

Collaborative Doctoral Award

In the Hands of the User : Changing patterns of participation and learning through the digital collections of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland



Department of Higher
and Community
Education,
University of Edinburgh

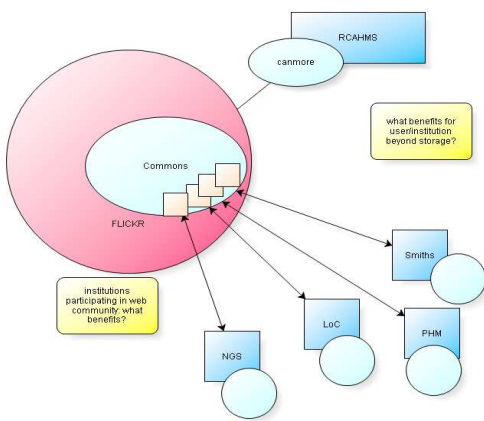
The Royal Commission
on the Ancient and Historical
Monuments of Scotland

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Research object

The focus of the research is on the experiences of RCAHMS as the institution embraces digital innovation for user participation and learning. The investigation sets out to:

- Institution**
capture and articulate the nature of RCAHMS' approach to creating a lasting digital presence in the context of the its traditional practices, strategic aims and overall vision
- Context**
explore RCAHMS' approach in the wider context of current experiences of digitization and networking practices around heritage content, and problematize it by contrasting it with other relevant models of online participation (i.e. The Library of Congress' contribution to the Commons on Flickr initiative)



- Futures**
in the light of the above and drawing from the relevant academic literature, explore key implications of digitization and online participation practices for heritage institutions, provide useful theoretical insights on the topics under study and make a meaningful contribution to the theoretical knowledge in this interdisciplinary field, with a view to translating this into recommendations to inform the future outreach work of RCAHMS and of cultural institutions more widely.

Research Aims

The study sets out to explore

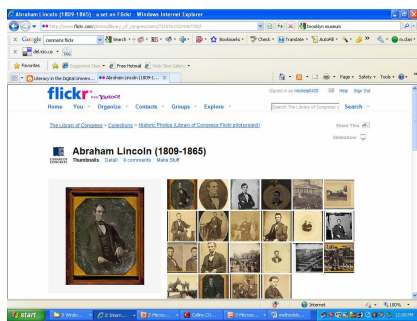
- how new online media environments are changing the way users engage with, and learn from, the collections of cultural institutions
- the role of users in contributing to the public online presence of cultural institutions
- the ways in which users might contribute to the making and unmaking of public archives
- the ways in which a global public learns and constructs meaning from institutions' digital collections
- how new online media environments challenge and might change the curatorial and outreach responsibilities of museums, galleries and archives

Research Questions

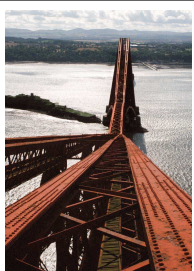
If we accept Poster's argument (2001) that digitization and networking practices on the Internet have a radically destabilising effect on texts, subjects and the act of meaning-making around objects, what are the implications of this for cultural heritage institutions?

What may be the significance and longer-term implications of embracing different models of online user engagement and participation for cultural heritage institutions, as they devise and put in place strategies for an enduring online presence?

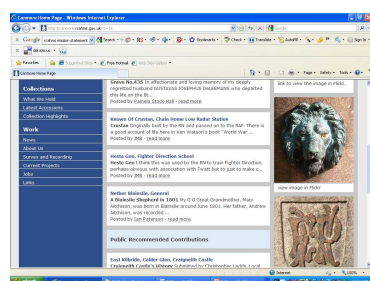
Recent Outputs



Pilot study on online research methodology:
virtual ethnographic study of online user interactions around the Abraham Lincoln photographs collection contributed by the Library of Congress on the Commons on Flickr site



Thematic analysis of RCAHMS' strategy documents (2006/2010)



Preliminary analysis of user contributions to RCAHMS's digital archive Canmore

Research data and methodology

The main research data for the project are being gathered through

- an ethnographic study of RCAHMS
- a virtual ethnography of RCAHMS' digital archive *Canmore*
- a virtual ethnography of the *Commons on Flickr* site, centred on the experience of the Library of Congress

