Integrating Archaeology
Science – Wish – Reality

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Content

Nina Schücker
Integrating archaeology in contemporary Europe
Preface XI

Integrating archaeology: community and public

Kostas Kasvikis, Eleftheria Theodoroudi and Kostas Kotsakis
The past and the public
History and monuments in the Aristotelous Axis, Thessaloniki (Greece) 3

Michał Pawleta
The past in the present
The case of the ancient stone rings in Pomerania (Poland) 9

Nicole Rodrigues
Saint-Denis, archaeology, territory and citizenship (Archéologie, territoire et citoyenneté)
Assessment and prospects 17

Raimund Karl
The public? Which public? 23

Cath Neal
Community archaeology in the UK
Setting the agenda 29

Gerhard Ermischer
Digging up history
A case study from the Spessart (Germany) 35

Xurxo M. Ayán Vila
Public archaeology, democracy and community
Experiences from Iron Age hillforts at Galicia (Spain) 41

Monique H. van den Dries and Sjoerd J. van der Linde
Collecting oral histories for the purpose of stimulating community involvement at Tell Balata (Palestine) 49

Karl-Friedrich Rittershofer
Volunteering and fundraising
Excavations in the Dünsberg oppidum in the vicinity of Gießen (Germany) 57

Daniel Burger and Sabine Kuhlmann
Opportunities and limitations
Working within an association as a way to support post-graduates 63

Sylvie Jérémie
Indigenous people of the American French Territory (the case of French Guiana)
Processes and dynamics of identity construction through archaeology 69

Integrating archaeology: different approaches

Stefanie Samida
Reenacted prehistory today
Preliminary remarks on a multidisciplinary research project 75

Birgit Jaeckel
Archaeological story-telling
Facts in fiction 81
Maria and Jörg Courtial
Making history emotionally tangible with the help of digital reconstruction 87

Wolfgang Meier and Kurt Frank
Temporary archaeologists 91

Matthias Jung
Case studies on the motivations of amateur archaeologists 95

Christoph Scholz
Virtual archaeology
The concept and implementation of an extraordinary touring exhibition 103

Integrating archaeology: all ages

Peter Lautzas
Archaeology in the German education system
Issues and requests from a practical perspective 111

Miriam Sénécheau
Digging in the books
Finding interactions between archaeology, politics and education by textbook research 115

Kostas Kasvikis
Prehistory in Greek primary education 1975–2012
Representations of a mythic and Hellenised past 121

Ulrike Radke
“Pick ‘n’ mix!”
On the diversity of educational programmes in archaeological exhibitions 127

Bernd Werner Schmitt
Archaeology
A meeting of generations 131

Jenny Linke
Experiencing our industrial heritage at every age
Programmes for older citizens at the LWL-Industry Museum 135

Integrating archaeology: working world and economic issues

Franz Schafranski and Katrin Wunderlich
EU demonstration project LIMES
Promotion of cultural tourism in rural areas by means of mobile services 143

Michaela Reinfeld and Güzden Varinlioğlu
Maritime archaeology versus diving tourism
Cultural heritage management in Kaş (Turkey) 147

Sandra Hatz and Wolfgang Dietz
The primeval entrepreneurs
In the Bavarian Forest, the bfz runs the Celtic village of Gabreta 155

Maria Theresia Starzmann
The political economy of archaeology
Fieldwork, labor politics and neocolonial practices 159

Barbara Wewerka and Alexandra Krenn-Leeb
ASINOE
Over 20 years of experience in a socially integrative employment project 163
Alexandra Krenn-Leeb and Barbara Wewerka
BALANCE
Promoting health and occupational safety as integrative parameters in archaeology 167

Christian Kaster
Archaeology at a rural municipal level 175

Integrating archaeology: excluded groups
Christian Soldner and Stefanie Schween
Curiosity, challenge and the wish to leave traces
Why do young men help to build a Celtic house 181

Rachael Kiddey
“i’d never thought about me being part of the history.”
The value of heritage work with socially excluded people 185

Integrating archaeology: ethnic groups
Achim Müller
Bridging the gap
Understanding and evaluating the role of Value in Audience Development 193

Christine Gerbich and Susan Kamel
Welcome on the Diwan!
Experiences with the visitor panel of the Museum für Islamische Kunst at the Pergamonmuseum in Berlin (Germany) 199

Maria Pia Guermandi
Museums as Places for Intercultural Dialogue
Experiences, reflections and practices from Europe and Emilia Romagna 205

