an update on the data currently provided in the site record. Interestingly, consistent with findings in the *Treasured Places* project, only a minority of items refer to an image in the archive.

Around half of the comments are written in a descriptive, impersonal style; they often include links or references to other sources, and can be short as well as, at times, quite comprehensive, especially when they consist of lengthy extracts from other publications.

Below are some examples:

**Russian Steamer Graf Todleben**

The Graf Todleben went aground on rocks at Chapel Green Earlsferry inside the East Vows Beacon on 20th February 1912. Refloated May 23rd and towed to outside Elie Harbour where lightening of her cargo of coal continued. August 3rd purchased by Port & Clyde Ship Breaking Company and towed to Bo'ness for breaking up 18th September 1912.

**End of 19th cent. Alleged occupant of 2 Kilgraston Rd**

This address is on the label on the back of a watercolor (landscape) probably by the artist: Ann B.D. Edmondston, known as exhibiting 1880 1887. [http://forum.findartinfo.com/topic.asp?TOPIC\\_ID=5063](http://forum.findartinfo.com/topic.asp?TOPIC_ID=5063)

Some entries, around 8.5% of all contributions, contain a link to other sources, with no additional comment:

**Oban Indicator Loop, Ganavan - Web Page**

The webpage detailing the history, layout and construction details of the Oban Indicator Loop Station at Ganavan are at: [indicatorloop.com/obanbay.htm](http://indicatorloop.com/obanbay.htm)

Some of these entries, however, are written in a slightly more informal style, for example with authors using the first person, or when some anecdotal element is included (my underlining):

**North British Hotel**

Prior to the Hotel at 230 High Street being named the Tayview Hotel, it was called the North British Hotel. There is a picture of the street on my website that was taken before July 1919 (...)

**Courthill House**

Courthill House is still standing. It was de-roofed in the 1940s but the external walls remain largely complete to the wallhead. The adjacent Episcopalian Chapel is well worth visiting if you're passing by on the A896 (...)

These are examples of contributions which, while aimed to improving on the knowledge about a particular site, were authored in a way which identifies them as clearly unofficial. There are not many, however, only around 6% of the total, as most contributions have generally tended to keep to a more formal style.

Not unsurprisingly, in some cases, contributors have used the commenting facility to alert RCAHMS to potential errors in existing records and to suggest corrections. There are only a small number of these entries, around 5% of the total, and they vary from straightforward technical updates to more informal comments (my underlining):

**Motherwell Mill**

The co-ordinates for the mill are incorrect they should be NS756 579 Mill Rd Motherwell, Lanarkshire ML1

**Confusion**

I think there is still some confusion with this entry. The first description is indeed of Denholm Mill, which is located near where the Dean Burn joins the Teviot River. But the second part does in fact appear to be a description of Westside Mill (...) This was converted into a private house around the 1980s.

Although the overall tone of text contributions is definitely more factual than anecdotal, there are nevertheless some entries which, while adding new information to the record, also bring an element of social history, for example with references to family history or connections, as in the example below:

**History of a Publican**

My grandmother was born in 1906. I believe my Great Grandfather was the publican of Ye Olde House around that time or a bit later, along with his wife. They were Allan McEwan and Elizabeth McEwan. I'm told that due to Great Grandfather being away (apparently poaching) a lot, Elizabeth actually ran the pub. (as well as keeping the local illegal SP bookie in business!!) Elizabeth was the daughter of the hotel keeper of the Ferry Hotel, a Francis Strathearn. Is there anyone out there who knows the history at all?



This type of entry represents about 9% of total contributions. A number of these entries, like the ones in the examples below, were contributed by users who are of Scottish origin but do not reside in Scotland; albeit in small number, they point to the potential usefulness and relevance of *Canmore* as a place of connection beyond its national borders (my underlining):

**John Sibbald, Loch Leven Inn**

My Great Great grandfather, John Sibbald, had the Loch Leven Inn around the year 1841. He appears in the 1841 census as a ventriloquist. He also had a farm at Broomhill, Crook of Devon. Two sons James & William came to Australia. James was my Great gfather & it is from a manuscript of his that the information was taken. It appeared in the Wellington Times at the time of his death in April 1922. James had been the Caretaker at the Wellington Caves NSW for 30 years, & was a well known character in the area (...).

Differently from what was found in the *Treasured Places* project, however, only a minority of entries uploaded by *Canmore* users, indeed just over 7%, make a more personal and anecdotal type of contribution to the archive. Below are some examples:

**holiday in Asknish house**

One of our best holidays was at Asknish house, the secret stairways the music room, and a staircase we could drive a car up it was that big, its a shame you can't holiday there anymore, what with 16 bedrooms and 8 bathrooms not to mention the 4 foot thick walls and walking through them to get to each room, my children are all grown up now but we still talk about the house with fond memories, 25 years on

**the 'point'**

whenever I go to stay with my granny I go for a walk along the canal and walk to 'the point' which is what we call this. It's not really that far but whenever we do it my granny asks "did you go all the way to the point?" and if I have she looks pleased

**Auchterarder Cinema**

Used to pass this antique shop on the way to school everyday. Had no idea that there used to be a cinema in the building. Something poignant about the old cinema being filled with old furniture now...

**Ex-St Ignatius Pupil, 1954**

After many months of searching I finally found these photos of St Ignatius School, thanks to Canmore. Bring back lots of happy childhood memories of my early days in Tollcross. Many thanks!

Interestingly, entries of this kind tend to have been contributed to *Canmore* by RCAHMS staff during pre-launch testing and to populate the site in the first weeks after the launch.

The tone of these comments is very different from that in the vast majority of user contributed entries.

As ascertained in conversation with RCAHMS managers, a preponderance of personal observations by staff members as opposed to more technical contributions is explained by the fact that, from the outset, it was decided that staff members would not, in fact, use the public contribution feature on *Canmore*, as their task is to act as ongoing professional creators of permanent records. The tone of their contributions, and the implicit participation model they offer for future inputs by other *Canmore* users, nevertheless show an interesting contrast with traditional practices, which members of staff, possibly encouraged by the experience of phase one of *Treasured Places*, appear happy to experiment with. It is interesting to find, however, that the style of contributions modelled by staff was not reproduced by subsequent users, who continued to opt for inputs which mirror the archive's original focus on factual information and data.

As mentioned earlier, hundreds of thousands of photographs and documents have been digitized and uploaded to *Canmore* in recent years. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that a number of comments uploaded by users refer to images in the archive. These are equally split between comments referring to original RCAHMS' images and to photographs uploaded by users.

The user-contributed entries which directly refer to photographs originally held in *Canmore* tend to comment on technical aspects of the image; some contribute additional information on the item portrayed; some share some knowledge about the actual photograph. Below are some examples and the images they refer to:



© RCAHMS

**amended image?**

The upper part of this image looks very like it has been 'drawn' on on the negative - the upper horizontal of the fence appears to pass in front of the recumbent which would be impossible.



© RCAHMS

### **East Balhalgardy, Pictish Symbol Stone.**

Both photographs, taken by Mr Ritchie in 1914, are shown upside-down.



© RCAHMS

### **The Origin of the Saltire Cross**

This painting shows that the link between Constantine's Battle of Milvian Bridge and the Battle of Athelstaneford was well understood in the early 19th century.

Some entries ask for further information about a particular item (my underlining):



© RCAHMS image

### **Old Inveraray Castle Postcard**

I have the original watercolour from which this postcard has been produced. I would be grateful for any information of the Artist or date of painting. The view is similar to Paul Sandby's print of 1750 (...)

In some cases entries share personal anecdotes about the places featured in the archive photographs, contributing interesting insights of a social history nature:



© RCAHMS image

### **Moulders at Work**

Knew these guys very well. I also worked there at that time.

The guys in the photo are as follows:  
left to right - Mr George Semple, Mr Frank McAteer and Mr Robert Pike.



© RCAHMS

### **History of premises**

I believe that this was the premises of my grandfather Tom Caldwell's "Lemonade" factory from some time in the 1930's until he sold the business to the Scottish Co-operative Wholesale Society in 1949. (...)

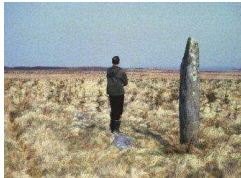
There are, however, no instances of users commenting on images from a purely aesthetic or emotional perspective. All entries, albeit written at times in an informal style, tend to bring some kind of historical or factual information about the site. The only exception to this are a few contributions by RCAHMS staff, mostly uploaded to the archive in the pre-launch testing stages of the project:



© RCAHMS

#### **Erskine Beveridge in Stromness**

Incredible photo - you want to know what all the people are up to!



© RCAHMS

#### **Jura Standing Stone**

Diane Arbus would be proud of this photo of two 'backs' - the man and the stone

Moving on to comments which relate to images which were uploaded by users, these include items which simply alert RCAHMS or other users to the fact that an image has been or will be uploaded:

#### **Ormiston Hall**

I am uploading a photograph of a drawing I came across in a junk shop in Wales. It says Ormiston Hall in the bottom RH corner.

#### **"Birds on a Sutherland Estuary" Archibald Thorburn 1908**

I am now sending on an image [fully in focus] of the brass plaque on the wall of Golspie High School giving the provenance of the mural.

There are also entries which provide an expanded caption for an image the same author uploaded to the site:



**View looking NW from the Glasgow Necropolis, c1967**  
Photograph taken c1967

**View N-W from the Necropolis**

This photograph was taken by my father, Andrew Paul, in 1967. Looking north west from the Glasgow Necropolis, you can see the Sighthill flats under construction and the western end of Alexandra Parade and the adjoining streets before demolition.

On very rare occasions, users comment on images uploaded by other users addressing them directly, as in the example below:

**Torr More picture**

Hi crìochan,

Thank you so much for posting this photograph on Canmore/Flickr.

I manage the "British Rock Art Collection" website ([www.rockartuk.fotopic.net](http://www.rockartuk.fotopic.net)) and would be very happy to publish your photo(s) to it.

Would it be possible to send me an e-mail?

Cheers (...)

The tone of the comment above is more typical, however, of Flickr users, where the investigation might have started, to then continue in *Canmore*.

It is interesting to note that from a structure and design perspective there is no real mechanism for linking a text contribution to a specific image, except by making the link explicit in the text. When there are a lot of images on a site record, it can therefore be difficult to establish immediately which item a comment might be referring to. Indeed, because of the way the archive is structured, user contributed texts and images are kept quite separate. Perhaps in an attempt to compensate for such disconnect, users sometime try to link comments and photographs more explicitly. In some cases, for example, they repeat an image caption in the text entry, thus providing a stronger link between them.

It is interesting to note that contributors have used the entry 'title' option in different ways. While many titles simply contain the name of the site as in the record heading, in some cases contributors have used the title to strengthen a link between a comment and an image or to 'tag' their contribution by inserting their own name or a recurrent keyword in the title space; some have also used the title as an anticipation or summary of the entry, as in the examples below:

**Alternative spelling of Thriepmuir**

**Identity of drowned crew member**

**Correction to name**

**Essay on building demolition**

**Short Video Clip Now Available**

**are you sure?**

There are also some more creative ‘titles’, in keeping with the nature of the entry’s content:

**Home sweet home**

**A circular walk**

**Childhood Memories**

**A fine dram**

**the 'point'**

However, once again, these are all entry titles contributed by RCAHMS staff.

The different ways in which contributors use the title option for their comments, and the references which they include in their text entries when they wish to strengthen a link with an image, suggest that users are experimenting with using the *Canmore* tools at their disposal in an environment which, on the one hand, is rather rigidly structured and, on the other, has left the purpose of some of its functionalities open to users’ interpretation.

Something that *Canmore* text contributors seem not to be doing through the commenting facility, however, is actively engaging with each other. Except for the odd query about a site when users might be seeking further information from RCAHMS or other contributors, the analysis shows little evidence of user interaction with other users or with RCAHMS. If these requests for help were followed up, this did not take place in the *Canmore* public space.

Only in one instance I noticed a user reacting to something somebody else had said in an earlier contribution:

These are really great photographs (and I note with a certain degree of jealousy the use of a Mark II 5D!), but I'm not sure why, when I read it, I should be ashamed? It's not my fault these buildings have been neglected - honest!

There was, however, no public follow up to his comment.

## 4.2 User-contributed Images

In the last few years thousands of photographs and documents from RCAHMS' collections have been uploaded to *Canmore* as part of an ongoing digitization programme which is not only enriching the archive with new information, but is also gradually transforming it into a more visually enticing online environment. Importantly, many of these images are subject to copyright. As well as being able to add comments and information to the archive's records, since August 2009 through the *MyCanmore* facility members of the public are able to contribute to *Canmore* their own photographs.

Having made this decision, at the time of the *Canmore*'s re-development RCAHMS had no way of anticipating how much photographic material might be coming from the public, nor what the nature of such material might be. Given *Canmore*'s size and complex structure, an important question was how user-contributed images should be uploaded to the RCAHMS environment and how they should be stored and managed.

It was felt at the time that the institution did not have the right kind of capacity, resources or expertise to tackle the demands of integrating user generated images into its own space. It was decided, therefore, that RCAHMS would enter into a partnership with the photo-managing site Flickr which had a robust track record of handling precisely that kind of content. Users would seemingly upload their image contributions to *Canmore*; however, while photographs could be viewed in this environment, they would be, in reality, stored on Flickr, where *Canmore* users, and the wider public, would also be able to handle the material using that site's tools and functionalities.

This was an interesting departure for RCAHMS at a time when it was beginning to experiment with online participation and networking practices. Flickr is a site which has

successfully attracted a thriving online community and is considered a model of good web 2.0 practices. As an observer of RCAHMS, but also, at the time, of the *Commons* experience on Flickr, I reckoned that the collaboration with the photo-managing site would offer RCAHMS an important opportunity not only to handle new photographic content safely but, importantly, also to widen the scope of the initiative to a much broader usership and, crucially, to learn first-hand about online engagement dynamics.

In the period from March 2009 to September 2010 around 2800 images were uploaded by members of the public to *Canmore*. While, as mentioned earlier, the number of images was much higher than that of comments contributed over the same period, it is important to stress that, in actual fact, the top five image contributors were responsible for as many as 40% of all photographs uploaded, around 1120 items, with the top contributor uploading nearly 400 items alone, while the remaining users, almost two thirds of the total, each posted 5 images or fewer. In other words, the image contributions activity resulted in a significant enhancement to the record, however mostly led by a small, very active, user base.

For this study I reviewed all images which users had uploaded to *Canmore* in the first year since its re-launch. I was able to access them on Flickr which, unlike *Canmore*, offers good browsing facilities. Here photographs appear as part of ‘RCAHMS’ photostream’ (Figure 41), which can be searched by individual contributors’ name or by tags (Figure 42).

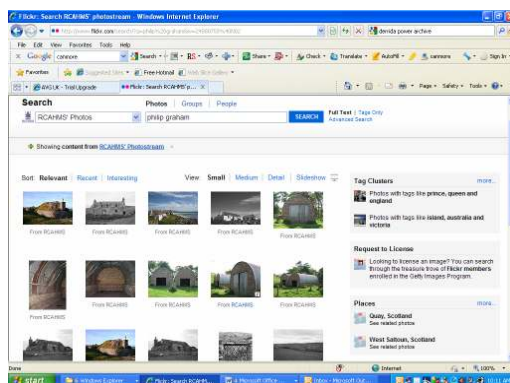


Figure 41 RCAHMS’ Photostream

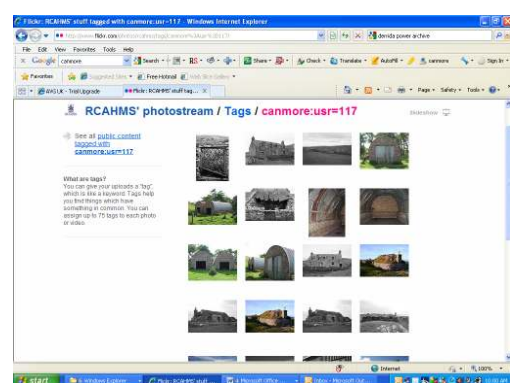


Figure 42 Individual users’

Flickr also offers a slideshow view of all images (Figure 43):



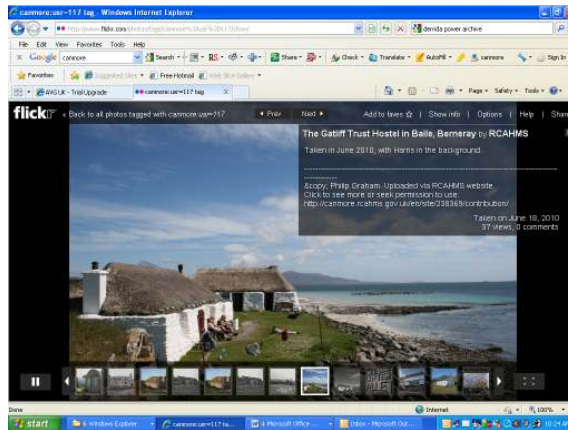


Figure 43 Slideshow view

Using Flickr’s archive facility it is also possible to gain a historical overview of contributions, including number of uploads per month (Figure 44).

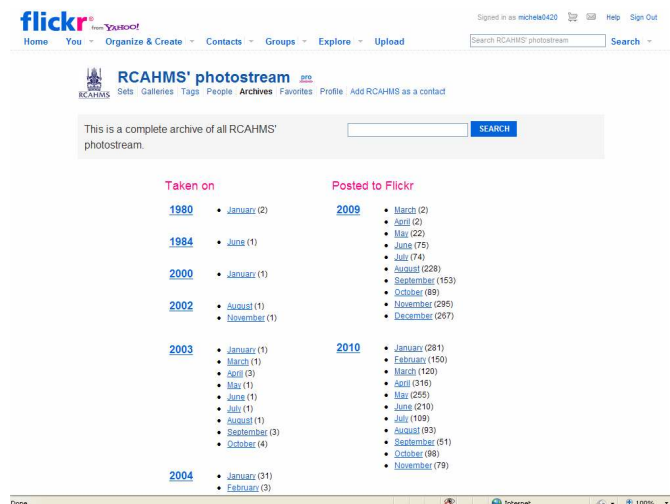


Figure 44 Archive view

By switching to the ‘calendar’ view, and by then clicking on individual days, one can see all RCHAMS-related items uploaded on Flickr on a particular day (Figures 45 and 46):

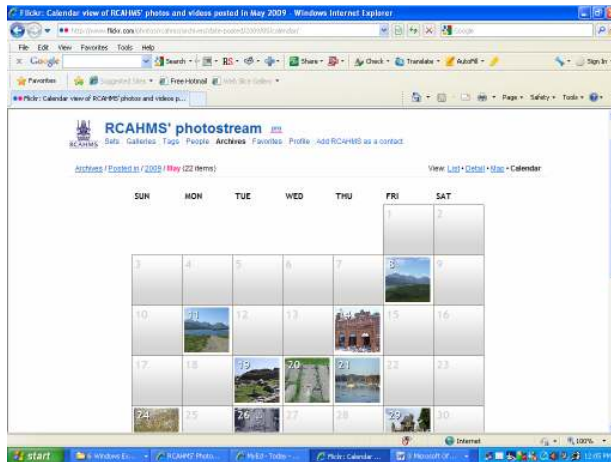


Figure 45 Calendar view



Figure 46 Contribution 'day-view'

From here, it is possible to zoom in on individual images in Flickr view (Figure 47), which, in turn, are hyper-linked to the corresponding *Canmore* record (Figure 48).

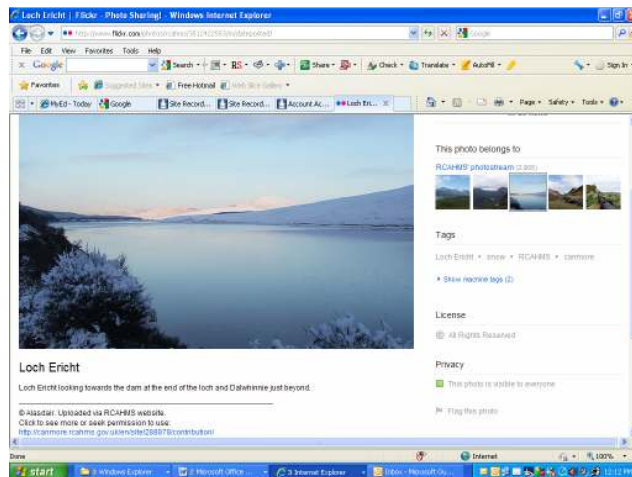


Figure 47 Flickr view

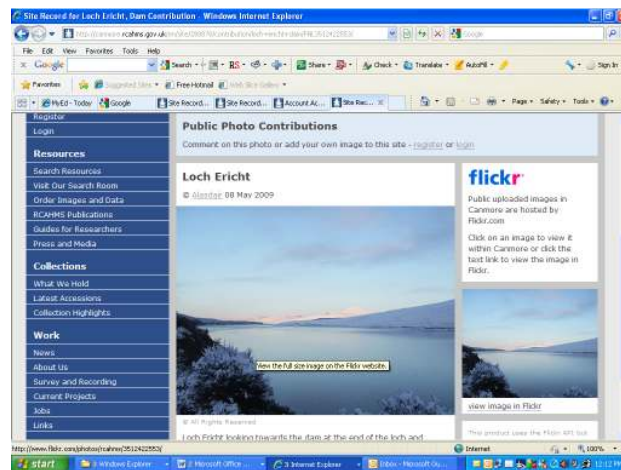


Figure 48 Canmore view

As I reviewed all digital images in the ‘RCAHMS’ photostream’ on Flickr, I was able to switch easily from the Flickr environment to *Canmore* to see contributions in the context of the relevant archive record.

Consistent with the analysis of user comments, the study of images uploaded to *Canmore* involved a review of all items aimed at identifying different types of contributions.

Through an iterative process, I created a list of categories which were refined as I progressed with the review and an electronic document with entries representing different

types of contributions. By the end of this process I had created an electronic repository where sample images were grouped into three broad categories, namely:

- a) technical and semi-technical contributions
- b) digital reproductions of old photographs
- c) records of recent activities

#### **a) Technical and semi-technical contributions**

The first group of images represents by far the most common type of contribution to *Canmore* in the period under study, over 95% of the total. These are high quality photographs, which include many aerial images, including kite aerial photographs and images taken during private flights, as in the examples below:



##### **Lettoch Cropmarks**

Oblique aerial view of cropmarks in cereal crop, observed during a private flight in early July 2009. Other indeterminate marks were noted in the vicinity by RCAHMS following an earlier reconnaissance.

© Bone. Uploaded via RCAHMS website.



##### **Broughty Castle from the south east**

Aerial view of Broughty Castle with the harbour behind, taken from the south east. Kite Aerial Photograph  
Photo taken: 27 February 2009

© Hamish Fenton. Uploaded via RCAHMS website.

There are also several images in this group of photographs which capture details from archeologically-significant sites, as well as photographs of buildings, and of items such as plaques or inscriptions.



**Bellsdyke external view**  
Bellsdyke external view

© Robert. Uploaded via RCAHMS website



**An Sgurr, Isle of Eigg - Hill Fort wall. June 2009.**

A small section of 6-8 courses of stone wall beside the path to the summit of Sgurr of Eigg. Position not noted exactly - about grid ref 460 847

© Hugh Dinwoodie. Uploaded via RCAHMS website.



**Glencoe Massacre Monument Inscription**

The inscription on the Glencoe Massacre Monument. Taken on 17/06/2007.

© Rumbly. Uploaded via RCAHMS website.

The quality of the images and the succinct and factual style of the captions make the contributions in this first group a natural complement to the archival records.

However, a detail analysis of the different types of photographs belonging to this first group would have been both impractical and, ultimately, beyond the scope of this study. Instead, I focused on the images which represented an exception to the overall contribution patterns. These images, fewer than 5% of the total number of contributions, stood out because of their appearance, the subjects they portray and the nature of the accompanying captions.

## **b) Digital reproductions of old photographs**

While much fewer in number than the more technically-focused contributions, these images are nevertheless interesting in that they bring a particular flavour to the archive, introducing elements of social history as well as interesting details about places and people. These

images tend to be accompanied by less formally-worded captions. Among these items we find:

- reproductions of old postcards: these include both images of places but also, at times, of the message on the cards.



**northfield colliery (pennypit) prestonpans**  
 this old postcard pre 1920s as housing now stands in foreground built late 1920s, in the background to left off church can be seen boilerhouse chimneys which stood in the middle off what is now the Pennypit playing fields

© john walker. Uploaded via RCAHMS website.



**EDENHALL**

Reverse of post card from Private George Vitty Regtl No. 14649 14th Battalion Durham Light Infantry to his father William Vitty of Fir Tree, 'Harperley', County Durham England. George, having recovered from losing his right arm in France, became the postman for Fir Tree. Further details can be found on the RoyalMailTeesdale website - [www.royalmailteesdale.piczo.com](http://www.royalmailteesdale.piczo.com) Dave

© RoyalMailTeesdale. Uploaded via RCAHMS website.

- images scanned from books and other publications:



**Reconstruction of Rothesay Castle (Hewison 1895, frontispiece)**  
 This is a scanned copy of an illustration which was the frontispiece of J K Hewison's Bute in the Olden Time Volume 2, published in 1895 by W Blackwood & Sons. It shows Rothesay Castle in an aerial view from the NW in the 16th century (...)

© George Geddes. Uploaded via RCAHMS website.



**Death Register, St. Andrew's Church, Calcutta**

Pages showing the registration of the deaths of Alexis Leopold and Regina DeLeemans

© Pamela Stock-Hall. Uploaded via RCAHMS website.



- photographs which carry information relating to particular sites by focusing on human subjects:



**Bruce Arms Hotel, Falkland, Fife**  
 Photograph of an unknown man standing outside hotel door, showing lamp, fire insurance plaque and other panels above door. Photo is undated, but the licensee is named in the panel over the door as William E. Strudley, who held the license during the mid-1920s.

© Colin McLeod. Uploaded via RCAHMS website.



**Dr Grierson and his museum**

This is possibly an early photograph of Dr Grierson in front of his museum in Thornhill . (I think it's him - same beard!)

© ros bayly. Uploaded via RCAHMS website. Click to see more or seek permission to use: [canmore.rcahms.gov.uk/en/site/257726/contribution/](http://canmore.rcahms.gov.uk/en/site/257726/contribution/)

- old family portraits:



**Mr Rhodes**  
 Photograph of Mr Rhodes together with his wife and daughter. Believed to have been taken around the time of his inspection of the South Esk Viaduct.

© trevorhut. Uploaded via RCAHMS website.



**Robert Orr, James Harper Orr and Guest.**  
 From left, Robert Orr, Chemical Merchant from Glasgow who built present Kinnaird House, his son James Harper Orr and Guest. taken in the grounds of Kinnaird House 1903-04

© Brian Russell. Uploaded via RCAHMS website.

- references to family members: these images convey details about the life of particular members of contributors' family as relating to a particular place:



### **Cockburn Lodge 1**

Cockburn Lodge was the home of my great grandfather James Huntly. He was a poultry farmer and it was also known as the Hirsell Poultry Farm. It was ran by the family as a poultry farm from circa 1895 to 1955. They won many prizes at the major agricultural shows in both England and Scotland for their prize poultry and ducks. My great uncles William and James Huntly ran the farm after my great grandfather died in 1923.

This photo was taken during the First World War and shows Cockburn Lodge behind who I believe to be one of my great uncles.

