Problematising digital and dialogic heritage practices in Europe

Tensions and opportunities

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Situating digital dialogues in the EU policy landscape

Within a European context, the position of dialogue as a means for addressing significant social conflict gained prominence just over a decade ago through two interlinked and currently active agendas, the *Faro Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society* (Faro Convention hereinafter) (Council of Europe, 2005) and the *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue – Living Together As Equals in Dignity* (White Paper on ICD hereinafter) (Council of Europe, 2008). Both published by the Council of Europe, the former commits to ‘promote dialogue among cultures and religions’ by treating all cultural heritages ‘equitably’ (Council of Europe, 2005, preamble), whereas the latter proposes dialogue as a key to Europe’s future and defines intercultural dialogue as

an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals, groups with different ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds and heritage on the basis of mutual understanding and respect. It operates at all levels – within societies, between the societies of Europe and between Europe and the wider world.

(Council of Europe, 2008, p. 10)

Both documents articulate dialogue as a means to achieving convergence around the European values of ‘human rights, democracy and the rule of law’ – both documents use the same phrase – by promoting knowledge around the different cultures as well as respect for diversity in both cultural expressions and interpretations, at the level of ethics and practices.

Remarkably, both of these influential programmatic documents make only limited mention of digital culture and practices: in the case of the *Faro Convention*, digital is evoked through the reference in Article 14 to the
Information Society with specific focus on enhancing ‘access’ to diverse heritages while protecting intellectual property rights; on the other hand, in the 61 pages of the White Paper on ICD, the word ‘digital’ appears once, with reference to digital broadcasting, while the phrase ‘virtual spaces’ makes a more productive appearance, only once in the document, in the section about ‘spaces for intercultural dialogue’ (Council of Europe, 2008, p. 32). Conversely, significant emphasis is placed on media, primarily in the form of media industries and their ability to render ‘national cultural systems increasingly porous’ (ibid., p. 13) and to act as ‘critical spaces for indirect dialogue’ (ibid., p. 33) by making visible cultural diversity to people who do not have first-hand experience of it. Notably, both of these documents – and the Faro Convention in particular – were produced at the cusp of what is now commonly referred to as the ‘revolution of the social web’, which from the early 2000s saw the rise of the global compendium Wikipedia (launched in 2001) and the establishment of numerous social content-sharing online platforms such as Flickr (2004), YouTube (2005) and Facebook (global release in 2005).

Furthermore, terms such as ‘dialogue’, ‘intercultural’ and ‘diversity’ do not feature in the key documents that outline the scope and purpose of the digitisation of heritage in Europe, such as the 2006 and 2011 editions of the Commission’s Recommendation on the Digitisation and Online Accessibility of Cultural Material and Digital Preservation (2006, 2011) and the mission statement of the European digital heritage platform Europeana (launched in 2008). Indeed, it is noticeable that in the most recent New European Agenda for Culture (European Commission 2008) (which was the first European Agenda for Culture to mention impact of the digital on culture), references to heritage’s potential in creating ‘dialogue’ or ‘intercultural dialogue’ have been dropped altogether, to be replaced instead by an emphasis on ‘nurturing peaceful relations’ (p. 7) between nations. However, ‘cultural diversity’ holds a central position in the Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on the Internet of Citizens (2016) – indeed, the latter reconfirms full respect for the 2005 UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions. All of these documents maintain a clear emphasis on increasing access to heritage resources in Europe or individuals and communities through ‘the permanent preservation of all relevant human creative expression for future generations through mass digitisation programmes’ (ibid.); in the case of Europeana, this can be further achieved through a culture of openness and collaboration among all stakeholders. In a similar vein, the overarching Digital Agenda for Europe (Council of Europe, 2010), when it comes to heritage, forgoes any mentions of dialogue and interculturality and emphasises the role of digital infrastructure and tools in increasing accessibility to European heritage through digitisation, as well as
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promoting cultural and creative diversity through pluralism in the media and greater opportunities for the creative expression of individuals.

