



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

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‘Digital heritage’ is a fluid expression, as showed by the current lack of consensus over a definition for this subject area (Sanchez Laws 2016: 48-49). The latter has received increasing interest from both researchers and practitioners, and especially so since the beginning of the 21st century, when a more interconnected kind of World Wide Web started to establish itself within networked pockets of the ‘network society’ (Castells 2010). Despite this growing attention, however, an extensive and accessible discussion over the role of social media and more traditional websites in and for museum engagement specifically was still missing. The author of *Museum Websites and Social Media* contributes to bridge this gap, building on literature concerned with the history of museums and computing, digital heritage and New Museology, amongst which Ross Parry’s work is noticeable and highlighted (Parry 2007, 2010). Sanchez Laws provides a very useful resource to guide the development of reflective practice, by articulating the theoretical underpinnings of different types of social media(ted) museum engagements. In doing so, she addresses three under-investigated issues. The first concerns the very nature of digital heritage and its relation with the characters that are recognised as being distinctive of heritage. The second issue pertains the need for a deep analysis of the real potential of digital technologies in the heritage domain - where museums are situated - beyond ingenuous techno-centred enthusiasms and marketing-oriented aims of audience expansion. What can the application of digital methods bring to heritage organisations and groups acting in different social, physical, cultural and political ‘spaces’ that could

not be achieved otherwise? What drawbacks can be expected? The third issue revolves around the dynamic links between ‘benefits’ and ‘costs’ in the longer-term maintenance of digital resources and practices.

The volume is subdivided in four parts, respectively devoted to: (1) overviewing the history and theory of digital technology adoption by museums; (2) proposing best practice; (3) discussing case studies; (4) and outlining ‘futures’. Part I is composed of three chapters: ‘Museums Online, from Repositories to Forums’ proposes three possible and alternative notions of public engagement (communication, consultation or participation) and relates them to the development of Web use over time. The second chapter focuses on ‘Digital Heritage and Sustainability’ from a twofold point of view: the sustainable management of digital heritage and the latter’s contribution to sustainable development - a topic that has been dealt with by museum studies literature in recent years. The chapter ‘Trusting the Online Museum’ closes the section with considerations about trust and power and how these are expressed through the online activities of museums. Part II contains suggestions for curators and other non-technical museum professionals who are increasingly required to participate in digitised or born digital curatorial tasks, with often little training and support from their institutions. As such, it includes both a first steps guide on how the non-initiated can more comfortably and effectively approach social media (‘A Practical Social Media Primer for Museum Staff’), and a recognisance of some of the most popular social media applications, exemplified through real-life curatorial situations (‘A Survey of Museum Social Media’). Part III builds on the theoretical foundations that are laid down initially, evaluates significant case studies and shows the real potential of digital heritage curation via means of social media. The author here chooses a

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comparative approach and examines projects from the UK, Sweden, Australia and Panama to unveil the importance of issues of trust, representation and diversity. Finally, Part IV sketches some directions for the future of museums' social media practices by presenting participatory digital experiments such as 'Augmenting the Garden of Australian Dreams at the National Museum of Australia' and the 'Cultural Interfaces to Environmental Data at the Questacon National Centre, Australia' (Chapters 9 and 10 respectively).

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

‘What new flows of information, participation and public engagement are emerging through museum websites and social media?’

‘How do museum websites and social media activities shape the potential of digital heritage as a tool for diversity, trust and sustainable development for the museum, its communities and its cultural resources?’

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5 Importantly, the author articulates her answers and builds her arguments by
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7 leveraging not only a majority of case studies located in realities where access to the
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9 Internet is more diffused, but also less ‘networked’ ones such as Panama.
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