© phuntly. Uploaded via RCAHMS website.



(c) Tom Caldwell 2010

### **Thomas Caldwell Lemonade Factory**

Probably wartime by the get up of the truck - same building from a different direction - truck is a Commer Raider. Factory used to supply Prestwick Air Base with "Lemonade" during WWII.

© Tom Caldwell. Uploaded via RCAHMS website.

Interestingly, the last picture bottom right in the set above is complemented by a comment added to the relevant *Canmore* record:

### **History of premises**

Posted by Tom Caldwell on 14 June 2010

I believe that this was the premises of my grandfather Tom Caldwell's "Lemonade" factory from some time in the 1930's until he sold the business to the Scottish Co-operative Wholesale Society in 1949. The SCWS set up a chain of soft drink factories trading as "Hendry's". The property including the adjoining residence was known as "Shawbank" East Shaw Street Kilmarnock.

Any further information on the history of the building or of the firm will be welcomed.



- ‘before and after’ images: as in the example below, these photographs juxtapose older and more recent images of a particular site.



**Reiverslaw House 2009**

Photo taken from the south to compare with the 1906 photo from the same place

© a mccrone. Uploaded via RCAHMS website.

- records of human activity around a site: these images relate to events or activities which took place at or around some particular sites. They have a commemorative, or chronicling, quality that contributes a different kind of understanding of the places to which they refer and of their history:



**No1 Mill Ingot being removed from the furnace**

This picture was taken in the late 1970's and shows the furnace door open and an ingot being removed at the start of the rolling process

© Colin Gault. Uploaded via RCAHMS website.



**Workparty**

Group of prisoners working in Kinlochleven. Apart from working on the pipe line from Loch Eilde Mor to the Black Water dam groups of prisoners were detailed for work within the community of Kinlochleven

© bigbob. Uploaded via RCAHMS website.

### c) Records of recent activities

This third and final group of contributions include recent photographs capturing scenes of group activities, such as outings or workshops, generally organized by associations, sometimes in collaboration with RCAHMS, and also images of artefacts created on such occasions:



**Elgin cathedral Pictish stone**  
Elgin cathedral Pictish stone and our leader Avril.

© Elgin Brownies. Uploaded via RCAHMS website.



**cathedral 1**  
This model was made by two or three pupils of Robert Owen Memorial Primary School  
We made the models in 2008 with RCAHMS and we all loved it

© ROMPS Lanark. Uploaded via RCAHMS website.

As they bring a contemporary and personal feel to the records, these images represent a different interpretation of the role of *Canmore* as an archive, seen on this occasion as a repository for people's memories and their creative efforts.

## 5. Discussion

Consistent with the discussion of findings from the analysis of the *Commons* on Flickr in Chapter 4, the sections which follow offer a reflection on insights from the exploration of *Canmore* in the context of a broader discussion of digitality and its potential for transformation, in particular, in relation to user dynamics, authorship practices and the notion of heritage artefact.

## 5.1 Users and Territories

As the ‘heart’ of RCAHMS, and a ‘window’ onto its collections (p. 164), *Canmore* was originally created in order to make the information about the built heritage of Scotland as gathered by the institution over decades readily available to those who wished to access it. As reported by RCAHMS staff involved in the project back in the nineties, this was a courageous, and also controversial, initiative, which reflected, however, a genuine focus on users’ needs and a determination to make data and artefacts as accessible as possible.

The recent introduction of web 2.0 functionalities, involving a transformation of *Canmore* from catalogue/archive to online space for engagement, undoubtedly represents another important shift towards greater accessibility; importantly, it also signals a readiness on the institution’s part for a closer relationship with its existing users, and with new ones, potentially invigorated by new incentives to participate.

RCAHMS’ own motivation in opening up *Canmore* to the public was, indeed, clearly articulated in that statement to the press at the time of the launch quoted earlier in the chapter, where accessibility is equated with interactivity and active participation:

our determination to be as accessible as possible meant making it as easy as it could be for people to contribute their information, stories or reminiscences in a way that could be retained, shared and added to.

(RCAHMS, 2009, no page)

Importantly, as RCAHMS invites the public to engage with *Canmore*, it is made clear that, in a spirit of confidence and trust, users’ contributions will not be subject to screening before to publication:

The interactive elements will be self-monitoring. We expect that the majority of entries will come from people who are enthusiastic about Scotland and its culture, and how its story is told through our built heritage.

(RCAHMS, 2009, no page)

While this decision might have been motivated, to a significant extent, by resource constraints, it nevertheless showed that RCAHMS had enough confidence to trust future contributors to *Canmore* to do the right thing; the positive experience on the *Treasured*

*Places* project, where users' voices had emerged both genuine and passionate and the stories they told deeply-felt and relevant, certainly contributed to such confidence. On *Canmore* too users would now be able to take centre stage in ways which were not possible before, having their voices heard through their comments and image contributions. Also, with the Flickr environment only one step away, there was a potential opportunity for an intriguing fusion of online sociality and historical authoritativeness, where new narratives might unfold through stories collectively constructed.

The analysis of the environment and of users' contributions carried out for this study shows the people who engaged with *Canmore* during that initial period did indeed take advantage of the interactive functionality, contributing material which is of high quality, well researched and relevant. The impeccable behaviour of *Canmore*'s contributors also fully rewarded RCAHMS' trust in letting users engage live with the material, without pre-emptive censorship. A number of contributions, if much fewer and mainly among the photographs, also reveal some keenness to share personal stories and details of social history, reflecting the depth of people's relationship with their built heritage and its meaningfulness in terms of personal identity.

*Canmore* users, as observed in the study, are certainly taking on a newly visible role, as they make their contribution to what was until recently, in terms of user interactivity, a closed repository. From this perspective, the outcome of opening up the archive to its public is very positive: useful, high quality material continues to flow into the record, or at least into its dedicated 'holding spaces', with minimal intervention from RCAHMS staff, no real need for active policing and very little call for the challenging of inappropriate user behaviour.

Having said this, on closer inspection it would also seem that the original structure of *Canmore*, and the purpose which is inscribed in its architecture and history, are proving remarkably resilient to the more fundamental reshuffling which the new functionalities, with their potential for more disruptive but reinvigorating change, might have been expected to bring about.

While its boundaries are redesigned by the opening up to new inputs and, through Flickr, to new social online spaces, the quality of *Canmore* as an online territory for engagement does

not appear, in reality, especially fluid. Indeed, both visually and conceptually, the environment appears to be characterized by rather strong dividing lines which do remain un-negotiated and unchallenged: these are lines which mark the boundaries between the original, authenticated archive content and what is being contributed by users, between comments and images, between the *Canmore* territory and the external space on Flickr, between digital content and its physical manifestation in RCAHMS' Search Room.

Maybe it is the rather constraining structure, which means that comments and images must be allocated to a particular record ahead of posting; perhaps it is the way in which comments and images remain separate at the point of entry, as well as consultation; either way, the impression is not one of a 'smooth' space of engagement where 'the movement is more important than the arrival' (Bayne, 2004, p. 303), nor of a territory whose boundaries are porous and easily trespassed; rather, with its gridlike quality, as an online environment *Canmore* appears to constitute 'a space of containment, regulation and efficient progression' (Bayne, 2004, p. 302). This is, arguably, understandable in a perspective which recognizes that boundaries of the kind we find in *Canmore* are there 'to demarcate the cultural territory of experts' and 'serve to define what constitutes legitimate specialist knowledge' (Ross, 2004, p. 96). Importantly, they also serve to safeguard the integrity of material which is subject to copyright and which, therefore, is not RCAHMS' to share outside the spaces it directly controls.

What is certain, however, is that the lack of cohesiveness between the different loci of user participation, the neat separation between the commenting function and the image uploading facility, and the pivotal role of the original *Canmore* record, do not appear to stimulate engagement beyond the individual contribution of new material to the archive. Indeed, overall, the pattern of interaction on *Canmore* very much reproduces a one-to-one, occasionally one-to-many, participation model, rather than a many-to-many pattern more typical of more recent forms of successful online social engagement. With little scope for serendipity, quick response or dialogue, the prevalent mode of interaction is found to involve information delivery, rather than discussion or, even less, digression.

Interestingly, as the nature of the contributions tends to show, what appears to motivate the majority of users is, fundamentally, the opportunity to make the archive richer and better.

Most contributors behave rather like members of those trusted and trained user groups which have been bringing value to RCAHMS for decades. In other words, rather than members of a budding online community who, while drawing from the experience of engaging with RCAHMS' material and with each other, might seek to take the experience further and elaborate it in new and unexpected ways, contributors generally perform as 'online volunteers', knowledgeable experts; not dissimilar, in fact, from those typical users featured in the permanent imagery of the site (p. 160).

In this perspective, while *Canmore* users may be able, at last, to be visibly active in a virtual space containing heritage artefacts liable to act as sources of meaning and creative expression, we still see the institution and its content remain firmly at the centre of the experience.

This impression is further reinforced by the noticeable lack of user engagement on Flickr which, overall, appears to serve mainly as a holding place for user-contributed photographs. There is no taking advantage of Flickr's commenting tools, no real conversation taking place, no new voices heard: instead, *Canmore* remains consistently the main territory of engagement, at the centre of the action.

It is worth noting that, from the outset, RCAHMS' concern regarding Flickr's involvement in the initiative has not been that users may not take full advantage of Flickr as a social media space; rather, the main worry has been that, in spite of a clear statement to this effect in the site's Terms and Conditions, *Canmore* users might not fully appreciate that, as things stand, their material is not being permanently and safely stored as part of RCAHMS' collections, but instead left somewhere vulnerable out there in cyberspace. The latter is a concern that the most active *Canmore* contributors, mostly experts, have also expressed.

Therefore the decision was reached in 2012 to develop a hosting solution for image contributions internal to RCAHMS, where any material uploaded to date will also be eventually moved; this will be a move which will see the design of *Canmore* further reinforce the value of data authentication, preservation and expert knowledge over that of the engagement experience.

It is interesting to compare the role of Flickr in the *Commons* and in *Canmore*. In the former, we see institutions releasing their artefacts on a social media site, keen to see what might be gained by letting users engage collectively and creatively with the material. Safely away from the original collections, the artefacts, which are free of copyright restrictions, can become disrupted, scattered, reinterpreted, and eventually made to return home transformed and enriched, should the institution decide to do so. In this context, the institution is controlling what it takes away from the experience, rather than controlling the experience itself.

Conversely, in *Canmore* Flickr acts more like an appendix to the main archive, used for what it can contribute by virtue of its technical capabilities and legal status; it is on *Canmore* that the real action takes place. In many ways, this latter scenario is more dangerous, as in this case all the material is, in fact, laid opened to the public. Crucially, differently from what happens on the *Commons*, much of this material is also subjected to copyright restrictions and it is not RCAHMS' to give away, having been entrusted to the institution for long-term care and safekeeping. Differently from what happens on the *Commons*, therefore, the conditions on *Canmore* call for a much tighter control over the process of engagement, so as to manage in advance its potential risks.

As the analysis of the environment suggests, this is done by inscribing the environment with a number of technical and structural devices which aim to prevent and/or respond to the risks and challenges which might present themselves. RCAHMS must defend its content from the danger of loss, inaccuracy or interference - hence the storing of contributions in a separate space in *Canmore* and on Flickr; by maintaining editor's privileges, the institution reserves the right to take down any contribution it considers inappropriate; at the same time, as the publisher of what the public is generously contributing, RCAHMS must also take responsibility for appropriately showcasing, as well as safeguarding, this material which, by virtue of its quality, it deems worthy of a permanent place in the national archive.

Under the circumstances, it could be argued that, rather than working with the processes of online environments seen as 'living systems' which institutions, as some suggest, need to learn to support rather than control, (Russo and Peacock, 2009, no page), RCAHMS has opted for 'harnessing' some important capabilities of web engagement – the uploading of

material from remote locations, the enriching of the archive with high quality content, the sharing of this material with a potentially wide usership, and also easy measuring of inputs. This has been achieved by successfully managing risk, and not venturing out anywhere where loss of control might take place, or at least not for long. As a consequence, however, *Canmore* users are also, in turn, ‘harnessed’ in a role which is probably not unfamiliar to them, as in the case of people who have been associated with RCAHMS in the past and used *Canmore* before, a self-selected, committed group of users, mostly experts, seemingly motivated to improve the archive.

Indeed, all stakeholders in the experience appear to be fundamentally maintaining their traditional role through an approach to digitality which might be described as focusing more on organizational value rather than user value (Russo and Peacock, 2009), successful under many aspects, however also missing out on an opportunity ‘for understanding the user experience and new ways of relating to individuals and the on-line ‘crowd’ (Russo and Peacock, 2009, no page), as traditional engagement practices emerge as reinforced rather than transformed in any significant way. In other words, *Canmore* users are more empowered, now, and at the centre of the experience, however, the experience continues to be managed and controlled in line with a wider institutional agenda.

## **5.2 Authorship**

An important feature of emergent online environments as identified and discussed earlier in this thesis is the ability to offer participants ‘a porous and continuous authoring environment’ (Anderson, 2007, no page) which can involve a transformation of meaning-making processes and the re-negotiation of the notions of authorship and ownership.

Until recently the task of drawing from the collections material to weave together fascinating stories illustrated by striking images has been the responsibility of RCAHMS’ publishing arm which, especially in recent times, has been expanding its list of publications through new titles with a more mass-market appeal.

With the opening up of *Canmore* to public contributions an important opportunity presented itself to both the institution and its users to experiment with new ways of engaging with the



artefacts contained in the archive and, in so doing, of having new stories, new content, authored differently. Importantly, for the first time there would also be an opportunity for users of the archive to communicate with other users and with the institution through a new-found voice, one which would also leave a written legacy in the online spaces of engagement. How did these new conditions affect the overall nature of the discourse around the artefacts in *Canmore*?

The analysis of *Canmore* contributions shows that, by and large, in ‘commenting’ on the material in the archive, users have tended to maintain a tone and style which in many ways emulate that of an official archival record. Entries are mainly factual, rich in information and written in an impersonal style.

However, while much of the material is uploaded by experts and specialists, seeking to complement records with up-to-date data, through the contribution of images some users do find a voice which is more personal in tone. These contributions bring a narrative quality to the records, as users begin to share stories about particular sites which, in turn, begin to feed into a larger narrative about places, people and time. Very occasionally, users address other users asking for their input to expand on the story so far and shed more light on past events.

The analysis shows, however, little evidence of collective engagement and dialogue beyond individual users’ input. Rather than taking on the typically multi-vocal quality of online discourse, even when contributions show some potential for generating dialogue, there is no public follow-up, no conversation, and the communication style remains fundamentally that of information delivery or, at best, reflective monologue, following a straight trajectory which goes from the individual user to the contributed item’s destination point in the record.

The reasons for this might be partly related, again, to structural difficulties. As promised by the institution, making a contribution to the archive is relatively easy. The problem, perhaps, lies in what happens next, once contributions reach their destination, becoming inevitably part of a complex and multi-layered internal architecture. So, on the one hand, *Canmore* appears to open up interesting new opportunities for shared authorship; at the same time, there is something about the combination of a comparatively loose contribution facility with a rigid internal architecture which appears to stifle the potential for genuine collective

meaning making. The Flickr environment could have offered an alternative opportunity to engage in a different kind of discourse; however, as discussed earlier, the analysis shows that during the period under study this opportunity does not seem to have been realized.

The analysis also shows that, while authoring the whole *Canmore* experience, RCAHMS has generally opted not to engage publicly at any time as participant or interlocutor. This is not to say that the institution is not monitoring users' input, for example through regular quantitative reports. Also, offline meetings have been held to get feedback from top *Canmore* contributors on their assessment of the interactive features and on possible issues or concerns. However, while every day a member of RCAHMS staff does check the material coming into the archive, there is no brief to respond or participate actively in a public way, unless to tackle potentially controversial or risky situations; there is no commenting on what users say or on the images they post; no public responding to queries, although I understand that this does happen separately by email; there is no thanking users publicly for their contributions. Recommended contributions are shown on the site; however these are chosen by other users and automatically highlighted.

In other words, after opening up *Canmore* to its users, in the period under study, RCAHMS appeared to withdraw, leaving the interactive elements to self-monitor, delegating control to the structure of the environment. As such, there has been no need for RCAHMS to find a voice on the *Canmore* stage and no incentive to author itself as participant, beyond its role as producer and stage manager: in other words, while interoperability between RCAHMS and its users has been enhanced through a system which supports the latter's contribution to a joint effort in making *Canmore* better, there is no actual move towards a conversational mode between RCAHMS and its public, or indeed among users, in this particular space.

### **5.3 A New Brand of Artefact**

On the *Commons* on Flickr we saw objects leave the boundaries traditionally placed on them by collecting institutions, released into new territories and placed at the centre of dynamics potentially liable to alter them, their meaning and value, in interesting and unpredictable ways (Lash and Lury, 2007; Chan, 2008). Artefacts can thus become gradually transformed into textually enlarged versions of their former selves, be re-absorbed or continue to travel,

enriching and being enriched, as outcomes of the ‘cultural production of texts’ that is digitality (Basset and O’Riordan, 2002).

What kind of artefact is emerging from the experience of opening up *Canmore* to its users? Before exploring this question, it is important to reflect on what one might, in fact, mean by ‘artefact’ in the context of an institution such as RCAHMS and an environment like *Canmore*.

A *Canmore* artefact is, to my mind, a complex concept. In its broadest terms, its referent is a physical place or a building, very concrete and embedded in the territory. For each site *Canmore* contains specific information, data and documents gathered in over a hundred years of careful work: together, these items constitute what is known to date about each site from a technical and historical perspective, the existence of a record in the archive implicitly recognizing each site’s value and significance as part of the Scottish national heritage.

Seen in this light, each *Canmore* record is itself an artefact, created over time and through different inputs and experiences; as such, it is composite and, given the unevenness of the collections, also rather individual in style and scope.

There are also, however, all the individual items which make up *Canmore* across its records; most noticeably, the thousands of photographs and documents which, beyond their ancillary role illustrating or bringing specific information about particular locations, also have technical or historical value as artefacts in their own right. While in some cases we see users engage with and respond to them, it is, however, mostly a process of record-improvement which is observed on *Canmore*: as missing pieces of a jigsaw, new information and images fill the gaps which inevitably exist in an archive which, by virtue of its history and size, is varied and uneven; contributions thus complete the *Canmore* record/artefact, thus contributing to the delivery of one of RCAHMS’ core functions, namely to ‘add to the information and items in its national collection’ (RCAHMS, 2010a, p. 3).

In all cases, the original artefact, the record as the abstract representation of each place, remains at the centre of the experience, the point of arrival, the ultimate destination, which will contain within its boundaries the new elements which come to improve it; and, through

the process, the collection of records that is *Canmore* becomes gradually more comprehensive, more even in texture and better balanced.

In this perspective, *Canmore* itself becomes ‘the artefact’, one which the process of engagement with the public is making more solid, coherent and robust. This is, in many ways, the very opposite of that new brand of collectively-produced, unfinished cultural artefact of the kind one might see in a space like the *Commons*, born from the meshing of original material with new perspectives, original associations, a different mix of unconnected experiences. Rather than through a scattering process which taps into new and original engagement dynamics as afforded through online sociality, *Canmore*’s dynamics are, instead, more resonant of centripetal forces drawing missing fragments towards a point as to a centre.

## **6. Conclusion**

Overall, findings from the analysis of *Canmore* as an online space open to user contributions show an interesting mix of perspectives and practices, a willingness to open up as well as a determination to control the process of engagement by anchoring it to familiar practices.

We see the potential for a shift towards a more active and engaged role for the user; yet the structure of the environment and the messages inscribed in it tend to reinforce familiar patterns of participation.

There is no question that much greater access is now granted to users willing not just to consult *Canmore* but also actively engage with, and contribute to, it. Having said that, rather than fluid, the territories for engagement in *Canmore* remain highly structured, making the engagement experience somewhat compartmentalized and controlled. Users are still at the centre of the experience, more so, in fact, as they can now contribute to the collections. However, their role is not very different from before when, as volunteers in an embodied rather than virtual situation, they were always welcome contributors.

Thanks to the new features which allow users to contribute and comment, *Canmore* is certainly a space of active engagement. Users become, for the first time, authors. And yet, as the interaction with the environment remains one-directional, more monologue than dialogue, no actual new forms of authorship seem to emerge which deviate from the style of contribution typical of a pre-web 2.0 environment. In other words, while new opportunities for authorship are offered both to the public and to the institution itself, they tend to result in individual inputs mostly modelled on a traditional archival style. As a result, *Canmore* the archive is improved with new and useful material, its content richer and more consistent; however, there are no signs of exposure to the kind of creative energy which can characterize online sociality when less constrained by instrumental agendas.

Finally, it is difficult to detect what may be described as a new brand of digital artefact emerging from user practices on *Canmore*. The experience is more one of enriching and consolidating the original individual records and, more broadly, the archive itself, while, at the same time, measures are taken to ensure that the authenticated data is protected. All in all, the value of the experience seems to be measured in terms of how well it provides the opportunity to add to the archive new material which, in quality and authenticity, mirrors that in the original archive, rather than in the experience of engagement and meaning making itself.

Seen in this perspective, while unquestionably a forward-looking departure from traditional practices, in the way it is currently controlled and managed, *Canmore* falls short of providing a meaningful testing ground for a re-negotiation of what it is to serve as the custodian and interpreter of a nation's cultural heritage in the digital age. Indeed, the way in which *Canmore* has been constructed as a digital object reflects positions which are, arguably, merely tolerating of the opportunity for disruption offered by digitality, rather than willing to actively engage with them; also, in the way it successfully harnesses the potential of the digital to improve on traditional practices, the approach appears to be one of accommodation of some of the changes which online engagement brings to institutional structures and practices, rather than the seeking of more far-reaching transformation. In other words, the experience is not about a shift in power and control from the institution to its users; rather, the emphasis is on the institution gaining greater control and ability to collect material from its public and take charge of it.

Having said that, mindful of its history and genesis, an important question is whether the ambivalence and the mix of perspectives which, in this study's interpretation, *Canmore* appears to embody as RCAHMS' main digital object, are due to the innate complexity of the site's original structure and to the significant limitations imposed by legal frameworks around its content; or whether they reflect, more fundamentally, RCAHMS' institutional approach to digital innovation. In other words, the question is to what extent and in what ways *Canmore* may be considered a metaphor for the way in which RCAHMS is embracing digitality, at once embodying a spirit of innovation and reflecting a legacy of analogue practices. I consider this question in the next chapter, where I discuss findings from an ethnographic study of the institution and reflect on how ideals and perceptions of digitality appear to be woven in the different texts which make up RCAHMS' discourse as a digital culture in the making.

## Chapter 6

### An Ethnography of RCAHMS

In this chapter I locate my findings from the *Canmore* analysis, and its problematization through the alternative approach of online participation observed in the *Commons* on Flickr, in RCAHMS' wider discourse on digitality as captured through an ethnographic study of the institution.

The exploration of *Canmore* as a self-contained site of interaction and meaning-making and the heart of RCAHMS remains, conceptually, central to this study, as the online archive functions, in many ways, as a symbolic microcosm reflecting the wider institutional context, both embodying a spirit of innovation and reflecting a legacy of analogue practices. As such, what emerges from the exploration of the digital environment as an interactive online space feeds into a broader interpretation of RCAHMS as a digital culture in the making. In this chapter I build on this interpretation turning to findings from an analysis of RCAHMS' institutional context.

Drawing from the thematic analysis of corporate literature and of the text of interviews, as well as field notes gathered during my period of association with RCAHMS, I explore the nature of the institutional discourse around digitality and reflect on how individual aspirations and willingness to experiment mesh with the tensions and uncertainties of an institution which is undergoing a process of change. The overall analysis, in this way, acquires a local focus, providing an interpretative snapshot of RCAHMS explored, to use Hand's expression, as a 'cultural technology', a 'provisional and effective configuration of human and non human elements', a meshing of narrative ideals with the digital objects and the practices which reflect these ideals and in turn, inform them (Hand, 2008, p. 155). My investigation attempts to offer a glimpse of these different elements as they get 're-shuffled' (Latour, 2005, p. 65), and made temporarily explicit through the institution's both invigorating and unsettling experiences as a digital culture in the making.

The chapter begins with a description of the ethnographic study of RCAHMS and a brief discussion of the approach to the analysis adopted in the different components of the study which complements the methodological considerations already articulated in Chapter 3. This is followed by a discussion of findings from the investigation.

## **1. The Approach to the Analysis**

The purpose of the ethnographic study of RCAHMS which this chapter reports on was to capture the nature of the discourse around digitality within the organization as found in the narrative ideals inscribed in its literature and as expressed by individuals working at the institution.

As anticipated in the methodology chapter, the methods employed in the investigation of RCAHMS combined participative and observational elements in the course of an association with the institution over a period of two and a half years. This also included two more formal activities, namely a comparative analysis of RCAHMS' strategy documents and a series of fourteen interviews with staff from different areas of the organization.

The sections that follow below report on the approach adopted in each of part of the study, on the materials examined and on the findings from the investigation.

### **1.1 An Analysis of Institutional Documents**

In the course of my association with RCAHMS I was able to access and review the institutional literature as available at the time. This included policy documents, including the Collections, Survey and Recording, Education, Public Services and Publication Policies and the Information Systems Strategy Statement. These had all been published in 2004 and covered the period 2004-2009. I also read a series of Annual Reviews. Much of this material is publicly available on the RCAHMS' website. I also had access to relevant project documentation, including project proposals, reports and evaluations. I was able to discuss this material at various times with staff members in the course of meetings at the institution.



Of the literature examined two documents struck me as especially relevant in a context of a reflection on RCAHMS' role and identity as a cultural heritage organization. These were the *RCAHMS Corporate Plan, Financial Years 2006-2009* and the new edition of the same, published in 2010 with the title *Future RCAHMS, the next five years 2010-2015*. A close analysis of the documents would provide, I believed, a useful insight into how RCAHMS had been articulating its corporate mission, values and identity in recent years and, importantly, how it saw its ambitions and priorities for the future at a time of innovation and change.

It would be against such background that I would then try and capture, in the same texts, the nature of the institutional discourse around digital innovation and how it had evolved over time. It was especially useful to gain such insight ahead of the series of staff interviews which I had planned to conduct next; these, in turn, would provide me with the opportunity to explore topics and issues from the perspective of individual experiences.

The analysis of the RCAHMS documents began with an examination of the way in which the institutional vision, mission and role are formulated in each publication; insights from this were then examined in combination with the findings from a thematic analysis of the texts.

This analysis involved an iterative process of reading and coding the documents' texts aimed at identifying interesting thematic patterns. While the main aim of the exercise was to capture significant features of the institutional discourse in relation to digitality and digital culture, throughout the process I remained alert to other emerging topics and themes, as well as to stylistic and structural elements, such as tone, style and layout, looking at the data both holistically and in detail, and from contrastive perspectives.

For the majority of the analysis I worked with the documents in digital form using qualitative data analysis software. The text of each document was analysed and coded through a process which generated a number of different broad thematic categories and thematic threads which reflected different types of references as found in the texts. As the process of analysis evolved, some of the initial categories were combined; others were divided into further sub-categories which reflected more nuanced aspects of the themes and

topics identified. In particular, the data analysis software used in this part of the study supported the automatic retrieval of different sets of text references, the review of annotations made in the course of the analysis work, and also some broad quantifications and statistical analyses. I report on findings from this work later in this chapter.