Silvia Rückert
Evet – ja, ich will! Wedding traditions and fashion from 1800 to the present: A German-Turkish encounter
An exhibition on cultural history as a contribution to intercultural exchange 213

Eva Rusch
Second Home Cologne (Zweite Heimat Köln)
How to engage new population groups with their Municipal Museum 221

Integrating archaeology: new media
Patrick Hadley
Web 2.0 as a communication tool between archaeologists and beyond 231

Diane Scherzler
On humility, power shift and cultural change
Archaeology on Web 2.0 sites 237

Tinne Jacobs
De Kogge (Antwerp, Belgium), testimony of a medieval shipwreck
Never too old for social media 241

Marcus Cyron
“Wikipedian in Residence” at the German Archaeological Institute 249
Inhalt

Nina Schücker
*Integrating archaeology in contemporary Europe*
Vorwort XI

**Integrating archaeology: Gesellschaft und Öffentlichkeit**

Kostas Kasvikis, Eleftheria Theodoroudi und Kostas Kotsakis
Die Vergangenheit und die Öffentlichkeit
Geschichte und Denkmäler entlang der Aristoteles-Achse in Thessaloniki (Griechenland) 3

Michał Pawleta
Die Vergangenheit als Teil der Gegenwart
Überlegungen am Beispiel der Steinkreise in Pommern (Polen) 9

Nicole Rodrigues
Saint-Denis, Archäologie, Stadt und Einwohner (*archéologie, territoire et citoyenneté*)
Bilanz und Perspektiven 17

Raimund Karl
Die Öffentlichkeit? Welche Öffentlichkeit? 23

Cath Neal
*Community archaeology* im Vereinigten Königreich
Agendasetzung 29

Gerhard Ermischer
Geschichte ausgraben
Eine Fallstudie im Spessart (Deutschland) 35

Xurxo M. Ayán Vila
*Public archaeology*, Demokratie und Gesellschaft
Projekte zu eisenzeitlichen Höhensiedlungen in Galicien (Spanien) 41

Monique H. van den Dries und Sjoerd J. van der Linde
Erinnerungen sammeln, um Verbundenheit zu stärken
*Oral History* am Tell Balata (Palästina) 49

Karl-Friedrich Rittershofer
Ehrenamt und Fundraising
Ausgrabungen im keltischen Oppidum auf dem Dünsberg bei Gießen (Deutschland) 57

Daniel Burger und Sabine Kuhlmann
Möglichkeiten und Grenzen
Vereinsarbeit als Chance zur Förderung des wissenschaftlichen Nachwuchses 63

Sylvie Jérémie
Indigene Völker in den amerikanischen Überseegebieten Frankreichs
(am Beispiel von Französisch-Guayana)
Zu Prozessen und Dynamiken der Identitätsbildung durch Archäologie 69

**Integrating archaeology: unterschiedliche Herangehensweisen**

Stefanie Samida
Vergangenheit erleben
Vorüberlegungen zu einem multidisziplinären Forschungsprojekt 75

Birgit Jaeckel
Archäologisches Erzählen
Fakten in der Fiktion 81
Maria und Jörg Courtial
Geschichte emotional erfahrbar machen
Die digitale Rekonstruktion 87

Wolfgang Meier und Kurt Frank
Archäologen auf Zeit 91

Matthias Jung
Fallstudien zu den Motivlagen von Hobbyarchäologen 95

Christoph Scholz
Virtuelle Archäologie
Konzept und Durchführung einer außergewöhnlichen Tourneeausstellung 103

**Integrating archaeology: alle Altersstufen**

Peter Lautzas
Die Archäologie im deutschen Bildungswesen
Fragen und Wünsche an die Archäologie aus der Praxis 111

Miriam Sénécheau
Archäologie im Dienste von Politik und Bildungsauftrag?
Was Archäologen finden, wenn sie Schulbuchforschung betreiben 115

Kostas Kasvikis
Die Vorgeschichte im Unterricht an griechischen Grundschulen 1975 – 2012
Darstellungen einer mythischen, hellenisierten Vergangenheit 121

Ulrike Radke
„Bitte recht bunt“
Von der Vielfalt der Vermittlungsangebote in archäologischen Ausstellungen 127

Bernd Werner Schmitt
Archäologie
Ein Treffen der Generationen 131

Jenny Linke
Industriekultur erleben in jedem Alter
Angebote für Senioren am LWL-Industriemuseum 135

