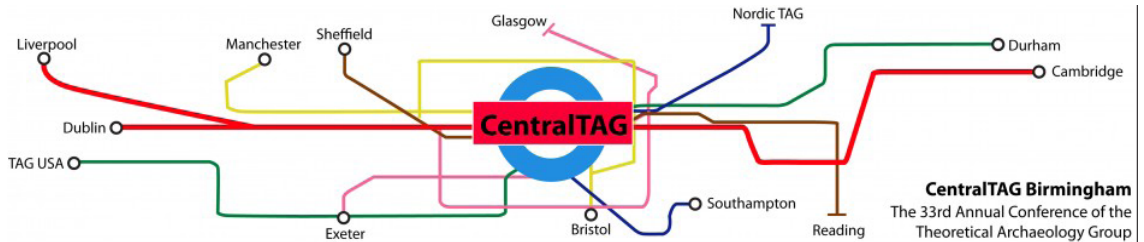Editor:
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Online Journal in Public Archaeology

REVIEWS

Don HENSON
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Dr. Web-Love:
or, how I learnt to stop worrying and love social media
Session at the 33rd TAG (Birmingham, 2011)

The TAG conference, held every December, is the highlight of the academic year in archaeology. It is where researchers can engage with the latest ideas and debates in archaeology. It is fitting, therefore, that two postgraduates, Lorna Richardson of University College London and Pat Hadley of York University, should choose to organise a session at TAG on the uses of social media in archaeology.

Archaeologists have always embraced new technologies. Archaeologists in the United Kingdom are increasingly engaging with the public through community archaeology and are beginning to use various digital technologies to help with this. Moreover, many are now realising that new social media allow archaeological communities to be formed, breaking down the barriers among different universities or different areas of expertise. The power of new technologies opens up new ways of working, thinking and interacting. Archaeology can become truly multivocal and decentralised in its structures and discourses. This is exciting and empowering, but also unsettling and off-putting to some. This session was held to address how social media is being used in archaeology, and some of the issues this raises.

Speakers came from a variety of places, not all were university researchers, and for some it was their first appearance at a major academic conference. All gave good, engaging and stimulating papers.

Doug Rocks-Macqueen (Edinburgh University) spoke about the complexities of using public social media in archaeology and the need to understand its psychological dimension. We need to understand not only the technology but also the psychology of using social media, and the way in which these can undermine or conflict with established power and organisational structures. Does social media have its own separate rules of conversation? Should we seek to employ specialist social media communicators rather than expect everyone to use social media as part of their work?

Andy Brockman (Mortimer website) focused on social media as a tool for activism in archaeology. The public face of social media ensures wide exposure, while its network of users can spread quickly and widely. Instantaneous communication can enable rapid responses to crises and issues. The Mortimer website arose out of dissatisfaction with the traditionally slow organisational response to cuts in funding for archaeology. Using social media for campaigning is in its early days, and is often misunderstood. Issues that have to be faced by campaigners include ensuring that the voices being projected are representative of wider constituency, and that the campaigning group does not simply become a narrow, self-perpetuating clique, talking among themselves and having little actual impact.

Morgana McCabe (Glasgow University) spoke for the group, including Jennifer Novotny and Rebecca Younger, who had created an online archaeology magazine, Love Archaeology. This had become unexpectedly popular, with visitors well away from the university and worldwide. They had to adapt to consumer demand on content and layout. They also had to confront the amount of time it was taking, time away from their postgraduate research. The Internet was allowing a new style of publishing for archaeology, based on an organically growing and adapting magazine model. They can also be highly topical and publish items in much shorter timescales than traditional journals. Readers of the magazine feel part of the Love Archaeology community, rather than simply visitors to a website, although this places more responsibility on the team behind the magazine to maintain it as a social space, not just as a publication.