Especially in view of the highly illustrated nature of the *Future RCAHMS* document, I felt that it was also important that any interpretation deriving from the analysis of the texts be set in the context of a reflection on visual aspects of the documents under study and, importantly, on the interplay between these and the texts they complement.

The approach to the visual analysis of the documents was consistent with Rose's analytical framework outlined earlier in the thesis (p. 148). It involved considerations on the overall visual features of the material, including the documents' format, design and layout, the nature of the specific images found, what they show, interesting compositional aspects, and their potential effect on different viewers. In the course of the analysis I also tried to remain alert to the bias I would be bringing to the interpretation by virtue of my own background and experience and as a researcher/ethnographer of RCAHMS.

The analysis of individual images involved two main stages: in the first instance, all images were extracted from the documents' electronic version and reviewed, individually and collectively, to form an impression of general editorial choices. Next, individual images were examined together with the particular text extracts which they accompanied, and annotated using the software's picture coding tool. Insights from the visual analysis were then considered in the context of a detailed examination of the texts.

There is no doubt that, as rigorous and systematic as the work of analysis of these materials aspired to be, the outcome of this composite investigation, textual and visual, remains a highly personal interpretation of the data examined, influenced by a range of factors. Having said this, I trust that the analysis of these sources did usefully complement and challenge some of the earlier findings from the study, and contributed some interesting insights to the overall investigation of RCAHMS and its experience of digital culture.

## 1.2 Staff Interviews

The second component of the ethnographic study of RCAHMS was a series of fourteen interviews conducted with members of RCAHMS staff in the spring of 2010. More structured than other, more informal, encounters with RCAHMS team members which had been taking place during my association with the institution, the interviews represented an opportunity for focused conversations with individuals in a regime of confidentiality and under conditions which supported the collection of data that could be later retrieved and analysed. The main aim of the exercise was to explore individual staff's experiences, interests and concerns in relation to RCAHMS' digital practices and plans for the future and, in so doing, add more pieces to the multifaceted jigsaw that was my evolving interpretation of RCAHMS' experience of digitality.

The fourteen respondents were chosen from different areas of RCAHMS, namely Education and Outreach, Collections, Survey and Recording, Publications, Enterprises, the IT team, and what was known at the time as Public Services, as such representing different types of expertise and professional focus. I had already met some of these staff members in the course of my visits to RCAHMS. When I contacted them, by email, as potential interview respondents, I provided them with a brief explanation of the research project and invited them to ask any questions they might have about the research.

The interviews were designed to be semi-structured; that is to say that they were supported by a broad template of questions which had been sketched out in advance to ensure some general level of consistency; at the same time, I was keen to remain open to the discussion of different topics depending on the interests and inclination of the different respondents.

Interviews were held at RCAHMS and lasted approximately fifty minutes to an hour each. The conversations were digitally recorded; they were then transcribed, a process which yielded around 280 pages of transcript. While laborious, this was also a very useful exercise, especially in a perspective which considers the work of preparation of interview texts and their transcription and use as key research activities (Atkinson and Heritage, 1984). I was mindful that these stages of work would require careful planning and managing so as to produce, 'high-quality, accessible data... the documentation of just what analyses have been

carried out... the retention of data and associated analyses after the study is complete' (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 45).

Once the interviews were transcribed, individual transcript files were created which retained a set of essential information, such as details on sources and timings. The analysis of the data was carried out using the software's coding and annotating tools; the outcome was captured and preserved in digital format. A range of reporting facilities allowed the creation of interim data reports as the analysis progressed. This process culminated in the identification of a final set of thematic categories, and the creation of individual files containing clusters of coded references corresponding to each category, in turn electronically linked with the original individual sources; this supported the checking, re-allocating and comparing of individual coded utterances throughout the analysis.

The texts which originated in the course of the interviews were, as is arguably always the case, co-constructed and mutually informed. Having said this, how I draw from these texts in writing this thesis is the result of subsequent analyses, my personal take on the co-constructed narratives and their inevitable elaboration, influenced by insights from my other sources.

For the transcription of the data, I opted for a verbatim account of the interviews. In the transcription I also signaled pauses and included filler words as well as word or phrase repetitions, mindful that what is not being said in an interview situation may well be as important as what is being said (Poland and Pederson, 1998).

At the same time, I also share the view that, however closely one may try to adhere to the original text, the transcription of research interviews and the use of transcripts after the event remain of limited value in terms of any ambition of accurately re-capturing the original dialogical experience. This because, in a perspective which sees the interview as a process of co-construction of meaning between the interviewer and its respondents, yielding meanings which must be understood simply as 'possible products of discourse in action' rather than as underlying elements (Alvesson, 2002, p. 146), the transcription of recorded exchanges can only be deemed as just another stage in an act of construction and interpretation. In other words, even if meant to be a faithful reproduction, the act of

transcribing conversations between interviewer and interviewees, transferring an already complex oral text into written code, can only result in re-invention through what is, ultimately, an act of translation.

Ross (2010) points specifically to important correspondences between the act and experience of transcription and that of translation, arguing in favour of applying some of the insights from translation studies to the theory and practice of transcription.

Based on my own experience as language analyst and translator, I certainly concur with Ross' analysis and also with the view that the researcher's effort of transcription, as that of translation, is worthwhile not solely by virtue of its outputs but, importantly, as a cognitive process, contributing to the sharpening of the interpretative lens, as a way of engaging reflectively with the oral data at a different pace, of hearing again all utterances, including the interviewer's own input, and how they mesh. Transcription, in this perspective, becomes the first, important, stage in the overall effort of translation that is the researcher's task, one of acting as a bridge across different cultural contexts, taking across a set of original meanings enriched with new interpretations. And as with translation, it is a process which, as touched on earlier (p. 59), offers a chance to enhance not only the understanding of a different culture but also that of one's own.

Moving on to the next stage of the work, like the text of the documents before them, the interview transcripts underwent a detailed process of thematic analysis and coding. A further stage of elaboration of the data was then carried out which led to the specification of broader thematic clusters based on earlier, finer categorization. These broader conceptual categories, while not forced to coincide artificially with those identified in the analysis of the strategy documents, complemented them in useful ways, feeding into the overall interpretation of the institutional discourse under study. I draw from these data for my discussion later in this chapter.

### **1.3 Field Notes**

Together with the strategy documents and the interview texts, a further set of data from which I drew for my reflections on RCAHMS' discourse on and around digitality were the notes I gathered during my period of ethnographic association with the institution, in

particular during the first two years. These were written in the form of a journal and contain impressions from meetings and conversations with RCAHMS staff, but also accounts of readings I was doing at the time, musings, questions, ideas. Entries in this stylistically mixed document are dated, and the 'occasion' behind each entry specified. Types of occasions include meetings, conferences, readings, reflections; depending on the occasion, details on participants, titles of readings etc. are also specified. Overall, this body of notes makes up some 95 pages of text, dating from autumn 2008 to spring 2011.

There is no absolutely objective way of using data such as this. My own approach to this particular source in preparation for the writing of the thesis was to read through the whole text and, first of all, identify and label all entries which were directly related to my interaction with RCAHMS, marking them as FIELDNOTES. I then re-read these entries carefully, taking care to highlight elements which struck me as significant and which resonated with other insights from other components of the study. For example, there are accounts of conversations with staff who were at RCAHMS when I began the PhD and who held important positions in relation to my work, but left the organization soon afterwards; or informal meetings with people I later met for more structured interviews. There were also accounts of events and conferences I had attended with members of the RCAHMS team, and comments from supervisory meetings which, as they included my RCAHMS supervisor, were, in a way, part of the ethnographic process too.

Rather than functioning as 'interrogable' data like other components of the study, the field notes constituted a valuable background source, useful for re-tracing my own thoughts over an extended period of time both as a trainee researcher and as a student of RCAHMS, a useful device, as the work progressed, to help me question my own positions and interpretations as I gradually acquired greater familiarity with the topics and the environments under study; this was a familiarity which, while giving me greater confidence in my readings of different situation, at the same time could also cause me to lose the freshness of the earlier periods of the work.

## **2. RCAHMS: A 5-Year Plan**

*Future RCAHMS*, the institution's corporate strategy plan published in 2010, sets out the strategic priorities which will guide RCAHMS until 2015. This section reports on the analysis of this document set in the context of a comparative study of the previous version of the corporate strategy, *RCAHMS Corporate Plan 2006-2009*.

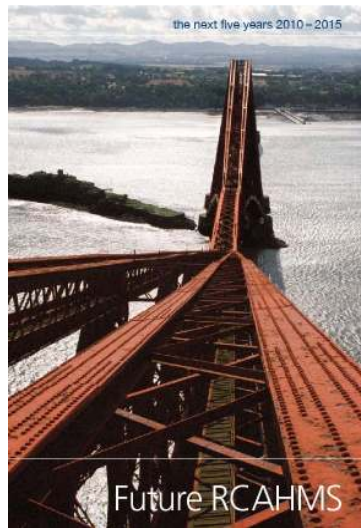
Both documents were analysed from two complementary perspectives: they underwent a process of thematic textual analysis; then a visual analysis was carried out which examined the use of imagery and the interplay between images and text in the document; findings from the analysis of the two documents were then compared and contrasted.

These different stages of the analysis were not, of course, as neatly sequential and self-contained as described above. On the contrary, there was inevitable, and useful, overlapping in the examination of the material. For reporting sake, the following sections start with a general description of the two documents under study; this is followed by a report on findings from the analysis of the texts; this is then complemented with an account of findings from a visual analysis of the documents. Drawing from this work, key insights are then summarized and discussed.

### **2.1 Design and Presentation**

The two documents examined as part of the ethnographic study of RCAHMS present some interesting differences in terms of overall design and presentation.

*Future RCAHMS, Business Strategy, the next five years 2010 – 2015* (Figure 49) exists as a bound A4-size booklet and is also published on the RCAHMS website in PDF .



**Figure 49** *Future RCAHMS*

The publication is divided into five sections, listed in the contents page as follows:

### **Contents**

<b>100 more Years</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Vision, Mission and Roles</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Our Strategic Priorities</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Outcomes</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Resources</b>	<b>16</b>

It is 16 pages/3363 words long, it has a bright, contemporary appearance, and makes good use of colour with as much space devoted to images as to text. Overall, the pages appear clearly structured and uncluttered, following a consistent layout template. Most double-page spreads feature on the right-hand page a number of bulleted statements and a full-page photograph on the the left carrying a framed caption (Figure 50).



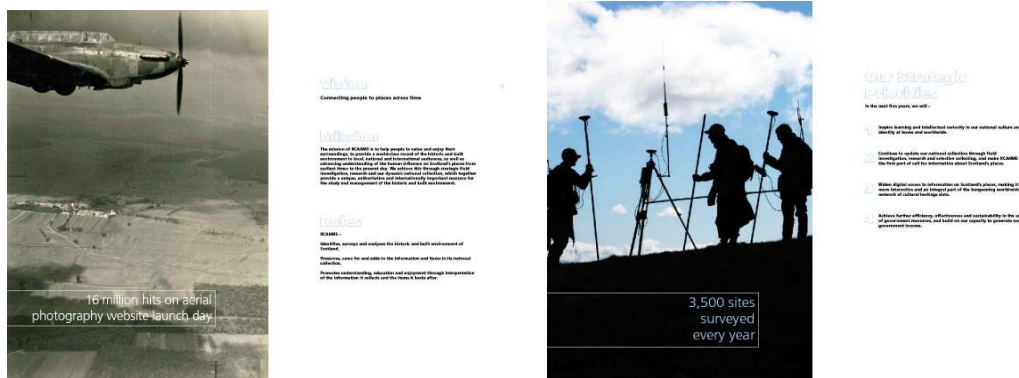


Figure 50 Future RCAHMS

The RCAHMS Corporate Plan 2006-2009 is a very different publication. It is a 24-pages/ 5675 word long document, significantly longer than the 2010 edition.

With the exception of one image on the title page, this is a text-intensive publication which alternates discursive sections with paragraphs mainly punctuated by bullet points (Figure 51).

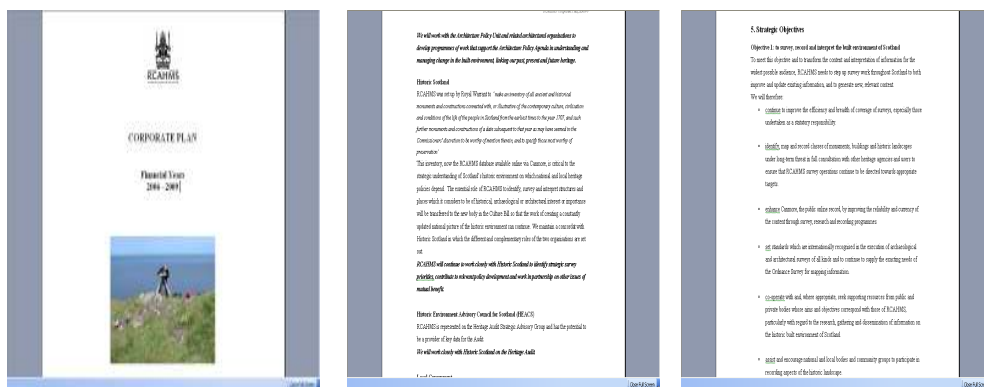


Figure 51 RCAHMS Corporate Plan

RCAHMS Corporate Plan is divided into seven main sections (see below), including an Appendix structured in table format:

<b>Contents</b>	<b>Page</b>
<b>Foreword</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Chairman and Commissioners</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>2. Strategic Ambitions</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>3. Position in the Cultural Sector</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>4. Strategic Issues</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>5. Strategic Objectives</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>6. Appendix</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>7. Infrastructure and Resources</b>	<b>23</b>

## **2.2 An Analysis of the Texts**

The analysis of the text of the two documents begins with an examination of the specific formulation, in each publication, of RCAHMS' vision, mission and roles as a cultural heritage organization. This is aimed at exploring, through a comparative study, any significant change in the institution's articulation of its corporate identity and strategic priorities to its key stakeholders. Next, a thematic analysis of the texts contributes some further insights into the nature of the institutional discourse in the two documents, and into its evolution over time.

Insights from this analysis are then combined with those from the visual analysis on which I report in the next section, providing a background for a reflection on the specific features of the institutional discourse in relation to digitization and online practices.

## 2.2.1 RCAHMS' Vision, Mission, Roles

A direct comparison of the formulation of RCAHMS' vision, mission and roles across the 2006 and 2010 documents proved surprisingly laborious. This is because the way in which these items are articulated in the two documents is rather different.

In the *Future RCAHMS* publication RCAHMS' vision, mission and roles are clearly laid out on the first page immediately after the Foreword by the RCAHMS' Chairman and Secretary (Figure 52).

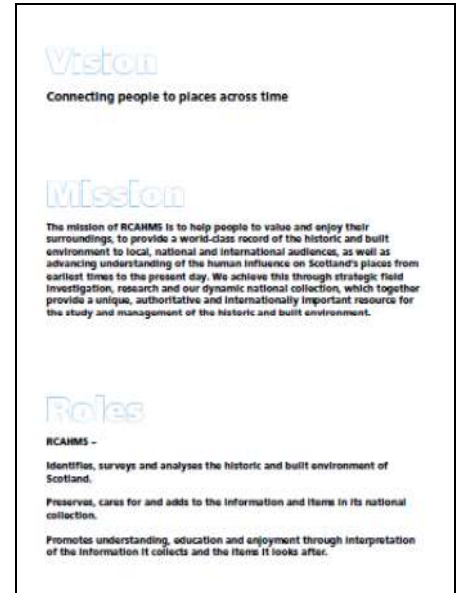


Figure 52 *Future RCAHMS*

The institution's overall Vision is encapsulated in a short and pithy statement:

Connecting people to places across time

(RCAHMS, 2010a, p. 3)

RCAHMS' Mission is then articulated as follows:

The mission of RCAHMS is to help people to value and enjoy their surroundings, to provide a world-class record of the historic and built environment to local, national and international audiences, as well as advancing understanding of the human influence on Scotland's places from earliest times to the present day. We achieve this through strategic field investigation, research and our dynamic national collection, which together provide a unique, authoritative and internationally important resource for the study and management of the historic and built environment.

(RCAHMS, 2010a, p.3)

Next, RCAHMS' Roles are spelt out:

RCAHMS –

Identifies, surveys and analyses the historic and built environment of Scotland.  
Preserves, cares for and adds to the information and items in its national collection.

Promotes understanding, education and enjoyment through interpretation of the information it collects and the items it looks after.

While also explaining in detail the RCAHMS' purpose and aims, it is interesting to note that in the 2006 document the word 'mission' is not mentioned anywhere in the text, and the term 'vision' is used only indirectly:

Our new strategy, outlined in this document, is intended to:

- underpin and enrich the understanding of the uniqueness of Scotland's cultural identity;
- serve the cultural curiosity of Scotland's people and her visitors in the 21<sup>st</sup> century;
- work creatively and efficiently alongside other organisations to discover new ways of engaging with public interest in Scotland's culture and environment.

The purpose of this Corporate Plan is to identify those areas of activity that we will undertake to achieve such a vision.

(RCAHMS, 2006, p. 5)

The different treatment of such key corporate messages in the two documents, which appear pithier, more immediately accessible and, in a way, more business-like in the 2010 text, already reflects the striking difference in the use of language and overall communication style which will transpire from a close analysis of the documents' text.

Perhaps the most noticeable difference between the documents is what could be described as a switch from an emphasis on intellectual processes in the 2006 text to a softer, more emotive use of language in 2010, as shown in the examples below (my underlining). In the earlier document RCAHMS was setting out to

underpin and enrich the understanding of the uniqueness of Scotland's cultural identity

In 2010, its vision is about

Connecting people to places across time

In 2006 RCAHMS aimed

to serve the cultural curiosity of Scotland's people

In 2010 its ambition is

to help people value and enjoy their surroundings

Indeed, an important change in focus and outlook seems to emerge throughout a comparison of the two texts.

RCAHMS' first strategic ambition in 2006 was:

to provide a centre of excellence for the survey, recording and interpretation of the built heritage

Now, in Future RCAHMS, the institution first strategic priority is:

to inspire learning and intellectual curiosity in our national culture and identity at home and worldwide

Interestingly, in 2006 RCAHMS was already signalling an ambition to reach a wider public as it aimed

...to provide high standards of public service, access for all, and encourage new audiences

However, in the 2010 text the emphasis on extending the institutional reach seems significantly greater, with recurring references also to an international dimension:

to provide a world-class record of the historic and built environment to local, national and international audiences

Inspire learning and intellectual curiosity in our national culture and identity at home and worldwide.

... making it more interactive and an integral part of the burgeoning world-wide network of cultural heritage data.

As suggested by RCAHMS' representatives, such international focus was undoubtedly enhanced in 2008 when the institution took over responsibility for *The National Collection of Aerial Photography*, one of the largest in the world (see p. 73).

Overall, it is interesting to note how, in the broad formulation of RCAHMS' corporate ambitions, expressions like 'centre for excellence', 'high standards of public service', 'high quality corporate services' which recur in the 2006 document have been complemented or replaced, in 2010, by terms like 'understanding', 'education', 'enjoyment', 'interactivity', in ways which strongly reflect that 'educational turn' in museum practice discussed earlier (p. 27).

In the *Future RCAHMS* document greater emphasis appears to be placed, in other words, on people, connection and enjoyment, as well as the intellectual pursuing of knowledge and information. This is an important change in tone and emphasis which is further explored through the more granular analysis of the documents' texts on which I report below.

### **2.2.2 Exploring Change: a thematic analysis**

As anticipated earlier in the chapter, in order to examine the features of the institutional discourse as articulated in the two publications under study, a thematic analysis of the texts was carried out.

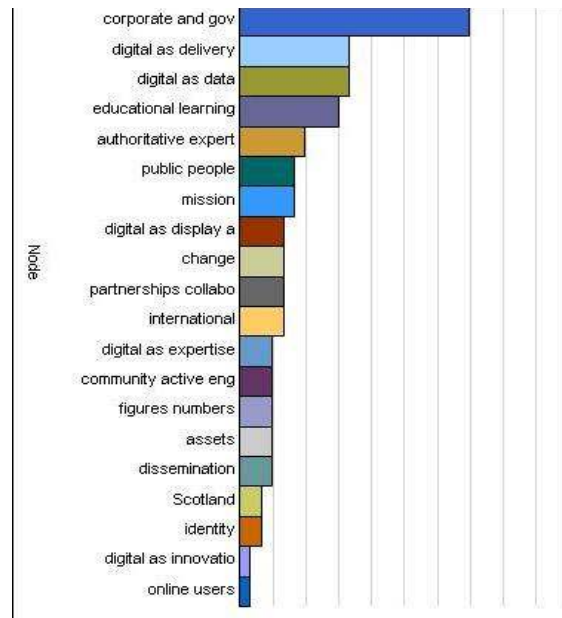
Through several readings of the documents, the texts were annotated and thematically coded. At the end of this iterative process a set of broad thematic categories was identified within which finer distinctions were then specified: for example, references in the text to education were divided into academic and research and learning; references to RCAHMS users were differentiated into statements referring to the general public, community engagement, online users, and so on. Table 2 below shows the final list of thematic categories and subcategories which were identified through the analysis of the texts.

<b>Thematic Categories</b>	
Achievements	
Change	
Corporate, governmental	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>corporate, governmental</i></li> <li>• <i>figures, stats</i></li> </ul>
Digital	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>digital as data</i></li> <li>• <i>digital as delivery</i></li> <li>• <i>digital as display and promotion</i></li> <li>• <i>digital as expertise</i></li> <li>• <i>digital as innovation</i></li> </ul>
Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>academic and research</i></li> <li>• <i>educational, learning, cognitive</i></li> </ul>
Expertise, authority	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>assets, content</i></li> <li>• <i>experts, authority</i></li> </ul>
Identity	
International	
Mission	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>mission</i></li> <li>• <i>what we do</i></li> </ul>
Partnership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>partnerships</i></li> <li>• <i>collaboration</i></li> </ul>
Scotland	
Staff	
Users	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>community active engagement</i></li> <li>• <i>dissemination</i></li> <li>• <i>online users</i></li> <li>• <i>public, people</i></li> <li>• <i>UGC - specialists</i></li> <li>• <i>UGC – general</i></li> </ul>

**Table 2**

The thematic analysis of the documents was a useful way of exploring the texts at a more granular level and of gaining an impression of overall emphasis and contrast. For example, it was possible to examine the relative prominence of different types of references in each document, a task which was made easier by the data analysis software's reporting tools. While this was an inevitably blunt and inexact process, bound to be informed by the original coding decisions, some of the insights it yielded are nevertheless interesting, especially when set in a contrastive context.

For example, starting with *Future RCAHMS*, the chart below (Figure 53) shows in decreasing order, by thematic category, the relative numerical frequency of references as identified in the analysis of the text:



**Figure 53** *Future RCAHMS*

References relating to ‘corporate’ or ‘government’ show the highest number of occurrences in the document. These include statements like

Achieve further efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability in the use of government resources...  
(RCAHMS, 2010a, p. 5)

Working with the Scottish government, local authorities....  
(RCAHMS, 2010a, p. 7)

We will strengthen our working relationship with planning authorities...  
(RCAHMS, 2010a, p. 9)

This is not surprising, given that this is RCAHMS’ Business Strategy. It is striking, however, how relatively prominent these references appear in relation to the rest of the text.



Text references coded ‘digital as delivery’ and ‘digital as data’ appear next on the chart in order of frequency. Below are examples of each of this type of references:

... using ‘scran-in-a-box’ technology to improve digital access to the cultural and heritage sector generally...  
(RCAHMS, 2010a, p. 7)

Increasing our capacity to deliver data online to people’s homes, offices and schools...  
(RCAHMS, 2010a, p. 10)

... Using digital technology to capture data, to maximise public access...  
(RCAHMS, 2010a, p. 10)

We will improve access for accredited specialists to add digital information directly to the database...  
(RCAHMS, 2010a, p. 10)

Almost as frequent are, based on the analysis, references in the text to ‘education’ and ‘learning’, such as

RCAHMS... promotes understanding, education and enjoyment...  
(RCAHMS, 2010a, p. 3)

Inspire learning and intellectual curiosity in our national culture...  
(RCAHMS, 2010a, p. 5)

Next come references to ‘institutional expertise’ and ‘authority’, such as:

... together they provide a unique, authoritative and internationally important resource...  
(RCAHMS, 2010a, p. 3)

... to ensure that RCAHMS is positioned as a leader in the cultural sector...  
(RCAHMS, 2010a, p. 10)

References which had been coded ‘digital for display and PR’ and ‘digital as expertise’ appear a little further down in the chart. Examples include:

... celebrating Scotland’s national culture by means of a series of touring exhibitions, publications of wide appeal and through imaginative outreach and using our leading edge web delivery...  
(RCAHMS, 2010a, p. 7)

... continuing to set standards in the design and management of heritage information systems...

(RCAHMS, 2010a, p. 10)

However, references to digital practices which had been coded as relating to ‘innovation’, as in the examples below, are less frequent in the text compared to the rest:

RCAHMS can be the catalyst through which innovative partnership projects, particularly those relating to information technology ... can be achieved...

(RCAHMS, 2010a, p. 1)

Looking ahead to what may be a revolution in the way data is used ...

(RCAHMS, 2010a, p.10)

In fact, the chart shows them as equal in frequency to references to ‘online users’, appearing at the bottom of the chart.

In the type of analysis conducted for this study, data elaborations of this kind are, I submit, interesting mainly as an impressionistic snapshot of the document’s text. Having said this, the insights they offer become arguably more meaningful in a contrastive context; in this case, when compared with findings from a similar analysis of the previous edition of RCAHMS’ business strategy.

The *RCAHMS Corporate Plan 2006-2009* was also analysed and coded drawing from the set of thematic categories identified in the course of the analysis of the first publication; and a node report like the one created for the *Future RCAHMS* was then obtained and examined. A comparison of the two reports throws up some interesting differences between the two documents in terms of node frequency.

Figure 54 below shows side by side the node frequency charts relating respectively to the 2006 and 2010 documents. While the analysis of the 2010 document shows, as mentioned above, the ‘corporate’ element emerging rather strongly in the text compared with other elements, in the 2006 document references to ‘partnerships- collaboration’, ‘authoritative – expertise’, ‘digital as delivery’ and ‘corporate-government’ appear, in relative terms, as roughly equally prominent in the text.

