

ANA LUISA SÁNCHEZ LAWS

## Digital Significance

This chapter proposes the idea of ‘digital significance’ as a governance and decision-making process for assessing the value of digital collections. This concept is inspired by Australian approaches to valuing heritage, which have had an important international impact in providing an alternative to the built-fabric conceptions of heritage (e.g., Venice Charter) that have dominated the field. Specifically, Australia’s 1979 Burra Charter helped establish a set of guidelines for assessments that amended the bias towards the built fabric (a bias that favoured the heritage of colonisers) implicit in the 1964 Venice Charter. The Burra Charter introduced the concept of ‘significance’ and became a step in creating pathways for the recognition of Aboriginal heritage, for which criteria based on the Venice Charter proved insufficient. I would like to argue that the focus on significance should also play a role in digitisation policy.

The structure of the chapter is as follows: I begin with a brief presentation of the concept of significance, to then discuss how digital significance could be an extension of this approach. I then look at key aspects of digitisation in the EU to then present in more detail the case of Norway, where I worked for a brief period as senior advisor on museums and digitisation issues at the Arts Council of Norway in 2018. I end the chapter by reassessing the idea of digital significance presented above and how it could aid in further developing collection digitisation policy.

### Significance

According to RUSSELL and WINKWORTH (2009), significance “refers to the values and meanings that items and collections have for people and communities.” Significance is an analytical standpoint that approaches a collection item from the point of view of the network of values that communities attribute to it. It is a decision-making method to collectively find the most compelling story about an item and use consensus to reach a conclusion about its worth. Speaking about significance, MASON (2003) argues that one of the things to bear in mind in heritage work is why we preserve. For him, preservation has its origins in our desire to highlight the connection between memory and environment and adds that this connection is dynamic. An important point Mason makes in his evaluation of the concept of significance, however, is that it tends towards exclusion, as it leaves the task solely to experts that often fail to acknowledge community voices. Mason argues that if one wishes to undertake a complete significance assessment, it is necessary to establish a dialogue between architects, historians, city planners, community members who are experts on the site because of prolonged relation to it, and stakeholders may

have little direct contact with a site but still value it highly. He calls for a more open process in which both the community and the experts have a dialogue to come to a fuller understanding of the reasons why a particular site should be preserved. In a review of the way in which the Australian NSW Heritage office was conducting its assessments of heritage value, BYRNE, BRAYSHAW and IRELAND (2003) made a similar call, stating that “the Service should encourage a culture in which the questions ‘Who values this heritage and how do they value it?’” should be the starting point.

Briefly, ‘significance assessments’ involve the non-hierarchical evaluation of aesthetic, historical, scientific, and social value (AUSTRALIA ICOMOS 2000, and interview with IRELAND 2012<sub>1</sub>). The definition of social value explicitly states that “social value embraces the qualities for which a place has become a focus of spiritual, political, national or other cultural sentiment to a majority or minority group” (AUSTRALIA ICOMOS 2000, emphasis added).

The spirit of the Australian approach is echoed in other countries around the world.<sup>2</sup> In the UK, for example, the matter of more inclusive policies for heritage has recently been in the agenda. Several instruments have helped guide heritage policy to better address the issue of unequal power that biases in heritage protection reflect. Since 2000, the Race Relations Amendment Act has required public authority heritage institutions to promote racial equality (CHEDDIE 2012). As CHEDDIE (2012) has written, in the GREATER LONDON AUTHORITY’s Report on *Delivering Shared Heritage: The Mayor’s Commission on African and Asian Heritage* (2005), the case for more inclusive heritage policy needed to address a variety of fora: the legal, ethical, human rights, intellectual, business, and corporate responsibility. It was also based on international frameworks (UN conventions that the UK abode to) as well as legal and business frameworks. As a result, definitions of heritage proposed by the commission “moved away from concepts of materiality towards concepts of the ritual, memory, transmission and orality” (CHEDDIE 2012). The resulting expanded idea of heritage “guardianship” gave impulse to new spaces for dialogue about cultural diversity in the sector (CHEDDIE 2012).

The Australian experience shows that the task is not only to establish concepts as significance within policies, but also to create clearer guidelines that ensure that participation from a broad range of stakeholders is embedded in the process – and this seems to be very much needed in the domain of digital heritage. Moreover, the

1 Personal Conversation with Tracy Ireland 2012 in Canberra.

2 For examples of the Australian context see the other contributions in this volume: for the application of digital resources in the repatriation of ancestral remains, see Paul TURNBULL: *Restoring Dignity*, pp. 29–45; for digital interpretations in the context of Australia’s difficult and traumatic pasts see Paul Longley ARTHUR and Isabel SMITH: *Digital Representations of Slavery in Australia*, pp. 47–62; for the pathways onto which items of Indigenous Australian origins were sent, see Friederike SCHMIDT: *Retracing the Mobile Object*, pp. 63–72.

questions of unequal power in any dialogue about the significance of heritage, be it analogue or digital, must be explicitly addressed in policy.