A sense of disconnect between the individual agendas that outline dialogue, heritage and digital practices in a global context also prevails in UNESCO documents. In the case of UNESCO, emphasis on the creation of suitable frameworks for the digitisation and preservation of digital cultural assets for future ‘access’ is also the focus of relevant declarations, such as UNESCO/UBC’s Vancouver Declaration on The Memory of the World in the Digital Age: Digitization and Preservation (2012) and the Recommendation concerning the Protection and Promotion of Museums and Collections, their Diversity and their Role in Society (UNESCO, 2015). For example, the latter affirms the role of museums as ‘key spaces’ for dialogue rather than ‘merely places where our common heritage is preserved’ (ibid., p. 5); however, when it comes to the role of the digital, the emphasis is on ‘technologies’ and their role in the ‘preservation, study, creation and transmission of heritage and related knowledge’ (ibid., p. 9). Furthermore, a recent UNESCO survey that looked at the ways intercultural dialogue is understood and operationalised by its member states (UNESCO, 2017) also utilises a limiting interpretation of the digital as ‘new technologies’ and ‘tools’. According to the survey, these new technologies, on the one hand, enable the sharing and creation of new cultural expressions, while on the other hand, can be used to undermine social inclusion and become a vehicle for hate speech (ibid., p. 8). Awareness of the use of social media for these negative purposes is increasing, for example, with the United Nations’ investigation of the recent use of Facebook to promote racial hatred against minority groups in Myanmar (BBC Trending, 2018). However, it is worth noting that respondents to the survey also cited ‘the significant rise in the use of social media as a means to enhance civil society voices and foster inclusive participation’ (UNESCO, 2017, p. 8).

These initial observations of the language used in the official documents that inform policy and practice in Europe around heritage, dialogue and digital practices suggest that language around digital is still quite slippery: the documents discussed earlier inseparably use terms such as ‘new and emerging technologies’, ‘ICT’, ‘media’, ‘the Internet’, ‘digital media’, ‘social media’ and ‘virtual spaces’ to refer to a set of tools, platforms or infrastructures that use digital technology. Although all of these documents outline or recommend ways to use these tools for primarily heritage preservation and dissemination purposes, they apply very limited or no attention to the potential dialogic capacities of these tools and the practices they engender for heritage. This is in contradiction to the significant dialogic turn in the heritage and culture-related documents. As many people’s everyday affairs, interactions and dialogues progressively take place on digital platforms and
rely on digital technology to come to fruition, and as museums and heritage sites are continuously affirmed as spaces for intercultural dialogue for social cohesion and peace in Europe, it is now imperative to explore how these assemblages of digital, dialogic and heritage practices interface.

This chapter attempts to articulate a productive framing of how museological, dialogic and digital practices come together in the European context by drawing attention to the tensions that arise from policy, theory and practice in this field. The chapter interweaves positions and assumptions expressed in relevant European policy documents with museological and philosophical discourse related to dialogue and characteristics of digital culture. For this purpose, we borrow concepts from key thinkers on dialogue such as Bakhtin and Levinas to debate two interrelated aspects: the conceptualisations of alterity/otherness within heritage in digital culture and the articulation of European heritage institutions as neutral spaces for dialogue. In this respect, the chapter aims to critically engage with two questions and their implications for heritage institutions: (a) who is the dialogue about heritage with, and (b) where (and how) does it take place within the realm of digital culture? The chapter concludes by reflecting on how the dialogic notions of responsibility and answerability can help us to think about ways forward for European heritage institutions in the digital public sphere and their ability to engage with it as a place for dialogue. This is a necessarily selective account as a means for opening a conversation rather than providing definitive positions in this field. In this respect, this chapter maintains a dialogic stance towards Chapters 3, 4 and 5, which provide focused treatments of key ideas and practices related to the topic.

**Definitions and key terms**

In seeking to respond to some of the themes laid out earlier, it is necessary to provide a definitional background for the key terms used within this chapter. We acknowledge that terms such as ‘cultural heritage’ (and ‘European heritage’), ‘dialogue’ and ‘digital practices’ have received significant attention by philosophers, theorists and other disciplinary researchers over a long period of time; complex discourses are in place for all three fields. This section, therefore, aims to highlight the aspects of these discourses that help us to build a roadmap for understanding how practices that involve European heritage, dialogue and digital technologies and platforms come to be realised by European heritage institutions and their publics.

