Transmitting the Spirit of Place in the Age of Web Wisdom?

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Abstract. The new generation of internet communication is transforming human relations and cross cultural communication in previously unimaginable and dynamically plural ways. The presentation/interpretation of places and indeed of national identity through heritage values and places is no longer predominantly in the hands of governments as a political tool or those of experts in academic research—it's also powerfully present on *Wikipedia* and *YouTube* and every social networking site yet to be imagined.

When the *YouTube* video of the Yolngu Chooky Dancers of Arnhem Land dancing Zorba the Greek went live in 2007, thousands of hits were registered in a matter of hours, and international interest has not abated. The results of recent internet voting for the New Seven Wonders of the World also exemplify these opportunities and challenges of transmitting heritage values. This paper will examine these issues and the impacts which the globalisation of communication will have on transmitting the spirit of heritage place in an age of web wisdoms.

1. The Inspiration and Diversity of Heritage Assets

Cultural heritage resources are amongst any culture's most prized social capital assets. They are diverse resources—buildings, landscapes, cultural traditions, archaeological sites, single objects and complexes such as the Temple of Heaven in Beijing and a simple building which it inspired, this teahouse, built in 1921 at Eryldene in Sydney. These are places imbued with layers of meaning given by generations of artists and craftsmen, families and governments, by diverse, influential, sometimes harmonious, sometimes conflicting cultures.

As scholars and practitioners we have developed special knowledge to conserve, manage and interpret[1] such heritage monuments, sites, objects and places. Governments, communities and interest groups also know well the

power of heritage places, objects and intangibles in terms of national identity, pride and international influence.

As individuals we each respond intellectually and emotionally to heritage places: with excitement, reverence, awe and pleasure or perhaps with anger, fear and sorrow at the demonstration of the progress or destruction of civilizations.

2.   Understanding, Valuing, Caring for and Enjoying Heritage Places

This diversity of personal response is usually directly related to how well we understand the natural and cultural environment, for it is through understanding heritage that people value it; and by valuing it people will want to care for it; by caring for it people will want to help others enjoy it; and through enjoying the natural and cultural environment comes a wish for further understanding and protection.

This adaptation of economic theory by English Heritage is known as the Virtuous Circle, and it forms the basis for my discussion today of the importance of interpretation in the conservation and management of heritage places, and reflection on the impact of the revolutionary change of global communication known as Web 2.0, the new generation of internet communication where people contribute as much as they receive**.**

Too often, the interpretation of a heritage place seems to be almost an afterthought to the work of restoration or maintenance of the physical fabric by specialist architects or archaeologists.

Too often interpretation is seen by site managers as a collection of signs on site, a brochure, perhaps a carefully footnoted guidebook, authored by scholars of the site—but interpretation can be, and should be, so much more!

The conceptualization and design of interpretation effectively forms the gateway to the understanding of a heritage place. It's an important part of the conservation process …. open to everyone—lifetime expert and first time visitor alike. And today most heritage places are able to be accessible virtually world wide, 24 hours a day, through the eyes of Everyman, his camera and his computer.

Absent are the checks and balances of editor and director, author and expert advisor. To the fore are open-ended conversations about the personal interpretations of tangible fabric and intangible traditions, monuments and sites.

I want to play for you now a brief excerpt from *YouTube,* one of the fastest growing Web 2.0 internet sites, a freely accessible platform where

anyone can upload videos, with minimal moderation (censorship). This is an excerpt from a recent dance performance by a group of ten teenagers living on Elcho Island, in Australia's remote northern Arnhem Land area. For these kids, English is a second or third language. None have traveled out of Australia and only one or two have ever left their remote communities, but they have accessed the music of the Greek community in nearby Darwin. These boys had learned the dreaming stories of their tribes from the elders of their clans, through initiation, and through dance and you will note their ceremonial paint, traditional for Yolngu dance performances.[2]

In the months since this performance was filmed and posted on *YouTube* by a proud father, the Chooky Dancers, as they are now known, have traveled around Australia, and indeed to Greece to perform, celebrated for their unique *mashup* of Greek and Yirrikala culture … from the spirit of the Elcho Island, channeling Zorba the Greek. Their performance illustrates the ability of Web 2.0 to facilitate the absorption and re-interpretation of the spirit of places.