<b>RCAHMS Corporate Plan</b> <b>2006-2009</b>	<b>Future RCAHMS</b> <b>2010-2015</b>
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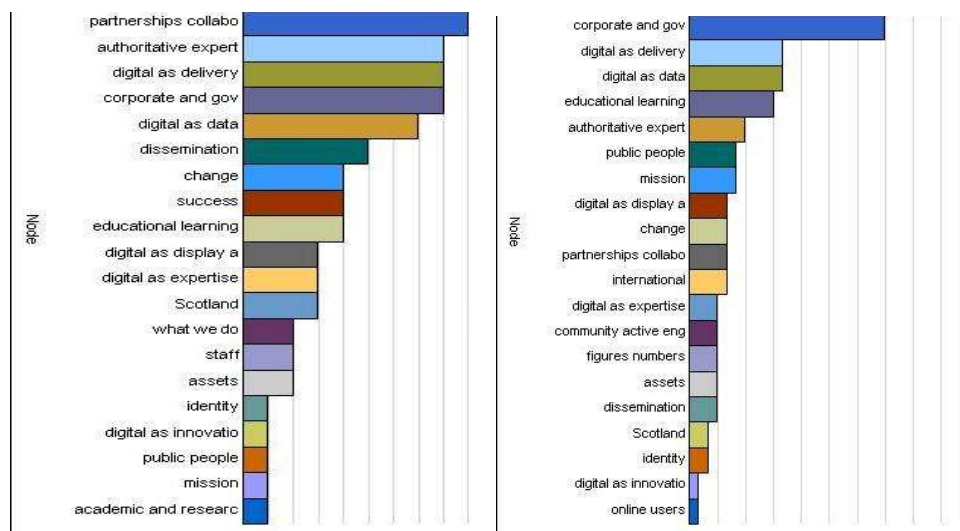


Figure 54

Interestingly, in the 2006 documents references to ‘education and learning’ feature half way down the frequency list, after ‘partnerships/collaboration’, ‘authoritative/expertise’, ‘digital as delivery’, ‘digital as data’, ‘dissemination’, ‘change’ and ‘success’. In the 2010 document, on the contrary, references to ‘education and learning’ appear to have overtaken them all. Also references to ‘public/people’ appear higher in relative frequency in the 2010 document, compared to the 2006 document.

On the contrary, references to ‘Scotland’ appear relatively more frequent in the 2006 document than in its later edition which, according to the node report, features instead a number of references to ‘international’ which, instead, do not appear at all in the chart relating to the earlier publication.

Both charts show that references to digital practices are mostly of the ‘data’, ‘delivery’ and ‘expertise’ kind, with ‘digital as innovation’ featuring last in relative frequency terms. Not surprisingly, however, only the chart relating to the 2010 document shows the presence of

specific references to ‘online users’, although significantly low in relative frequency in the text.

There is no objectivist claim about an analysis such as this, of course, as many factors influence both the coding and the interpretation of the coding outputs. Having said this, the process did offer a valuable opportunity for reflection, both in the course of the analysis process and in the examination of findings, and also an intriguing impressionistic snapshot of the institutional discourse at different times.

In particular, it was useful to take findings from the thematic analysis of the two documents seriously enough to reflect on them in relation to the earlier insights from the comparison of the institution’s vision, mission and roles. Combined, they certainly point to one, important broader theme, namely an eagerness to project, in the *Future RCAHMS* publication, a vision of institutional change; they also contribute some ideas as to the main features of such change. Based on a comparison of the two texts, these features are, seemingly, a more confident, business-like outlook combined, at the same time, with a greater focus on the public, in Scotland and beyond, a new attention to, and appreciation of, what might matter to this public beyond the intellectual pursuit of knowledge; namely, a personal connection with places and their history, the exploration of issues of identity and, importantly, a sense of enjoyment to be drawn from the experience. Finally, a greater focus on education and learning also emerges in the tone and wording in the new RCAHMS strategy. I return to a discussion of these elements later in the chapter.

### **2.3 Looking at Change: A Visual Analysis**

As mentioned earlier, especially in view of the highly illustrated nature of the *Future RCAHMS* document, the study of the corporate documents included, as well as an analysis of the texts, also an analysis of the imagery used in the publications. This section offers an account of insights from such analysis, and a discussion of how they feed into the overall interpretation.

The analysis of the documents was informed by Rose’s approach to a critical visual methodology (Rose, 2007) and guided by the theoretical framework also used in the

investigation of RCAHMS' online environments. As such, the study considered the site of production of the visual elements observed in the documents under study, the site of the images themselves and their site of audiencing; this, again, mindful of the potential implication of technological, compositional and social modalities associated with the different sites (p. 149).

The description of the documents' design and layout provided earlier in this chapter anticipated some of the key differences between the 2010 publication and its earlier edition in terms of overall presentation. Most notably, while the 2006 document was found to be text-intensive, highly structured and seemingly aimed at conveying a substantial amount of detailed information to its readers, in the significantly shorter *Future RCAHMS* publication the text is much more spaced out and there is a much greater use of images. So much so, that the 2010 publication has, arguably, the appearance of a marketing brochure, designed to inform but also to communicate a range of messages at a number of different levels.

### **2.3.1 RCAHMS as the 'site of production'**

The greater attention to presentation noticeable in the *Future RCAHMS* document could be recognized as a symptom of more complex changes at and around RCAHMS at the time of its publication. On this point, it may be worth reflecting on RCAHMS as the site of production of the documents under study and how this might explain particular editorial solutions.

Firstly, the shift in style observed between the two documents arguably reflects a change in RCAHMS' approach to its publishing activities. This coincided with an organizational re-structure in 2006 and a change of personnel dealing with design and editorial matters. As mentioned earlier, this has involved a move towards expanding the existing publication list with more mass-market type of titles. This new departure has also translated into a new attention to production values and market appeal in recent publications, both online and offline, one which is clearly reflected in the *Future RCAHMS* document's glossy and colourful presentation.

More broadly, the different approaches embraced in the two publications also reflect, arguably, a cultural move away from writing as 'the dominant mode in the prospectus'

(Kress, 2005, p. 9), which we see in the RCAHMS 2006 publication, towards a pervasive use of images, as now found in the *Future RCAHMS* document. This move is consistent, as Kress notes (2005), with a shift from ‘the centrality of the medium of the book to the screen as a medium’ (Kress, 2005, p. 6). Notably, the same team who was behind the redesign of the RCAHMS’ website was also responsible for the design of *Future RCAHMS*; and in a way, one can see an element of ‘contamination’ across the different outputs, the website and the 2010 strategy document, namely a legacy of analogue thinking in the former, and a new, strong visual element, characteristic of the digital, in the printed document.

This shift towards a more mass market appeal in RCAHMS’ publications is, reportedly, not meant to overshadow the more academic type of publishing traditionally associated with RCAHMS; however, it is nevertheless seen as an important way of complementing the more scholarly genre by sharing with a wider, less specialized public a wealth of material, especially photographs, which has not been shown before. Importantly, it is also a way of tapping into new opportunities both financially and in terms of public exposure.

Such attention to new market opportunities and the putting in place of strategies which aim to identify and exploit new sources of income are, in fact, not limited to RCAHMS’ publishing activities. In 2008, the new Enterprises department was created as part of a wider RCAHMS’ re-organization, reportedly with the aim of ensuring a focused and coordinated approach to the identification of new commercial opportunities. The integration of *Scran* into RCAHMS the same year also helped sharpen the attention on issues of efficiency, customer focus and public interfacing, leading to a review of existing systems and practices.

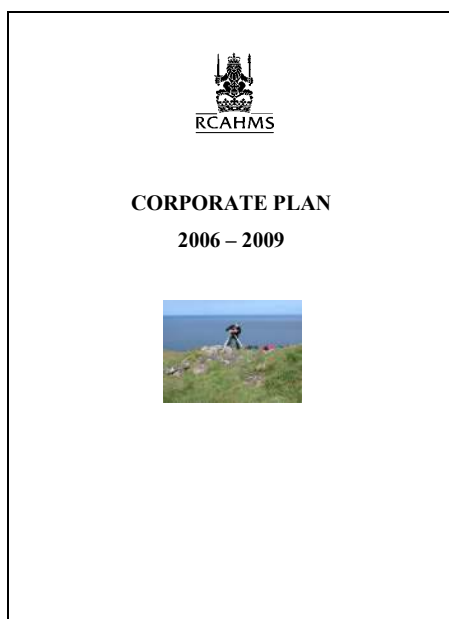
All together, these measures reflect a broader change of outlook and focus at RCAHMS, one which is fundamentally in response to growing demands on cultural heritage institutions in terms of greater efficiency and corporate accountability. This is a trend which is certainly continuing, as most recently evidenced by the launch in Scotland in 2011 of a National Strategy for Museums and Galleries (MGS, 2011), which specifically encourages institutions to think more creatively about the use of resources, promoting innovation and new ways of working against a background of cultural change and economic uncertainty. These developments are clearly reflected in the RCAHMS’ new strategy, which articulates as its 4th strategic priority:

**4. Achieve further efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability in the use of government resources, and build on our capacity to generate non government income**

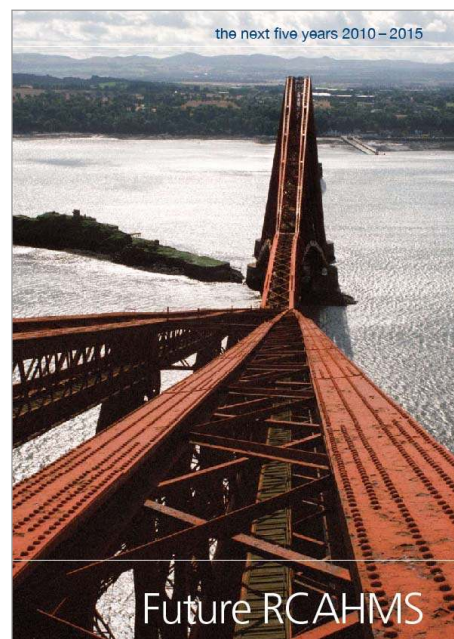
(RCAHMS, 2010a, p. 5)

Moving on with the visual analysis, a closer examination of the imagery in the two publications under study reveals some further interesting differences.

From a compositional perspective, starting with the cover, the first noticeable difference is that while the RCAHMS' logo - the royal crest - is featured prominently on the front page of the 2006 *Corporate Plan* document, it does not appear at all on the cover of *Future RCAHMS* nor, indeed, anywhere else in the document (Figures 55 and 56).



**Figure 55**



**Figure 56**

The decision to eliminate the logo from the 2010 document is rather significant, especially if we cast our mind back at some of the observations made about the design of the RCAHMS web sites as re-launched in 2009. There too the study observed a strong and newly consistent approach to institutional branding, one, however, where the royal crest was prominently featured. Arguably, the elimination of such an iconic element from the visual

presentation of RCAHMS in its new corporate literature in 2010 signals a further important step towards a renewal of the institutional image. For those familiar with RCAHMS, the absence of the historical logo is, indeed, an important clue, one which reinforces visually the aspirations of renewal jointly expressed in the foreword by the RCAHMS' Chairman and Secretary:

Looking ahead, we feel the time is right to establish a new name and identity more appropriate to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We therefore propose to re-brand RCAHMS...

(RCAHMS, 2010a, p. 1)

### **2.3.2 The use of imagery**

Moving on to the actual imagery used on in *Future RCAHMS*, it is interesting to observe how textual and visual elements consistently complement each other.

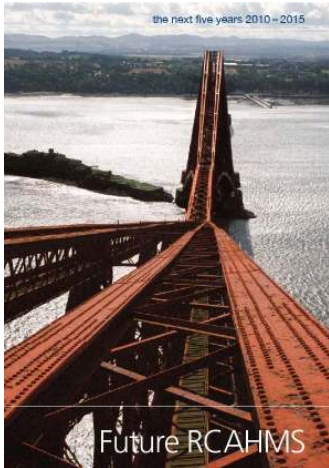
The analysis of the texts of the documents on which I reported earlier in this chapter identified a strong determination on RCAHMS' part to put itself forward as a cultural mediator and interpreter for its public,

connecting people to places across time

(RCAHMS, 2010a, p. 3)

The imagery chosen for the 2010 cover certainly seems to seek to reinforce such message: on the front, it features the symbolic image of a bridge connecting two shores (Figure 57), while on the back, it shows children admiring, captivated, features of an historical building (Figure 58).





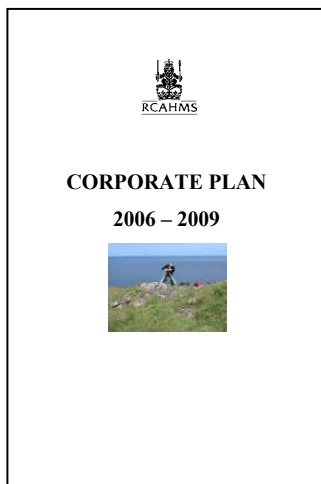
**Figure 57** *Future RCAHMS' front cover*



**Figure 58** *Future RCAHMS' back cover*

Connection, places, people: all three elements which make up RCAHMS' new vision are arguably inscribed in the cover imagery.

The choice of images on the cover of the 2010 document, evoking connection and discovery, is in striking contrast with that on the front page of the *2006 Corporate Plan*, which showed, instead, a surveyor at work (Figure 59).



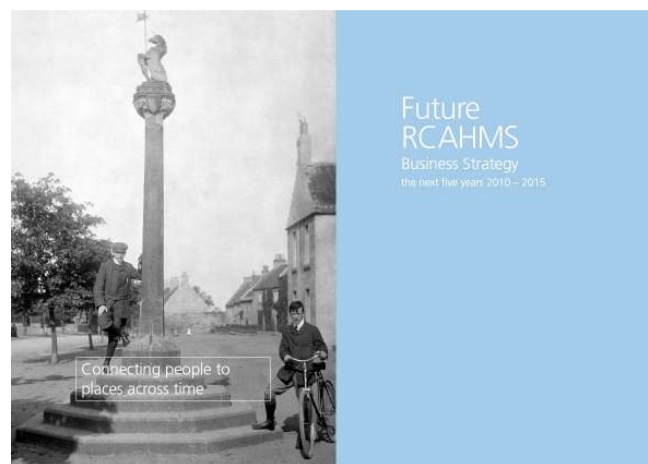
**Figure 59** *2006 Corporate Plan*

While the 2006 publication foregrounded RCAHMS' surveying and recording function, in 2010 the choice of imagery seeks to reflect a move away from an internal focus - 'this is

what we do’ – to embrace, instead, a more outward-looking perspective, one that is about connecting with the public and about the learning experience.

Such shift in perspective, which puts centre stage RCAHMS’ relationship with its public, is again, consistent with a broader trend in museum culture and practice in recent decades involving a shift of institutional focus from content to the visitor/learner, and from data and information to process and experience (Hein, 1995; Anderson, 2000; Hooper-Greenhill, 2004, 2007; Roberts, 2010; Ross, 2004). RCAHMS certainly appears to have embraced such change in emphasis in recent times by focusing more resources around its education and outreach function through a range of projects and initiatives, mostly supported through external funding. And it is to these external funders that such focus on benefits to the public must be clearly demonstrated. What the analysis of the strategic documents suggests is RCAHMS’ determination to articulate clearly its commitment to a user-centred approach and communicate it unambiguously to its different stakeholders.

The choice of imagery in *Future RCAHMS* continues to reinforce the connection/people/place theme throughout the pages. On opening the booklet, on the left-hand page RCAHMS’ new vision statement, ‘connecting people to places across time’, appears against a black and white photograph picturing two young men in a town square (Figure 60):



**Figure 60**

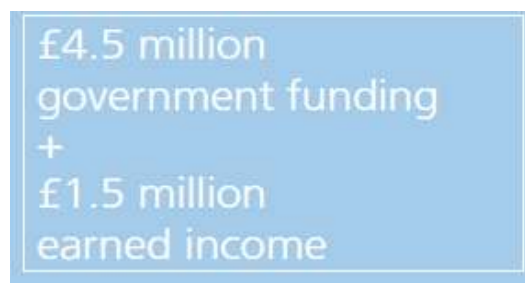
The historical photograph creates an interesting visual contrast with the title page, headed *Future RCAHMS*, combining, as it were, the idea of past and future. This pattern of mixing historic and contemporary imagery, already observed on the RCAHMS' website, continues throughout the publication.

The next double-page spread in the 2010 publication features, instead, a contemporary image, showing, on the left, a group photograph of RCAHMS staff today and, on the right, the list of Contents (Figure 61).



**Figure 61**

What is interesting about the visual composition of the page here is that it marks the beginning of a recurring pattern, namely the combination of images with captions carrying sets of facts and figures. In this case, the photo of the RCAHMS staff team is accompanied by the quantification of the institution's financial worth, i.e. the public money it is trusted with and the money it earns independently (Figure 62).



**Figure 62**

Here the focus is, again, on capital: the image shows the human face of RCAHMS, as it were and, at the same time, confidently asserts its financial achievements.

This 'image + numbers' pattern continues on the next page with a quantification of the volunteering effort supported by RCAHMS - 1,000 local volunteers - superimposed on a photograph of a Scottish landscape (Figure 63).

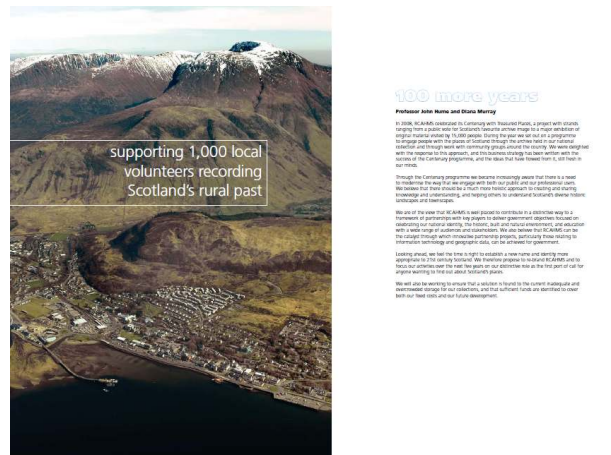


Figure 63

Repeated throughout the publication, this superimposing of quantification on visually appealing images arguably confirms the complex nature of the communicative task of the 2010 document which, as I discuss later, is clearly aimed at multiple audiences.

Next, again in another interesting combination of contrasting elements, the Vision, Mission and Roles page features a historical image (Figure 64).

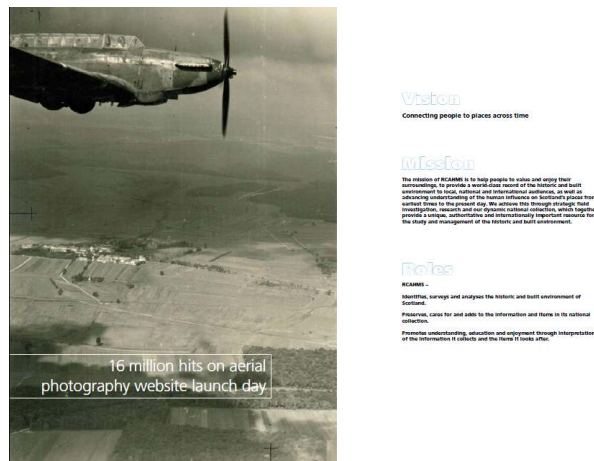
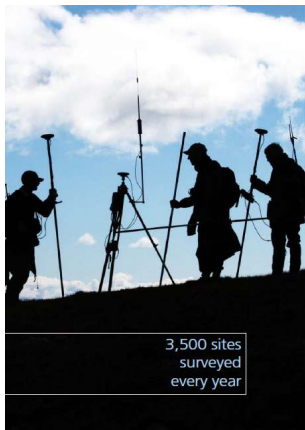


Figure 64

The choice of a black and white photograph of an old military aeroplane flying in the sky might seem rather odd as a complement to a corporate message which, ostensibly, is all about emotional connection and a projection to the future. Still, the effect of the combination of the image, caption and text on the right is rather powerful: the striking image of the plane, arguably symbolizing strength, courage, past glory, is complemented by a caption which is also powerful but, importantly, also evocative of modernity: ‘16 million hits’ - one has to pause at the perhaps unintended pun - ‘on aerial photography website launch day’ (RCAHMS, 2010a, p. 2). Again, past and future, old and new, are combined through the interplay of imagery and the text, carrying a strong message of tradition but also hinting at a future which is set to deliver clear, measurable results.

The pattern continues: the same image we saw in the ‘Work’ page on *Canmore* (p. 158), a photograph showing surveyors at work, accompanies the articulation of RCAHMS’ Strategic Priorities (Figure 65).



**Our Strategic Priorities**  
 In the next five years, we will:

- 1 Inspire learning and intellectual curiosity in our national culture and identity at home and worldwide.
- 2 Continue to update our national collection through field investigation, research and selective collecting, and make RCAHMS the first port of call for information about Scotland's places.
- 3 Widen digital access to information on Scotland's places, making it more interactive and an integral part of the burgeoning world-wide network of cultural heritage data.
- 4 Achieve further efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability in the use of government resources, and build on our capacity to generate non-government income.

Figure 65 RCAHMS' Strategic Priorities

1. Inspire learning and intellectual curiosity in our national culture and identity at home and worldwide.
2. Continue to update our national collection through field investigation, research and selective collecting, and make RCAHMS the first port of call for information about Scotland's places.
3. Widen digital access to information on Scotland's places, making it more interactive and an integral part of the burgeoning world-wide network of cultural heritage data.
4. Achieve further efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability in the use of government resources, and build on our capacity to generate nongovernment income.

Here, the focus returns on what RCAHMS staff do, their specialist knowledge and dedication. Again a set of figures - '3,500 sites surveyed every year' - points to RCAHMS' success in delivering on its commitments.

The next double-page spread is the one articulating in detail the first of RCAHMS' strategic priorities (Figure 66).



**1 Inspire learning and intellectual curiosity in our national culture and identity at home and worldwide.**

**We will achieve this by:**

- 1 Adding and promoting national and local bodies, community groups and individuals to our national collection and to our online digital collections in the knowledge that these bodies, groups or individuals have the skills and the resources to add to our national collection and to our online digital collections. These people will be able to help us to collect, research and interpret our national collection.
- 2 Continuing to update our national collection by means of a series of exciting activities including: field investigation, research and selective collecting, and making RCAHMS the first port of call for information about Scotland's places.
- 3 Making it easier for people to contribute to our national collection, working when possible in partnership with other organisations.
- 4 Engaging with users of all ages to meet their needs and information needs, such as through our online presence and our national collection, and to ensure we have the best collection across Scotland's sites, and the digital resources to support it.
- 5 Working with the Scottish Government, local authorities, archives, libraries and other national and local bodies to encourage participation in projects which focus on widening digital access to the national collection and heritage sites generally.
- 6 Engaging in partnerships in international digital projects to promote Scotland's national collection.
- 7 Working in partnership with others to provide high quality advice to formal and informal education for all ages, in line with the Scottish Government's strategy.
- 8 Seeking to maintain the Independent Research Organisation status granted to RCAHMS by the Scottish Government's Cultural and Creative Industries Scotland, to ensure research and knowledge transfer projects.

**Outcomes:**

- 1 Increase in the number of communities and individuals who have the opportunity to interact with our national collection, leading to an increase in the level of public engagement with RCAHMS.
- 2 Continued expansion and growth of Scotland's national collection.
- 3 Increased access to Scottish national cultural resources used for formal and informal education purposes.
- 4 Increased use of Scottish national cultural resources as a primary resource for digital education research projects.

Figure 66

1. Inspire learning and intellectual curiosity in our national culture and identity at home and worldwide

As shown above, this reference to RCAHMS’ educational role, which as discussed earlier comes across strongly in the text, is accompanied by an image of two elderly people looking at a map, assisted by a member of staff. The caption on the image reports the number of outreach events carried out, 310, and people involved, 22,000.

This is one of two images in *Future RCAHMS* which show users engaging with RCAHMS’ staff or content. The second image is found on the pages relating to the institution’s 3<sup>rd</sup> strategic priority,

**3. Widen digital access to information on Scotland’s places, making it more interactive and an integral part of the burgeoning world-wide network of cultural heritage data.**

Here a picture shows two children talking in front of a computer (Figure 67). The caption reads ‘1,000 public contributions to the national collections in six months’.



**Figure 67**

On this occasion there is, perhaps, a slight incongruence between the caption and the image: the former is about public contributions to the collections, supposedly online as this is about digital access, and supposedly from adult users – or, indeed, as observed in the analysis of *Canmore*, expert contributors. On the contrary, the image of children, most likely school pupils, seemingly engaging with RCAHMS material using a computer, conveys an association of technology with education. This is possibly in relation to *Scran*, which is referred to in the text on the page opposite the image:

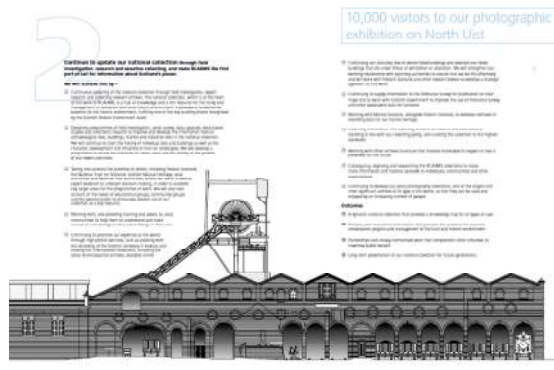


...continuing to provide, through Scran, technical advice and assistance to Learning and Teaching Scotland for the delivery of cultural resources to education....

(RCAHMS, 2010a, p. 11)

More generally, it is interesting to note that, not unlike what was observed in RCAHMS' online environments, these images show RCAHMS users either in the more mature age range (Figure 66) or, as in the second image (Figure 67), as school children. It may be worth noting that nowhere in the document there is a reference, textual or visual, to users in a young-adult demographic.

Moving on with the analysis, Pages 8 and 9 and 12 and 13 also combine images, text and facts and figures. On pages 8 and 9 the drawing of the Victoria colliery, winner of the *Treasured Places* project's online voting competition (p. 142) is set next to the articulation of RCAHMS' Strategic Priority number 2 (Figure 68):



**2. Continue to update our national collection through field investigation, research and selective collecting, and make RCAHMS the first port of call for information about Scotland's places.**

**Figure 68**

However, while the choice of image could be read as a reference to the experience of opening the collection to user contributions, there is no reference in the corresponding text to such development.

On pages 12 and 13 the text which articulates RCAHMS' 4<sup>th</sup> Strategic Priority is complemented by a mix of different images. Here the image caption reads '1,000,000 hits a day on *Scran*, one of UK's largest educational resources' (Figure 69):





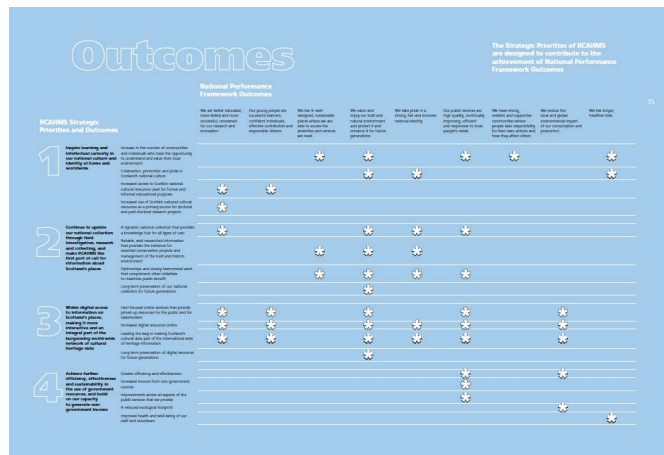
**4 Achieve further efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability in the use of government resources, and build on our capacity to generate nongovernment income.**

**Figure 69**

It is interesting to note that *Scran*, the online educational subscription service which became part of RCAHMS in late 2008, is singled out as an example of good practice next to the list of RCAHMS’ planned strategic outcomes, which are:

- \* Greater efficiency and effectiveness.
- \* Increased income from non-government sources.
- \* Improvements across all aspects of the public services that we provide.
- \* A reduced ecological footprint.
- \* Improved health and well-being of our staff and volunteers.

Finally, the last two pages in the *Future RCAHMS* booklet (Figure 70) present in grid-format RCAHMS’ priorities and outcomes matched against nine National Performance Framework Outcomes as published by the Scottish Government (2007).