**Cultural heritage, interculturalism**

It is incontrovertible that terms such as ‘cultural heritage’ have now taken on an almost common-sense definition both across the academic and
political literature and, as covered by the Faro Convention (Council of Europe, 2005), can be understood to refer to “a group of resources inherited from the past which people identify [. . .] as a reflection and expression of their constantly evolving values, beliefs, knowledge and traditions” (online, Article 2). Such a definition does, by and large, correspond with the academic literature in this area, where “cultural heritage” is described as “a set of values and meanings” (Smith, 2006, p. 11) and is understood by bodies like ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites) to encapsulate both material and immaterial forces. Although some of the policies related to digital heritage align with this definition of heritage by subscribing to UNESCO’s 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, the emphasis is more than often on the more traditional definition of heritage as primarily consisting of tangible collections and heritage assets, the cultural, creative and economic value of which can be unlocked through mass digitisation.

The European Union (EU) has been somewhat slower than individual national governments to recognise the power invested in the values associated with cultural heritage; a fact that Tuuli Lähdesmäki (2017) notes is evident in the outpouring of policy documents and briefings on cultural heritage that followed the initial Faro Convention. A consequence of this sudden slew of culture-related policy has been, according to Christopher Gordon (2010), an “often inappropriate elision of “arts/heritage” and “culture” found in documents published by EU”, which he acknowledges is “one of the more obvious sources of confusion in a policy context” (p. 103). Certainly, whilst the early history of the EU was characterised by a top-down push towards fostering a common European identity (Sassatelli, 2002), the strategic underpinnings of this were, more often than not, framed through a common cultural heritage in particular, which the European Commission believed had the power to create “communality and feeling[s] of belonging among the citizens in the EU” (Lähdesmäki, 2014, p. 402; see also Calligaro, 2014). Therefore, schemes such as the European Agenda for Culture, whilst broad in their remit, very often specifically implicate the heritage sector, leading to some of the confusion around how culture is defined and understood within these documents. For the purposes of this chapter, whilst attempts have been made to distinguish between policies that address cultural heritage specifically, and the more sociologically oriented interpretations of culture, some allowance must be made for a crossover between the two in our analysis of the European context.

Regardless of its precise definition, there is a consensus in heritage studies that “heritage” is understood and experienced through practices of inclusion and exclusion that often assign homogenising values to diverse histories, cultural expressions and their material evidence. According to Smith (2006), these practices give rise and maintain a dominant way of
perceiving heritage through what she terms the ‘Authorised Heritage Discourse’ (AHD). Reflecting on the capacity of heritage to accommodate both diverse and alternative forms of identity in Europe, Macdonald (2013) asks the question: ‘can and should a “European heritage” be identified that transcends national and other diversities within Europe?’ (p. 162). Macdonald subsequently develops the argument for both a transcultural and a transnational European heritage, which is particularly relevant to the notion of dialogue and the dialogic practices examined in this volume. Mason (2013) similarly argues that national and transnational understandings of heritage can coexist simultaneously and can be understood through a framework of situated cosmopolitanism. Although Smith, Macdonald and Mason approach heritage from different angles, they have in common a preoccupation with the practices that underpin our understandings of heritage; for example, Smith (2006) emphasises the role of heritage practices, such as listing schemes and cultural policies, in maintaining AHD. It is essential to pay attention to the emergence of practices among heritage professionals in relation to the policies developed by supranational bodies such as the European Commission in order to understand Lähdesmäki’s (2012) observation that in European policies, culture and heritage have often been regarded as tools for advancing the EU’s political project, rather than multilayered, complex and contested domains in their own right.

