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SAPIENZA
UNIVERSITÀ DI ROMA

Social Media and Cultural Heritage

Module 6 — Analytics, Ethics & Long-Term Impact

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This final module brings together two dimensions that must always remain connected: evaluation and ethics.

Evaluation and Responsibility

Digital communication is not complete once content is published. Institutions must ask whether communication was effective, responsible, and socially meaningful.

Analytics can help answer part of this question, but numbers alone are insufficient. A highly visible post may still be problematic if it misrepresents evidence, exposes a vulnerable site, or excludes relevant communities.

In heritage communication, success cannot be measured only by visibility. Evaluation must combine quantitative data, qualitative interpretation, ethical judgement, and community awareness.

Beyond Vanity Metrics

The most visible social media metrics are often the least informative. Reach, impressions, and likes can indicate visibility, but they do not necessarily measure understanding, trust, or meaningful engagement.

These are often called vanity metrics because they are easy to report and may appear impressive, but they can encourage shallow evaluation.

This does not mean they are useless. If the objective is awareness, reach may matter. But if the objective is education, then saves, shares, comments, viewing duration, click-throughs, and qualitative feedback may be more important. Metrics only become meaningful when connected to purpose.

Meaningful Engagement

More meaningful indicators include saves, shares, substantive comments, direct messages, click-throughs, event participation, and community responses. Saves suggest that audiences found content useful enough to return to. Shares suggest relevance beyond the immediate viewer.

Comments can reveal curiosity, misunderstanding, disagreement, emotional response, or deeper engagement. These indicators require qualitative interpretation, not only numerical counting.

In heritage contexts, community feedback is especially important. Analytics dashboards cannot fully capture whether communication was respectful, useful, or culturally appropriate. Impact is not only counted. It is interpreted.

Site Security and Looting Risk

One of the most serious ethical risks in archaeological communication is site security. Digital content can unintentionally provide information useful to looters or illicit antiquities networks.

A high-resolution image may reveal object type or material. Location tags, GPS metadata, landscape features, or identifiable surroundings may reveal where a site is located. Language that emphasises rarity or value may increase risk.

Responsible communication must include location management, metadata removal, delayed publication when necessary, avoidance of market-value language, and coordination with local heritage authorities. Public engagement must never compromise site protection.

Ethical Image Use

Images are powerful, but they are also ethically sensitive. Photographs of human remains, burials, sacred objects, conservation work, community rituals, or private individuals require careful consideration.

The fact that something can be photographed does not mean that it should be published. Ethical image use depends on context, consent, cultural sensitivity, and possible harm.

Institutions should establish image protocols before fieldwork or exhibition communication begins. Some materials may be published freely. Others require review, community consultation, or restriction. Visual communication is a form of representation, and representation has consequences.

Community Representation

Community representation is one of the central ethical questions in contemporary heritage practice. Institutions often communicate about places, objects, and traditions that have living significance for communities.

If those communities are absent, represented superficially, or consulted only after decisions have been made, communication reproduces unequal authority. Ethical heritage communication requires more than visibility. It requires participation and respect.

Representation can be understood as a spectrum: exclusion, tokenism, consultation, collaboration, and co-ownership. Not every project can immediately achieve co-ownership, but collaborative practice should be treated as a professional standard wherever possible.

Scientific Integrity Online

Scientific integrity is an ethical responsibility as well as an academic one. Digital content circulates quickly and may be detached from its original context. For this reason, communicators must be careful with claims.

Preliminary findings should be identified as preliminary. Uncertain interpretations should be framed as hypotheses. Terms such as "first," "unique," "oldest," or "most important" should be used only when supported by evidence.

Corrections are also part of integrity. If interpretation changes after further analysis, institutions should update or clarify the record transparently. This builds trust and helps audiences understand research as a developing process.

Emerging Technologies

Emerging technologies create new opportunities and new risks for heritage communication. Artificial intelligence can support drafting, translation, accessibility, image organisation, and audience analysis. But it can also generate inaccuracies, reproduce bias, or flatten interpretive complexity.

Augmented and virtual reality offer powerful forms of immersive interpretation. They can help audiences visualise lost architecture, inaccessible sites, or reconstructed spaces.

However, these technologies must be transparent. Audiences should know what is evidence-based, what is reconstructed, and what remains hypothetical. Innovation must always be accompanied by scholarly and ethical clarity.

Final Course Conclusion

This course has argued that digital communication is now central to heritage and archaeological practice. We began with the digital ecosystem, then moved through platforms, strategy, identity, storytelling, editorial planning, analytics, and ethics.

Across all modules, one key idea has remained constant: effective communication requires both creativity and responsibility. The objective is not simply to generate visibility, but to make cultural heritage knowledge meaningful, accessible, credible, and socially responsible.

Heritage communicators must engage audiences without distorting evidence, tell compelling stories without exploiting people or places, and use digital tools without surrendering critical judgement. That is the professional and ethical standard to which heritage communicators should continually aspire.

In the PDF materials accompanying the course, you will find additional examples and case studies that are recommended for further consultation.

Thank you for your attention.