3. The Heritage Challenges and Opportunities of Web 2.0[3]

In this increasingly interdependent age of web wisdom, audiences for heritage monuments and sites are demanding—and indeed creating for themselves—an entirely different approach to heritage site presentation and it may well be the antithesis of any 'official' or agreed understanding of the heritage significance of the place.

Any number of personal views and interpretations of a heritage place[4] can be shared globally via websites such as *MySpace* and *Facebook*. Sites such as *YouTube* and *Flickr* provide further opportunities through audio visual and photograph sharing—particularly relevant media for heritage places.

The development of the on-line open encyclopedia *Wikipedia* has swiftly demonstrated that explanations of cultural value can be written by anyone, and not withstanding their qualities or accuracy, accepted by many. Wikis are not static documents—they are collaboratively built by every contributor. At present, Wikipedia is not yet accessible globally, but a review of the papers for this forum will demonstrate how much it is being used by lay persons and scholars alike as a ready reference source.

The challenges to the integrity and authenticity of any item of information which these Web 2.0 communication networks bring to our daily lives are the subject of much debate, and today I want to examine their particular challenges and opportunities to heritage conservation work. I

note, of course, that the accessibility of these Web 2.0 opportunities is as variable as the reach of the internet, which is itself extraordinary, yet also limited.

The best quality interpretation of heritage sites addresses diverse audiences, who require diverse interpretation techniques and media. Museums, libraries and archives have been developing databases and interactive visitor engagements for many years. Statutory authorities have begun to provide massive historical records and resources on line, the UK's Heritage Gateway is extraordinary in its range and depth, but with very few exceptions (and the Brooklyn Museum is an outstanding one), most heritage place based websites are offering information access for planning and learning purposes, perhaps with the odd curatorial blog.

When compared with the dynamism of social networking media, there is a fundamental gap where user-generated content demands a new relationship between new audiences and the spirit of place—a tension between the virtual and the real, between established authority and new, ever changing cyber connected communities. No longer does one small group 'own the expertise' about a place—it's diffused and accessible.

Traditionally, on-site signage and guidebooks have been created to provide interpretation for visitors through scholarly research, and photography. People able to visit these sites appreciate the unique experiences of being there, but for everyone else, their understanding and respect for the place is moderated by others—through a book, a photograph, a souvenir. Web 2.0 sites like *Flickr* are challenging those limitations. The Australian War Memorial (AWM) has recently experimented with developing exhibition blogs where curators and audiences created, discussed and published exhibition material before, during and after a display[5]. The AWM is now establishing a *Facebook* profile, a *YouTube* page, joined *Flickr* and is using these vehicles for engaging audiences and interactive research, building all manner of new "visitor" relationships with the museum.

4. Developing International Principles for Presentation and Interpretation

The WH Convention aims include the identification, protection, conservation, presentation and transmission to future generations of cultural and natural heritage of outstanding universal value (Article 7) States Parties have a specific responsibility to use education and information programmes to strengthen appreciation and respect by their peoples of the cultural and

natural heritage (Article 15). Usually, most visitors need to have places 'interpreted', their stories told, their meanings explained.

In recent times, the importance of presentation in the process of development and conservation has come to be better recognised by heritage agencies, heritage practitioners and visitors alike. Since 2002, an international collaboration has been underway to develop a charter to provide practical guidance for site managers and practitioners alike.

Following initiation by the Ename Archaeological Centre in Belgium, ICOMOS has sponsored the development of what was initially a local guideline for archaeological sites into an international charter that covers all types of monuments and sites. In its draft forms, the International Charter on the Interpretation and Presentation of Cultural Heritage Sites and Monuments has been workshopped and circulated extensively internationally and in 2007 was approved by the ICOMOS Advisory Committee for presentation to this ICOMOS General Assembly for final ratification here in Quebec.

This Charter notes that in today's globalising world, particularly where heritage assets are often separating from their originating communities and cultural values, conservation for the future requires proactive management in the present, particularly capturing the meanings and stories of places which are in changing cultural contexts.

In Europe, and to a large extent in the USA and in Australia, heritage conservation work has traditionally been led by architects, engineers and archaeologists- experts with a strong focus on building and site 'fabric' (the 'nuts and bolts' of a monument or site) in the belief that its value or significance resides and is interpreted in that built evidence.