Such framings are present in the *White Paper on ICD*, where cultural heritage is described as a space in which dialogue between divided communities takes place by ‘offer[ing] scope for mutual recognition by individuals from diverse backgrounds’ (Council of Europe, 2008, p. 33). Undoubtedly, dialogue *per se* is ubiquitous in European Commission’s practices – as indicated by current schemes such as *Citizens’ Dialogues* (public debates with European Commissioners and other EU decision-makers), *Social Dialogue* (between the representatives of the European trade unions and employers’ organisations) and *Structured Dialogue* (between young people and decision-makers in Europe). In these cases, dialogue is seen as a means to delivering the democratic and participatory promise of EU by enabling multiple and diverse stakeholders to shape the decision making of the European Commission. On the other hand, distinctly from the more operational approaches to dialogue, intercultural dialogue (ICD) is specifically articulated as ‘a forward-looking model for managing cultural diversity’ (Council of Europe, 2008, p. 4) as a means for realising European identity; in turn, the latter is expected to be grounded on ‘shared fundamental values, respect for common heritage and cultural diversity as well as respect for the equal dignity of every individual’ (ibid.). Intercultural dialogue, therefore, is tasked with negotiating the coexistence of commonality and diversity within individuals, groups and nations, or as Näss (2010) puts it, ‘the
line between acceptable diversity and unacceptable difference’ (online) in Europe. It is this emphasis on the responsibility of the people of Europe (and the EU member states) to manage otherness, and the conceptualisations of otherness, as articulated by the White Paper on ICD, that we aim to connect to philosophical and museological preoccupations with dialogue, per se, in the European context.

**Dialogue and the ‘dialogic museum’**

As observed by Stanley Deetz and Jennifer Simpson (2004), some of the most formative work on Western articulations of dialogue emerged in the early twentieth century, corresponding with the development of several philosophical turns; it could be broadly categorised according to the perspectives of liberal humanists, critical hermeneutics and postmodernists. Others, including Deetz and Simpson, have already done the work of unpacking the various scholarly contributions made during this period (Anderson, Baxter and Cissna, 2004; Stewart, Zediker and Black, 2004; Kögl er, 2014). This chapter does not aim to provide a comprehensive account of the philosophical approaches to dialogue, but rather focuses on the elements of these approaches that help us understand the position of dialogue in relation to heritage and digital practices. To this end, we draw on writings by Levinas and Bakhtin from the last three quarters of the twentieth century, and their applications in the museological and heritage context. Often regarded as the forebears of much of the current work on dialogue, whether in relation to education (Rule, 2013; Wegerif, 2008), critical psychology (Boe et al., 2013) or philosophy (Erdinast-Vulcan, 2008; Oliver, 2001), the most commonly cited aspects of Bakhtin’s and Levinas’s work tend to focus on their shared commitment to exploring the subjectivities that precede dialogue and their impact on the formation of a ‘new’ ethics of responsibility. Their approach to the central themes of alterity and otherness, and their positioning in relation to the role of responsibility and answerability provide, we argue, a productive bridge between the calls articulated in the EU policies on intercultural dialogue and cultural heritage, and the challenges of museological practice in this context.

Although not directly referencing Bakhtin and Levinas, many of the ideas they explored can be directly seen in the museological literature of recent years. For example, within museological practice, the notion of the dialogic museum as articulated by Tchen (1992) highlighted that a dialogue-driven museum practice had the capacity to make the Chinatown History Museum ‘a more resonant and responsible history centre’ (p. 291) towards improving New York and the community at large; it also acknowledged that the identity of Chinese residents in New York had been ‘formed by many layers of
influences’, which means that ‘the self is intricately tied to “others”’ (p. 294). Furthermore, in his provocation statement for the 2011 ICOFOM annual meeting on the topic of ‘[t]he dialogic museum and the visitor experience’, Jacobi (2011) advocates the need for museums to enable conscious and explicit modes of dialogue rather than relying on the inherent dialogical nature of the very act of the production of content for the communication tools and the education documents of the museum (p. 18). While Harris (2011) in the same forum refers to Bakhtin to clarify that the binary ‘one-to-one dialogue’, that is, the dialogue between a museum and its visitors, is ‘a very limiting understanding of dialogism’, as it maintains the assumption of the museums’ cultural privilege, stemming from its ‘old authority and power’ as a propagator of ‘national citizenry’ and ‘bourgeois taste’ (pp. 9–10).

