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Social Media and Cultural Heritage

Module 2 — Social Media Platforms & Heritage Communication

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In this module we move from the broader digital ecosystem to the specific role of social media platforms in heritage communication. A platform is never a neutral channel. Each platform has its own formats, audience expectations, algorithms, and communicative logic.

Introduction: Why Platforms Matter

For heritage institutions, this means that communication strategies cannot simply be copied from one platform to another. A post designed for Instagram may not work effectively as a TikTok video, and a detailed academic thread may fail entirely on Facebook. Effective communication therefore depends on platform literacy: understanding how each environment shapes attention, visibility, and audience behaviour.

The key question is not which platform is most popular. The more important question is which platform best supports a specific objective, audience, and institutional identity. This idea will guide the entire module.

Instagram: Visual Identity and Curated Engagement

Instagram remains one of the most important platforms for cultural heritage communication because it is fundamentally visual. The platform privileges photography, short-form video, aesthetic coherence, and recognisable visual identity. For museums and archaeological projects, this makes Instagram especially effective for artefact presentation, fieldwork documentation, and behind-the-scenes storytelling.

At the same time, Instagram creates risks. Because the platform rewards visual impact, heritage can easily become aestheticised or detached from historical context. A beautiful image may generate engagement without producing real understanding.

The task of the communicator is therefore to connect visual appeal with interpretation. Captions, carousel structures, and story sequences should explain archaeological context, historical meaning, and research significance. Instagram works best when aesthetics become an entry point into knowledge rather than a substitute for it.

YouTube: Depth and Long-Form Education

YouTube differs from many social platforms because it combines video content with search-engine visibility and long-term discoverability. Unlike highly ephemeral platforms, YouTube videos may remain accessible and relevant for years. For this reason, it is particularly valuable for educational heritage communication.

Archaeological missions can use YouTube for documentaries, excavation diaries, interviews, site tours, and methodological explainers. The platform allows institutions to communicate uncertainty, interpretation, and context in much greater depth than short-form environments.

However, this depth also requires higher production standards. Audio quality, pacing, editing, titles, subtitles, and thumbnails all influence audience retention and discoverability. YouTube should therefore be approached as a long-term educational archive capable of supporting public learning over time.

TikTok and Short-Form Storytelling

TikTok represents one of the most important shifts in contemporary digital communication. Its algorithm distributes content aggressively to users who may have no previous connection to the account. This allows archaeological and heritage content to reach very large non-specialist audiences extremely quickly.

The platform is particularly effective for short educational videos, object explanations, myth correction, and behind-the-scenes content. For younger audiences, TikTok may become the first point of contact with archaeology.

At the same time, TikTok creates challenges for scholarly communication. The platform rewards speed, humor, surprise, and emotional immediacy. The solution is not to avoid the platform, but to define realistic educational objectives and use short videos as gateways toward deeper engagement.

Facebook and Community Engagement

Although Facebook is sometimes considered less innovative than newer platforms, it remains important for many heritage organizations. Its strengths lie in community building, event promotion, local engagement, and longer-form communication.

Facebook is particularly useful for communication with local stakeholders, volunteers, diaspora communities, educational groups, and partner institutions. Unlike TikTok or Instagram, the platform often supports slower and more relational forms of interaction.

For many heritage organizations, Facebook functions less as a platform of rapid visibility and more as a platform of continuity and sustained institutional presence.

X, LinkedIn, and Specialist Networks

Professional and text-based platforms fulfill different functions within heritage communication. X has traditionally been used for conference commentary, publication announcements, academic networking, and rapid scholarly discussion. LinkedIn, by contrast, focuses more strongly on professional identity, institutional visibility, partnerships, and funding opportunities.

These platforms remind us that heritage audiences are plural. Not every communication activity should target the broadest possible public. Some forms of content are intended primarily for specialists, collaborators, policymakers, or funding bodies.

Many institutions therefore adopt a dual-channel strategy: accessible storytelling on visual platforms and more technical communication on professional networks.

Museum Communication vs Field Communication

Museum communication and archaeological field communication operate under very different conditions. Museums usually function within controlled institutional environments, with communication teams, planned schedules, and stable visual standards.

Field archaeology is far more dynamic and unpredictable. Excavations unfold in real time, environmental conditions change constantly, and internet access may be limited. Communication often depends on researchers who are simultaneously engaged in scientific work.

Yet this unpredictability also creates a major communicative advantage. Audiences can witness discovery as it happens. The challenge is to transform the immediacy of fieldwork into structured and responsible communication.

Four Functions of Social Media

Social media serves several overlapping functions for heritage institutions. The first is knowledge dissemination: translating specialist research into accessible public narratives. The second is community building: developing relationships with audiences, local communities, and partner organizations.

The third function is institutional recognition. A strong digital presence demonstrates visibility, transparency, and public value to funders, governments, and universities.

The fourth function is archival documentation. Social media creates a secondary record of exhibitions, fieldwork, educational activities, and public engagement. These functions often overlap within a single post or campaign.

Platform Risks and Ethical Challenges

Every platform introduces structural risks. The most important is that algorithms reward engagement rather than accuracy. Emotionally charged or sensational content is often amplified more aggressively than nuanced interpretation.

Archaeology is particularly vulnerable to this dynamic because discoveries are easily romanticized or commercialized. Communicators may feel pressure to exaggerate significance or simplify interpretation.

Responsible communication requires resisting these pressures without becoming inaccessible. The goal is to combine engagement with intellectual honesty by foregrounding uncertainty and distinguishing clearly between evidence and interpretation.

Module 2 Key Takeaways

The central lesson of this module is that platform choice is strategic. Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, Facebook, X, and LinkedIn are not interchangeable environments. Each platform supports different forms of storytelling, visibility, audience interaction, and institutional identity.

We also distinguished between museum communication and field-based communication, recognizing that archaeological missions require more flexible and reactive strategies.

Finally, we identified four major functions of social media for heritage institutions: dissemination, community building, institutional recognition, and archival documentation. These concepts provide the foundation for the next module, where we will move from platform analysis to communication strategy and institutional identity.