**Integrating archaeology: Arbeitswelt und wirtschaftliche Aspekte**

Franz Schafranski und Katrin Wunderlich
EU-Demonstrationsprojekt LIMES
Förderung des Kulturtourismus in ländlichen Regionen durch mobile Dienstleistungen 143

Michaela Reinfeld und Güzden Varinlioğlu
Unterwasserarchäologie versus Tauchtourismus
Denkmalpflege in Kaş (Türkei) 147

Sandra Hatz und Wolfgang Dietz
Die Ur-Unternehmer
Das bfz betreibt im Bayerischen Wald das Keltendorf Gabreta 155

Maria Theresia Starzmann
Die politische Ökonomie der Archäologie
Feldarbeit, Arbeitspolitik und neokoloniale Praktiken 159

Barbara Wewerka und Alexandra Krenn-Leeb
ASINOE
Über 20 Jahre Erfahrung in einem sozialintegrativen Beschäftigungsprojekt 163
Alexandra Krenn-Leeb und Barbara Wewerka
BALANCE
Gesundheitsförderung und Arbeitssicherheit als integrative Parameter in der Archäologie 167

Christian Kaster
Archäologie auf kommunaler Ebene 175

Integrating archaeology: ausgeschlossene Gruppen
Christian Soldner und Stefanie Schween
Neugier, Herausforderung und der Wunsch, Spuren zu hinterlassen
Warum junge Männer helfen, ein Keltenhaus zu bauen 181

Rachael Kiddey
„Ich hab’ nie darüber nachgedacht, Teil der Geschichte zu sein.“
Die Bedeutung von Kulturerbe-Arbeit mit Menschen, die von sozialer Ausgrenzung betroffen sind 185

Integrating archaeology: ethnische Gruppen
Achim Müller
Gegensätze überwinden
Wie man einem erlebnisorientiertem Publikum Identifikation und Verbundenheit anbietet 193

Christine Gerbich und Susan Kamel
Willkommen auf dem Diwan!
Erfahrungen mit dem Besucherpanel des Museums für Islamische Kunst im Pergamonmuseum, Berlin (Deutschland) 199

Maria Pia Guermandi
Museen als Plätze interkulturellen Dialogs
Beispiele aus Europa und der Emilia Romagna 205

Silvia Rückert
Evet – Ja, ich will! Hochzeitskultur und Mode von 1800 bis heute:
Eine deutsch-türkische Begegnung
Eine kulturgeschichtliche Ausstellung als Beitrag zum interkulturellen Austausch 213

Eva Rusch
Zweite Heimat Köln
Wie man neue Bevölkerungsgruppen für ihr Stadtmuseum begeistert 221

Integrating archaeology: Neue Medien
Patrick Hadley
Web 2.0 als Kommunikationsmittel zwischen Archäologen und der Öffentlichkeit 231

Diane Scherzler
Von Demut, Machtverschiebungen und einem Kulturwandel
Archäologie in Web-2.0-Umgebungen 237

Tinne Jacobs
De Kogge (Antwerpen, Belgien), Aussage eines mittelalterlichen Wracks
Niemals zu alt für Soziale Medien 241

Marcus Cyron
Der „Wikipedian in Residence“ am Deutschen Archäologischen Institut 249
whether it is a Facebook account, Twitter, putting up pictures on Flickr, editing Wikipedia articles or maybe even uploading videos on Youtube – it is the most recent trend in academic communication to be present in Web 2.0, the interactive web with all its blogs, wikis and social media platforms. Currently, museums, research institutions and professional associations are competing for friends on Facebook, followers on Twitter and their clicks or comments. However, is all that glitters really gold and is it justified under any circumstances to be convinced of these instruments’ effectiveness? This article aims to take a closer look at this question. Which opportunities and risks does Web 2.0 harbour for archaeologists and archaeological institutions that wish to communicate their topics beyond the circles of experts? Are we really only talking about a new technology or is there more to it? This text will give a brief overview of the current changes in global communication systems and their impact on the non-expert academic communication. Generally speaking, it aims to provide an approach to a strategic perspective for Web 2.0 involvement.