In many respects, the terms ‘dialogic’ and/or ‘participatory museum’ – terms that are further explored in Chapters 3 and 4 of this volume – have come to encompass a significant variety and volume of museological practices that are preoccupied with the relationship between heritage institutions and communities, as well as the deployment of diverse modes of participation and exchange between the two. However, Boast (2011), in his critique of Clifford’s notion of the ‘museum as a contact zone’, warns his readers against an uncritical acceptance of the intentions, promise and, ultimately, effect of these participatory practices and ‘cross-cultural dialogues’. The springboard of his cautionary critique is not just the inherent asymmetry of the communicative practices between a valorising institution and its communities but also ‘the fundamental asymmetries, appropriations and biases’ (Boast, 2011, p. 67) that underpin several Western heritage institutions due to their colonial genesis.

**The transformative power of digital?**

It appears as if this call for a radical re-thinking of heritage institutions, and the way they position themselves in relation to their audiences and community stakeholders, pushes theorists and policy makers alike to champion the potential transformative power of digital technology, especially that of online platforms and digitisation techniques. For example, the section on Digital Cultural Heritage policy on the website of the European Digital Single Market Strategy proclaims that ‘cultural heritage breathes a new life with digital technologies and the internet’ (European Commission, n.d.). However, we share Parry’s (2005) still-valid concern that many institutions and, we add, policy makers, adopt a techno-deterministic approach to digital heritage presuming that technology itself can somehow do the radical re-rethinking and lead to transformation of heritage institutions. This approach does not appear to take into consideration the socially and
culturally constructed nature of digital technologies and their practices of use. An example of this somewhat uncritical attribution of agency is the ultimately utopian idea, if taken literally, that technology can give ‘new life’ to heritage, as seen in the earlier quotation. However, it is left unclear who or what will determine what this new life is going to be.

Van den Akker and Legêne’s (2016) analysis of technological interventions in museums and cultural spaces also highlights the positive transformative nature of technology to challenge pre-existing hegemonies. They argue that a key change impacting museums in digital culture is the new ‘knowledge infrastructure’ of on-site and online museums that does not only redefine ‘what we take to be objects and collections’ but also ‘may challenge existing power relations and offer opportunities for new forms of self-representation and communication’ (p. 8). In this new context, ‘information technology strengthens the ease with which master narratives are broken open, and it may multiply the possible relations between art and artefacts from different times and places, both on-site and online’ (ibid.) while museums ‘work with rather for their community’ (ibid., p. 9).

Gere offers a parallel suggestion for how digital technologies can reshape relationships between museums and their communities. Drawing on Clifford’s idea of the ‘contact zone’, Gere (1997) suggests that the idea of the ‘contact zone’ could be interpreted to conceptualise the museum’s relations with its communities in terms of a de-centralised network, rather than the core (museum) and periphery (communities) paradigm most commonly utilised in museum scholarship (Nightingale, 2009). However, Gere warns us that although digital technologies, and specifically the Internet, can provide a useful way to re-imagine the museum, its promise for a symmetrical and reciprocal mode of communication is not straightforward. Instead, the Internet – like the museum – is defined by asymmetry in patterns of access and use that ‘are not limited to the practical’ (ibid., p. 65). These asymmetries can be seen as both a challenge and an opportunity for the museum; for example, in the case of digital objects, Srinivasan et al. (2010) highlight their positive potential for community work as ‘they can carry a multitude of complex references to the original physical object, while being decoupled from its dominant institutional account’ (p. 747).

