



Finanziato
dall'Unione europea
NextGenerationEU



Ministero
dell'Università
e della Ricerca



Italiadomani
PIANO NAZIONALE
DI RIPRESA E RESILIENZA



SAPIENZA
UNIVERSITÀ DI ROMA

Social Media and Cultural Heritage

Module 3 — Communication Strategy & Institutional Identity

Dr. Serenella Mancini

In this module we move from platform literacy to communication strategy. Many institutions begin by asking what they should post. A stronger approach begins earlier: why are we communicating, to whom, and with what purpose?

From Platform Use to Strategy

Without strategy, social media becomes reactive. Individual posts may be attractive, but they do not necessarily build a coherent institutional presence. A strategy connects objectives, audiences, platforms, visual identity, tone of voice, workflow, and evaluation.

For heritage organizations, this is especially important. Communication must support public engagement while protecting scientific accuracy, ethical responsibility, community relationships, and institutional credibility. Strategy is therefore not bureaucracy. It is the framework that makes responsible communication possible.

Defining Communication Objectives

The first step in a communication strategy is the definition of clear objectives. An institution must know what it wants to achieve before deciding what content to produce.

Objectives may include public education, visitor engagement, community participation, institutional visibility, research dissemination, student recruitment, fundraising, or policy influence. Each objective requires different content forms and different indicators of success.

A useful tool is the SMART model. Objectives should be specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound. A vague aim such as "increase engagement" is difficult to operationalize. A stronger objective would be to increase meaningful interaction with excavation updates among students and local audiences during a six-week field season. Precision makes communication actionable.

Audience Segmentation

Heritage institutions do not communicate with one single public. They address several audiences at once: specialists, students, teachers, tourists, local communities, diaspora groups, volunteers, journalists, funders, policymakers, and general cultural audiences.

Each of these audiences brings different expectations and different levels of prior knowledge. A technical post about ceramic chronology may be useful for specialists but inaccessible to general audiences. A short video explaining excavation methods may work well for students. A bilingual update may be essential for local stakeholders.

Audience segmentation does not mean fragmenting identity. It means calibrating content. A mature strategy can speak differently to different communities while maintaining the same institutional values: accuracy, clarity, respect, and coherence.

Building a Communication Strategy

A complete communication strategy connects aims, audiences, messages, platforms, formats, responsibilities, and evaluation. It should answer practical questions: what are we trying to communicate, who needs to hear it, where will it be published, and who is responsible for producing and approving it?

For archaeological missions, this work should be done before fieldwork begins. In the field, time is limited, conditions are unpredictable, and decisions made under pressure are rarely ideal.

Pre-season preparation should include templates, tone-of-voice guidelines, content buffers, ethical protocols, approval procedures, and a preliminary editorial calendar. Strategy does not eliminate flexibility. It makes flexibility manageable, so that teams can respond to opportunities without losing coherence or control.

Visual Institutional Identity

Visual identity is one of the most immediate ways an institution becomes recognizable online. It includes color palette, typography, graphic templates, photographic style, composition, logo use, and general visual atmosphere.

In fast-moving digital environments, audiences often recognize content before they read the account name. Consistency therefore creates familiarity, and familiarity supports trust. For heritage organizations, visual identity should reflect the character of the institution or project rather than relying on generic templates.

An archaeological mission might use earthy tones, stone greys, restrained typography, and consistent image framing to evoke material context and scholarly seriousness. The details may vary, but the principle remains the same: visual consistency gives communication institutional weight.

Verbal Identity and Tone of Voice

Verbal identity is the linguistic counterpart of visual identity. It determines how an institution sounds. Tone of voice includes formality, vocabulary, sentence rhythm, use of first or third person, emotional register, and the way uncertainty is expressed.

Heritage communication often requires movement between registers. Academic register is appropriate for publications and specialist presentations. Professional register works well for reports, LinkedIn posts, and partner communication. Accessible register is necessary for Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, schools, and general public outreach.

Register flexibility is not inconsistency. The same institution can adapt to different platforms while keeping the same values. The voice may change in form, but it should remain accurate, respectful, clear, and intellectually serious.

Communicating Uncertainty

One of the most important tasks in archaeological communication is expressing uncertainty responsibly. Archaeological knowledge is often provisional. Evidence is incomplete, contexts are complex, and interpretation may change after further analysis.

Public communication, however, often rewards confidence and simplicity. This creates a tension between scientific caution and communicative clarity. The solution is not to hide uncertainty, but to make it understandable.

Phrases such as "current evidence suggests," "our working hypothesis is," or "preliminary analysis indicates" help audiences understand archaeology as a process of investigation. Far from weakening authority, transparent uncertainty can strengthen trust. It shows that the institution is honest about what is known and what remains open.

Negotiating Communication Tensions

Heritage communication constantly negotiates tensions. One tension lies between scientific accuracy and public accessibility. Another lies between maximizing reach and serving specialist communities. A third lies between institutional control and community participation.

These tensions cannot be solved permanently. They must be managed strategically. A dual-channel approach can help: accessible storytelling on public platforms, and deeper technical material through websites, repositories, lectures, or specialist networks.

The communicator's task is not to choose one side and reject the other. It is to design systems that keep competing responsibilities in balance. Good communication is clear without being simplistic, engaging without being sensational, and participatory without abandoning scholarly responsibility.

Community Consultation and Co-Authorship

Institutional identity is also shaped by how an institution relates to the communities connected to the heritage it studies. In many archaeological contexts, local, indigenous, or descendant communities have living relationships to the material being communicated.

Ethical strategy therefore requires consultation before publication, not only after controversy arises. Community involvement may include reviewing sensitive content, contributing terminology, advising on cultural restrictions, appearing with informed consent, or co-authoring interpretive material.

This may require institutions to share narrative authority. That is not a loss of professionalism. It is a sign of responsible heritage practice. Communication becomes stronger when it recognizes that heritage significance is not produced by institutions alone.

Module 3 Key Takeaways

The main lesson of this module is that effective digital communication requires strategy before content. A strategy defines objectives, identifies audiences, selects platforms, establishes visual and verbal identity, and creates procedures for production and evaluation.

We have also seen that identity depends on consistency, but not rigidity. Institutions must adapt their language, format, and platform use to different audiences while maintaining recognizable values and visual coherence.

This is particularly important in heritage, where communication must balance engagement, accuracy, ethics, and community relationships. The next module builds on this foundation by focusing on content creation and digital storytelling.