**Figure 70**

This reader-friendly presentation, more typical, perhaps, of commercial or marketing literature, is another example of a stylistic departure in the 2010 publication from the approach seen in the 2006 document, again reflecting a change of approach, as well as personnel, at RCAHMS. More than anywhere else in the document, it shows RCAHMS' keenness to convey its corporate message to stakeholders clearly and unambiguously, evidencing its understanding of key requirements from the wider national agenda and a willingness to play a useful and productive role as a public body, in full compliance with these requirements.

### 2.3.3 RCAHMS' audiences

An interesting question may be how, as a visual object, *Future RCAHMS* addresses different audiences at the same time, and how it might be received by them.

As a business strategy the document is, fundamentally, aimed at corporate stakeholders. The colourful, glossy presentation and the combination of attractive photographs with pithy declarations of achievements and measurable objectives were arguably chosen to project an idea of modernity and business focus, and to communicate confidence and clarity in terms of future direction. Corporate interlocutors might well appreciate such succinct articulation of RCAHMS' corporate strategy and its clear alignment to national requirements.

Having said this, the document is published both as a booklet and in digital version on the RCAHMS website. As such it is potentially accessible to a wider public; on this point, it is

interesting to note that the booklet is simply entitled 'Future RCAHMS - the next 5 years 2010-2015', and that the sub-title 'Business strategy' only appears on the title page inside the document; this might suggest that, with its glossy appearance and visually undemanding presentation, the document not only addresses RCAHMS' corporate stakeholders but also aims to perform as a marketing tool for a potentially wider usership, as yet unfamiliar with RCAHMS and its activities.

Finally, *Future RCHAMS* is also addressed, of course, to RCAHMS' staff. The new institutional strategy was reportedly developed through a process of internal consultation and discussion, and the document represents an important synthesis and encapsulation of corporate priorities and ambitions going forward. As I prepared for the staff interviews, I was told that members of staff were being expected to be familiar with the new strategy document. As I report later in the chapter, I had the opportunity to explore people's reaction to the document which, more commercial in style, could be potentially welcomed as a refreshing change or, conversely, be perceived as an exercise in marketing projecting an oversimplified idea of RCAHMS' purpose, value and identity.

#### **2.3.4 Summing up**

To conclude, overall, the visual analysis of the document, especially when set in contrast with its earlier edition, seems to confirm the findings from the analysis of the texts: like the latter, they point to a determination to communicate a switch in institutional emphasis, fundamentally in terms of a greater business focus, a greater attention to the public and a move to a role of mediator for RCAHMS, delivered also through an enhanced educational brief.

The use of images reinforces the impression of an institution keen on sending a strong, confident and positive message to the wider public, as well as to its corporate stakeholders. This message is conveyed through the use of attractive imagery, evoking the past but also showing scenes from today's activities, not unlike what was observed on the RCAHMS' websites, likely to appeal to general viewers.

The images are combined, however, with business-like declarations of achievements and measurable objectives, which speak to corporate stakeholders. Some interesting elements also emerge which further resonate with findings from the analysis of RCAHMS' digital environments, namely certain assumptions on RCAHMS usership and the association of technological innovation with the idea of progress, efficiency, quantifiable success and also education.

Generally, findings from the analysis of the documents are consistent with what the RCAHMS' Chairman and its Secretary jointly state in the foreword to the *Future RCAHMS* publication, entitled '100 more years':

...there is a need to modernise the way we engage with both our public and our professional users. We believe that there should be a much more holistic approach to creating and sharing knowledge and understanding, and helping others to understand Scotland's diverse historic landscapes and townscapes.

(RCAHMS, 2010a, p. 1)

Indeed, in the way it articulates its strategic ambitions in its 2010 Business Strategy and in the way it packages its corporate message, especially when contrasted with earlier formulations, RCAHMS shows a determination to articulate a shift of perspective, one which includes the effort to communicate more clearly with its stakeholders, a willingness to take on a role of mediator and interpreter for its public, performing a bridging role between people and their understanding and appreciation of Scotland's built environment. Importantly, a sharp focus on corporate objectives is clearly articulated and the determination to embrace such evolution efficiently and with an eye on market opportunities.

A question which is especially important for this study is how the discourse relating to technological change and innovation emerges against the background of such evolution, and what role digitization and online practices in particular might be attributed in the context of RCAHMS' new cultural mission.

## 2.4 RCAHMS, Change and Digital Innovation

We also believe that RCAHMS can be the catalyst through which innovative partnership projects, particularly those relating to information technology and geographic data, can be achieved for government.

(RCAHMS, 2010a, p. 1)

Starting from the Foreword ‘100 more years’ above, references to technological innovation are pervasive in the *Future RCAHMS* document, appearing throughout the text in the detailed articulations of RCAHMS’ strategic objectives and plans for implementation.

The nature of the role of technology, however, comes across differently in the 2010 document compared with the 2006 edition. In the latter RCAHMS’ ambition was

**5** to provide a centre of excellence for ICT applications for heritage information  
(RCAHMS, 2006, p. 7)

In *Future RCHAMS* this ambition appears more forward- as well outward-looking, as the institution declares a strategic commitment to

**3. Widen digital access to information on Scotland’s places, making it more interactive and an integral part of the burgeoning world-wide network of cultural heritage data.**

(RCAHMS, 2010a, p. 5)

Based on analysis of the *Future RCAHMS* document, technological innovation does indeed appear to play a central role in RCAHMS’ strategy for the future. This is further confirmed if one zooms in on that grid at the end of the booklet where RCAHMS’ planned strategic outcomes are matched against those in the National Performance framework (Figure 71).

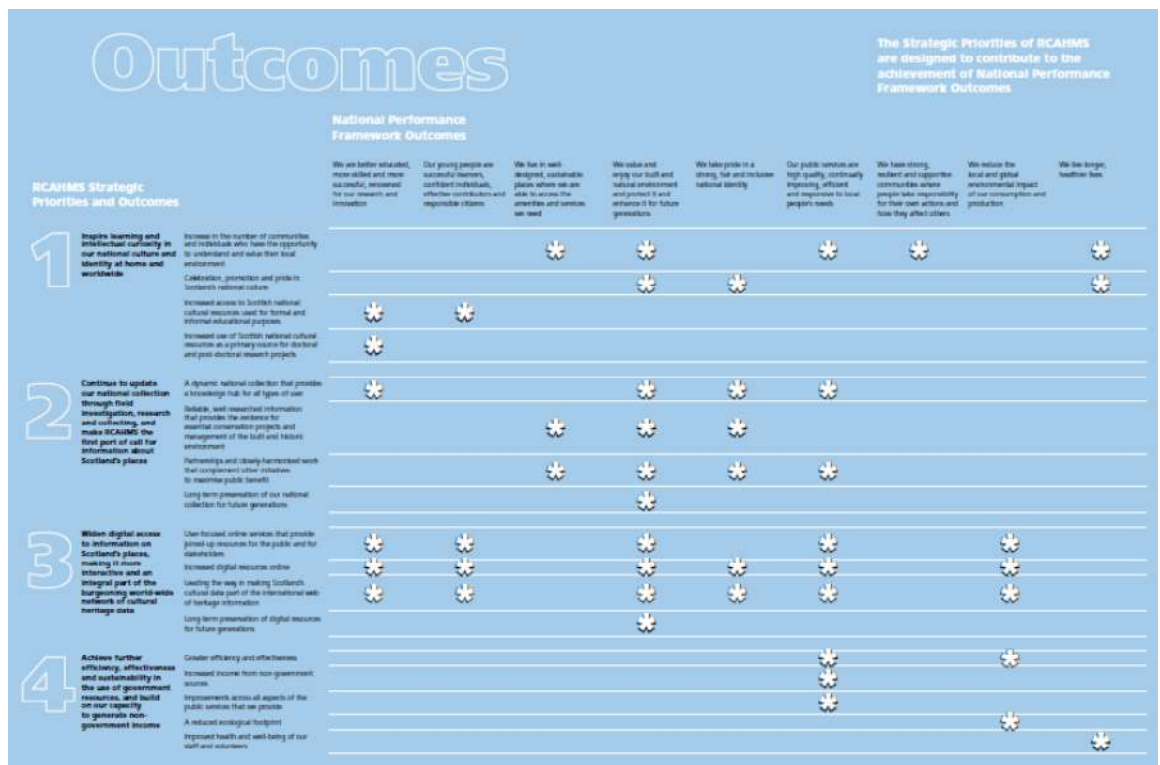


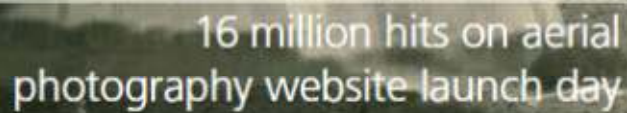
Figure 71 Future RCAHMS

Here, the outcomes associated with RCAHMS’ digital ambitions score the highest number of ‘stars’, 18, against the National Performance Outcomes; this compared with 12 stars for the ‘Continue to update...’ strategic priority, 11 stars for the ‘Inspire learning ...’, and 6 for ‘Achieve further efficiency...’.

In particular, the National Outcomes which are matched with those stated in relation to the ‘Widening digital access...’ Strategic Priority are about achieving better education and skills, being successful learners and responsible citizens, enjoying and preserving the built environment, with a strong and fair sense of national identity, enjoying good quality and responsive public services and demonstrating a responsible approach to the environment (RCAHMS, 2010a, pp. 14-15).

In other words, RCAHMS’ commitment to technological innovation, expressed in terms of widening access to the public and of greater interactivity, is cast as a key premise in RCAHMS’ strategy for the successful delivery of its public mandate. And, indeed, most references in the *Future RCAHMS* document do reflect the determination on the part of the

institution to widen public access to its content, using digital technology to capture more data, preserve it more safely, and deliver it more efficiently (see above). There is also a strong commitment to achieving greater interoperability through technological solutions, so as to be part of a wider, international network, making use of digital solutions also for promotional and profile-raising initiatives. Importantly, technology-related statistics are used throughout the document to evidence success:



16 million hits on aerial  
photography website launch day



1,000 public web  
contributions to the  
national collection  
in six months



1,000,000 hits a day on Scran,  
one of UK's largest  
educational resources

Conversely, it is interesting to note that the interactive element mentioned in the strategic statement relating to new technologies comes across less prominently in the rest of the document's text: the term itself, 'interactive', is, in fact, used exclusively in the wording of the strategic priority itself, and never again in the document. Also, when referring to engaging with users online, the notion of interactivity beyond granting users better access to information appears to be mainly about RCAHMS creating the conditions for more efficient public contributions to the archive:

... extending facilities for the public to contribute their own digital content to the national collection. We will improve access for accredited specialists to add digital information directly to the database, and will explore automated ways of enabling key donors to add their own digital collections to enhance the archive...

(RCAHMS, 2010a, p.11)

So, while there is a clear ambition to greater openness to the public, expressed through statements like

... aspiring to create a dynamic national collection that provides a knowledge hub for all types of user...

(RCAHMS, 2010a, p. 9)

or

Engaging with users of all ages to meet their data and information needs....

(RCAHMS, 2010a, p. 7),

there is no mention anywhere in the document of a different kind of online engagement; nor is there any visual reference to the RCAHMS' website or other online environments, while references to website hits are placed against the background of an old military plane.

Regarding learning, the analysis of the texts showed the educational message in the *Future RCAHMS* document as emerging strongly, if compared with its earlier version. Interestingly, however, the 'Inspire learning and intellectual curiosity...' section is illustrated with an image of elderly people looking at a map with the help of a member of staff (Figure 72).



Figure 72

In turn, the section on 'Widening digital access...' is illustrated by a picture showing schoolchildren talking in front of a switched-off laptop (Figure 73).





Figure 73

Combined, these textual and visual elements arguably reinforce an impression of traditional learning contexts, wholesome and relevant, no doubt. However, it is noticeable that there are no references in the document to different brands of learning and engagement as afforded today in the new digital environments, and potentially equally relevant to an institution like RCAHMS.

In this regard, it is interesting to note that, at the time of writing, RCAHMS' Education Policy as published on the institutional website still dates back to April 2004, published as an Annex to the 2004-2009 Corporate Plan. In it, objective 4.2 headed 'online initiatives' reads as follows:

developing online initiatives to promote learning and access activities and resources and extending links between RCAHMS online resources and other related portals, sites and databases, such as Scran, Archaeology Data Service, and the National Grid for Learning

(RCAHMS, 2004, p. 2)

While this statement stresses the importance of a range of interventions relating to online practice, these fundamentally concern improved interoperability and interconnection. There is no acknowledgment, in other words, of what, for example, the authors of the Smithsonian's new digital strategy in 2009 described as:

the emergence of a new class of learning techniques—built on a foundation of broad and unrestricted access to information, social sharing, creativity, play, and participatory learning

(Smithsonian, 2009, p. 11)

It is hoped, however, that an updated version of the educational policy will indeed combine earlier priorities with considerations on changing conditions of engagement in digital spaces and their implications on RCAHMS' approach to user participation and learning.

To conclude, based on a comparative study of its corporate literature, it could be argued that RCAHMS is embracing innovation in ways which are consistent with an understanding of the need to embrace a new approach to the sharing of cultural content; this involves a more visible public role, taking on a role of communicator/educator willing to share more with its audiences. Underpinning this important shift from a content-focused orientation to a user-facing perspective is, in many ways, a sustained, confident and strategic use of technological innovation.

However, in spite of such enhanced focus on community and education, and a forward-looking approach to technological innovation, in terms of a more positive engagement with those 'radical, interesting and vibrant opportunities' potentially presented by digital technologies (Bayne *et al*, 2009a, p. 65), RCAHMS' corporate strategy still projects, in this study's interpretation, an emphasis on technology for the improving of traditional practices and for greater interoperability, rather than a search for a more far-reaching transformation.

In other words, in my analysis, consistent with what was detected in the study of *Canmore* and other digital environments, RCAHMS appears to be both innovating at different and important levels but, also, facing a difficulty which is shared by many cultural institutions today, namely that of embracing fully the creative opportunities that online practices now afford (Parry, 2007). RCAHMS' choice not to venture in this direction does come across strongly in the analysis of its corporate literature. An interesting question is to what extent this might reflect a conscious strategic stand or, rather, a position which derives from a tacit awareness that such a move is problematic; and, also, to what extent this position is shared across the institution.

In order to test and, also, challenge the impression gained from the detailed reading of RCAHMS' corporate literature I turn, in the next section, to a discussion of findings from the analysis of the text of the interviews conducted at RCAHMS after completing the analysis of the strategic documents.

### **3. RCAHMS: Staff Interviews**

As I mentioned earlier, the decision to interview staff members at RCAHMS was motivated by an interest to gain more personal perspectives on some of the topics and questions at the heart of the study.

The questions which loosely guided conversations with staff explored individuals' role and responsibilities within the organization, and asked each respondent for their interpretation of the role and purpose of RCAHMS as a cultural heritage institution, especially in the light of the then newly-published corporate strategy *Future RCAHMS*. The meaning and value of cultural heritage were also discussed, before exploring respondents' understanding of RCAHMS' role as educator. Against this background people were asked to comment on the role that technological innovation, and in particular online practices, play or could play in terms of user participation and learning in relation to RCAHMS' content. While I used a set of questions as a guiding template for conversations, I was however also happy to let these follow different paths depending on individuals' particular interests and preferences.

Through a process of iterative coding, the analysis of interview transcripts resulted in the identification of a number of thematic categories and sub-categories. With the help of the data analysis software already used for the analysis the documents I reviewed text references by code, interrogating the text from different perspectives. In the course of the data review process, alternative macro-categorizations were identified which built on the original thematic analysis, cutting the data in different ways, while still preserving the granularity of the original analysis. Table 3 below shows an example of such groupings.

### **THEMED REFERENCE CLUSTERS**

- RCAHMS' Role and Identity
- A Changing Institution
- Cultural Heritage, Place and the Self
- Content, Authority and Control
- Projects and Collections
- About Users
- Education and Learning at RCAHMS
- Change and Technology
- Online practices

**Table 3**

I draw from this data for the discussion which follows below. I do this, in a way, by telling a story through the words of the respondents, inviting the reader 'to see through my eyes what I have seen' (Wolcott, 1990, cited in Creswell, 2007, p. 162). Inevitably, while I use the interviewees' own words, this is a text which, as the storyteller, I have constructed; as such, while recognizing its debt to my informants, my approach is more consistent with an 'epistemologically' rather than 'politically' correct stand (Hine, 2000, p. 56), as it favours the destabilization of ethnographic authority in favour of a view of writing as an act of construction rather than as an accurate representation of reality.

### **3.1 Narrating RCAHMS**

The study of the corporate literature discussed in the earlier section of this chapter shows RCAMHS as an organization undergoing change, keen to project a strong corporate focus, and embracing a more public-facing role as it casts itself as a mediator between the public and its historical places. Technological innovation and online practices are shown to play a key role within this, fundamentally as a means for improving data collection and

preservation, for widening users' access to content, for raising the institution's profile and to improve efficiency.

The data collected through staff interviews offer rich and interesting insights on a range of topics relevant to this study as they reflect different experiences and perspectives within and about RCAHMS. For the sake of this discussion I draw from the analysis of this body of material to explore, in particular, how the narratives stemming from individual experiences resonate with findings from the study of the institutional discourse discussed earlier in this chapter, also exploring any tensions or uncertainties surfacing in relation to the topics under study.

The questions which I broadly consider, drawing from the interview data, are: is RCAHMS indeed changing and, if so, how do people understand and perceive such change? How do staff characterize RCAHMS' role as an educator? And, against such background, what role do respondents believe is digital innovation playing or could play within the institution?

### **3.1.1 Change at RCAHMS**

Overall, it would be fair to say that interview respondents were generally in agreement in describing RCAHMS as a changing organization or, as one respondent put it,

*... an organization in flux, in transition...*

Before exploring how respondents characterized such change, it may be interesting to report on how RCAHMS' identity and role as a cultural heritage institution comes across, at least in my interpretation, in the words of the interviewees.

Firstly, it may be worth noting how RCAHMS' mere existence and longevity, a hundred years after its foundation, is seen by several respondents as remarkable; this because, as one of them explains

*A royal commission is normally a time-limited body set up to investigate something and is then abolished... it's anomalous that we are still in existence after more than 100 years.*

Having said this, from most accounts RCAHMS consistently emerges as an authoritative and useful body; also as a multi-faceted, versatile, and rather ‘special’ one:

*in essence (...) we are unique in terms of national collections, ... because we are not just a collection of objects and things, we are a collection of knowledge, as well...*

*There's nothing else like that, there is nobody else doing that work...*

RCAHMS is described, in different accounts, as a ‘knowledge hub’, a ‘custodian’, an ‘interpreter’:

*...we are the place that people come to for information about the historic environment... we are a kind of knowledge hub...*

*... and so we are custodians of one aspect of the heritage of Scotland for the people of Scotland...*

*... we provide tools to enhance the interpretation or enjoyment of the physical built heritage, the outside built heritage...*

The recognition of RCAHMS’ authoritative stand as a heritage institution and pride in its achievement are a common thread in respondents’ accounts:

*...we've been working for a 100 years, we've built up a world-class reputation...*

*the Commission... has always been the source of absolutely certain information, ... the Commission’s survey information is... the best that is.*

There is, however, also candid recognition of unevenness in the quality of the content and that there is much work to be done:

*I think our data is sometimes very good, and sometimes appalling and sometimes between the two.*

There is a culturally and socially important role that RCAHMS performs and which many recognize:

*... we are the ones making sure that if somebody is putting up a big development they take cognizance of the fact that they are in a historic environment*

This is a role which is also important at a deeper, more personal level; a metaphor used by one of the respondents captures especially well the relevance and usefulness of RCAHMS in this way:

*I often think of the idea of someone rushing back into a burning building and grabbing the photo album... If you like, we hold the nation's photo album...*

Overall, in the respondents' accounts RCAHMS emerges as an interesting mix of different roles and expertise, not just an archive, not quite a museum, rather a combination of both and more. Most respondents seem to find such complex identity as a positive feature:

*[a museum] or an archive? Or a library? [...] we are not one or the other, and I think that's what I have always enjoyed about being at the Commission, you know...*

Yet, while appreciating the richness and composite nature of RCAHMS' institutional identity, there is also recognition among respondents that this complexity might be hard to fathom outside the institution's immediate area of activity:

*... we have been aware for a little while that we need to clarify to the public what we do... and have a much more high-profile role*

*... the Commission is, on an international scale, certainly, quite an obscure organization, and it's not necessarily an intuitive one.*

There is, most agree, a need to clarify RCAHMS' identity and purpose and ensure it remains relevant to its users. There is, however, an image problem, for RCAHMS, as many are aware of a perception of RCAHMS as a distant, perhaps too formal an organization, an impression which might get in the way of fully engaging the public:

*...the Commission does have the sort of facade, which is rather unapproachable...*

This is attributed, however, more to issues of poor communication rather than actual institutional rigidity:

*...things like Scottish Rural Past has demonstrated that people saw us as an aloof, distant institution, until they've met us and then suddenly we are fabulous.*

RCAHMS' long, forbidding name does not help, people feel, and they are generally in agreement that it would make sense to change it, showing no great attachment for the 'royal' branding:

*Nobody likes the name... although obviously around the building people like the gravitas of the Royal Commission... it does have that effect ... but ...our name is really so antiquated...*

The need to communicate more clearly with the public is, indeed, generally acknowledged as a priority for RCAHMS:

*it's not quite enough to build the wall, it is also important to display the wall, to occasionally chip bits off the wall, you know, and invite people inside the wall, and I think that's what it's started to learn more in the last few years...*

In this sense, asked to comment on the approach taken in the then newly published *Future RCAHMS* document, most respondents seem to welcome the change in communication style it represents:

*... I have to say, the 5 year plan...is very important... because... it's set out very clearly... I think it's very simple to understand...*

*...the new mission statement connecting people to places across time, I think is quite a good one, and quite helpful*

At the same time, it is also recognized that the document is meant more as a declaration of intents than an accurate reflection of the current state of play:

*...this is an aspirational document, it's not a description, it's a mission, it's a projection to the future, it's a re-interpretation of the core role of RCAHMS refocusing on users, refocusing on people...*

There are, however, are also dissenting voices which, on the contrary, find the document

*...platitudinous... trying to say the words that people want to hear rather than actually saying words that have real meaning behind them,.... It doesn't set out the actual balance between the roles...*

*... I still think it's woolly ..., lots of we will encourage, we will support, we will embark...*



As well as welcoming greater clarity in projecting RCAHMS' role and purpose, there is, in some quarters, an element of tension in relation to what does strike some as a rather hollow, over corporate approach, which dresses up, rather than works to resolve more complex problems.

These problems are, based on respondents' accounts, of different kinds: they relate, for example, to ways of working, such as a tendency in the organization to perform procedures on the basis of a perception of standards which are, some argue, overstated and not relevant anymore, and which hold the institution back from being more innovative and successful.

More importantly, perhaps, people recognize the need to tackle, as is happening already, issues of a structural nature born of a legacy of institutional over-compartmentalization. This, it is argued, coincides with an inward-looking tendency, which some refer to as a 'silos-like' mentality; these problems are being addressed and they must be resolved, some note, if RCAHMS is to remain a relevant organization:

*it's [...] a big [...] organization, quite bureaucratic, quite... hierarchical, very civil-service minded*

*... the Commission is always at its worst when it looks inwards. It is always at its best, often at its best, when it looks outwards...*

Having said this, it is recognized that change, and the disruption it brings about, is not unproblematic:

*...somebody said 'why can't we go back to the old days when we used to come by, enter results in a ledger, and put them in a nice big safe?'*

And yet, changes in terms of how RCAHMS' service to its public is performed are seen as fundamental, and non-negotiable in a changing political climate:

*... that's all there is to it. We are here for the public, we are funded by the tax payer...*

*...getting Heritage Lottery Fund money seemed like a very good idea ... but with that came responsibility to explain what you were doing to the public ...*

In other words, interview respondents seem to confirm a perception of institutional change in progress, a change which, it is generally felt, is necessary because RCAHMS, a well-established and, as many see it, highly prestigious organization, needs to project itself differently, and also change internally; this because it has been over-compartmentalized, it has shown a tendency to being somewhat self-referential and has not necessarily used its composite institutional profile to its advantage.

Fundamentally, RCAHMS needs to look outwards and focus on its users, to do justice to the work it does and what it can offer, but also in response to an external call to be responsive to the wider public it exists to serve. RCAHMS needs, also, to become more competitive, now that, as one senior member of staff puts it:

*... the [heritage] market is getting more crowded,... and there's no room for overlap in scarce resources...*

To do this, some believe, the institution must recognize and embrace its own heritage and identity and play to its strengths:

*We are about the past, we are about our material history, we are about social history, we are about places in time and, presently, we have a theme, it's quite a coherent theme, we are in the heritage game, and I think we can play to that.*

At the same time, it is also important to remain aware, some respondents feel, of the risk of offering superficial solutions, sending out a message which complies with external demands but belies other problems.

Overall, however, I found that, together with the recognition that change is indeed as needed as it is inevitable, respondents mostly share a striking genuine fondness, respect and pride for the collective work of RCAHMS, and a strong sense of mission to serve the public. The latter is, possibly, the most consistent common denominator across the interviewees' responses, namely, a commitment to public service combined with a shared recognition of the need to embrace a broader and more composite usership as a strategic priority. As one respondent pithily puts it:

*... in the Future RCAHMS document ... the public enjoyment is actually upfront now, the dissemination, the archive, the information, the database is kind of*

*number two... so it's turned... the whole organization has actually turned upside down...*

### **3.1.2 Opening to the public**

While it might have been originally motivated by political and economic developments external to the institution, the awareness of the importance of RCAHMS sharing its content with a wider public comes across as deeply felt by all respondents. One interviewee in particular expresses simply but effectively why RCAHMS, in his/her view, is fundamentally relevant to anybody, not just professionals, experts or academics:

*I'm also conscious that the person that's walking down the street is walking in a historic environment, doesn't necessarily appreciate it, and anything that we can do... which is why a lot of the education and outreach that have been done in recent years have been very exciting because they are actually about new audiences...*

This is a sentiment which comes across strongly and consistently in the interviews:

*I think our emphasis has switched between being very much an organization being there for professionals and other professional users and it's trying to engage with a much broader audience ...*

*... I think the Commission [...] now what it's got to do is open up...*

As already detected in the study of RCAMHS' digital environments and corporate literature, there is also the recognition that there are important gaps in terms of public reach:

*I suppose that age group is particularly hard... often the people that I speak to are more the lifelong learners or the students, and everything in between I maybe don't have as much contact with that group...*

The question is, importantly, how to reach a wider audience, what interest it may have in relation to what RCAHMS has to offer and what kind of engagement could be expected. In this regard, it is important, some note, for RCAHMS to understand, and indeed accept, that users' interest is different from what might be traditionally expected:

*there's an audience out there who are interested in interesting stuff, and we have lots of interesting stuff and if that's how they want to interact so be it...*

*You look at the photograph and you think ... it doesn't look very interesting to me... but to that person it means everything, because that's the field where his dad worked...*

Also the importance of gaining a much clearer sense of who RCAHMS' users specifically are, or who they could be, emerges in the comments from a number of respondents, who are keen on more systematic approaches to gaining such understanding:

*let's stop anticipating what we think people expect from us and actually ask what people want from us, from all the different... age groups and types of people...*

Overall, this sense of urgency in terms of gaining a better understanding of users' needs, and widening access to a broader audience, comes through in respondents' comments as strongly as the sense of pride in, and commitment to, high quality standards in surveying, recording and preserving the material.