What is evident from this exploration of the terms underpinning this chapter is an often-utopian approach to the articulation of the potential of both heritage and digital technologies for intercultural exchange and dialogue. To some extent, this reflects the fact that at its heart, Europe, and more particularly the European Union (EU), is a fundamentally utopian construction. Borne out of a period of intense international conflict and designed to act as a shield for European nations against future disputes between nations and across continents, the creation of the EU also signified the attempted
creation of a new imaginative community (Toplak and Sumi, 2012). Admittedly, the cultural dynamics of this imagined community did not become foundational to the EU project until the 1980s with the establishment of the European City of Culture initiative, a direct consequence, Monica Sassatelli (2002) argues, of the realisation that ‘legal and economic integration alone will not create a united Europe’ (p. 435). In this context, heritage was swiftly identified as a key locus for European identity and by 1987, Christopher Gordon (2010) suggests, was being identified by the European Commission as ‘a prerequisite for solidarity’ (p. 102). This emphasis on harmony and solidarity also underpins references made within European policy documents (such as the White Paper on IDC) to digital platforms as intrinsically ‘open’ spaces, an idea that is often accompanied by the under-examined assumption that such openness is an automatic precursor for dialogue. The normative nature of this assumption is the key issue when thinking about the potential of digital heritage. Whilst this approach can be seen as insufficiently critical, it is very much in keeping with other EU policy documents and initiatives that frame dialogue as the necessary transition into an ideal European society, one which is perhaps based on an overly optimistic understanding of people’s willingness to engage across cultural and social divides in the first place. How this societal vision is reinforced through EU policies and how this, in turn, is interpreted and actualised on the ground by heritage sector workers is fundamental for understanding the way that digital dialogues coalesce with the cultural sector. The following two sections explore two key aspects of dialogue that are pertinent to museological practice and policy in Europe: the notion of alterity and/or otherness and the conceptualisation of the dialogic space in a networked society. Subsequently, the discussion section asks whether museums in Europe have the responsibility to enable and participate in dialogue in digital culture, what form this might take, under which conditions and to what end.

Altery and otherness in relation to dialogue

As outlined earlier, the concept of dialogue in both a philosophical and practical sense necessarily involves a self and an other. It thereby necessitates an encounter with difference and otherness, which is also in the heart of the European Commission’s preoccupations with intercultural dialogue, as also discussed earlier. Difference and otherness coexist in the philosophical and anthropological term ‘alterity’, which the Oxford English Dictionary defines as ‘the state of being other or different’. In this respect, engaging with alterity through intercultural dialogue can also be taken to point towards a conscious engagement with dissimilarity and distinction within the European cultural context. However, a review of the critical responses
(Näss, 2010; Phipps, 2014) to the various policy documents put forward by the European Union (EU) on issues of intercultural dialogue quickly shows that the translation of the principles underpinning intercultural dialogue into policy is far from smooth, precisely because of the darker side of European heritage relating to slavery, colonialism, genocide, war, displacement of peoples and institutionalised and everyday racism. Awareness of such issues is less obvious in the EU’s own literature, although the Report on the Role of Public Arts and Cultural Institutions in the Promotion of Cultural Diversity and Intercultural Dialogue (European Union, 2014) does offer some reflection on the role that conflict can play in dialogue:

Intercultural dialogue therefore consists of both and agreement and a disagreement with each other, a consensus and dissent between expressions.

(p. 10)

Intercultural dialogue has the possibility to combat the limits of the universalism of human rights that does not take into account cultural differences, and the limits of multiculturalism, which gives them a social and political recognition but at the same time creates risks of division.

(p. 11)

For example, in the EU’s flagship White Paper on ICD, which at the time of its publication attracted heavy criticism from activists and academics alike, dialogue is, as Robert Aman (2012) has highlighted, conceived of as operating through a dualistic relationship between the EU and its immigrant ‘others’; in this context, traits identified as ‘European’ are implicitly constructed along colonialist and racial lines. Such criticisms are reinforced by Alison Phipps (2014, p. 112), who argues that the aforementioned policy paper fundamentally fixes the inequalities produced by the EU’s relationship to its racial ‘others’ by redirecting attention onto ‘perceptions of cultural difference’, thereby absolving the EU of any of the structural violence historically inflicted on colonial communities by many European countries. A similarly restrictive understanding of this relationship between the EU and its others also percolates through some of the core documentation on cultural heritage such as the Faro Convention, where the stress that is placed on cultivating a ‘common heritage of Europe’ (Council of Europe, 2005) presumes a European identity formed in isolation from the rest of the non-Western world, a thesis with which decolonial scholars such as Gurminder Bhambra (2016) and Walter Mignolo (2002) take explicit issue. Although European policy scholars (e.g. Calligaro, 2014; Agustín, 2012) argue that in the White Paper on ICD, the distinctive emphasis on common culture
and heritage, which defined earlier cultural policies of the European Commission, is diluted (Agustín, 2012) and, instead, has given way to a set of ‘shared values’ that will hold European diversity together (Calligaro, 2014, p. 78), the lack of explicit acknowledgement in this document of the underlying historic tensions defining Europe’s diversity remains.

