Digital Heritage
in Cultural Conflicts:
An Introduction

By

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Digital technology rapidly permeated all aspects of human existence in the majority of the world during the early twenty-first century, concurrently reshaping social understanding of the present and interpretations of the past. Indeed, the process has reconditioned age-old social communication and expression practices, while opening up inventive spaces for information organisation, data preservation, as well as for the creation and distribution of knowledge, beliefs and cultural values. The commercialisation of the Internet in the 1990s, coupled with the simultaneous emergence of the World Wide Web, have played a particularly significant r ole in the development and popularisation of *public* digital cultures (Gere 2008: 207-224). However, relying as such on digital technology for their exposure, sustainability and expansion, digital cultures were not as conspicuous back then as they turned out to be, especially in the 2010s when social media platforms, augmented reality (AR), artificial intelligence (AI) and smart communication devices rose to prominence and became integrated across the otherwise discontinuous geographies dominated by technologically-advanced nations. Since then, it has hardly been possible not to be conscious of how digital cultures have re-energised well-established cultural memories and legacies, on the one hand, and perpetuated innovative cultural dispositions, on the other. In doing so, digital technology, and perhaps digital cultures more specifically, have adapted a set of recognised traditional identities to the social pressures and political demands of life in the twenty-first century. At the same time, they have given expression to otherwise marginalised, non-conformist, and even contentious identities.

One consequence of the renegotiation of cultural values, beliefs and principles in light of the overpowering influence o f s ocially-inclined digital p ractices has been the gradual emergence of the notion of digital heritage. Undeniably, by itself, the term "heritage" lacks one clear and coherent meaning. As a number of scholars,

such as John Carman (2002: 22), David Harvey (2008: 22-23) and Laurajane Smith (2006: 11-43), have already pointed out, the properties qualifying any material object or immaterial possession as a heritage asset tend to be both contingent and reliant on discursive contexts and conventions. In line with its mission to promote world peace and security by endeavouring to foster understanding and cooperation between peoples worldwide, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has largely embraced a rather elastic, all-inclusive approach to the idea of heritage, according to which the term may stand for anything that nations, states, groups or communities desire to pass to the future due to its collectively perceived importance. Considering digital heritage more specifically, UNESCO's 2003 Charter on the Preservation of the Digital Heritage—still UNESCO's policy on the matter to date—explains that digital heritage comprises "cultural, educational, scientific and administrative resources, as well as technical, legal, medical and other kinds of information created digitally, or converted into digital form from existing analogue resources." In terms of materials, the 2003 Charter indicates that digital heritage may include "texts, databases, still and moving images, audio, graphics, software and web pages, among a wide and *growing range of formats*" (UNESCO 2003, Article 1; emphasis not in the original).

At first sight, it may appear that, in its Charter on the Preservation of the Digital Heritage, UNESCO merely extended its traditional understanding of the concept of heritage to equally apply to that of digital heritage. A closer look, however, reveals that UNESCO has recognised digital heritage as an ongoing process directed by multiple participants of varying socio-cultural backgrounds, whose manifestations are still emergent, thus not fully comprehended at present. Yet, essentially in accordance with UNESCO's definition, academic discussions have thus far tended to perceive digital heritage as a democratic process in which various, otherwise unrelated actors engage in the expression and definition of cultural values to increase tolerance of cultural difference across global, social and geographic boundaries. As a consequence of this general tendency, the role digital heritage has played in acts of exclusion and dissidence—be they national, social or political—has largely been either unrecognised altogether in some academic debates or at least underestimated in others.