## Significance in the Digital Domain

Digital participation has been on the agenda of policymakers for at least a decade now. Perhaps as in the case of the significance of built heritage, the dream of open participation has not been realised in the digital domain also because the existing social infrastructure has not been disrupted enough for this to happen. As the review of European and Norwegian digital collection policy documents in the next sections will reveal, digital media has transformed museum functions, yet has in many cases left the deeper governance infrastructure of museums intact. For digital heritage, it would seem straightforward to make an approach such as significance central to digitisation policy.

An inclusion of social values also in what concerns digital heritage, such as is done in Australia for other types of heritage via significance, would help mend some of the current gaps in policy formulations regarding the digitisation of collections. While museums and collecting organisations have made of significance assessments for material items or the built environment a common practice, these (at least in the author's experience) are less used in the process of digitisation. Since many digitisation processes revolve around creating digital copies of existing material items, it is understood that the significance assessment accompanies the object. However, for born-digital objects, attempting to simply transfer significance assessment practices directly from the physical domain may not be appropriate, or even feasible. I will come back to this issue at the end of the chapter.

The next sections leave the topic of significance aside for a moment to concentrate on what has been the trend so far in collection digitisation policies in Europe. A brief look at European and especially Norwegian collection digitisation policy whitepapers shows that the focus of policymakers has been on practical matters such as platforms, standards for metadata, and speed, and amount of digitisation. These practical matters related to the physical process of collection digitisation may have been the focus attention because material conditions slow down progress in some areas hindering the more ambitious social goals of policymakers. However, as digitisation efforts continue to improve in terms of the technical aspects of digitisation (in speed, amount, and interoperability), other areas of policy that have already received much attention in the physical spaces of museums (for instance, the social significance of a collection) will also need to be addressed more explicitly in digital collection policies, which I propose could be done through the idea of digital significance as an explicit part of the frameworks for the work that museums, archives, universities, and other public and private heritage organisations can conduct in the field.

## Collection Digitisation Policy in Europe

At a governance level, the European Union's (EU) structure presents several challenges for digitisation of museum collections: Member States balance digitisation policies between centralised and decentralised approaches, sometimes relying on both regional and sectoral directions, even though about two thirds of Member States centralise the country's digitisation strategy for cultural heritage at the Ministry level (European Commission 2013). However, coordination efforts have a long history, and are strongly anchored in the democratic structures of the EU as a whole and of EU Member States. Nevertheless, one can also see that this democratic structure may prompt individual organisations to choose their own approach (platforms, policies, practices) over a collective effort such as Europeana, since the collective strategy remains too diffuse or too distant.

One of the key documents for digitisation policy at an overarching level (though not necessarily binding for individual museums) in the EU is *Cultural Heritage: Digitisation, Online Accessibility and Digital Preservation – Consolidated Progress Report on the implementation of Commission Recommendation (2011/711/EU) 2015–2017* (EUROPEAN COMMISSION 2013). This policy document states that EU policy is to make the European cultural heritage accessible to all EU citizens. Precedents for this document include the *eContentPlus (2005–2008) programme* and *i2010 – A European Information Society for growth and employment (2005–2010) strategy* (PUBLICATIONS OFFICE OF THE EUROPEAN UNION 2010). Amongst the issues of concern pointed out in this progress report, are long-term storage, access, and copyright issues. Investments in this regard include Europeana, which has been the flagship initiative in the EU. This platform is meant to address the need for a common digital arena for cultural heritage in Europe, yet while policies and investment in Europeana promote growth of digital heritage collections, they seem to be inward looking: the public does not access Europeana as much as they access other collections of cultural digital media. In Europeana's 2016 benchmarking study *Europeana as Online Cultural Information Services*, the author found that Europeana ranked “in the mid to low range popularity among services for online cultural content, making it comparable to the World Digital Library and the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam” (NAVARRETE, 2016).

While the EU cultural heritage report from 2011 called for investment in open-source technologies and open access such as Europeana, it also considered how to include commercial actors in the digitisation effort. Service providers and technology companies seemed to have had limited emphasis on how regular citizens may use such services, and users were seen mainly as providers in the digitisation chain, so one question asked in the report was how to create policies that addressed this participation imbalance.