Having said this, while in the interviews I did not encounter any particularly dissenting voice on widening access as a strategic priority for RCAHMS, some of the respondents do nevertheless report on an element of polarization within the institution:

*... there's modernizers... and there are... people who want to keep the flame...*

*... in the Commission there are almost two trains of thought, one very academically-based, ... and the Education & Outreach point of view [where it is felt that] we need to be reaching out to as wide an audience as possible...*

It is clear, however, that change is what drives the agenda:

*it's work in progress ...hum... you convince some of the people... others remain to be convinced...and some people are never going to be convinced*

### **3.1.3 Users, learning, education**

It is interesting to note that in the discourse around access, users and their relationship with the institution, an element of ambiguity or, better, complexity, emerges around RCAHMS' supposed educational role.

Indeed, both in my conversations with the interviewees and in re-examining interview transcripts, it proved somewhat difficult to gain a clear sense of respondents' understanding

of RCAHMS' role as educator, which is surprising in the light of the recent developments in the institution.

Asked specifically about RCAHMS' educational role, one respondent seems, in fact, unsure about using the term at all in relation to the institution:

*... I don't actually see it as an educational role, I see it as a provision of information for everyone ... so therefore our role is educative in its wider sense...*

There does indeed seem to be something of a terminological problem:

*...the word 'education' makes you think of something formal... I rather like the term curiosity, because I think that you can be curious in a formal sense or you can be curious in a casual sense.*

Apart from the work of the recently annexed *Scran* which is directly involved with licensing content to schools and universities, RCAHMS' educational role is, in fact, generally associated in respondents' accounts either with a tradition of academic research or with the broader task of helping the general public understand their historical environment; this rather than in terms of a more formal involvement with the educational sector:

*we've never been targeting actual schools, we've just been looking at ways in which we can put our materials into the educational domain, if you like.*

*If you look at the RCAHMS website there are no 'education' sections, which is anomalous, I think...*

In terms of pedagogy, while a clear formulation of a learning model for the institution does not emerge in any of the accounts, or in the policy documents, a preference nevertheless transpires for less traditional, non-transmissive approaches, consistent with the idea, also foregrounded in the *Future RCAHMS* publication, of promoting enjoyment rather than organizing formal learning:

*what we do is a more, looser form of learning, we've... it has a framework and a structure, but we respond to individual needs as well, which aren't necessarily box-ticking exercises...*

Rather than more formal educational aspirations in the comments of some respondents transpires, in other words, a sense of social mission, where knowledge is taken to the public at large for their improvement:

*...giving people a sense of who they are, where they are and why they are there ...*

*... to offer an opportunity to the public to be informed about their cultural heritage...to be informed of the cultural heritage... to understand more and ultimately use that understanding to understand themselves...*

An important aspect of this involves a sustained effort, through specific projects, to engage with communities around the country:

*We have projects like Scotland Rural Past which actively go out and teach people how to learn about the historic environment...*

It is interesting how, in these cases, the aim is not one of sharing with people a knowledge of the built environment based on RCAHMS' expertise, rather to equip people with the ability to gain that knowledge independently:

*the Commission...tries quite hard to have as little bias as possible... more enabling other people to carry out that research, carry out the interpretation...*

As for the formal Education and Outreach function at RCAHMS, interestingly, several respondents associate it with the recent drive for better PR and communication, both external and internal, and for general audience expansion, rather than to a greater focus on pedagogy or learning:

*the responsibility for Education & Outreach is to promote the work of the Commission...*

*... it's aligned with the communication work that goes on, with the public relations work, as I said...*

'Education' as such happens anyway, some note, across all areas of the institution:

*... education work does not only happen within E&O, it does actually spread throughout the whole organization, ...there are many people in collections and survey that are... actively engaged with education work, on the ground, with communities, or giving talk or presentations...*

The Education and Outreach unit complements this work and, where possible, extends the institution reach:

*...what I would see as educational and outreach [...] is interacting with people who don't normally use us... hum... education, life-long learners, and so on...*

In other words, the Education and Outreach unit seems to represent, for many, a catalyst for a whole range of user-focused activities which might have been happening before but in a less coordinated way, a stimulus for new initiatives for involving the public, also researching and monitoring audiences, and a clear interlocutor for the institution's new strategic objective of widening access, deeply involved, as such, with all other institutional functions.

The Education and Outreach function also symbolizes, arguably, a transformation in institutional culture and an important change in focus in terms of activities and resources; as such, it is not surprising that while there is no particular objection from respondents to pursuing a wider usership agenda, some tensions do emerge in the interviews in relation to the forcefulness with which such an agenda is being pursued, which, some feel, risks tipping the skill-set balance within the institution in ways which may not be prudent longer-term:

*...during that time I have seen potentially a change, more emphasis on education and outreach, definitely cutting back in terms of field surveys, almost to the point where field surveying is being strangled...*

*... we're in danger of having a skills drain [...] that expertise which is what RCAHMS is sort of traditionally renowned for and respected for...*

*I know that a lot of people within the Commission feel that it's begun to get to the stage, they say, of the tail wagging the dog...*

In other words, some anxieties do surface regarding the current emphasis on a more outward-facing RCAHMS, however mostly in terms of the energy and resources invested in this aspect to the detriment, some feel, of other core functions within the institution.

It must be noted, however, that, generally, such positions tend to question how the new strategic objectives are being pursued rather than whether they should be pursued in the first place, as there is definitely a consensus among respondents regarding the importance of RCAHMS' role in helping the public more on a number of fronts: providing professional

and specialist users with high quality data; helping them learn how to use such data; getting the general public better acquainted with the Commission's content; making material available to schools and academia.

As for the tools that can help RCAHMS achieve these aims, all respondents seem to agree that that technological innovation and digital media have an exciting role to play.

### **3.2 RCAHMS, Change and Digital Innovation**

All interviewees were asked to comment on their personal and professional experience of digital innovation and online practices.

With some notable exceptions, the analysis of transcripts confirms, overall, a somewhat tentative experience among most respondents in the use of social media. Most people declare to have some experience of using the web for personal and professional purposes, however, most express regret for not having greater familiarity with the new digital tools and environments. At the same time, all respondents seem convinced of the importance of digital innovation for institutions like RCAHMS. Being seen to be active through online media is, people feel, crucial in terms of credibility and relevance:

*... what Treasured Places has helped me to learn is that engaging with the public and making yourself available online is absolutely key now to being seen as a relevant organization...*

Most respondents tend to discuss digital innovation as a useful way of supporting and enhancing current institutional practices in ways which are consistent with current strategic priorities; these priorities are, as noted earlier, a stronger focus on users, improved efficiency and greater visibility.

In particular, when asked about online practices and the social web, most people associate these developments with opportunities for raising RCAHMS' profile and for reaching a wider public; in other words, as an effective PR tool:

*..., I think [the web] ... it's fundamental to what the organization does, because I think it gives me that conduit [...] to the public*



*So from a marketing perspective, why don't we have a social network plug which is focused on our audience but that you can access from any of our websites...?*

So much so that any developments relating to social media in particular tend to be associated to the work of Education and Outreach department and its PR function. As someone from this department observes, it is almost as if the social media function is entirely delegated to them:

*I don't think they [i.e. colleagues outside Education and Outreach] are particularly concerned with changes that are concerned with social media because they view that as something that happens somewhere else in the organization...*

When talking of digitization and online practices, several respondents focus the discussion on technical solutions for the improvement of content: quick and efficient delivery of data to the public, the re-packaging of content by combining different types of material, and greater interoperability within and outside the institution:

*digital technology creates an immediacy of delivery ...hum... a capability for reproduction, also quality repurposing for different uses, and a network of intercommunication between institutions overcoming geographical distance ...*

*one of the most exciting things is that you can join data up...*

As for other uses of digital technologies, together with a sense of possibility and excitement for the opportunities offered in terms of capturing, delivering and mixing data, respondents also express some concerns; some people are worried, for example, that not enough is as yet known or understood about online users:

*I think there is a slight bandwagon approach... 'new media is out there, let's use it'. ... not perhaps thinking through or researching well the impact and the implications of what that would do and how ... really also not really researching the audience...*

In other words, some seem concerned that, if the idea is to reach a different audience, work needs to go into understanding who this audience is so that it can be 'recruited' more effectively. The important issue of exclusion is also raised:

*some of the people we are dealing with are... are not the sort of people who voluntarily go out and set up a Facebook account or Twitter or, you know, even use email... it seems that RCAHMS [...] isn't playing to them in any way, and it's playing to a different audience ... you need to work with all types of audience, particularly those who have been loyal to you...*

Having said this, several people do point to new technologies also as a tool for learning more about users in general, online or offline, monitoring activities more closely, and constructing useful statistical measurements:

*Google analytics is so important to see how many searches people are doing, how many people are using us...*

*it's interesting to look at what sites people are interested in, what people are commenting on...*

A different set of concerns relate to more practical implications of greater interoperability and, more specifically, of different, collective ways of working within the institution as now supported by digitisation. The issue is one of quality control:

*Anybody in the organization now... can contribute... This is wonderful democracy and will lead to a much better site... and I say, well, not necessarily...hum... I'm all for everyone contributing, but if you don't hold on to the quality of the content and the design, then you will degrade how you are perceived...*

*... this phrase 'perpetual beta'... it's perpetually not what you want it to be... and I kind of think that the idea of continual change is fine but it can be an excuse for continually not doing the work...*

The question of quality becomes especially interesting when the discussion touches on the opportunity now offered to members of the public to make a personal contribution to RCAHMS' original collections in the form of new information, comments or photographic material:

*I think it is a very tricky problem this user-generated content... we have a record, a collection which is supposedly very... hum... very rigorous, very high quality...*

*yeah, I think there's definitely a need... to maintain the integrity of the collections and the ...hum... the quality of the information that we put out ... a separation perhaps between user-created content that has been, that has not been verified by the Commission staff, and the content that we perhaps receive from trusted users...*

*public involvement in the building of the record... requires a lot of work from people from the organization to visit sites, to validate the records that are coming in and to work with volunteers so that they know that the quality of the information is of the kind of standard that would be acceptable and the records are accurate...*

*one thing I was worried that might happen is just lists and lists of comments that said 'Oh, I got married here, it's really pretty here', which is valuable in itself, but wouldn't necessarily add to anybody's knowledge...*

Indeed, talking about *Canmore's* new interactive facilities one respondent actually observes:

*now any old idiot can put any old thing ... well, not an idiot but.. People can add anything that they want, and it can be inaccurate, it can be entirely wrong and who's to know? ... is that really what the Commission wants?... there is always this 'Oh, new technology is marvellous!' and actually perhaps the thinking-through hasn't been quite... has been a bit too... kind of starry-eyed...*

In spite of some notable concerns about the risk of compromising the quality of the original collection, most respondents recognize, however, that there are a lot of potential benefits in embracing user contributions, and that there is indeed great interest outside the institution in becoming involved:

*... this experiment with web 2.0 in terms of Canmore, I think it's really displayed that people are really keen to share their images and information with us... whereas before ... it was very one way...*

And several people do remark also on some really interesting material coming in:

*... there's been somebody commenting, I think, on a distillery, he used to work in that distillery, he's been adding captions to the photos saying exactly what process happened in each building, somebody has looked at photos of a forge and named the apprentices working in there and what they were doing. And that's just absolutely brilliant, that's what's it's there for...*

*the Commission is like a core and people are plugging more into that... essentially almost doing the job that we are doing...*

It is, fundamentally, an issue of balance, as one respondent suggests:

*... I think the big division is this idea of user content and official RCAHMS content and hum... how you value those without demoting user content into being secondary...*

Finally, there are some realistic concerns relating to a different kind of loss of control, this time to do with data ownership and copyright:

*... copyright is the real issue [...] we have a lot of collections which aren't our copyright, [...] throwing it all online is a problem... it's quite limiting in many, many ways...*

*just because something is in the public domain, or accessible to the public, it doesn't mean that the public own it...*

*I do think that copyright is copyright, and... and not everything is necessarily free... hum... but again... access doesn't... hum... there doesn't need to be money involved, it's just not necessarily have to be thrown out there into... into the wild...*

Lack of control on the release of institutional content on the web is seen, by some, also as a potential threat to institutional identity and long term survival:

*if all the material is entirely free and available, somebody, ... could take ... the entire reason for the organization to be existing, and do something entirely different with it...*

Control is, in other words, a crucial consideration for some:

*... it has to be well thought out and we have to extend our boundaries in a very thoughtful manner...*

*... I think that everything needs to be accessible to the general public, but yes, in a controlled manner...*

Equally interesting, however, is that much as there is a clear awareness of the possible risks involved in losing some control, and in spite of some anxieties and concerns, there appears to be in RCAHMS a fundamental determination to push on with change, learning from experience rather than trying to anticipate all solutions. *Treasured Places*, the opening of *Canmore* to user contributions and other initiatives do all point to this.

This is not surprising as RCAHMS has, as a senior member of staff explains, a proud tradition of risk-taking and of breaking with traditional patterns, particularly in relation to technology:

*When we first started doing computerization in the 1990s, and I was giving lectures at conferences saying, 'We are going to put all this stuff online', it was 'Oh, how can you do that? it's got mistakes in it', Hard luck, you know [laughs], warts and all it's going out there, if it's got mistakes, we'll correct the mistakes, we are not a perfect organization, it doesn't matter that there are mistakes. But there was a big debate about that, 'oh, people might use it and you might get blamed and sued for having wrong information, people taking wrong decisions'. Of course, it's never happened...*

Still, it might be argued that, while keen to embrace technology in a very public way again, the inevitable anxieties which come with it translate into an instinct to manage and control innovation in ways which make it fit in, wherever possible, with familiar analogue practices, opting for an approach which takes from technological innovation what is seen as useful to the institution, rather than combining the steep technical learning curve with a further, more radical re-assessment of its overall purpose and meaning. As one respondent puts it:

*... I think the organization has always been really good at harnessing technology for the key things that we are doing, what we are not so good at, is when we are trying to do something slightly different, to get to grips with that and drive it forward, and I think that this web interaction throws up so many different questions...*

### **3.2.1 A different perspective**

Overall, as shown in the analysis above, at the time of the investigation there was at RCHMS a predominant perspective on digitality, at least in this study's interpretation: while most people seem aware of the potential for greater transformation in relation to the rise of a new digital culture, the focus tends to remain on what can be achieved by harnessing the power of this technology to improve on existing practice.

Having said this, it is important to report briefly on another perspective which, albeit far less predominant in the overall discourse as captured in the interviews, still emerges in some of the conversations with staff. Stemming from different experiences, this is a perspective which seems less informed by an interest in harnessing technology for the delivery of specific institutional objectives, either to extend its reach or protect it from possible dangers; rather, it draws from the recognition of a different kind of experience, a new brand of connectedness and a different way of relating to people and to knowledge as intrinsic

features of an emerging digital culture. One respondent comments on the transformative potential of such developments as follows:

*over the next few years as we look back, in 20/30 years time, it will seem like an absolutely enormous change...*

There are also comments on the potentially different quality of the experience of engaging with RCAHMS' material in new digital environments:

*... looking at what the nation's got, flying through valleys and seeing their finds and pieces of archaeology.. that is... such a seductive experience compared with trying to work out the alphabetical box storage system within the search room to find a pile of photographs...*

Some people recall coming into contact through serendipitous online encounters with artefacts and ideas which are unfamiliar but interesting, in spaces which do not foreground the source of the material but where the experience is nevertheless meaningful:

*the National Archive in Germany has put a lot of their stuff on Wikimedia Commons ... and I was just browsing through these hundreds of photographs of ... hum... you know, wartime Germany and things, which I wouldn't necessarily think to go and look at..., but I still enjoyed it, engaged with it...*

They report on the experience of being stimulated into thinking about things in different ways:

*through Twitter... you often get access to information that you might not have thought of before... it might encourage you to do something that is outside the Internet that you might not have done [...] to form an opinion on something...*

*...there's a wonderful image... a fort in the borders [...] and of course I look at that and immediately think 'fort', you know, 'pre-historic fort'...But somebody blogged that and said, 'What an interesting photograph, it looks like a crocodile' ...and I would never have thought about it like that...*

They recognize the opportunities for collective engagement and discussion which now exist in digital spaces:

*You don't put your own photos up on Flickr for you to look at them, you put them up there for people to talk about them, have a discussion, that discussion might be, oh, what a lovely picture, or might be my granny was born in that house...*

Also, some people seem to relish the opportunity to bring their expertise to contexts which are not directly related to their professional context:

*There's a... guy, he has a blog where he put up some pictures and one of them really caught my attention. It was from a glass plate negative [...] it was of a woman and a baby, and he explained that the glass plate negative had paper masking [...] so that all you could actually see was the baby, and he had then removed this paper and digitized it. And there was then a huge amount of discussion... about why that was done... but coming from a curatorial point of view, I felt, I kind of know why they do that [...] we have hundreds of plates upstairs which have paper masking areas that are of no interest. It's Photoshop... for the Victorians...*

From a professional perspective, some respondents point to new ways of extending one's expertise by connecting with a wider online community of practitioners:

*I would probably be also Googling exhibition blogs, and find out what other people have done... I think it's a really powerful professional tool...*

It is interesting to note how, in these perspectives, the focus tends to be on the live experience rather than on the creation of resources to be used longer-time:

*I would definitely like to see encouragement to all staff to be operating online at some level [...] so that if you are starting a project, you also start a blog. But then also equally not trying to see these things, 'Oh, we now have to archive that blog'... You put it up, you leave it there you know...*

It is also interesting to see how experiences such as the ones reported by some respondents have the potential of bringing together professionals and the wider public in new ways:

*so it was quite interesting how they talked... through the stages of the conservation, the mounting, the framing, I mean... it wasn't incredibly detailed but still... it gives you a flavour of the behind scenes work... I think it's also exciting for the public to know that...*

For example, talking about a history curator from another organization and his blog, a respondent observes:

*it's very popular, it gets tweeted about regularly, hum, you know, it really engages and catches people's imagination, but these again are not necessarily people who would go to the museum...*

There is certainly, in some of these accounts, a sense that RCAHMS could usefully engage in new forms of dialogical exchanges.

*... for example , with the Commission, encouraging people to discuss images, to talk about them, to give information about them... we saw with Treasured Places when there was a commenting element on those images, people were very keen to kind of tell their story...*

People are conscious, however, that this would involve a change in the institution's traditional role:

*... and again this is not necessarily information that... it's quite ephemeral information, it's actually quite personal information, so... the role of the Commission wouldn't necessarily be one to curate that information, but to provide a forum for it ...*

*I've noticed that the thing that is most successful is when you have someone who is actively commenting and has a different take on things... can kind of throw new light on it, interpret things differently....people can then follow and engage with, and you need someone who can stimulate it and start it*

Interestingly, it is the actual engagement value rather than any measurable outputs that, again, is foregrounded in some of these comments.

*So there is a really important role for us to sort of moderate that... you want to encourage people to engage, and the engagement in itself, people contributing something, is something they enjoy in itself, even if no one ever looks at that, just the act of publishing something.*

With the recognition of the potential for a new brand of engagement in virtual spaces come, however, the feeling that the institution might not be ready for the experience:

*for an organization is quite difficult, because it's very much a personal.... social networking is very personal, is about... people's experience, people's thoughts on things... that's something that's a bit scary for an organization that works very institutionally...*

Some people are unsure about whether the right voice, a tone appropriate to the new environments, could be found:



*it's also difficult to find the voice that kind of communicates, because... who does it? And where does it come from within the organization, because these are all personal voices, and the institution's voice doesn't really chime with people...*

And, fundamentally, while appreciating the potentially interesting nature of different forms of engagement, it is still, for some, back to issues of controlling and managing an institutional persona which some expect as having to be ultimately unified and consistent:

*the other side of giving a more personal take is just harder because you have so many voices within the organization, you can't find a unifying voice... we have a very different take on things... and we are interested in different things, and it's quite a wide ranging organization, so how do you harness that?*

The concern, in other words, is again about the risk of fragmentation, misrepresentation and loss of credibility and authority. And yet, some do recognize that an approach which seeks to control the message going out might be entirely missing the point:

*the web is not 'this is how this organization is doing things', but 'this is the trouble we had in opening these boxes', and it's real life, personal...*

There is, however, also some uncertainty in some quarters about institutional relevance and the ability of an organization like RCAHMS to stimulate real user engagement:

*we are all rushing off to do this because that's the way we see things going, but do we have the right kind of thing to say that these people want to engage with?*

Again, what emerges in these comments is a lingering tendency to see online participation as an institutional task which needs to be carefully crafted and which must produce measurable results:

*you have to be original, different, a bit quirky, you've got to capture someone's imagination, because they've got to come back...*

At the same time, people's reaction is mixed, there is a sense of uncertainty, an understandable lack of confidence together, however, with an intuition of new potential; very much evidence, as it were, of thinking in progress:

*Maybe... maybe we don't have to have a voice, but maybe we do and maybe there's a way in which we can do it that can be relevant...*

People have seen it done elsewhere:

*I have seen organizations where... curators can individually comment on their take on things, on what happens, and that can be very successful, but they do have a very personal voice and personal take on things and they seem to have the freedom to be able to do that...*

*...it's authors, and it's individuals, and it's their take on it, and it's not always about agreeing with what the institution is doing, it's about even being able to say 'I don't really agree with this' and it's about to sort of deal with that...*

People are, however, not sure if the conditions are ripe for this kind of experience in an institution like RCAMHS:

*... I think that's difficult getting that balance... lots of people in the organization have interesting things to say but no one knows quite how to do it within the new setup... there's already strict editorial guidelines and there's a strict way of how you do things, you don't put things on the web unless it's been checked by at least the Operations Manager and gone through, you know, by someone else, before it goes out and live...*

Some feel it is still early days, not just for RCAHMS:

*... there are new transformative possibilities in digital media which are still to emerge and I don't know the extent to which it has found its own grammar, its vocabulary,... these things are still evolving and the social web is still in the process of creating itself just now...*

Some, however, are anxious to see progress in this area:

*technology, and things like wikis, have been really underused so far, and has a lot of potential, is something that we should really be exploring here at RCAHMS, and it's kind of talked about in meetings but...*

There are certainly mixed feelings about the solutions adopted in recent projects, particularly in *Canmore*. While some are concerned about it being too accessible to non-expert users:

*the input of users is not controlled or patrolled in any way...*

most respondents are, on the contrary, finding *Canmore* not accessible enough:

*I think it's better than it was... but I think we have a long way to go... if you actually want to search Canmore I think it's difficult and impenetrable.*

*if I want to do anything beyond a simple text box search I have to click four times...*

*I don't like the fact that you have to put your images on the Commission's photostream, because I think people ... it prevents you from actually tapping... [...] tapping into existing Flickr communities...*

*we are not really engaging with Flickr, we just happen to use it [...] it's bolted on to the system...*

*I think that we present the information in a very rigid structure...*

*the attempt to implement web 2.0 was far from being ideal..., and it ended up being 'we must have web 2', let's put it in place, without really considering how we could open up Canmore to user needs ... yes, it is, definitely a missed opportunity...*

Some find that *Canmore* in reality constitutes less of a departure from traditional practices than one might have hoped:

*I think it could have been a bigger step [...] because we are still, I think, only reaching a very small portion of the potential audience for the information that we hold...*

People, however, also recognize that there are objective constraints relating to time and resources, and that *Canmore* nevertheless reflects a necessary learning curve for the institution:

*it is not the way we envisaged it when we were doing the redevelopment but because of other factors of time, expediency... and everything else, that's what we ended up with...*

*it was perhaps for the organization a necessary step ... a lot of the people here aren't... involved... with social media, and getting to this stage [...] is probably important enough...*

To conclude, the views reported in this last section reflect an arguably more exploratory take on digital innovation than the more instrumental approach discussed earlier. Importantly, these views are not all held, as one might expect, by younger members of staff, more familiar with social media. Rather, albeit in different tones, a sense of possibility emerges in accounts from individuals from the very opposite ends of the institutional

hierarchical spectrum, in a combination of intuitive vision at one end, and personal, hands-on experience of every day engagement with digitality at the other. As one senior respondent, indeed, observes, talking about the web:

*it changes the way that we look at the whole way that we work... I think that the future is going to be digital.*

## **4. Conclusion**

The study of *Canmore* showed how RCAHMS is experimenting concretely with new ways of engaging its users through the integration of interactive digital solutions into its online environments. In the study's interpretation *Canmore* was found to embody an approach which combines a willingness to embrace new ways of working with the public with a tendency on the part of the institution to control the process of engagement by anchoring it to familiar practices. In other words, the study observed an approach to digital practices which focuses on potential outcomes in terms of improvements to institutional holdings, greater efficiency and public reach; this rather than the pursuing of more radical and, arguably, more risky, opportunities for creative dynamics where the emphasis be placed on the engagement process, rather than its outcomes, and where the balance of power and control on the experience is more emphatically re-negotiated in favour of users.

In this chapter, through an analysis of corporate literature and of staff members' accounts, I complemented the study of *Canmore* with an exploration of the features of RCAHMS' discourse on and around digitization and online practices against the background of more composite narratives of institutional change and innovation.

The study of the documents shows RCAHMS as an institution undergoing an important process of transformation. Key to this is a willingness to embrace a new approach to the sharing of cultural content which looks beyond a purely academic, specialist usership, with the institution casting itself in a role of cultural mediator for all, connecting people with the history of the built environment and with the meanings inscribed in its legacy. The important shift which arguably characterizes such departure from earlier practices involves a move from a procedural, content-focused orientation to a more open, user-facing perspective. Just as importantly, there is also a determination to construct and articulate a

strong and consistent institutional message to the outside world, a message which is, presumably, to be clearly understood across the full spectrum of RCAHMS' stakeholders, namely its current and potential users, whether specialist or the general public, government, the cultural heritage sector at large and, of course, RCAHMS' staff.

The analysis and interpretation of transcripts from the interviews which involved RCAHMS' representatives from different areas of the institution fundamentally suggest that, overall, staff are on message on most of the strategic priorities which the institution articulates in its *Future RCAHMS* corporate plan. There are anxieties relating to the way in which some of the changes are being implemented and about the speed of change, however it seems clear that the aims of widening access, forging a closer relationship with users and ensuring relevance and higher visibility for the institution strongly resonate with RCAHMS' staff members.

More interestingly for this study, the analysis of the different sources shows the casting of technological innovation in a pivotal role within the broader institutional change process, supporting and securing the delivery of key strategic objectives, namely the reaching of wider audiences, a higher profile and exposure, sleeker interoperability, greater efficiency and better content. Keywords in the discourse around digital innovation are 'harnessing', 'capturing', 'delivering', 'measuring', 'promoting', and 'hit counts'.

In this perspective, users are, indeed, shifted centre stage, however, importantly, and as already observed in *Canmore*, moving along charted territories which are carefully constructed and controlled by the institution.

As for new authorship opportunities potentially afforded by the new digital environments, there is a lingering notion among representatives of the institution of an elusive common goal of creating a consistent, unified, appropriate institutional voice for communicating with new online interlocutors; a task which is seen as challenging and problematic.

On the contrary, new authorship opportunities are being opened up for users, as they are invited to contribute through new online channels, and the value of tapping into the knowledge of 'trusted users' is, indeed, recognized by RCAHMS staff. However, these

contributions are being sought fundamentally with the aim of augmenting and improving the original collection in a spirit of efficiency and shared effort.