The present special issue intends to attend to this concern and its implications through considerations of digital heritage in cultural conflicts. More specifically, it focuses on nationally-framed employments of digital heritage in public reinterpretations of the past, with the intention of increasing the knowledge base about how the amalgamation of digital technology and cultural heritage has been used both to solidify and challenge long-standing structures of power. In this regard, this issue features case studies from countries such as Brazil, Finland,

India, Poland, Russia and Sweden, each highlighting the need to investigate digital heritage not as an apolitical, universal phenomenon, but rather as one directly influenced by historical knowledge and culturally-conscious political forces that condition broader definitions, as well as the identification and protection of cultural heritage, locally, regionally and globally at the very same time. Indeed, the special issue's prioritisation of the study of digital heritage practices in the specific context of cultural conflicts is itself informed by awareness of the historical and political processes that have accompanied the advent of digital heritage. Here cultural conflicts are understood as clashes between value systems that find distinctive expression in public as they lead certain social formations away from one another, either through one-sided or mutual attempts to oppress the core principles, ideas and beliefs of others (Pasternak 2021: 259-260). However, as value systems do not tend to propagate merely through rational thoughts and decision-making processes, but also, and perhaps more commonly, via deep beliefs and inexplicable emotional attachments (cf. Avruch 2006: 18-20), it must not be assumed that cultural conflicts are necessarily the product of intentionality.

Cultural conflicts have become particularly significant in discussions and analysis of socio-political processes since the late twentieth century, when the end of the Cold War, coupled with the collapse of the Soviet Union, gave way to a new political era of globalising liberal-democracy. Purporting that the modern-day battle over socio-political Left and Right ideologies was complete, the end of the Cold War was largely seen by political scientists and theorists as the beginning of a new era, underpinned by the prevalence of global freedom and equality (Fukuyama 2012), or at least by a prevalent ideology of global freedom and equality (Rancière 2007; Žižek 1999). In this perceived new world order, characterised not least by cultural fluidity owing to its globalising properties, differing local, regional and emergent global value systems have begun to impinge upon one another, challenging the freedoms of some and the equalities of others. Posing a threat to the ability of local communities to effectively protect their traditions and memories as a consequence, this political reality has increasingly compelled individuals worldwide to readjust their political identities to resonate with one cultural disposition or another, most often in connection with the world's most dominant civilisations of the time (Huntington 2011). The battle between Left and Right socio-political ideologies has, thereby, been replaced by multiple cultural conflicts, primarily underlined by struggles over the visibility of differing cultural identities that draw upon divergent memories and disputed interpretations of the past. These historical and political processes have both correlated with the commercialisation of digital technology and been shaped by its rising incorporation into local and global social mechanisms of cultural expression and safeguarding alike (Pasternak 2021: 260-261). The Internet,

social media platforms, museum exhibitions and archival collections—as just a few examples of direct interest to the special issue—have subsequently become common social spheres in which memories and interpretations of the past are being regularly articulated, negotiated and contested by digital means.

With this in mind, contributors to the special issue insist on paying due attention to the question of how individuals, communities and interest groups have engaged with digital heritage both to impose and resist forms of cultural repression and tyranny. Put differently, they refuse to perpetuate hegemonic descriptions of digital heritage as an apparatus whose employment inevitably leads to societal benefits by virtue of its *potential ability* to democratise data accessibility, increase public interaction with culture, and facilitate all-inclusive participation in its sustainability. Thereby, the special issue opens up a critical space for the exploration of the ways in which digital heritage has been created and managed in different socio-political contexts through in-depth analysis of the impact that relationships between heritage professionals, policymakers and stakeholders have exerted on these very practices.

Several articles in the issue look into digital transformations of cultural heritage assets connected with past conflicts. In particular, they focus on institutional photographic, library and archival collections of the First and Second World Wars preserved in memory institutions worldwide. Given the scale and two-dimensionality of the materials safeguarded in these collections, coupled with their perceived importance for the construction of national identities, they have been at the centre of some of the largest-scale digitisation projects carried out to date. In his insightful analysis of the initiatives centred on the photographic collections at the Imperial War Museum in London, Mariusz Gąsior questions the traditional measures based on the number of scans and views commonly used to assess digitisation projects. Gąsior suggests, accordingly, that such initiatives should aim not so much at making cultural heritage accessible, but at unlocking its potential. Thus, the success of the discussed projects is evidenced in the number and significance of exhibition, scientific, broadcasting or educational projects they have almost immediately engendered. Actual community participation in the digital transformation of the collections is another important indicator of the projects' impact. The Imperial War Museum has used truly innovative means to involve digitally anyone interested in history – the users can open their own accounts, contribute with their own research, or own family stories, create their own communities of interest. The unexpected scale of such involvement—expressed by hundreds of thousands and even millions of accounts, contributions, and discussions—has revealed a growing public interest in the history and heritage of both world wars. Furthermore, it has shown how thought-out digitisation initiatives can concurrently benefit