Snapshots of cultural change

If you wish to voice your opinion in public these days you do not need to write a book or own a newspaper or media conglomerate. These times are over. You do not necessarily have to raise mass media interest in your topic or need large funding. All you need is a computer and access to the internet to start blogging, sharing your views on social media networks, form a group and develop your ideas with kindred spirits. This is why, at present, communication systems are fundamentally changing around the world. People – and only some of them are researchers – take photos of excavations or film this archaeological work during their vacations and on other occasions, or they document the destruction of archaeological sites, for instance in Egypt or Syria. They collect data and make it available to others, as seen after the nuclear disaster in Fukushima. Similarly, they debate the opportunities and significance of science, whether it be nanotechnology or new remote sensing techniques in archaeology.

Web 2.0 can provide real-time communication where a discussion can arise within minutes. Users share information, collect ideas and pass them on to their friends and colleagues who, in turn, share them with their respective networks. Ideas, suggestions, protest and enthusiasm thus spread at an enormous speed and in an organised way. Re-tweeting information and clicking on Facebook’s “like” button will help information spread rapidly. Just imagine someone passing on a piece of information to, say, 100 of his / her friends and followers of whom, in turn, 30 will “like” or re-tweet this information to their networks (for the sake of simplicity let us assume they consist of 100 people as well) – there will be 3,000 people who are potentially aware of a certain fact. This can happen in no time. Also, it is obvious that the passing on, discussion and interpretation of information can continue forever. Web 2.0 is a non-linear system and its coverage cannot be foreseen by the sender of information.

An audience that previously was very fragmentated and hardly able to connect has turned into an audience that quickly forms groups of kindred
or interested spirits in the social media. These groups have the potential to grow at enormous speed and links can be quite strong. Web 2.0 allows for a much stronger degree of participation than Web 1.0 did. The key word to the success of social networks is “social” – the internet is not merely a knowledge base anymore, it is an interactive space. To a certain extent, it meets the needs for social interaction.

While, in the past, non-expert discussions of archaeological topics took place in the pub or in clubs and societies to a limited extent with a strongly fragmented audience, social media platforms today allow for the formation of networks on a much larger scale. Apart from the swift distribution of facts they provide a space for emotions such as enthusiasm, anger or rage to wind each other up and collapse just as quickly. The network theoretician Peter Kruse calls them dynamics that boost themselves: “There is the formation of groups of people with the same interests, beyond any political party or advocacy work, that are impressively able to acquire democratically relevant majorities. The effects triggered by this have a dimension which is irritating and difficult to predict for the existing structures of power.” (Diehn 2011, 42).

People will continue to debate archaeology – or what they think archaeology comprises – in much larger groups than before. They will do so whether an archaeologist participates in the discussion or not. The journalism researcher Jay Rosen called them “the people formerly known as the audience” in the famous online newspaper The Huffington Post, and although he was actually talking about journalists (Rosen 2006) he could easily have referred to researchers as well when he said: “You don’t control production on the new platform, which isn’t one-way. There is a new balance of power between you and us. The people formerly known as the audience are simply ‘the public’ made realer, less fictional, more able, less predictable. You should welcome that, media people. But whether you do or not we want you to know we’re here.”.

■ Benefits of Web 2.0 engagement

It could be an advantage for the field of archaeology to get involved in Web 2.0. Still, people continue to hear about archaeological findings mainly from the mass media but, in parallel, it is possible for archaeological institutions or individual researchers to get in touch with people, easily and in a direct way, without the journalist. Archaeologists can voice their opinion wherever the debate takes place; they reach their audience without the filter necessitated by media logic, and without delay. Those who write a blog might also aim at rectifying pseudo-science and wrong statements – as wrong information might also spread fast and influence people’s opinion.

Social media provides an excellent space for “niche information”. If you want to present your field of research or your work from an unusual point of view by focusing, for example, on a single project, research policy or the illicit use of metal detectors at archaeological sites with the aim of looting, there is a possibility that you will reach your audience with a blog if you are not able to reach it via the mass media because your audience is small and highly interested in specific information from your field.

Archaeologists are able to spread burning issues or significant information swiftly around the globe. One current example is the Facebook group “Syria’s archaeological heritage in danger” (Le patrimoine archéologique syrien en danger), that informs us about the severe damage being done to Syria’s cultural heritage.

Archaeology with all its findings and non-renewable resources depends much more than other fields on public support and has thus much to gain from a direct communication with the citizens, and even more so from its active support, the “wisdom of the crowd”. Just to name one example: Jason Felch is a reporter for the Los Angeles Times and will soon start WikiLoot, an open source web platform for the publication and analysis of data and photographs documenting the illicit trade in looted antiquities. The raw data is planned to be made available to everyone, Felch says: “It’s all raw, unprocessed data. Researchers can use it, but we also hope the public can use it to find out a bit more about what is on display at their local museum.” (Kington 2012). This will also change the role of “experts” as they become one of the crowd.

