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Social Media and Cultural Heritage

Module 1 — Cultural Heritage, Archaeology & the Digital Ecosystem

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Opening

Welcome to Module One.

This session lays the foundations for everything that follows. We will explore what cultural heritage means today, how digital transformation is reshaping institutions and practices, the impact of social media, and the idea of the hybrid institution. These themes are connected — together, they form the core argument of the module.

The title brings together three dimensions: cultural heritage as a contested and political domain; archaeology as a material and evidence-based discipline; and the digital ecosystem as a fast, algorithm-driven environment.

This module examines what happens when these worlds intersect — and what it means to work responsibly within that intersection. Our goal is neither to celebrate nor reject digital tools, but to understand them critically and use them consciously.

Learning Objectives

Before we go further, take a moment to read through the four objectives on screen. The first is definitional: what do we actually mean by cultural heritage, and how do international frameworks structure that concept? The second is historical: digital technologies have been reshaping heritage work for several decades, and we need to understand what specifically has changed — in fieldwork, in documentation, in communication. The third moves into more contested territory: a structural analysis of what social media actually does to heritage communication, what it makes possible, and what it makes more difficult. And the fourth is perhaps the hardest — it asks not just for knowledge but for a habit of critical thinking: the ability to hold the potential of digital environments alongside a clear-eyed understanding of their structural biases, without collapsing into either enthusiasm or alarm. Keep these four objectives in mind as we move through the slides.

The Three Pillars of Cultural Heritage

Look at the chart on screen. It divides cultural heritage into three broad categories, and the logic of that division matters more than the proportions. The largest segment is tangible heritage — monuments, artefacts, archaeological sites, the built environment — the things most people think of first when they hear the word heritage. These are governed primarily by the UNESCO World Heritage Convention of 1972. The second category is intangible heritage: oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, traditional craftsmanship — forms of heritage that live in people and communities rather than in objects. The 2003 UNESCO Convention formally recognised their equal legitimacy as objects of preservation, which was an important conceptual expansion. The third category — the smallest here, but the fastest-growing — is digital heritage: born-digital content, three-dimensional models, GIS datasets, archaeometric databases. This is the category that sits most uneasily within frameworks designed for the first two, and the one that concerns us most directly in this course. Now, archaeological heritage sits across all three of these categories — but it has one characteristic that sets it apart from almost everything else: most of it is invisible. It is underground. It does not present itself. It has to be uncovered, analysed, and actively communicated before it can contribute anything to public understanding. That is what makes communication so central to our work — not an optional extra, but a constitutive part of the discipline itself.

Digital Transformation in Archaeology: Key Milestones

The timeline on screen traces five decades of digital change in the discipline. In the 1990s, GIS and relational databases allowed us to manage and analyse spatial data at a scale and with a precision that had been previously impossible — what changed was not just efficiency, but the kinds of questions that could be asked. In the 2000s, photogrammetry, laser scanning, and structure-from-motion gave us accurate three-dimensional records of sites and objects; documentation could now capture full spatial geometry, and share it. In the 2010s,

the open-data movement — built around the FAIR principles, Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, and Reusable — began to transform how research data is shared internationally, through platforms like the Archaeology Data Service and Open Context. From around 2015, Instagram, YouTube, and then TikTok brought archaeology to entirely new audiences in real time, and the relationship between the discipline and the public changed not incrementally but structurally. And now, in the 2020s, machine learning, augmented and virtual reality are opening further frontiers that the field is still learning to absorb. The point of this timeline is not to chart progress. It is to show that each of these developments changed what archaeologists can do, what they can see, and what they can say — to each other, and to the world.

Social Media & the Participatory Turn

Look at the distribution of heritage institutions across platforms on the left — Facebook still leads, but Instagram and YouTube are significant, and TikTok is growing quickly. Now look at the three structural points on the right, because these matter more than the platform statistics. Communication has shifted from broadcast to network: in the past, institutions produced content and audiences consumed it, and that asymmetry has now broken down. Audiences respond, share, remix, and reinterpret — the institution is no longer the sole author of its own narrative, and that shift is not reversible. But notice the second point: algorithmic mediation. Social media platforms do not distribute content neutrally. They prioritise whatever generates engagement, and engagement does not always correlate with accuracy, nuance, or scientific rigour. That structural bias is one of the central challenges of heritage communication today — it is not a problem we can solve by posting better content, because it is a feature of the environment itself, not a defect in our output. And then the third: the audience has changed. Users actively comment, share, reinterpret, and co-create narratives. The boundary between producer and audience is no longer stable, which creates both genuine opportunities for participation and real epistemological risks — the risk that the narrative passes out of expert hands entirely.

The Hybrid Institution: Physical & Digital Entanglement

The diagram on screen is one I want you to hold on to as a working concept. The overlap at the centre — the hybrid institution — is where contemporary cultural organisations actually operate. Museums, universities, archaeological missions: none of these functions purely in physical space any more, and none functions purely in digital space. They work in both simultaneously, and each space shapes the other in ways that cannot be cleanly separated.

Think of it this way: someone who watches a video about your excavation before arriving at the site arrives with an entirely different set of expectations, questions, and prior knowledge than someone who has had no prior digital encounter with your work. The physical visit is not separate from the digital engagement that preceded it — they form a single, continuous experience. The left side of the diagram represents what belongs to the physical: in-situ excavation, material artefacts, museum collections, field documentation. The right side represents the digital: social media outreach, online platforms, virtual exhibitions, global reach. And the centre — the hybrid zone — is where 3D site models, open data repositories, hybrid audiences, and live field posts live. Most of the interesting and difficult questions happen in that centre. What this means practically is straightforward: digital outreach is not an add-on to physical work, and it cannot be treated as a translation of physical work into another medium. It needs to be conceived as part of the same integrated strategy from the very beginning.

Key Takeaways — Module 1

Let us close with the four takeaways on screen. Heritage is not a passive legacy — it is an active, ongoing practice of selection, interpretation, and value attribution; nothing becomes heritage automatically, and understanding that process is the beginning of understanding heritage itself. The archaeological record cannot communicate itself — the artefact in the ground says nothing until it is excavated, analysed, contextualised, and communicated, which means every archaeologist is, in some fundamental sense, also a communicator, and there is no separating the science from its transmission. Digital transformation in archaeology is not a

single event or a single tool — it runs from fieldwork data capture all the way through to social media strategy, changing practices, relationships, and the very nature of what counts as knowledge in the public domain. And finally: social media platforms are not neutral conduits — they impose structural preferences that favour engagement over accuracy, simplicity over nuance, emotion over evidence. Knowing this does not mean avoiding these platforms; it means working within them with clear eyes. These four ideas are the foundation for everything that follows in this course.