from and address this interest, which has been mainly triggered by anniversary celebrations and commemoration events.

The present-day transformations of the heritage related to the memories of the First World War, which were reinvigorated by its centenary, is the focus of the article by Anne Heimo, Aila Mustamo and Saijaleena Rantanen. Analysing the recent popularity and circulation of songs of the Finnish Civil War on YouTube, the authors show how the still vivid pains and controversies associated with unravelled aspects of the Finish national past resonate in digital manifestations and renditions of its heritage. In fact, the patriotic songs of the Finnish Civil War, which tragically marked the end of the Great War in Finland and set the nation's trail to independence, are nowadays flourishing on YouTube and other social media platforms more broadly, where they are being transformed, decontextualised and even used to express and mark extreme political ideas and nationalist views. Indeed, as shown in Robin Ekelund's article, based on his analysis of selected retrospective Facebook groups, heritage and history are an important point of reference, a community-building factor in the socio-political spaces created by social media. In the context of social media practices and uses, the past can be transformed into an idealised "place of sanctuary," where no controversies, incoherencies or debates exist. In her article about multimedia historical parks in Russia, Olga Zabalueva shows that digital transformation and digital tools can also create official "places of sanctuary," impose and reinforce highly politicised and instrumental official narratives about the past, and supress any kind of discussion around memory and past occurrences. The challenge and threats brought to historically sensitive heritage collections, specifically by digitisation and open access, are the main concerns addressed by Stanisława Trebunia-Staszel's and Monika Golonka-Czajkowska's article. The authors analyse the recent Polish "archival fever," focused on difficult and often repressed memories and experiences of the Second World War. An ever-growing number of journalists, politicians, amateur historians, and other members of the public are searching for easy answers to difficult and unresolved issues about the past, often sharing its distorted vision subsequently via the internet and social media. Drawing on their analysis of two sensitive collections, Trebunia-Staszel and Golonka-Czajkowska argue that the digitisation and provision of open access to such heritage can not only facilitate a simplified, ideological and politicised use of history and reinforce current memory conflicts but may also harm the still living witnesses, their descendants and communities. The risk of decontextualisation and simplification of cultural heritage brought by its digital transformation is also at the centre of Giovanna Casimiro's and Liron Efrat's article. Although they do not address the heritage and legacy of wars and conflicts, their contribution relates to general aspects of the digital transformation of cultural heritage. Taking

the Google Open Heritage and mobile Augmented Reality and Mixed Reality projects as case studies, they look into the question of how digitisation changes the way we experience and engage with historical spaces and heritage sites. Based on the concept of "new heritage", they argue that it is not only heritage itself that is transformed by digital means, but also our perception of its meaning and significance, and thereby our perspective of the past.