More recently, in Australia, we have come to include the understanding of setting, use, association, records, related places and related objects in our approach to establishing what is significant about a place and thus to guide its interpretation, through other specialisations: curators, interpreters, documentalists and planners.

However, the integration of social and spiritual values brings with it the need to consult and involve associated communities in conservation and interpretation processes. With that shift from expert influence to community participation in interpretation, come many potential opportunities and conflicts, and Web 2.0 provides a vehicle.

In promoting the importance of interpretation in the conservation process we recognise the very real (but not new) inherent danger of bias. This may be the perspective of professional bias, such as that of an architect or archaeologist, passionate for the fabric of the place to be able to tell its

story—actively influencing the understanding of the significance of the place.

It might also be the bias of a dominant culture—for example in Australia, few of our post-European contact sites tell the Indigenous story well. In Afghanistan, the recent dramatic destruction of the Bamiyan statues and the damaged Buddhist images along the Silk Road each tell stories of cultural conflict.

At a time when the tools and frames of reference for passing on and indeed archiving the accumulated wisdom of civilisations are rapidly changing—witness *Google Book Search*, the historic effort to make the full text of the world's books searchable—it is appropriate to reflect on the impact of the increasingly popular use of electronic media in the interpretation of heritage values and places.

5.   The Impact of Web 2.0

Less than ten years ago, I didn't have an internet address and the major Australian museum that I worked for did not have a website. Now, as the mother of two teenagers, I know that the world of electronic communication and information gathering that they now occupy—and have done all their lives—will be less impacted by any of the worthy guidelines and charters that I just described, than by the development of internet communication.

Despite growing up in a home full of books, my two children go to the internet to research essays, to check mundane facts often on *Wikipedia*. They introduced me to *YouTube*, the extraordinarily fast-growing video sharing hub that claimed more that 40 million plays a day in 2006, and even then was growing at a rate of 5 million plays a week.[6] Yes, each week!

Web 2.0 applications present an array of extraordinary statistics: for example, every minute of today, in excess of 10 hours of video will be uploaded onto *YouTube*.

Canadian site, *Flickr*[7], is a photo management and sharing application, which held over 2 billion photographs in November 2007, and whose members upload images at a rate of around 4,000 per minute.[8] Flickr's recent pilot project with the Library of Congress, *The Commons*, aims to enhance the body of knowledge (metadata) about the extraordinary photography collections in public institutions, providing access to selected imagery and inviting the *Flickr* community to tag (add comments and information) about the images, an unbeatable resource combination—with the Library as editor/moderator. The Australian National Library has recently similarly opened its online pictorial gateway *Picture Australia www*

to enable individuals to contribute their own images to this national repository[9].

MySpace, Facebook, Bebo and *Linkedin* are all social utility sites operating on similar concepts—a shared content site that is user friendly with personal accounts that include shared blogs, music, photos, videos and friends networks.

FaceBook, founded in 2004, now has 80 million active users in its community; its fastest growing demographic is over 25s, who supply personal profiles, upload photographs and chatter, providing a marketers dream mailing list segmented, particularised and freely accessible. *Linkedin,* a networking site for professionals is a relative latecomer in the field, with just 24million users.[10]

These are the products of Web 2.0, the new generation of internet products which are easy to use, offering free accounts, and using standardised formats where contributors tag their efforts personally. *YouTube* is populated by a huge variety of video genres, searched by collaborative tags associated as a '*folksonomy'*.[11]

The issues of copyright in all these sites are blurred—technically respected, but self-evidentially impossible to manage—and exacerbated by incoming concepts such as *Mashups*—where users 'cut and paste' each other's contributions to form new hybrid contributions. And this is the new direction.

In an economic sense, globalisation is now impacting every nation; and so too is the Web 2.0 generation of internet communication, transforming human relations and cross cultural communication in previously unimaginable ways. It is impossible to isolate any national culture from its impacts, though clearly not everyone participates equally. For developing counties, the potential benefits of web access will not be so quickly reached, as Klaus Muller observed in 2003 "when 2/3 of the worlds population do not own a telephone … poverty, gender inequality, disability and illiteracy remain the most visible barriers to the cultural participation of developing countries".[12]

What is clear, is that the presentation of national identity through interpreting and presenting heritage values is no longer predominantly in the hands of government administrators or academics publishing scholarly research. Nor is it in the hands of museums, as they change from information interpreters to information providers, sometimes with more virtual visitors than real[13], offering digitised access to immense collections.