The question of how to promote open, fair, and secure access also through commercial services operating in the EU is tightly connected to changes in policies

regarding digital privacy and security, and the turn towards stronger regulation (e.g., GDPR). The policy, economic, social, and political factors within which the EU operates are said to call for a heterogeneous yet coordinated approach, where concerns with the democratic function of information access and exchange are central and equally important than economic concerns. The emphasis so far has been on open source, free services, and open data. How this is planned to happen is still unclear. Perhaps it is here that a concept such as digital significance could become an organising principle for further coordination.

The heterogeneity one sees at EU level is also present at national levels, and this is well exemplified by the case of Norway. Three widely different types of organizations administer the country's Government-managed digitisation of collections, a) the National Library, which has the main responsibility for printed material and leads the national network of libraries, b) the National Archives, which manage material from a variety of government agencies, and c) museums, which manage artifacts, specimens, buildings, monuments, printed materials, photographs, artworks, and immaterial heritage.

The museum sector is very heterogeneous. It is composed of large, medium, and small museums organised as private/public businesses with a board of directors, inter-communal partnerships, or ideal organisations grouped into regional networks under the jurisdiction of the Culture and Church Department. There is also a strong university museum sector that falls under the jurisdiction of the Knowledge Department. In addition, several local private small collections operate independently yet receive State or municipal funding for their activities.<sup>3</sup>

In Norway, digitalisation strategy started early. Already in the late 1990s, the *Research whitepaper* (St.meld. nr. 39 [1998–1999], *Forskning ved et tidsskille*) spoke about the knowledge commons (building on HESS and ÖSTROM's 2007 view of the growing online shared knowledge resources as a 'commons'), as a vision of "an open and accessible shared space" which should be the first priority of the public sector, and the *ICT whitepaper* (St.meld. nr. 17 (2006–2007), *Et informasjonsamfunn for alle*) stated that "Everyone should be able to participate in the Information Society."

3 The museum sector in Norway has in recent years opened for for-profit projects that would not fit with the definition of museums that is currently under debate at ICOM, where it is proposed that museums should be defined as "democratising, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures [...] Museums are not for profit. They are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing." (ICOM 2019). The museums in the network supported by the Department of Culture and the university museums supported by the Department of Knowledge would fit with this proposed definition, but other privately run organisations that run on a profit-based, non-participatory model may not be allowed to continue to call themselves museums if such definition is approved and later enforced through legislation and policy in Norway.

To this end, the Norwegian government should invest in the development of a digital commons, which should be as large as possible and have high quality information. Meeting user's needs (as defined by users themselves, for instance in terms of access to information, participation, accessibility and ease of use, type of information made available, language requirements etc.) should be the focus. There should be access to free non-commercial use of digital materials, albeit respecting existing copyright arrangements.

For Norwegian museums, the purpose, scope, and pace of digitisation was discussed more specifically in the *Museums of the Future* whitepaper (St.meld. nr. 49 (2008–2009), *Framtidas museum – Forvaltning, forskning, formidling, fornying*). This whitepaper defined four key aspects of museum work: management, research, dissemination, and renewal (renewal hereby understood as the way in which museums must constantly work to make their collections relevant to their publics). Two key factors were identified as crucial for the pace and form of digitisation in Norwegian public collections: the first was the public's high trust in government, which led therefore to high expectations of quality and accuracy of digitisation; the second was having to deal with very large collections. In the chapter about digital dissemination, the government was concerned with the balance between dissemination activities for the public visiting the physical museum and for the public visiting the museum online. The discussion was that many museums were just at the start phase of preparing their digital offers, and so, a confusion could be seen amongst museums in relation to the digital administration of the museum vs the museum's digital public outreach, where they were mixing the broader idea of digitalisation of their organisations with the task of digital dissemination of collections. The main problem was a misunderstanding of what digital dissemination should accomplish.

The technical discussion in this whitepaper was very detailed when it came to specific needs for digital collection management. Amongst other things, the Department was interested in good metadata, good authority registers, and standards of practice. The way in which prioritisation of what should be digitised would take place was up to the regional networks and to individual organisations. The main request from the Department was in terms of the number of items to be digitised, with an expectation of a strong increase in the next decade. This was partly connected to a report by the Auditor General (Riksrevisjonen), which stated that the pace of digitisation of collections was too slow and argued that the Department of Culture and Church had not followed up appropriately the digitisation process, museums and archives were not doing enough and that there was no plan for long-term storage.

