



Museum websites & Social Media. Issues of Participation, Sustainability, Trust and Diversity by Ana Luisa Sanchez Laws, New York and Oxford, Berghahn Books, 2015, 212pp., US\$85 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-78238-868-5

Journal:	<i>International Journal of Heritage Studies</i>
Manuscript ID	Draft
Manuscript Type:	Book Review
Keywords:	Digital heritage, Museums, Social media, Digital engagement, Sustainability

SCHOLARONE™
Manuscripts

1
2
3 Museum websites & Social Media. Issues of Participation, Sustainability, Trust and
4
5 Diversity by Ana Luisa Sanchez Laws, New York and Oxford, Berghahn Books,
6
7 2015, 212pp., US\$85 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-78238-868-5
8
9

10
11
12 ‘Digital heritage’ is a fluid expression, as showed by the current lack of consensus
13
14 over a definition for this subject area (Sanchez Laws 2016: 48-49). The latter has
15
16 received increasing interest from both researchers and practitioners, and especially so
17
18 since the beginning of the 21st century, when a more interconnected kind of World
19
20 Wide Web started to establish itself within networked pockets of the ‘network
21
22 society’ (Castells 2010). Despite this growing attention, however, an extensive and
23
24 accessible discussion over the role of social media and more traditional websites in
25
26 and for museum engagement specifically was still missing. The author of *Museum*
27
28 *Websites and Social Media* contributes to bridge this gap, building on literature
29
30 concerned with the history of museums and computing, digital heritage and New
31
32 Museology, amongst which Ross Parry’s work is noticeable and highlighted (Parry
33
34 2007, 2010). Sanchez Laws provides a very useful resource to guide the development
35
36 of reflective practice, by articulating the theoretical underpinnings of different types
37
38 of social media(ted) museum engagements. In doing so, she addresses three under-
39
40 investigated issues. The first concerns the very nature of digital heritage and its
41
42 relation with the characters that are recognised as being distinctive of heritage. The
43
44 second issue pertains the need for a deep analysis of the real potential of digital
45
46 technologies in the heritage domain - where museums are situated - beyond ingenuous
47
48 techno-centred enthusiasms and marketing-oriented aims of audience expansion.
49
50 What can the application of digital methods bring to heritage organisations and
51
52 groups acting in different social, physical, cultural and political ‘spaces’ that could
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 not be achieved otherwise? What drawbacks can be expected? The third issue
4
5 revolves around the dynamic links between ‘benefits’ and ‘costs’ in the longer-term
6
7 maintenance of digital resources and practices.
8
9

10
11 The volume is subdivided in four parts, respectively devoted to: (1) overviewing the
12
13 history and theory of digital technology adoption by museums; (2) proposing best
14
15 practice; (3) discussing case studies; (4) and outlining ‘futures’. Part I is composed of
16
17 three chapters: ‘Museums Online, from Repositories to Forums’ proposes three
18
19 possible and alternative notions of public engagement (communication, consultation
20
21 or participation) and relates them to the development of Web use over time. The
22
23 second chapter focuses on ‘Digital Heritage and Sustainability’ from a twofold point
24
25 of view: the sustainable management of digital heritage and the latter’s contribution to
26
27 sustainable development - a topic that has been dealt with by museum studies
28
29 literature in recent years. The chapter ‘Trusting the Online Museum’ closes the
30
31 section with considerations about trust and power and how these are expressed
32
33 through the online activities of museums. Part II contains suggestions for curators and
34
35 other non-technical museum professionals who are increasingly required to participate
36
37 in digitised or born digital curatorial tasks, with often little training and support from
38
39 their institutions. As such, it includes both a first steps guide on how the non-initiated
40
41 can more comfortably and effectively approach social media (‘A Practical Social
42
43 Media Primer for Museum Staff’), and a recognisance of some of the most popular
44
45 social media applications, exemplified through real-life curatorial situations (‘A
46
47 Survey of Museum Social Media’). Part III builds on the theoretical foundations that
48
49 are laid down initially, evaluates significant case studies and shows the real potential
50
51 of digital heritage curation via means of social media. The author here chooses a
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 comparative approach and examines projects from the UK, Sweden, Australia and
4
5 Panama to unveil the importance of issues of trust, representation and diversity.
6
7 Finally, Part IV sketches some directions for the future of museums' social media
8
9 practices by presenting participatory digital experiments such as 'Augmenting the
10
11 Garden of Australian Dreams at the National Museum of Australia' and the 'Cultural
12
13 Interfaces to Environmental Data at the Questacon National Centre, Australia'
14
15 (Chapters 9 and 10 respectively).
16
17
18
19

20
21 The monograph should be praised for combining theoretical discussions with operable
22
23 advice and examples, thus equipping a mixed audience of students, researchers and
24
25 practitioners to navigate the varied and demanding space of digital heritage. The first
26
27 and last sections of the book are particularly convincing and well integrated, also
28
29 sketching a Digital Heritage Sustainability Framework for Museums that can assist in
30
31 the challenging endeavour of critically assessing the value/s of digital engagement
32
33 efforts. Although the volume suffers slightly from the difficulty of keeping pace with
34
35 the fast rate of media change – as it is perhaps inevitable given the breadth of its
36
37 scope - on the whole, it does succeed in answering the two core questions that are
38
39 posed in the introduction (Sanchez Laws: 3):
40
41
42
43
44

45 'What new flows of information, participation and public engagement are
46
47 emerging through museum websites and social media?'

48
49
50
51
52 'How do museum websites and social media activities shape the potential of
53
54 digital heritage as a tool for diversity, trust and sustainable development for
55
56 the museum, its communities and its cultural resources?'

1
2
3
4
5 Importantly, the author articulates her answers and builds her arguments by
6
7 leveraging not only a majority of case studies located in realities where access to the
8
9 Internet is more diffused, but also less 'networked' ones such as Panama.
10
11

12
13
14 Dr Chiara Bonacchi

15
16 University College London

17
18 Institute of Archaeology
19
20
21
22

23 References

24
25
26
27 Castells, M. 2010. *The Rise of the Network Society*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
28
29

30
31
32 Parry, R. 2007. *Re-coding the Museum: Digital Heritage and the Technologies of*
33
34 *Change*. London and New York: Routledge.
35
36

37
38
39 Parry, R. ed. 2010. *Museums in a Digital Age*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge.
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60