Such an approach to difference stands in stark contrast to Bakhtin’s and Levinas’s approaches to alterity which, whilst divergent on many key points, remains absolute about the mutual dependency that exists between the subject and the other of dialogue. For Levinas in particular, this relationship is a deeply protean one, in which the subject comes into being only through their encounter with the other who they are compelled to respond to (Kögler, 2005); Bakhtin too stresses the importance of difference as ‘a form of connection’ (Sidorkin, 2002, p. 85), which Erdinast-Vulcan (2008) suggests is based on an understanding of the dialogic relationship as one of continuous, reciprocal exchange between subject and other. Bhambra (2016), reflecting specifically on how diverse policies (in the UK and elsewhere) approach the relationship between immigration and multiculturalism in Europe, strongly argues that one of the unresolved issues of diversity in Europe in the context of increased im/migrations is that in these policies, ‘multicultural others are not seen as constitutive of Europe’s own self-understanding’ (p. 188).

For those working in, or on, heritage, the mis-recognition of the multicultural other as part of self very often starts with the subtle elision between ‘dialogic’ and ‘community’ work. As discussed in the previous section, the dialogic turn in museum practice has been triggered by concerns with community work; moreover, as discussed in Chapter 3 of this volume, dialogue as a structured activity often falls within the remit of museum education, outreach staff or both. Within the European context, such an elision between the work of dialogue and that of community mirrors the instrumentalism that features in the White Paper on ICD, where dialogue is conceived of as a tool for mediating community relations and resolving issues related to multicultural conflict, rather than a continuous and natural part of societal interaction as a whole. This slippage between dialogue and community work also becomes part of the restrictive casting of multicultural others. As Laurajane Smith and Emma Waterton (2010) have argued, this work within heritage often revolves around the artificial construction of a ‘seemingly homogenous collective defined by ethnicity, class, education or religion’ that ‘reinforce[s] presumed differences between the white, middle classes and “the rest”’ (p. 5). Such an approach to community engagement, which presumes monologic difference as its starting point for dialogue, is in concerted opposition to the more philosophical understandings of the ideal conditions for dialogue which should, as the Brazilian philosopher of critical pedagogy Paulo Freire (2005) argues, be a more reflexive ‘epistemological
relationship’ between self, and cannot, he continues, ‘occur between those who want to name the world and those who do not wish this naming’ (p. 86).