National identities are now being defined on sites such as *Wikipedia* and *YouTube* with as many 'interpretations' as there are individuals contributing

to these sources of web wisdom. Currently accessible in 19 countries and 12 languages[14], *YouTube* is now owned by Google.

If you looked at the *YouTube* listings for 'World Heritage Sites–Australia' in early July 2008, you would have found 262 tagged videos for sharing—very few official, a few plainly advertising travellers facilities (accommodation, etc), but mostly very informal views posted by young visitors about their impressions and highlights of their personal visits.

However, the video of an English backpacker pretending to assault Nuremberg Castle (in Germany, but tagged to associate with any world heritage site hit) was not what I expected to find, and probably not how the site management would like to see its world heritage stories interpreted to potential visitors. But this opportunity for the backpacker and the interest in his antics evident in the accompanying blog commentaries associated with his video makes me ponder: how can site interpretation be 'managed' in the age of web wisdom?

My recent search for 'World Heritage Sites—China' revealed 265 videos to share (a three fold increase in the last 6 months), many of the gardens in Suzou, of Lijiang and the Kaiping Dialou. In Canada, just 124 sites (and some of these appear to be spoofing attacks). Of varying quality and content, these videos seemed to be made by backpackers, school students, visitors and probably administrators, too, and focused on the pictorial beauties of the sites, rather than the uniquely personal views of Nuremberg Castle that my previous search had revealed. This is one of the qualities of these sites—they change content constantly!

For those with easy access, Web 2.0 may well be the ultimate in freedom of communication. For heritage site managers, however, it demonstrates that the public and indeed global interpretation of any heritage place is henceforth virtually uncontrollable.

An immediate and positive response from several heritage sites and monuments is the development and provision of good on-site and internet interpretation material that provides both data and graphics about heritage places ready-made for such sharing—surely many opportunities for applying the principles of the ICOMOS Interpretation Charter.

The speed with which Web 2.0 will impact our lives is breathtaking—but a recent experiment in using just the existing capacity of the internet to gauge international opinion is already impacting in unforeseen ways on the identification, management and conservation of national and regional physical heritage assets.

In conclusion, I would like to look quickly at a recent campaign to invite international on-line and SMS voting for the New Seven Wonders of the

World as one such example of the impact on cultural heritage management of global communication opportunities.

6.   The New 7 Wonders of the World Campaign

In 2006/7 a commercial campaign to identify the New Seven Wonders of the World was sponsored by a Swiss-based foundation. It established an international system of phone (SMS/phone eventually accounted for 20% of votes) or electronic voting (online accounted for 80%)[15], and an associated publicity campaign. Although support for the conservation of heritage sites was an intended outcome, this apparently did not eventuate. However, a total of 100 million votes were recorded in 2006/7, collected in a decidedly 'unscientific manner'—whoever dialled in, however many times they chose to vote.

Not everyone was happy with the results, nor with the open voting methods used. The Vatican was reported to be unhappy that the Sistine Chapel was omitted; the Government of Cambodia felt that Angkor Watt should have been included. It appears that nations such as India, China and Peru voted heavily, whilst Europe and America were relatively disinterested, so results were not solely related to internet accessibility.

The concept of the world's seven wonders was introduced 2000 years ago in Greece, arbitrated then by historian Herodotus and the chief librarian of Alexandria, Callimachus. Only 2 of the original 7 ancient wonders of the world were outside Greece, so skewing of the list is not new. However, in the New Seven Wonders campaign, the judgement of modern day, apparently nationally-biased voters, completely displaced that of expert selection.

In a new era of international travel and communication, national voting for the Seven Wonders Foundation list was enthusiastic. At one point China was voting at 70,000 per day for the Great Wall to be included in the New Wonders list.[16]

As A. Svithathsan points out writing in *The Hindu*, "the internet may have the potential to create a relatively democratic space. But people still need the capital and effort to take part".[17] 14 million people in Jordan successfully voted for Petra, in a nation with a population of 7 million. 10 Million Brazilian votes were recorded for the Statue of Christ in Rio de Janeiro, many by free SMS offered by Brazil's national corporate telecommunication companies.

