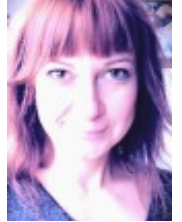


Iteration, Iteration, Iteration: Digital public archaeology and the presentation of online research

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*Having recently completed her PhD on participatory digital technologies and widening participation in the discipline of archaeology, **Lorna Richardson** considers the interplay between her research and her own academic practice. The impact of the many discussions she had through various online platforms on the subject of social media, archaeology and Internet technologies had an iterative effect on her work and on her methods of data collection. Her research suggests there is still a great need for the archaeology community to explore further public consumption and creation of engaging and useful projects.*



Much of the literature on the subject of Public Archaeology defines it as an examination of the relationship between archaeology and the public, where the public of Public Archaeology is represented both by the state, working in the public interest to protect, excavate and investigate society's archaeology on their behalf, and by the notional 'general public', meaning those who are not professional archaeologists. It is over sixty years since Sir Mortimer Wheeler wrote that archaeologists are obliged to disseminate their findings to the public; "It is the duty of the archaeologist, as of the scientist, to reach and impress the public, and to mould his words in the common clay of its forthright understanding" (Wheeler 1956, 234) and his words still have relevance today.

One of the central conceptual and ethical paradigms for Public Archaeology is the examination of socio-political relationships between archaeology and contemporary society, and the renegotiation of power and control through open participation and communication between archaeological professionals and non-professional members of the general public. These are also the key issues for an understanding of the role of digital technologies in Public Archaeology, and central to the research for my doctoral research at the UCL Centre for Digital Humanities into 'Public Archaeology in a Digital Age' (which is [available Open Access on Figshare](#)).

The rapid growth and adoption of participatory Internet platforms and mobile technologies has opened the potential for a 'digital' form of archaeology communication. The concept of this 'digital public archaeology' are the methods and strategies used to engage with archaeology in all sectors, through web and mobile technologies, alongside the use of social media applications, as well as the understanding of the communicative process through which this engagement is mediated online. My research focused on participatory digital technologies and platforms (websites, social media, crowdsourced archaeology projects), and their ability to create arenas for truly democratic participation in the discipline of archaeology. My work explored whether the utopian ideal of social media offered practical methods and communications that could disrupt the balance of academic expertise and authority, their usefulness for [heritage activism](#) and the creation of [professional archaeological online communities](#), and the forms in which these online platforms offer opportunities for public contributions to archaeological knowledge.



Image credit: [Archaeological Excavations North-central Oregon \(USA\), 1977](#) by [John Atherton](#) (Flickr, CC BY-SA)

My thesis was the product of three years of online and offline experience, and the reflexivity of my work online was central to the creation of this research. I walked the normal PhD student path along a literature search, read numerous books and articles, and attended and presented at various conferences and workshops – all the things you do as a graduate student. However, the innovative character of my work came from the use of [online ethnography](#) and online networking as the foundation for data collection. The impact of the many discussions I had through various Internet platforms on the subject of social media, archaeology and Internet technologies had an iterative effect on my work and on [the methods of data collection](#) I developed. I observed the activities and conversations taking place in online archaeological communities; and used my own experience of participation in digital public archaeology, both as a professional digital heritage practitioner working part-time and volunteering with a handful of digital heritage projects, such as the [Day of Archaeology](#) and [Hidden Commemorations](#). My approach to data collection aimed to gather qualitative information from as many participants as possible with an active use of websites and social media in archaeology. It was not always easy to be taken seriously, when explaining that I was researching communications through the Internet and social media. The use of these media in archaeological organisations for public engagement is a process subject to change, and, as my research demonstrated, heavily reliant on staff skills, financial support within the organisations for these practices, and wider sectorial pro-public archaeology trends, set against a backdrop of fiscal austerity in the UK, which has had a heavy impact on funding for archaeological projects.

The democratic ideal of the Internet falls down where scholarly archaeological literature is concerned, and articles are frequently found behind paywalls, with academic library access required. The main academic journals relating to the study of the theory and practice of public and community archaeology are currently all subscription-only. This means access to current archaeological research can be expensive and could preclude projects and individuals without a budget for journal and library access from the latest debate on topics relevant to best practice and experience. I chose from the outset to be as public as possible with my research findings, as I was aware that the data collected would be useful and relevant for a short period of time, as Internet obsolescence is rapid. I shared my findings as best I could (without complete revelation pre-submission) on my [Twitter account](#) and through [my blog](#). I decided my thesis was better off in the light of day through a repository, and made it available as soon as I was able.

As my research has shown, recognition of multiple perspectives on archaeological experiences and knowledge is

not, at least in the UK, undertaken through a process of actively sharing knowledge authority or accommodating multiple, often emotional, responses to archaeological information. As this thesis has demonstrated, archaeological organisations are generally very strongly defended against participation in difficult or emotive conversations. As a profession, our lack of understanding of how people interact with archaeology online, generally within platforms and discussions created by archaeologists, rather than springing from interested and passionate communities, means we continue to create 'top-down' communications through digital technologies. Archaeologists still need to understand and explore further public consumption and interpretation of archaeology in the media, and focus on the creation of sustainable and useful projects that are truly engaging, especially when difficult choices are being made for the long-term investment of public funding in heritage within central and local government.

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

About the Author

Lorna Richardson *has recently completed her PhD at the UCL Centre for Digital Humanities. Her key research areas are the impact of Internet technologies on archaeology and cultural heritage, Public Archaeology, and the politics and sociology of community participation and social and participatory media.*

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