Andy Burnham (Megalithic Portal) had set up his website as a non-archaeologist but someone who was interested in all kinds of Stone Age monuments. It was an Internet home for people with like interests and consisted largely of user-generated contact. This is mostly images and information about stone-built sites from Britain and elsewhere. Many of these sites are burial or ritual sites and inevitably attract interest from people with non-rational ideas about their use. Although welcoming and respecting the views of all visitors and contributors, Andy is careful to challenge views that are not based on sound evidence and lead people towards a closer archaeological understanding of the monuments. The site is a good example of how the Internet allows the discussion about archaeology to be enlarged to include new audiences.

Pamela Jane Smith (Cambridge University), the wife of Thurstan Shaw, a pioneer of African archaeology, set up the Personal Histories project which is now run by students. The idea has been to capture on record, as oral histories, the experiences of people working in archaeology. The need to archive the personal recollections of archaeologists is an important adjunct to the ephemerality of the instant communications of social media. Pamela went through the process and logistics of recording oral histories, before asking volunteers from the audience to demonstrate the process. Lorna Richardson duly interviewed Don Henson for a short session reminiscing on his career in archaeology.

Pat Hadley (York University) introduced the idea of 'perpetual beta'. This is similar to the way in which Wikipedia works, where content is never fossilised in a final form, unlike traditional publication where the fixed, final edition is a desired end goal. Perpetual beta makes the most out of social media's flexibility and networking, to allow endless debate, discussion and contributions towards even more refined discourses about archaeology. This could be a more productive kind of archaeological output than traditional journals or books, and yet carries some risks. These include attributions of authorship and deliberate vandalisation of content. Also, are most archaeologists even aware of the possibilities presented by social media software?

Stefano Costa and Francesco Ripanti, (Siena University, Italy), offered the view that modern excavation has become a form of theatre. They termed their work at the Roman mansio of Vignale as an excava(c)tion where the site is a stage on which the archaeologists are performers, entering into a continuous dialogue with the public who visit the site. There are on-site tours, on-line diaries and videos, and an on-line blog. Feedback from visitors to the site and the webpages

is welcomed and forms part of the excavation experience of the sites. People's responses to the site and their ideas about what they see become part of the narrative of the excavation. The site itself becomes a kind of social medium.

Lorna Richardson (University College London) spoke about the use of Twitter in archaeology, and presented interesting statistics, such as: 41% of Twitter account holders never make a tweet and 24% of people who do tweet have no followers. The best uses for tweeting seem to be maintaining informal networks and sharing of research. Tweeting took up a lot of time, and could too easily become a communication between self-selecting narrow cliques. The anonymity that is made possible by Twitter could be both an advantage and a problem if misused. If used as part of archaeology projects, then it needes to be part of a suite of social media, and not be relied upon as the main means of communication. Its best use may be as a specialist networking tool rather than for public engagement.

The papers were all engaging and stimulated good discussion. There is only space here to mention a few of the points raised. Social media allow multivocality with all its attendant risks of giving voice to unrepresentative or irrational views. They also have the potential to undermine traditional patterns of academic or professional authority, but will they introduce in their turn new patterns of authority? If more and more communication is being done by social media, is this all ephemeral and lost as soon as files are wiped from a hard drive? Are there implications for archiving the history of archaeology and of academic discourse? There is a lot of good use of social media now, and there was a need for some arena or means of sharing good practice and communicating ideas among its practitioners.

The session ended with a drop-in session, during which Lorna and Pat taught participants in a practical workshop how to set up social media accounts and use the software. This proved very popular, as did the whole session. There was genuine discussion and a lot of questions. The session could easily have gone on longer. I am sure there will be future sessions on a similar theme, to build upon the enthusiasm that this one engendered.

References

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AP: Online Journal in Public Archaeology

Quotation:
Henson, D. 2012. Review: TAG Session. Dr. Web-love: or, how I learnt to stop worrying and love social media. *AP Journal* Vol. 2, 171-175.

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