About such new material, relief is often expressed by respondents in relation to its remarkable good quality, together with a determination to protect the original content from possible contamination, a position which, in a perspective of valuing outputs over process, is perfectly sensible and necessary.

In the institutional discourse as interpreted through this study's analysis, less emphasis appears to be placed, instead, on the potential for greater creative disruption as brought about by digitality. RCAHMS' corporate literature, for example, does not refer to the implications for the institution of an online dimension which is independent of RCAHMS' immediate sphere of influence. And, while specifically foregrounding education and technological innovation, there is no reference in these texts, nor in the interviewees' comments, to a need to reassess the fundamental meaning and value of engaging with cultural content, or of what it means to educate and to learn in the light of different types of relationships and dynamics now afforded by digitality.

Having said this, this study does detect an underlying interest, in some quarters, in some of the further-reaching implications of digitality. RCAHMS' participation as partner in this collaborative doctoral award does, for one, testify to this. Indeed, as discussed earlier, among the many comments from respondents confirming and reinforcing a focus on technological innovation seen as a means to an end, there are also allusions, here and there, to a more deeply transformative quality to digitality, and an interest in the opportunities this lends for a change of a different nature for RCAHMS and institutions like it.

Such transformation is not described in terms of traditionally measurable gains – more people, more content, more control, more speed – rather, in terms of a different quality to the engagement, more varied, less predictable, unscripted; more risky, perhaps, but only if traditional parameters of risk are adhered to.

In this perspective, online users are not necessarily 'trusted', often they are, in fact, described as completely unknown and yet valued for their insights and for bringing to the

table different perspectives. The digital environments talked about are not under the control of the institution, on the contrary they often exist by virtue of the merging of different discourses; there is no 'institutional voice' to be constructed; and what the institution might actually get out of this at the end of the process seems rather to depend on individual participants' sensitivity and autonomous interpretation. Also, the cultural artefact which might emerge from these engagement dynamics might be very different from the more familiar ones, its value inscribed in the experience, certainly un-collectable, not really for the archiving.

Such new forms of engagement might demand that a vision for the future of cultural heritage institutions be predicated on a fundamental rethink of the overall learning model underpinning their practices, crucial to securing continuing relevance and usefulness at a time of far-reaching cultural and technological change. Such learning model would need to set as an important goal that of facilitating dialogue in a global community of learners, both on institutional sites and on external ones; and that, rather than as solely in terms of measurable outputs, user-generated content be embraced as an important catalyst to engagement and inquiry.

To conclude: the aim of this part of the study was to gain and articulate an ethnographic picture of the RCAHMS' experience of, and reaction to, digital innovation, built up with insights from an ongoing association with the institution and through an exploration of the discourse around digitality as found in official documents and in the accounts of individual members of staff at a particular point in time. This exploration has offered useful glimpses into a culture-sharing group with common patterns of values, behaviours, beliefs and language; it has also revealed, in places, inevitable tensions at a time of change and transformation as a resilient analogue tradition becomes implicated with new kinds of cultural practices.

Different perspectives do seem to coexist within RCAHMS: one, which is most widely shared, reflects its resilience as a traditionally constituted organism (Parry, 2007), an institution which, consciously focused on maintaining authenticity and cultural authority is, by necessity and design, 'a 'controlled environment', both intellectually and physically' (Parry, 2007, p. 102, emphasis in the original); the other is a view as yet less predominant,

but passionately held, which is instead more tuned-in into the emerging of new cultural practices as mediated by digitality. These practices are not there necessarily to improve the position of the institution as currently constituted but have, rather, the capacity to change it in unpredictable and interesting ways (Poster, 2001, p. 3). In this latter perspective, institutions might choose, as Parry suggests, to ‘assimilate new media, not just into their practice but into their very definition and sense of purpose’, willing to be ‘recoded’ in terms of their role, function and provision, of the notion of object, visit and collection and, crucially, even down to the construction of their authority (Parry, 2007, pp. 138-139).

At the heart of these different perspectives lies, arguably, a different interpretation of the notion of access to cultural content as granted, shared, or gained in digital territories; of what interactivity actually means in situations of potential multi-vocality and collective meaning making around such content; of the value of authenticity both of the artefacts but also of the experience of engagement itself; and, ultimately, of the real implications of a power shift along the institution-user axis, seen either as a threat to the common good or, conversely, as desirable evolution.

While the coexistence of different interpretations of digitality can constitute an opportunity for useful creative tension, an important question is how institutions can tap into such tension and ensure that it does not create situations of unspoken polarization where anxieties and misunderstandings prevail due to a lack of clarity, and where opportunities for a useful and meaningful exchange and creative exploration become stifled or altogether missed.

I turn to this question in Chapter 7.



## Chapter 7

### Different Participation models and an Analytical Framework

In this chapter I draw from my exploration of RCAHMS' narrative ideals, practices and objects and from my interpretation of the institution's experience of engagement with digitality, to reflect on broader theoretical implications.

In particular, I consider the features of different models of online participation and engagement with and around cultural heritage content as emerged from the investigations conducted for this study. I then extrapolate from these to propose a framework for analysis, a set of conceptual dimensions and questions which institutions might find useful as they grapple with the opportunities and challenges presented by digital innovation.

#### 1. Different Models of Participation

In the thesis I investigated and discussed different patterns of participant engagement with and around cultural heritage content online as observed in RCAHMS' *Canmore* and in the *Commons* on Flickr. In particular, I reflected on how the experiences in these spaces resonate with three potential paradigm shifts foregrounded in my earlier discussion of digitality and museums; these concern, respectively, a re-negotiation of the notion of user-centrality as traditionally understood in museum practice in the light of participants' access to qualitatively different territories of engagement; new authorship opportunities emerging from online collaborative creative practices; and the rise of new types of digital heritage artefacts from these practices challenging traditional conceptions of authenticity and cultural authoritativeness.

*Canmore* and the *Commons* present, in principle, a number of important similarities: in both spaces cultural artefacts traditionally looked after by a heritage institution potentially get to fall in the hands of online users in ways which go beyond mere consultation and which

allow for intervention, contribution and which, more generally, support personal as well as collective engagement. Both environments also involve collaboration between heritage institutions and a mature social media environment and community, *Flickr*, potentially opening up the artefacts to a different and composite public; as such, at the time of their implementation, both developments represented a departure from more established traditional institutional practices.

As the thesis discussed, however, while there are similarities, the environments present also some fundamental differences. These concern both the cultural premises which led to their creation and the practices and conventions which are inscribed in their design, the invisible ‘architecture of practice’ (Manovich, 2001, p. 49) which, as the study goes on to show, inevitably ends up informing and structuring the experiences of the users who engage with them.

More specifically, *Canmore* and the *Commons* were found to reflect two distinct models of online participation and engagement with cultural heritage content. Respectively, one is a model where access to institutional collections is granted to online users within an architecture which could be described as of ‘containment’; this involves ‘tolerating and accommodating’ digitality, which is harnessed for the enhancement/improvement of existing practices, mostly channelling digital innovation into greater interoperability and the delivery of measurable outputs. The other is a model which, instead, involves the release of original content outside institutional territories, admitting ‘disaggregation’, active participation in social dynamics not managed or controlled by the institution, enabling a process of serendipitous engagement and learning through unfamiliar modes of online participation and meaning making.

Importantly, the two environments were also found to differ in the way they support or stifle the potential for transformation as characterized in the paradigm shifts foregrounded in the thesis. I elaborate on these aspects in the sections which follow below.

## 1.1 Access versus Release, Containment versus Disaggregation

*Canmore* was originally created, and has always existed, as a component of RCAHMS' online presence; indeed, while upgraded and enhanced with web 2.0 functionalities, conceptually and physically it remains very much located within the institution's wider virtual architecture, and under its control and jurisdiction. Accessing *Canmore* and engaging with its artefacts means engaging with authentic and authenticated material, the material which lends RCAHMS its ultimate credibility and authority as a heritage institution. Much of this material is also subject to copyright restrictions and RCAHMS has a legal duty to protect it and safeguard it.

If only to be seen and not touched, this content can, however, be added to, as long as this is done safely and carefully. To ensure this is the case, a system was constructed which is predicated on both granting and managing public access and contribution to *Canmore*, a dual function which, as discussed earlier in the thesis, translates visually and structurally into a gridlike page design and into a strict compartmentalization of original and unauthenticated content. There is an extra dimension to the *Canmore*'s territory, one which involves a space outside RCAHMS' control, namely the area on Flickr where user-contributed images are stored. However, as the study showed, this performs as little more than a storage space, one which, curiously, functions as a reinforcement rather than a relaxing of the risk management effort. So, while there is an opening into a potentially qualitatively different territory, in *Canmore* there is no fundamental switch in the locus of engagement, no disruption in the relationship between the user and the institution: the user remains at the centre of the action, undoubtedly empowered with new authorial opportunities, however, the action is very much controlled by the institution.

Conversely, on the *Commons* artefacts are released into a territory which lies outside institutions' official online spaces and beyond its control. Links with the originating institutions do provide a two-way channel between institutional territories and the *Commons* space; however, it is quite possible for users to engage with the artefacts without having any contact with the organization where the objects originally reside. Artefacts land in this space as part of the original collections as historically created; they also carry the institutional branding which documents and guarantees their authenticity at source. Crucially, however, as they are not subject to copyright, on the *Commons* artefacts can be 'touched', getting to

act not only as pieces of a shared heritage patrimony but also as catalysts of social engagement and creative effort. As such, they often get covered in notes and tags, copied, changed and displaced. Indeed, through user tagging, annotating and ‘appropriating’, the artefacts can potentially become conceptually detached from their contexts of origin, the institution and its collections, liable to resurface as part of some other grouping on Flickr originated through tag searches, where they may well be making unforeseen types of contribution.

## **1.2 Tolerance versus Active Engagement, Interoperability versus Conversation**

A study of user engagement with and around objects in the two environments showed interestingly different dynamics at play. *Canmore* showed impressive results in terms of the quality of the new data and material acquired, and the calibre and expertise of the participants-contributors. Also, the absence of forms of behaviour which might threaten the integrity of the collections ultimately rewarded RCAHMS’ trust in its users, proving as unfounded initial anxieties expressed by staff about a potential influx of irrelevant or inappropriate contributions to the archive.

However, when examined against the three paradigm shifts foregrounded in the thesis (p. 33), *Canmore* was found to be missing out on those opportunities for radical innovation which the meshing of different discourses and practices in less restrictive online territories can arguably offer. User participation patterns were found to replicate established analogue practices, with the equivalent of ‘trusted volunteers’ improving the archive with new data or using the space as a safe repository for their own material. On the one hand, in the new ‘web 2.0 *Canmore*’ users do move centre stage by being allowed to reach into the archive in new ways; on the other, the environment’s architecture ensures that any potential risk of disruption is pre-empted and the institution maintains full ownership of the process. Authorship practices were, overall, found to mirror traditional practices: while, in theory, users are offered the opportunity to write, comment, add images, explore, they were seen to be striving to conform to traditional archival styles, taking no advantage of new dialogical opportunities. Nor did the institution seem to find a reason or motivation to address users publicly or engage in any form of collective meaning making. As a result, no instances of merging of visual and textual elements were observed, and no examples of disruption of the

institutional story-line were revealed, as artefacts remain safely inside their record, with new data and information fundamentally coming in to fill existing gaps.

Conversely, on the *Commons* the study observed a highly dialogical quality to participants' interaction around the Library of Congress' collections, many instances of user creative engagement with the artefacts and with the discourse around them, and a role of participant and interlocutor emerging for the institutional custodian of the artefact; this, as well as the contribution of useful new information and data about individual artefacts and collections. As members of Flickr, users were seen abiding by its rules; however, a sense of ownership of the territory is also detected in the way users relate to the environment, to each other and, importantly, to the artefact they come to engage with.

A power shift, in other words, was observed, one which casts users and institutions in qualitatively different roles in relation to the experience of engagement with the artefacts: these are not 'museum' users or visitors to the Library of Congress; nor does the institution co-ordinate or control the experience, rather it joins in and contributes to it, engaging in public dialogue with participants. As such, while the implications of delegating the hosting to a social media environment such as Flickr need to be also considered, the experiences as observed on the *Commons* did appear to stimulate an interesting transformation in participation and meaning-making dynamics, supportive of collective engagement and dialogical exchanges.

### **1.3 Contrasting Perspectives**

In this study's interpretation, *Canmore* and the *Commons* embody different perspectives on the purpose behind the creation of online environments for active public engagement with heritage content, on the role envisaged for users, curators, the institution and its artefacts in these environments and, more broadly, different interpretations of the value of the experience itself as a whole.

The original purpose articulated by the Library of Congress on launching the *Commons* on Flickr was clear: guided by experts from the hosting environment, the aim was to experiment, share, risk very little and, importantly, learn. As such, the approach represents a

departure from traditional museum online formats, conforming instead to Flickr's tried and tested participation dynamics. The artefacts get to perform not only as data, but also as social objects around which conversations happen, functioning as key mediating artefacts and engines of different socially networked experiences (Engeström, 2005; Conole *et al*, 2008). Their authenticity remains a value; however, because of lack of copyright restrictions this acts as an incentive rather than a constraint; and as simple objects, they can be transformed and re-interpreted.

On the *Commons* the action takes place in a space where user active engagement is a basic premise; users are seen to perform a wide range of roles, not especially, however, as museum visitors or volunteers; they are commentators, experts, photographers, Flickr members; they enter into a dialogue with each other and with curators, the latter involved as expert participants, with no real say, however, in how the space is managed. The institution takes a step back, returning on the scene to reflect on and learn from what has taken place in a space which is fundamentally outside its control; in some case, as with the Library of Congress, also rewarding users along the way with public demonstration of gratitude (p. 134).

In other words, while maintaining its authoritativeness, on the *Commons* the institution becomes a participant/contributor, in an environment which is not its own. This environment, in turn, is itself changed through the experience, as the quality of interaction on Flickr on the *Commons* is observed to be somewhat different from what has been happening elsewhere in the space, possibly because of the particular nature of the artefacts involved.

As the literature on the *Commons* shows, the experience also acts as a catalyst for different institutions to come together and reflect, from their own perspective, on different lessons learnt, as they continue to take the experience seriously; importantly, not only in terms of its demonstrable potential for collections improvement but also in the light of the particular quality detected in the engagement process, sufficient to suggest the need for a collective rethink of traditional evaluation metrics deemed not adequate to understand fully the meaning and value of the type of online engagement witnessed in the new environments. All in all, in terms of purpose and its articulation through the architecture of practice put in

place, the *Commons* experience emerges as transformative, open-ended and, generally, well received.

With *Canmore* things are somewhat more complicated as, as found by this study, it appears to embody a tension between, rather than a resolution of, different aspirations. As the study discussed, its purpose is, from the outset, a mix of different elements. Following the positive experience of the first phase of *Treasured Places*, (p. 140), *Canmore* promises connection, a conversation, engagement; instead, it fundamentally delivers a data input system. While embracing a rhetoric of digital innovation and outward-facing approaches, ease of access and flexibility, *Canmore* proves still rather laborious to use; while it is meant to embrace a wider community of online users, it is found to reinforce, all in all, analogue patterns of participation and usership. Almost all artefacts, original or new, perform fundamentally as data only; the digital space remains an archive/repository, initially for some of the material; soon for all of it, as RCAHMS moves closer to the decision to close off any access points to other web spaces – namely Flickr – thus consolidating the managing of the spaces entirely within the institutional territory. Users engage with *Canmore* and RCAHMS as trusted volunteers; curators act as editors and managers; there is no dialogical interaction among users and/or curators, with the institution remaining very much the focus of authority in a strongly branded and regulated environment. Ultimately, the integration of web 2.0 functionalities into *Canmore* proves instrumental to achieving quantifiable and measurable outcomes.

Interestingly, however, as the data from the interviews showed, while well received in some quarters, *Canmore* is found to have somewhat disappointed both those who wished it to become a sleeker, safer, technically sophisticated, digitally-enhanced interactive database, and those who were hoping to see a new type of user engagement, a different way of connecting with online communities through a thoughtful use of social media. As such, differently from what emerged from the experiences observed on the *Commons*, *Canmore* could be seen as falling short of those basic premises which, as mentioned earlier in the thesis (p. 12), Shirky identifies as common to successful online collaborative experiences, namely a ‘plausible promise’ which is followed through, an ‘effective tool’ for the coordination of participants’ activities, and an ‘acceptable bargain’ which clarifies what all concerned can expect (Shirky, 2008, p. 260).

## 2. Mapping Change

As this thesis discussed, there are many reasons for *Canmore* and the *Commons* to have been conceived and have evolved the way they did, reasons which must be understood within the particular historical, cultural and political contexts of the organizations involved. As such, the value of a contrastive analysis lies not in the opportunity it may offer for the formulation of value judgments on their particular merits as different models of participation and engagement around digital collections, rather for the chance it offers for extrapolation.

Indeed, stepping back from the specificity of the particular contexts examined, it is possible to distil from the contrastive analysis a number of conceptual dimensions which emerge from, and encapsulate, the different tendencies and tensions encountered in the empirical investigations. These are presented in Table 4 below.

<b>Environments</b>	<i>the digital space as a data repository</i>	.....	<i>the digital space as an environment for collective engagement</i>
<b>Content</b>	<i>digital heritage artefacts as data</i>	.....	<i>digital heritage artefacts as social objects</i>
<b>Users</b>	<i>online users as visitors or trusted volunteers</i>	.....	<i>online users as active participants, commentators</i>
<b>Curators</b>	<i>online curators as editors and administrators</i>	.....	<i>curators as participants, learners, expert commentators</i>
<b>Discourse</b>	<i>online discourse as monologue</i>	.....	<i>online discourse as dialogue</i>
<b>Institutions</b>	<i>the institution as locus of authority</i>	.....	<i>the institution as enabling participant/learner</i>
<b>Purpose and value</b>	<i>information delivery and measurable outcomes</i>	.....	<i>the enabling of transformative processes of engagement</i>

**Table 4**



Laid out in this way, these dimensions reflect, respectively, different interpretations of the purpose of digital **environments** which institutions create and inhabit or with which they temporarily interface; different understandings of the function of digital **content**, both institutional and as generated by users, and of the engagement dynamics around it in the new online spaces; different expectations in relation to the role of participants, both **users** and **curators** and their motivation to participate; a different quality to the **discourse** emerging from participant interaction with and around the digital artefacts; different assumptions in terms of the role of the **institution** in the online experience; and, ultimately, a different understanding of the **purpose and value** of the online experience in the wider context of the institution's cultural and educational role.

Referring back to earlier discussions of digitality and culture, within the specifics of cultural heritage practice the different set of dimensions as presented above reflect, respectively, an adherence to or, conversely, a tendency towards a break with what Poster refers to as print and broadcast media models typical of an analogue tradition (Poster, 2001, p. 16).

Depending on where they are positioned along the axes which connect the different dimensions, institutional practices will reflect situations where the pre-digital producer/receiver model is, respectively, supported or disrupted; where many-to-many communication is blocked off or, conversely, enabled; where 'the simultaneous reception, alteration, and redistribution of cultural objects' is restricted or, instead, made possible; and where the communicative action is located in or, conversely, dislocated from the institution's territory (Poster, 2001, *ibid*).

More specifically, in terms of those paradigm shifts discussed in the thesis, depending on where they are located along the axes connecting the different dimensions, institutional practices might be found, respectively, to tend towards preserving the traditional hierarchy in the relationship between users and institutions, or be supportive of a shift in the overall position of the user in relation to the museum, its objects and its authority; authorship practices around heritage content might be found to merely replicate, or simply enhance, familiar approaches, or to be also breaking with traditional patterns of meaning-making around original artefacts, both inside and outside the institution and its collections; and the objects arising from different engagement practices might be found to be primarily a more

robust version of the authentic and authoritative institutional ‘originals’ or to be, at times, allowed also to perform as ‘original re-inventions’, problematic but also potentially rich and surprising.

Clearly, no institutional context will embody such positions as starkly as this characterization suggests. On the contrary, in each context, there will be many nuanced situations and subtle combinations of different tendencies, depending on a complex range of factors.

## **2.1 A Framework for Analysis**

The dimensions identified above were distilled from the analysis of the experiences and discourses examined in the research informing the thesis. They are not, however, offered simply as a way of unpacking some key features of different approaches to digital innovation. Rather, combined, these dimensions can provide a framework which, it is argued, may prove useful to tease out, articulate and re-assess ideological stands and intellectual positioning on digitality within individual institutional contexts.

In a perspective such as the one which informs this thesis, where it is considered important that museums create the conditions for engaging with ‘the radical, interesting and vibrant opportunities presented by digital technologies’ (Bayne *et al*, 2009a, p. 65), these dimensions are proposed, in some respects, as pointing to a direction of travel. In other words, on the left-hand side of the framework are moorings, points of departure, while on the right are open-ended destinations reached along interlinking and overlapping paths. This involves a move from institutional scenarios which reproduce analogue models through digital media, towards scenarios which, instead, reflect efforts toward a re-interpretation of roles and engagement dynamics more consistent with those typical of online sociality.

Having said this, however, it must be stressed that the main aim of proposing a framework of this kind as a tool for analysis is not, crucially, to enable the formulation of rigid qualitative judgments about institutions’ engagement with digital innovation so as to ‘move them along’ to the right-hand of the framework where the ‘promises’ of digitality will be delivered; rather, the intention is to encourage a guided reflection about, and a re-think of,

the way in which the discourse around digital innovation is framed at institutional level, in ways which, put in simple terms, ‘give digitality a chance’ in the first place. Whether this might result in a change in practices or, indeed, ideological positioning, is a different consideration altogether, as the outcomes of a process of re-assessment will always depend on many different factors, unique to the particular contexts, each bringing its own brand of ‘promises’ and ‘threats’ (Hand, 2008, p. 15).

## 2.2 Using the Framework

The value of the framework proposed above, born from the analysis of different experiences and approaches, lies, arguably, in its potential to help institutions formulate questions which are worth asking in a structured but flexible manner; this also with a view to encouraging the articulation of conflicting perspectives, tensions and barriers along a trajectory leading to a meaningful engagement with digitality.

Below is a more detailed elaboration of the nature of the different dimensions featured in the proposed conceptual framework with pointers to questions and issues that might be raised and discussed by managers and staff members using the framework to analyse current and planned digital activities. These questions and issues concern current modes of online access and interactive dynamics as enabled by the institution; they enquire about ambitions and tease out difficulties relating to these; they also explore concerns relating to situations where, with artefacts and their meanings falling in the hands of online participants, power relations within and around the institution and its objects call for re-negotiation.

<i>the digital space as a data repository</i>	.....	<i>the digital space as an environment for collective engagement</i>
<p>This dimension focuses on the specific nature of the digital environments created or enabled by an institution, and stimulates discussion on how it might support or hinder participants’ active engagement with content, the institution and each other.</p> <p>In considering this dimension, stakeholders might discuss the location of the spaces in relation to the overall institutional online presence, how strongly they project the institutional identity, how accessible they may be beyond traditional usership, how secure or otherwise their boundaries. Design features and textual and visual messages inscribed in the environments might be brought into focus, considering whether they reinforce the environment’s performance as a digital data</p>		

<p>repository for original and new content, or whether they might support and encourage more varied forms of participation, serendipitous encounters beyond traditional usership, collective engagement. Tensions and existing barriers to a shift in the latter direction might be identified and discussed, considering underlying causes and possible solutions.</p>
<p><i>digital heritage artefacts as data</i> ..... <i>digital heritage artefacts as social objects</i></p>
<p>This dimension focuses on digital content, both institutional and as generated by users.</p> <p>Discussions around this dimension might involve a reflection on the role played by the institutional objects in the online experience, how the material is presented, maintained, used; whether artefacts act fundamentally as untouchable originals, a set of data whose value is inextricably linked to their authenticity and inalterability, or whether they are also able to perform as social objects, catalysts for online cognitive as well as emotional participant engagement. The process might also stimulate a reflection on the nature of new content, textual, visual or other, which is generated by online participants, both users and staff, in and around the spaces under examination; it might also encourage the identification of specific constraints which might currently prevent digital artefacts from playing more of a social role, encouraging debates around different perceptions of risk and loss or, conversely, opportunities and gains, associated with processes of content disaggregation and re-interpretation.</p>
<p><i>online users as visitors or trusted volunteers</i> ..... <i>online users as active participants, commentators</i></p>
<p>This dimension concerns the role of users and how they currently engage within the online spaces created or enabled by the institution.</p> <p>In considering this dimension, institutional stakeholders might focus on the nature of user participation as observed in the online spaces examined, whether participants tend to conform to a role of visitor, researcher, volunteer, or whether they perform in roles which break traditional museum usership patterns; also whether participants might constitute an online community, how so, its relation to the institution and implications of this. They might also encourage the exploration of different institutional perceptions on participants' motivation to engage within the environments under examination, as well as existing disincentives to participation. Potential tensions and barriers in relation to enabling more varied forms of user active participation might be identified and explored, and possible solutions discussed.</p>
<p><i>online curators as editors and administrators</i> ..... <i>curators as participants, learners, expert commentators</i></p>
<p>This dimension focuses on the role of curators or, more generally, staff members in the context of existing and planned online practices.</p> <p>It calls for a reflection on whether and in what way individual staff members become visible in the online environments in which the institution has a stake, what 'voice' or 'voices', if any,</p>

<p>emerge in the new spaces, what contribution is being made and how this might resonate or clash with the institution's broader identity and mission. Incentives to greater staff participation might be explored, as well as existing constraints, pressures and obstacles to greater engagement. Such a discussion might offer opportunities to reflect on individual experiences, compare different contexts of engagement, disseminate examples of good practice, and help bring to the surface new ideas and proposals for greater creative expression in a public forum, taking into consideration professional remits, roles and feasibility issues from a variety of perspectives.</p>	
<p><i>online discourse as monologue</i> ..... <i>online discourse as dialogue</i></p>	
<p>The nature of the overall discourse as found in the online spaces under examination is foregrounded by this dimension.</p> <p>In particular, discussions might explore whether this tends to conform to one-way forms of communication, from the institution to the user or vice versa; whether there is evidence of dialogue between users and the institution; whether this extends to users engaging collectively, where this might be deemed problematic and why. Different interpretations of the 'usefulness' of dialogical forms of discourse could be explored, examining situations where greater collective engagement is incentivized or, conversely, where it may be stifled, and how this might be changed through targeted interventions.</p>	
<p><i>the institution as locus of authority</i> ..... <i>the institution as enabling participant/learner</i></p>	
<p>This dimension encourages an examination of how the institution may be casting itself in the online spaces.</p> <p>As such it might generate discussions on how strongly the institution's presence may be felt or otherwise, and how this is achieved; of the merits of the institution acting merely as 'container' and manager of the experience versus it seeking more active forms of participation, setting itself a learning brief in relation to new forms of engagement as found in online social spaces beyond its traditional domains. As such, the discussion process might usefully probe how willing the institution's decision-makers may be to acknowledge a role for the digital beyond that of promotional tool or virtual cabinet or crowdsourcing medium. It might also test the institution's overall commitment to gaining a better understanding of digital culture through its own practices, even when this might involve a loss of control and a shift in power away from itself. Importantly, discussions might also explore different perceptions regarding the risks but also the types of gains which could derive from such shift.</p>	
<p><i>information delivery and measurable outcomes</i> ..... <i>the enabling of transformative processes of engagement</i></p>	
<p>Although appearing last, this dimension could, in fact, sit in parallel to each individual dimension, as it fundamentally informs and underpins the rationale for each shift contemplated in this framework. However, in spite of its potential conceptual ubiquity,</p>	

it is important that it be individually foregrounded as it might attract broader questions and help identify different types of institutional tensions.