■ Challenges of Web 2.0 engagement

As was mentioned before, people expect to be able to participate when they hear the words Web 2.0. They will not silently acknowledge just any facts by any expert. This potential and challenge of Web 2.0 should not be underestimated by archaeologists. “As long as the internet exists”, Peter Kruse says, “you cannot stop people from participating anymore. The internet is like a permanent invitation to get involved.” (Stifterverband 2011).

In a Web 2.0 environment, archaeologists are users like everyone else, and they are perceived as peers. If an explanation by an archaeologist is correct but too complicated, another user might comment “this does not make sense to me”, completely unimpressed by any PhD title
or list of publications – he or she probably does not even know about them. Other users who are more familiar with the topic might contribute additional information or inquire about the validity of data. However, this kind of comment is posted directly below a blog or Facebook entry and is therefore visible to everyone, in black and white, and you can hardly ignore it but have to answer. You must be willing to face potential criticism, listen and learn. The audience demands to communicate with human beings, not with an abstract institution that tries to wriggle its way out of a disputed issue by using politically balanced, yet non-committal wording. Web 2.0 makes you visible, tangible, and archaeology is thus given a face.

Power, too, shifts from the sender of an information to the addressee. If you are not able to generate feedback in your networks and if you send out information without generating a response you do not have any power there. “I am only powerful if power is given to me,” according to Peter Kruse (Stifterverband 2011). And unlike a glossy brochure or a full-page advertisement, this power cannot be purchased.

Possible strategies in Web 2.0

As was mentioned above: the unilateral sending out of information and not responding to your audience’s questions, interests and needs does not work in a Web 2.0 environment. Users will realise when someone is not interested in them and just brushes their concerns aside; they will know if someone wants to use Web 2.0 as just another advertising channel. This fact, too, will potentially be communicated to the public and commented on by other users – in the worst case you can be hit by a shitstorm. It is obviously possible to make mistakes in Web 2.0 and in that case the user will have to pay dearly for them.

The essential point is to not just serve Web 2.0 “because that’s the done thing”. The most costly involvement will not help your matters if you simply post information on the website of your institute, just like in Web 1.0. That’s the point: Web 2.0 is not just a paradigm shift in terms of technology but just as much a cultural change. The academic must dare to enter into a discussion with the public. If, however, you already find it difficult to accept that journalists do not write exactly what you would like to read about your projects, you will run into problems when dealing with non-experts. If your aim is mainly to inform and “enlighten” them you will have to think again.

Now, what is the best approach? In Web 2.0, users must learn to deal with criticism and to be questioned by other users. A certain humility towards your audience is necessary. In Web 2.0 networks it is not possible to keep up the nimbus of “objectivity” or the narcissistic idea of owning the “truth”. Users must learn to encounter situations they are not able to control in the end.

All of this is not easy. Furthermore, any Web 2.0 involvement is time- and energy-consuming, therefore also costly. This is certainly not a nine-to-five job with six weeks of annual vacation. As this article shows there can be good reasons why archaeological institutions should currently not get involved in Web 2.0 activities. On the other hand, Web 2.0 develops at great speed. It must be a matter of the heart for this research discipline to help shape this development and the changing view of archaeology. Archaeology must not close its mind to those networks because that would be detrimental. Thus, the question we archaeologists must ask is actually simple: are we ready for a new understanding of power and dialogue? Are we ready to accept that networks develop a momentum of their own? Yes or no?

Von Demut, Macht­verschiebungen und einem Kulturwandel

Archäologie in Web-2.0-Umgebungen

About the author

Diane Scherzler is project manager for new media at Südwstrundfunk, a major German public broadcasting company. Before that, she worked there for ten years as science editor and project manager. Furthermore, she regularly teaches writing courses for Südwstrundfunk’s trainees that last several weeks. For more than 15 years she has been concerned with the subject area science, the media, and the public. She regularly gives media training to academics and advises academic organisations that want to improve their media strategy and collaboration with journalists. As visiting lecturer at Tübingen and Freiburg Universities, she teaches science communication and writing skills. Diane Scherzler serves as vice-chairperson of German Society for Pre- and Early History (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Ur- und Frühgeschichte). She is founder and head of the Euroscience workgroup Science Communication that aims to share experience and best practices in communicating topics from the “hard” sciences and humanities with non-experts and a broader audience.

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