Clearly the question of having the places symbolic of a nation's cultural identity recognised internationally were felt to be of great importance by many, many individuals—100 million voters.

At close of voting, the New Seven Wonders of the World were announced[18], with the honorary inclusion of Egypt's Pyramid of Giza, the only surviving Ancient Wonder.

Understandably, UNESCO, responsible for the World Heritage Convention, was dismissive of this commercial campaign, and remained resolutely uninvolved, regretting that the initiative "cannot in any significant and sustainable manner, contribute to the preservation of the sites elected".[19] UNESCO focuses instead on implementing the daily realities of the World Heritage Convention—the tasks of education, technical conservation and political persuasion.

The impacts of such a corporate campaign's results—particularly its associated publicity are still emerging, but it is certain that as global communication interconnections develop, the responsibility for interpreting heritage sites well—so that the many audiences of on-site visitors as well as remotely accessing visitors—the millions of potential *YouTube* and *FaceBook* subscribers, have authentic information resources on which to draw.

More critically, site managers need to proactively provide excellent interpretation material for the Web 2.0 networks, and be prepared to engage, like the Elcho Island Chooky dancers**.**

7.   Conclusions

ICOMOS hopes that the collaborative development of the *Charter on the presentation and interpretation of cultural heritage sites* will become a useful tool supporting sustainable heritage site management and interpretation, but it will need adaptation, quickly, for Web 2.0.

As climate change impacts the globe, and petrol prices accelerate, and the real carbon costs of long-distance air travel are realistically costed, it may well be that 'virtual' travel will provide more access to heritage places to more people, with less physical impact on the sites themselves. In a coming era of reduction in air travel, experiencing heritage places through remote media will rapidly increase.

The reality of Web 2.0 must be factored into heritage site management and interpretation. As a communication tool its power seems almost limitless. Ultimately democratic, yet also potentially inaccessible, the future

use of these media in heritage perception and presentation/interpretation demands the swift engagement of heritage site managers.

References

1   *Interpretation and presentation* mean 'all the ways of presenting the significance of the place (or object)', a key element in the heritage conservation process.

2   Frank Djirrimbilpilwuy, Top End Aboriginal Bush Broadcasting Association <http://youtube.com/watch?v=O-MucVWo-Pw>.

3   *Web 2.0* is the fast developing new generation of the internet, consisting of interconnected communities and hosted services such as social networking, Wikis and folksonomies.

4   *Heritage Place* includes buildings, works, relics, sites, monuments and objects of heritage value or significance.

5   Liz Holcombe, Blogging at the Australian war Memorial, *M&G NSW,* June 2008.

6   Boutin, Paul, A Grand Unified Theory of YouTube and MySpace, *Slate Magazine,* 28 April 2006.

7   Launched in 2002 and now owned by Yahoo.

8   12 July 2008 Flickr home page.

9   Hooton, Fiona 2008, Flickr @ the National library of Australia, *M&G,* June 2008.

10 Stone, Brad 2008, *New York Times*, 18 June 2008, A Social Site Only the businesslike need apply.

11 *Folksonomies* are organic systems of organising information in Web 2.0 communities by collaborative tagging—a form of do-it-yourself social indexing.

12 Muller, Klaus 2003, The Culture of Globalisation, *Museum News,* May 2003.

13 The Met and the Tate, cited in Muller, Klaus 2003, The Culture of Globalisation, *Museum News,* May 2003.

14 **Countries:** United States, Japan, United Kingdom, Italy, Spain, Netherlands, Ireland, France, Poland, Brazil, Canada, Mexico, Australia, Hong Kong, Taiwan, New Zealand, Germany, Russia and Korea. **Languages**: English (US and UK), Japanese, Korean, Italian, French, Spanish, Dutch, Polish, Portuguese, Chinese (Traditional), German, Russian. Source: *YouTube* home page, 12 July 2008.

15 *The Hindu,* 29 July 2007, New Wonders? A Srivathsan.

16   Beijing News, cited on blogsite <http://www.danwei.org/>.

17   New wonders? A Srivathsan, *The Hindu,* 29 July 2007.

18   Petra, Jordan; The Taj Mahal.

19   UNESCO Media Release No. 2007–66, UNESCO confirms that it is not involved in the 'New 7 wonders of the World' campaign.