This dimension encourages institutional stakeholders to consider where, on an axis as the one proposed above, an institution might be culturally and intellectually located in terms of its fundamental perspective on digitality; to what extent it may embrace a primarily instrumental perspective on digitality aiming to take advantage of digital solutions to improve existing practices, holdings and corporate communications – with all their measurable and demonstrable gains; or whether there may be a shared intuition and recognition of the potential usefulness of a cultural transformation such as that potentially mediated by online sociality. If the latter is the case, stakeholders should engage in an effort to clarify and define such usefulness, and to find ways of articulating it as a value, internally and externally. Discussions around these issues might highlight existing tensions and differences in perspective across the institution, and help identify current barriers to a shift towards approaches which recognize the value of the process of engagement in relation to the value of more readily measurable outcomes, considering ways of translating such perspective into practice.

Examined through a framework of this kind, different institutional contexts would, of course, give rise to different questions, taking the discussion in different directions.

Also, within the same institution different online initiatives might well be found to be located in different positions along the trajectories which link the various sets of dimensions, reflecting a range of orientations, aspirations and constraints. RCAHMS, as I discuss in the next section, is certainly an interesting example of this.

### **3. Re-assessing Engagement: Back to RCAHMS**

In the time that it has taken to write up this thesis RCAHMS has continued to evolve through new projects and initiatives which engage with digital innovation. Indeed, much has been happening since the launch of *Canmore*, and another doctoral thesis might be easily taken up to explore what may be described as a new, important phase in RCAHMS' digital journey: new partnerships have led to new collaborative online initiatives; further funding has been secured for new digital projects; also, greater awareness of, and confidence in, the use of digital media have become more apparent, as a number of RCAHMS staff members are now actively using social networking tools like Facebook and Twitter as part of their professional activities.

As such, RCAHMS continues to offer an interesting example of an institution which keeps evolving in the way it engages with digitality; such evolution also reflects, through a range of different activities and projects, the blossoming of different approaches, the seeds of which were glimpsed in the course of the ethnographic work conducted for this study.

In the light of the discussion above, and as a conclusion to this thesis, it might, therefore, be interesting to return now briefly to RCAHMS as a digital culture in the making, and consider some of its past, ongoing and new online initiatives, this time, however, with the benefit of the conceptual mapping tool which the work carried out for this thesis helped to construct; not least as a way of testing, if in an inevitably impressionistic manner, its potential relevance and usability.

To this purpose, I shall consider four projects which are likely to be located at interestingly different points in the proposed conceptual framework, namely: the *Treasured Places* project, phase one, launched in 2008 and concluded in 2009; *Scotland's Rural Past* (SRP), an initiative which has also recently come to its conclusion, and which is under discussion for potential future development; *ScotlandsPlaces*, a website launched in late 2010 and set to continue as a ongoing online service; and *Britain from Above*, a 4-year project launched in late 2011 and, as such, still at a relatively early stage of development.

### **3.1 *Treasured Places* (2008-2009)**

As described earlier in the thesis, the first phase of the *Treasured Places* project took place between 2008 and 2009. A particularly interesting aspect of the project involved inviting the public to cast an online vote for their favourite building or place in Scotland out of 100 RCAHMS suggested sites.

*Treasured Places* was a relatively short-lived initiative motivated by particular circumstances, namely RCAHMS' Centenary celebrations. Interestingly, however, if briefly considered through the proposed analytical framework, the *Treasured Places* project could be seen as embodying a remarkable shift away from many of those 'anchor points' located on the left-hand side of the framework towards those 'open-ended destinations' on the right: the initiative involved the creation of an online space specifically aimed at encouraging

active user engagement, where the purpose of, and motivation for, participation were clear stated; the original artefacts, RCAHMS' 100 images, were displayed fundamentally as catalysts of cognitive and emotional connection; participants were empowered by the voting initiative which cast them as potential authors through commenting and story-telling; RCAHMS staff also had the opportunity to engage in authoring activities, choosing the original images and creating the public exhibition showcasing users' contributions; importantly, in these embodied settings, contributors, and the wider public, had further opportunities to engage with the material, with each other and with RCAHMS. Importantly, while acting as enabler, RCAHMS also created opportunities for reflection on what could be learnt from the experience through a commissioned evaluation report.

As such, the *Treasured Places* project involved innovative modes of accessing and relating to institutional content; it supported novel forms of interactivity; it allowed for a re-negotiation of the value of authenticity of institutional artefacts, as personal memories became legitimate heritage pieces. Importantly, the project not only supported, but also celebrated, through a high-profile public exhibition, a shift in power relations as members of the public, not necessarily traditional RCAHMS users, became legitimized as expert and relevant commentators on the value and meaning of the Scottish built heritage.

The project is now long concluded. However, a re-assessment prompted by, and conducted through, the analytical perspective proposed in this thesis might be useful to review, in the light of subsequent initiatives, which lessons were indeed learnt from the *Treasure Places* project, and where these might have been applied, apart from *Canmore*, where, as the study showed, this yielded rather mixed results; as such, it might encourage a reflection on how some of the more successful aspects of the initiative might be better replicated or scaled up, and what barriers might have prevented or might be still preventing this from happening.

### **3.2 Scotland's Rural Past (2007-2011)**

*Scotland's Rural Past* (SRP), now concluded, was another, highly successful, award-winning RCAHMS project, also briefly discussed earlier in this thesis. The project involved the training of interested rural communities to carry out archaeological and historical surveys of their local area and collect new information and data.



Although it included the creation of a dedicated interactive website, SRP was not born as a ‘digital project’. Having said this, a reflection on its main features along the dynamic conceptual model proposed in this thesis would show that, in its general conception, the project embodied many of the values underpinning the dimensions which feature on its right-hand side: it identified spaces and created opportunities for engagement and dialogue as it brought together local communities with shared interests; artefacts were used as social objects and catalysts for group activity; RCAHMS staff members were actively and personally involved as they trained interested participants; and communities of participants became empowered through opportunities for active engagement and learning, which also included important social components, such as regular meetings and an annual conference.

As such, SRP was, indeed, a remarkable example of value placed on the enabling of engagement process as well as on measurable outcomes. This approach did not, however, extend to the digital components of the initiative, which were employed exclusively for the systematic input of the new data collected by trained volunteers into carefully designed templates, to be then submitted for consideration and verification by RCAHMS staff.

While there is no taking away from the very successful formula adopted in the project and its sound educational achievements, a question which might be raised, if the project were to be mapped against the analytical framework proposed in this thesis, concerns the barriers that pre-empted any attempt to complement each aspect of the successful cognitive and social engagement model experienced offline with one that might tap more boldly into digitality. Should the average age and inclination of participants and their limited digital literacy, as reported by RCAHMS staff, have been really enough to stop any development in that direction, or were there other constraints? If so, do these exist now, or could the legacy of SRP and its possible future evolution contemplate collaborative practices online as well as offline? If so, how might they be realized?

### **3.3 *ScotlandsPlaces* (2009 – ongoing)**

Next, it may be interesting to consider *ScotlandsPlaces*, an online initiative launched in late 2009 by RCAHMS in partnership with the National Archives of Scotland (NAS), The

National Library of Scotland (NLS) and the University of Edinburgh, with support from the Scottish Government.

*ScotlandsPlaces* is an award-winning website which was conceived and created ‘primarily for the benefit of local historians, but also for other researchers, including archaeologists, social and economic historians, genealogists, and architectural historians’ (NAS, 2011). The site enables users to search across three different national databases using geographic locations: by entering a place name or a coordinate users can search across the different collections, also using the mapping in the website to both define and refine their search. The results pages provide the data relevant to the search conducted, from each of the project partners. The site’s design does not currently envisage or support any form of user active input beyond consultation and data interrogation; hence, as it stands, *ScotlandsPlaces* represents a successful example of technical interoperability supporting professional and academic work.

If considered against each of the dimensions featured on the proposed conceptual framework, in terms of its current purpose and functionalities, the site would be found to be firmly located on the left-hand side: the space functions very much as an interactive data repository, users are visitors to the site, rather than contributors, mainly motivated by professional or research interests, institutional staff ensure the site is appropriately managed, and there is no apparent scope for different forms of engagement beyond data retrieval. The value of the site is predicated on the authoritativeness of the institutions holding the different sets of data, the flexibility with which these can be interrogated, and the efficiency with which search results are delivered.

On the one hand, a re-assessment of a site such as *ScotlandsPlaces* from a perspective of active user engagement might well be deemed not relevant, even wasteful: the website is reportedly a well-liked service for academic and professional users, winning the award for ‘most beneficial information service’ at the Association for Geographic Information (AGI) annual conference in Glasgow in 2010 (RCAHMS, 2010b). Its purpose is clear, it works well and it arguably constitutes a successful model for the sector.

On the other hand, it is interesting to note that in the introductory blurb on the RCAHMS website it is claimed that ‘everyone from novices to expert researchers can use the site to investigate local and family history in places across the nation’ and ‘make connections between the people and places of Scotland across time’, as they ‘can now search ... online for invaluable documents, records and images past and present’ (RCAHMS, 2012). If it is true that, as well as a professional focus, the site might aspire to support a more personal brand of individual and collective connection, highly resonant, incidentally, with RCAHMS’ new vision for the future, then a re-assessment of the site through a framework such as the one proposed in this thesis might be interesting.

Such a re-assessment might raise questions around different interpretations of the function and longer-term potential of the *ScotlandsPlaces* site, whether, as it stands, RCAHMS and partners might be missing out on opportunities for a different brand of personal and collective engagement in its online spaces, what the barriers and constraints may be that prevent such opportunities from being pursued, what might be the perceived risks and potential losses involved in branching out in such a direction, and what such a departure might involve. In this perspective, input from current users of the site might prove especially interesting.

### **3.4 *Britain from Above* (2011-2015)**

Finally, it may be interesting to turn to *Britain from Above*, an initiative launched in late 2011 which appears to be predicated on another model and serve a distinctly different purpose from other RCAHMS online projects examined, confirming that significantly different approaches to digital innovation can co-exist in interesting ways within the same institutional context.

Funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, and launched by RCAHMS in partnership with English Heritage and the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales, the 4-year *Britain from Above* project will share for the first time with the public 95,000 photographs, now available in digital format, taken between 1919 and 1953 and part of the *Aerofilms Collection*, one of the UK’s most significant collections of oblique aerial photography. To this aim, a website has been created to be launched in June 2012 which

will enable the public to tag and comment on photographs, upload their own images and engage through wikis. There will also be exhibitions, publications, and community engagement through workshops and local presentations (Clari and Graham, 2012).

The *Britain from Above* project is still at a relatively early stage of development, and the digital environments which are being created for it are not as yet open to the public. It might, indeed, be interesting, when this happens, to consider the nature of the environments created, their location and features, what type of use is envisaged for the content, how participation dynamics are structured in principle and so on, against the dimensions foregrounded in the conceptual map proposed in this study. It would be also equally interesting to follow the project's progress along those dimensions, to see what role the institutions involved might play over time, what users might do with the content, what might happen to it.

In other words, together with the evaluation initiatives planned for any such project, it might be interesting to consider the project more specifically from the perspective of transformation underpinning the conceptual framework proposed in this thesis, and see whether *Britain from Above* might succeed in achieving, through public engagement what is, arguably an exciting aim; namely, the transformation, through public engagement, of a collection of historical, often un-captioned photographs taken in the course of commercial survey flights, into a collection of valuable and authenticated heritage artefacts; at the same time, unleash the potential of these artefacts to act as powerful catalysts for emotional connection, new knowledge and creativity, in ways which involve a more complex re-negotiation of the value of participation and meaning-making processes for all involved.

### **3.5 A Final Word on *Canmore***

*Canmore* has also, reportedly, moved on in different directions in recent times.

Following the experience of increased interaction with the public through *MyCanmore*, a User Group was established by RCAHMS in 2011 to initiate an informal dialogue with the most active contributors. Interestingly, a request expressed by these users was to move towards submitting images directly onto RCAHMS servers rather than onto Flickr. In other

words, the request from expert users supported a further move towards strengthening *Canmore* as sole digital repository of the new material, in recognition, from their perspective, of the greater value of actively sharing these images with the national collection rather than on external spaces; a move which, from the perspective of the analytical framework proposed in this thesis, shifts *Canmore* back towards some of those anchor points on the framework's left-hand side.

At the same time, however, building on the research undertaken for this PhD, in 2011 RCAHMS obtained funding to carry out the *Taking forward a participative 21st Century Inventory* project. This project set out to explore and test ways of improving how users can access, interact with and reuse *Canmore* records. In particular, three proposals were put forward for public consultation: an API which would enable the use of RCAHMS data for innovative development of applications and websites; a new image tagging facility for users; the enhancement to the Thesaurus functionality using images from *Canmore* to represent a site type.

So, while the intervention of the User Group might have moved *Canmore* closer to the left-hand side in the conceptual framework discussed in this chapter, this latter initiative might support a future shift towards different and less predictable forms of user engagement. Again, it might be interesting to consider these developments along the different dimensions in the framework over time, and see whether and how, longer-term, they might change the way *Canmore* is used and perceived.

Finally, it may be worth reporting on an interesting incident which took place in late 2011 involving *Canmore* and RCAHMS. Hundreds of digital images, many of them taken from the RCAHMS' archive, were downloaded, without permission and with minimal reference, on a Facebook page called *Lost Edinburgh* (McLean, 2011). The site gained 20,000 followers in a matter of days along with a degree of press coverage (scotsman.com, 2011). However, as soon as they became aware of the fact, RCAHMS and other images' owners requested that the photos be removed from the site. The reason for this was that Facebook gains automatic copyright of any material uploaded to the site, something that RCAHMS was not in a position to allow without breaking its own licensing agreements in relation to the images involved.

RCAHMS' move was initially received by many as unnecessarily restrictive, leading to negative feedback on the social networking site, along with some critical press coverage of the rise and fall of *Lost Edinburgh*. However, although uncomfortable with the strong negative public reaction, once the reasons behind its actions were clarified and better understood, RCAHMS entered discussions with the *Lost Edinburgh* creators to seek a solution that could build upon the strong interest in the material, while at the same time safeguarding the intellectual property rights of the owners' images.

What is especially interesting about this incident from the perspective of this study is that it showed the remarkable effects of a temporary switch in online environment and access mode on the engagement dynamics around a set of digital objects, in this case historical photographs from *Canmore*. Albeit 'illegal', the move set hundreds of *Canmore* artefacts temporarily free of their customary digital, and legal, shackles allowing them to act beyond their traditional role of data: this arguably unleashed their potential as social objects generating great interest among online users, in many cases probably unfamiliar with their original location and function; so much so that their sudden removal triggered outrage and indignation, stemming from a deeply felt, and rather complex, sense of ownership and entitlement.

The experience revealed, in other words, the different dynamics which the material engendered when transposed in more conducive digital settings. Following the incident, RCAHMS has reportedly resolved to focus more strongly on the creation of packaged content, rather like the themes galleries which have already been appearing on its site, in order to enable the public to decide the level of information that they are interested in accessing. The incident is also considered further evidence that, as Graham suggests, *Canmore* 'would benefit from complete restructuring... to reconstruct it from a user (not a provider) perspective', an option which is 'actively being investigated' by RCAHMS (Clari and Graham, 2012, no page).

While these are certainly important considerations, and it is true that content packaging will help tackle some of *Canmore*'s structural navigation difficulties, there are, arguably, other lessons to be learnt from the Facebook incident. These resonate strongly with findings from this study's analysis of the *Commons* and are, as such, reflected in the conceptual

framework proposed in this thesis, where considerations include not only the format of the digital artefacts but also very much the nature of the territories into which it is released, the way in which users are able to relate to it, who these users are and what they might wish to do with the content, the opportunities which exist for collective engagement and the perceived value of this experience of engagement for users and the institution alike.

The incident also illustrates a situation where an institution, in this case RCAHMS, was forced through the illegal behaviour of others to learn from a direct experience of engagement with an online social environment it does not control. While, initially, it might have proved somewhat traumatic for RCAHMS, longer term the experience might well prove useful and creatively productive, and a lesson in the value of risk-taking and in the fundamental usefulness of a temporary loss of power and control which comes with venturing, as one interview respondent for this study put it, out there ‘into the wild’.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In this chapter, from the analysis and problematization of the specific experiences of online engagement examined for this doctoral study, different models of online participation and engagement with and around heritage collections and artefacts were theorized.

From here, I extrapolated a dynamic conceptual model framed around a set of dimensions. While recognizing that these overlap and are interlinked in interestingly complex ways, I proposed these dimensions as nodes in a conceptual framework for the examination of heritage institutions’ initiatives and practices involving digital innovation. The value of such framework, I suggested, lies in its potential to encourage a rethink of how institutions might frame the discourse around online practices in relation to their cultural and educational role in the digital age in a perspective of change and innovation.

In the final section in the chapter I offered a preliminary illustration of how such a framework may be employed by turning it back on RCAHMS and some of its online initiatives. Only more sustained practical applications in concrete institutional settings would, however, test to the usability and usefulness of such a conceptual tool. I return to this and other considerations in Chapter 8 which concludes the thesis.

## Chapter 8

### Concluding Remarks

In this thesis I have explored the implications for museums and their users of an emerging digital culture and of new participation and authorship practices in online spaces. I started from the assumption that changes in the ways by which knowledge circulates through and around cultural artefacts in new online territories can profoundly transform the way in which users and institutions engage with artefacts and with each other.

The exploration of these topics was located in the experiences of RCAHMS, an institution which is grappling with the opportunities which digitality presents while also endeavouring to respond to a changing cultural and political environment. Through an examination of RCAHMS' online practices, digital objects and discourses around digital innovation, contrasted with experiences on the *Commons* on Flickr, the research identified and explored some of the issues which arise when institutions experiment with digital innovation in situations where traditional analogue practices are being reshuffled by changes of a material as well as narrative kind.

These issues relate to tensions around authority versus openness, expertise versus the power of the crowd, information and knowledge-building versus experience, outputs versus process; they derive from, I argued, different conditions and contexts, ideological and environmental, under which cultural heritage content is made accessible to online users; different interpretations of the purpose of digital innovation in the context of institutional aims and objectives; different understandings of the potential value of the online experience itself in relation to cultural heritage participation practices.

The research showed that in situations where, as on the *Commons* on Flickr, heritage artefacts are genuinely allowed to fall into the hands of online users within territories which are shared with, rather than controlled by, the heritage institution, some important transformations can take place. These transformations concern the role of users, who can now engage with heritage artefacts without the sole mediation of the museum, in ways which open up the experience to new dynamics and stimuli; they inform the creative process



around the artefacts, not only because users are more actively involved, but also because it calls for new inputs by curators; they affect the objects, which are enriched with new interpretations and meanings, and become potential catalysts for unexpected experiences.

Such an unscripted and mostly unpredictable process is, I believe, fundamentally productive. It takes nothing away from more traditional patterns of engagement with heritage content; on the contrary it can complement and enrich them. Online users might well opt to become 'museum users', should they wish to do so, stimulated by the experience; the role of curators as experts is still valued, however, they can now enter into a dialogue with users they might not have encountered before, and engage with narratives enriched by users' inputs; and the objects do not lose their original value which, conversely, is potentially extended to unfamiliar contexts. It is therefore my opinion that heritage institutions would benefit from actively engaging in activities which support this type of process, one which does not seek to replace or threaten more traditional user engagement activities, but transform and enrich them.

RCAHMS, the institution which the research focused on, showed an interesting ambivalence in this regard. Early innovative forms of public engagement online, like the *Treasured Places* public vote in 2008 and the interest it stimulated in the public, were initially welcome and celebrated as a new departure. And yet, in *Canmore*, we saw the locking down of spaces, of objects and, ultimately, of opportunities for transformation. In a situation where an ideology of instrumentality is embraced, the research showed users continuing to be cast in traditional roles, the value of the objects remaining anchored to the idea of branded authenticity, and any experience beyond collection improvement remaining potentially un-nurtured.

Indeed, more generally, notwithstanding its rhetoric of openness and strong focus on technical innovation, this study did find RCAHMS' approach to online participation to be rather conservative. Having said this, there is also evidence of change as in new projects there is a determination to engage more actively and meaningfully with digitality. The institutional discourse around the digital has also been changing, at least in some quarters (Clari and Graham, 2012).

On this latter aspect, although as an ethnographer of RCAHMS it was never my aim to influence people's views in any specific way, this project arguably did act as a vehicle for change, mainly in relation to the discourse around digitality within the institution. At the same time, the research did persuade me of the need, and difficulty, of creating opportunities for a more sustained and meaningful exchange of ideas and perspectives across the institution on this complex topic. It also stimulated me to think of ways in which I might assist RCAHMS in this process, as well as other institutions in similar situations.

To this aim, drawing from theory and from insights from the research conducted for this thesis, I proposed a conceptual framework to help heritage institutions map their current and planned engagement with social media and user-generated content. The value of such a framework, I argued, lies in its potential to stimulate a shift in the nature of the institutional discourse around the digital and its significance for institutions' cultural mission and role through a guided examination of online practices and approaches to digital innovation from a perspective which recognizes its potential for transformation.

The conceptual framework which the thesis identifies represents an output which has, arguably, both theoretical merits and pragmatic value. Having said this, it is certainly not offered as an end point to the enquiry, rather as opening up a number of different routes for future research.

Firstly, there is no doubt that more work is needed in order to refine the features of the framework and to test its usability and usefulness. At the end of Chapter 7 I provided a preliminary illustration of its use through a brief re-assessment of some of RCAHMS' early and more recent online activities. However, as the value of such a re-assessment arguably lies in the ownership which institutional stakeholders take of the process, and in the particular discussion that this might generate, I am aware of the inherent limitations of this illustration. It would certainly be more useful to return to RCAHMS and test the use of the framework in collaboration with managers and staff, through a pilot study of its most recent flagship online initiatives.

To test its broader applicability and transferability, the framework should also be piloted across a wider range of institutional settings and under different conditions. In particular, it

would be productive to test it in institutions which are different from RCAHMS, such as museums or galleries with actual exhibition spaces. It would also be interesting to study situations where digital technologies are employed by institutions to engage users not only in virtual environments but also in their physical spaces. In these scenarios the analysis of texts generated by online participants could be usefully complemented with activities such as interviews or focus group discussions which solicit the views of visitors to the physical museum as they simultaneously engage with the physical and virtual artefacts. As the key task in planning such activities is framing productive questions, it would be interesting to test how the framework which this doctoral research helped construct might stimulate and guide the formulation of meaningful questions for users and provide a useful lens for the analysis of their responses.

## **1. Suggestions for Future Research**

The thesis foregrounded three potential paradigm shifts at the confluence of digital and cultural heritage practices. Each of these three aspects would merit, I would argue, more focused investigations in different institutional and online settings.

These might include, for example, closer examinations of the changing role of users in relation to different types of museums and particular types of collections, as the engagement experience extends to online territories; analyses of the potential impact of online authorship practices on institutional texts, such objects' captions and official narratives around collections; investigations of how heritage objects do transform as they leave their original institutional location and 'travel' in cyberspace. This latter research scenario would provide opportunities to refine a methodology which combines visual and textual analyses, as employed in some parts of this study, to look at the features of such changing objects in the online environments which they inhabit, temporarily or more lastingly. It would also offer the opportunity to explore situations where these 'new' objects become part of other collections as a result of different brands of curatorship, and encourage a reflection on the significance of these transformations in relation to the original artefacts and the institutions which act as their custodians. Such a study might complement in interesting ways research

initiatives which are beginning to explore the rise of amateur collections competing with institutional offerings (Terras, 2011).

Another research route which I believe might be fruitful is one which resonates with my interests as a linguist, especially one involved in a sustained reflection on cross-cultural equivalence and difference. I have been conscious of this study's limitations as a linguistically mono-dimensional effort; as such I would be keen to widen its scope by problematizing the thesis' findings and interpretations, as well as the viability of the analytical tools it proposes, through contrastive explorations conducted within non-English speaking research settings, liable to entail different interpretations of cultural authority and different discourses around the figure of the museum, its objects and users.

By the same token, it might be productive to consider to what extent the insights and issues which the research has helped identify could be transferred beyond the specific domain of cultural heritage practice. An intriguing, if perhaps ambitious, possibility would be, for example, to consider the transferability and usefulness of the conceptual framework as a mapping resource to organizations operating in my original area of expertise, lexicography and language reference publishing; this is an area which is also undergoing a process of profound transformation, not dissimilar to that observed in the cultural heritage field and which, albeit in different ways, is also grappling with the tensions which emerge from the often jarring meshing of analogue and digital approaches to content creation and sharing, as the authoritativeness of the branded text is challenged by original content generated through online user collaborative practices.

Finally, a more general reflection concerns the research process which was involved in this project rather than its content. I would argue that the practice of collaborative doctoral research, which is becoming increasingly common in the context of universities' active knowledge exchange agenda, would itself merit an effort of meta-analysis and theoretical exploration beyond the specific contexts of individual projects. This is something which, as far as I have been able to ascertain, is not as yet being formally considered by funding bodies or academic institutions.

In the case of this study, the collaborative relationship with the non-academic partner has been, in my view, highly successful in providing access to a rich research setting, continuous feedback on research activities and interim findings and, overall, a professional perspective which has complemented in useful ways the study's main academic focus. The project has reportedly made a contribution to RCAHMS' thinking and future planning activities (Ruiz, 2010, p. 26), and has also stimulated the institution to secure follow-on funding to scope a range of practical implementations building on the findings from the research (AHRC, 2011).

As touched on in the thesis, however, the study has also raised some valid questions regarding the methodological, ethical and scholarly implications of collaborative doctoral research practices, especially in studies which, like this one, focus not just on specific institutional holdings, but also on the institution itself as a research subject.

It would be arguably useful to ensure that insights from experiences such as those in this project and others like it, as well as the issues encountered and the solutions employed to resolve them, and their implications for methodological and procedural choices, are identified and considered in the context of a broader theoretical reflection on collaborative doctoral practices as a form of scholarship.

## **2. To Conclude**

My research has led me to a position where I believe that the implications of digital engagement and online practices for museums and archives and their users are, indeed, important and profound. I also believe that it is crucial that institutions engage in practices which actively support the re-negotiation of roles and participation dynamics which digitality now affords and which can unleash new meaning, new creative energy and new ways of learning from and through the artefacts in which our history is contained, sometimes hidden.

I also believe that it is important that institutions examine their practices and strategic plans in ways which, while taking them into account, are not solely driven by traditional values and priorities rooted in analogue thinking. My aim has been to find a way of helping with

such an examination and I believe that such an aim has been fulfilled through the research carried out for this thesis. At the same time, I am also mindful that this constitutes very much a point of departure, rather than of arrival; one, however, which opens up different paths which, in turn, point to a challenging but inspiring journey ahead.

As for the experiences I have observed and the many people I have spoken with in the course of my research, I would like to say a word of thanks, in 'julia's' words:

Do you think you have not provoked me into thought? I win because you made me examine my own opinions and ideas -- as do you, if you take the opportunity.  
( 'julia', 15 February 2009, on the *Commons* on Flickr)

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