To address some of these issues, the Department created *digitaltfortalt.no*, a national dissemination channel for museums, libraries, and archives, which was meant to stimulate to new thinking in terms of digital dissemination (now discontinued with content moved to Digitalt Museum). The idea was to encourage the creation of channels where the museum and the public could engage in dialogue

about collection items. In *digitaltfortalt.no*, any regional cultural network member could publish a story based on collection items. For the Department, this was the way forward in terms of innovation in museum dissemination practices. The Department also highlighted a second example of innovation in digital dissemination which aimed at making the online virtual museum a rich embodied experience: *Rockheim*, the national centre for rock and pop, part of the network of Museums in Sør-Trøndelag, planned to have a virtual offer where the museum would offer spaces very similar to those of the physical museum, with museum employees also walking around those virtual spaces, and with the public being able to choose an avatar, put on their favourite costume from the collection, and walk around exhibition spaces to learn more about Norwegian rock and pop (St.meld. nr. 49 [2008–2009], 107–108).

When it came to digital collection management, the Department identified as the biggest challenge a lack of full registration of collection items in ICT infrastructure. At the time, only 39 % of about 2,8 million cultural historical artifacts on hold at Norwegian museums had been digitally registered, and of these, only 15 % were registered with a photograph (St.meld. nr. 49 [2008–2009], 107–108). Another issue was that those collections involving audiovisual materials were often in a state of disorder, not registered, and not digitised, or not following international standards for electronic registration (other types of collections suffered from similar issues, though not as badly as audiovisual material). This all meant that there was not enough capacity to add the knowledge embedded in collections to the public digital knowledge commons. One reason for this was that the job of digital registration had so far consisted of transforming catalogue and accession forms to digital format. This was partly to make work easier for museums, and partly because the electronic material was mainly intended for internal curators working in the given organisation. The problem, however, was that the transformation into a database for public access was being hindered precisely by this very specialised type of registration.

The then authority for libraries, museums, and archives, *ABM-utvikling*, was given then the task to try to organise the effort of all these institutions, to harmonise digital collection management. They would be assisted by KulturIT, an organisation created by the Norwegian Folk Museum. Amongst the main challenges identified as affecting the digitisation work and needing more attention are understanding how to exploit the potential of new technologies for systematic management and dissemination of information, managing long-term storage of digital information, cross-sector collaboration, finding coherent approaches at local, regional and national level, improving the ability to document fast changes in society, and finding ways to communicate history in a pedagogical way to as many as possible.

About five years later, in the report entitled *Digital infrastructure for museums* (GLEINSVIK/WEDDE/NAGELL 2015), an evaluation was made of the results from the work of the Arts Council, which manages an important number of the Department's Museum programs and investments, in creating appropriate infrastructure for the

digitisation of collections. The conclusion was that the Arts Council had made appropriate investments in infrastructure, creating the resource *DigitalMuseum.no* – Norway’s national equivalent to Europeana. However, and as in previous reports and whitepapers, the question of why digitise was only briefly dealt with, naming amongst other things that the various investments in infrastructure should help support the new digital sharing culture, and provide more public access to the country’s knowledge commons. Additionally, it was mentioned how this should also contribute to the broader European commons, since services such as *DigitalMuseum.no* would feed directly into Europeana.

### **Digital Significance as Common Standpoint, Analytical Framework, and Decision-Making Principle**

The presentation in the previous sections of the way in which European policy has tackled digitisation in heritage organisations shows that there is still a lack of a cohesive principle to coordinate the various infrastructure and general policy activities. It shows that the focus has been predominantly on infrastructure, at the expense of dealing with the social aspects of digital collections. I argue that digital significance could be the common standpoint, analytical framework, and decision-making principle to address this gap. I would like to end this chapter by outlining some key points for future discussion in this regard.

First, digital significance would mean considering how the qualities for which a digital material has become a focus of spiritual, political, national, or other cultural sentiment to a majority or minority group. Yet defining groups (majority/minority) in such a disruptive context as the internet is not a trivial matter. Let us imagine for a moment the composition of a board dealing with a digital significance assessment online: who should be the interested parties? Facebook, Twitter, Google, along with the individuals and communities that used their platforms to create the digital heritage item? These questions show the issues that may arise in the digital domain that cannot be so easily tackled when directly transferring practices of significance assessment from the built environment or material collections to ‘born-digital’ items.

Second, digital significance should be an opportunity to reflect upon both the ‘why’ and the ‘who’ in digitisation very carefully, without taking for granted that social inclusion is an implicit attribute of digital media. It is my hope that in coming years, the very important discussions about ‘how’ that have so far dominated policy will finally start giving way to the more pressing issues surrounding the ‘why’, that is, the governance and social goals of our digital collection commons.

Third, digital significance could bring to the fore the problem of ownership of digital materials. The idea of significance implies someone who is taking responsibility for assigning value, and who will be willing to function as caretaker of the



heritage item. In this regard, the differential power technology companies (service providers, software producers, code developers) have over the future of born-digital items must be re-examined.

I leave the reader with these three points as prompts for a new conversation, which I hope we may continue asynchronously in a new branch of the digital domain to which this volume extends.

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