Similar problems and issues concerning the digital space of memory-making and heritage engagement are attended to in this special issue by three articles that analyse the digital transformations of emerging cultural heritage related to present processes. All three focus on the heritage of marginalised social groups, indicating how the digital realm is in fact the main space where the official and unofficial heritage of such groups is being shaped and expressed. Madhavi Shivaprasad's and Shubhangani Jain's article considers social media as a dominant space employed to highlight and challenge key cultural stereotypes and official historical narratives. Based on research in India, it focuses on the response to the controversial and highly criticised Citizenship (Amendment) Act of 2019, which introduced religion as a criterion of citizenship in India for the first time in the country's history. The authors analyse internet memes that cropped up as part of the socio-political debate and consider Facebook as an "archive" of resistance and activism. While the traditional caste system (i.e., the class-like structure of Indian society) is the main focus of such "archives," the authors suggest they must be also considered as sociocultural spaces in which cultural heritage transforms. Taking the example of the "Women's Rebellion" in Poland, Ewa Manikowska considers in her article how such bottom-up heritage of contemporary social movements is institutionalised and how the challenge of documenting and preserving such heritage change memory institutions and their practices. The institutionalisation of digital heritage is also a key issue in Malin Thor Tureby's and Jesper Johansson's article, closely analysing the process of the incorporation of MIGTalks – a Swedish Migration Agency's digital communications project aimed at influencing the current public debate on migration in a Swedish context – into one of the Nordic Museum's collections, which rendered them as national Swedish heritage subsequently. The authors demonstrate how through this patrimonalization process, the original social and political context of the MIGTalks, and most importantly, its participatory value, was lost.

As already indicated above, within the cultural heritage sector worldwide, digitisation, often coupled with its associated digital distribution practices, is framed as a tool for democratisation that guarantees and broadens access to culture, heritage, and education. Digitisation has therefore become a dominant strategy in the sector's enterprise to increase public and citizen involvement in discussions and negotiations over definitions and the value of cultural heritage. Indeed, the application and proliferation of digital technology in the cultural heritage sector

has challenged to the core what counts and what is understood as cultural heritage (Manikowska, Pasternak and Thor Tureby 2020). Put differently, the process and its propelling practices have transformed conservative ideas about what is heritage, to whom it belongs, and how it should be preserved and shared. Moreover, the process raises new questions about ethics (cf., Thor Tureby and Wagrell 2020) and, as has also been argued by Andrew Prescott and Lorna Hughes (2018) in relation to the pertinent question of "why do we digitize?", there is a risk that digitisation programmes, by focusing on making "treasures" more widely available, will reinforce rather than dispel existing cultural stereotypes. In this regard, all articles in this issue deal with a range of different fundamental risks and threats implied by digital engagements with heritage, memory and the past, including decontextualisation, cultural exclusion, radicalisation and conflict, to name but a few. Tellingly, in their analyses, the authors focus in particular on the different environments in which such engagement and transformation take place (e.g., social media platforms, AR apps, museum blogs and databases) and on the different actors most commonly involved in these processes, such as public institutions (e.g., museums, governmental agencies), international companies (e.g., Google), NGOs, communities, heritage professionals, scholars, and individual activists.

This special issue is the second themed collection put together jointly by the DigiCONFLICT Research Consortium as part of the project *Digital Heritage in Cultural Conflicts* (2018-2021). The Consortium's founding members—who are also the joint editors of this special issue—are based in the United Kingdom, Poland, and Sweden, and the project has been funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme, via the Joint Programming Initiative on Cultural Heritage and Global Change. Throughout the duration of the project, the Consortium has focused on multimedia museums, oral history and photography as some of the most common sources, media and means employed in digital heritage practices to explore the impact exerted by different manifestations of digital heritage in multiple nationally-framed sociocultural environments.

The Consortium's other jointly edited special issue, "Cultural Heritage and Technology," was published in the journal *Santander Art & Culture Law Review* and was dedicated to explorations of the current challenges faced by cultural heritage law and policy in view of the changes brought about by the emerging prominence of digital technologies (Manikowska, Pasternak and Thor Tureby 2020). The present issue continues to consider these changes, while shifting attention to questions such as: How might we target and support participatory and community-engaged digital heritage practices? How might we promote socio-cultural inclusion and empower communities to express themselves in official and institutional digitisation and digital heritage documentation and preservation ventures? How might we safeguard against the misuse of memory and heritage in the digital realm

and when employing digital means? In attending to these difficult questions, the contributors to the special issue offer at least some answers while increasing the knowledge base of the employment of digital heritage in cultural conflicts.

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