Whilst the aforementioned critiques suggest that a more limited approach to the other of the dialogic process may be somewhat embedded in museological practice at the moment, it is also frequently asserted that digital technologies can help to shift some of these barriers. Indeed, in the early days of writing about the Internet, digital networks were regarded as somewhat utopic spaces in which community could transcend the usual geographic, cultural or social boundaries (Rheingold, 2000). It is not a coincidence, we argue, that some of the bolder claims about the capacity of digital technologies to address the challenges of otherness in the heritage sector in Europe and elsewhere relate to community-oriented projects that utilise participatory media and sharing platforms often associated with Web 2.0 – it is worth noting though that critical discussion on how digital heritage community practices specifically advance epistemological understandings of alterity in Europe is very limited. The capacity afforded by digital technologies to document, disseminate, store and provide access to cultural content (often in real time) has been interpreted by researchers as a catalyst for what Thornton (2007) calls ‘civic pluralism’ in virtual heritage, referring to digital heritage projects in Canada that enable diverse users to contribute their memories and local history online displays within a single digital platform hosted by CHIN (Canadian Heritage Information Network). Elsewhere, also in relation to online community memory projects, Affleck and Kvan (2008) see the opportunity of sharing of individuals’ stories and memories online as the distinctive contribution of digital technology to the realisation of a ‘discursive interpretation’ of heritage, while Simon (2012) suggests that particular forms of ‘remembering together’ in online platforms may ‘incorporate an interactive regard for the non-equivalent, singularity of others, particularly those who have been subjected to the violence of injustice’ (p. 93). The latter is demonstrated in a poignant example of impromptu interreligious dialogue enabled by Facebook (Illman, 2011) in Turku, Finland, in 2010. In the unfortunate event of the vandalism of the Vietnamese Buddhist temple in Turku, an informal solidarity group on Facebook was soon created, which, according to Illman, ‘offered a forum where minority groups such as Buddhists, neo-pagans, and Muslims could engage in dialogue with one another without the mediation of either the state or the Lutheran church’ (ibid., p. 51), demonstrating the capacity of social media platforms to enable the fluid assembling and re-configuration of otherness in response to common issues of concerns. All of the authors cited here, however, also critically reflect on the limitations of these technologies to currently fully deliver on their potential to re-configure already cemented understandings of alterity or to move, in the case of online memory work, beyond the interests of the individuals.
The proliferation of examples and case studies in the literature like the ones mentioned here suggests that heritage and cultural practices that are preoccupied with alterity increasingly inhabit dialogic spaces as part of a broader digital public sphere, which is not limited to traditional heritage institutions. How heritage institutions negotiate alterity and new configurations of dialogic spaces in this digital public sphere and to what extent intercultural dialogue and heritage change as a result of this negotiation is the focus of the next section.

How heritage is transformed by the digital public sphere

Policy documents, heritage literature and practice have firmly presented the physical space of the museum as a fitting place for intercultural dialogue (Bodo, Gibbs and Sani, 2009). Dialogic space in the actual museum environment is materialised either through its exhibitions or the programming of specific dialogue-oriented activities, which bring diverse communities together. This often aligns with a perception among museum workers that dialogue is a face-to-face activity, as discussed by Arrigoni and Galani in Chapter 3 of this volume. Delgado (2009, p. 9), Bodo (2009, p. 22) and Simone (2009, p. 32), in their exploration of intercultural projects in European heritage and cultural institutions, further utilise Homi Bhabha’s concept of the ‘third space’ to articulate dialogic space in terms of not just bricks and mortar but also a set of potentialities, where diverse communities can encounter each other through active exploration, and the generation of new knowledge and experiences. They do not, however, provide further reflection on how museum dialogic spaces may be shaped by digital technologies and platforms.

However, as already mentioned earlier in this chapter, museums are progressively conceptualised not as institutions that are bound by their walls but as networks, rhizomes or both; they also inherently inhabit a networked society. On this issue, Innocenti (2014) provided a thorough and persuasive investigation of European cultural heritage and its memory institutions as nodes in a progressively networked culture and society. For the purpose of this chapter, we understand network society as ‘a social formation with an infrastructure of social and media networks enabling its prime mode of organisation at all levels (individual, group/organisational and societal)’ (van Dijk, 2006, p. 20). In this new context, intercultural dialogue around and through heritage also requires a new articulation.

Although the idea of the museum as a platform initially surfaced in the early 2000s (Dietz et al., 2003), that is, predating the social web, it was Proctor (n.d.) in the late 2000s who provided, for its time, an avant-garde proposition of the museum as a ‘distributed network’. As Proctor vividly
describes, ‘in the museum as distributed network, content and experience creation resembles atoms coming together and reforming on new platforms to create new molecules, or “choose your own ending” adventure stories’ (ibid., online). In this context, digital technologies are highlighted as enablers of cooperation between organisations and dissemination of cultural assets in different scales, local, national, global and transnational contexts which, as Nuria Sanz (2018) asserts, ‘in a global world, often overlap’ (p. 46). This networked reality is significant in relation to the role of European museums as dialogic spaces, as it also powers the active de-centralisation of truth and its re-conceptualisation as constantly emergent, relational and intertextual. As Proctor writes:

> Truth, rather than being disseminated outwards from a centre point, is discovered in its intersections and interstices, through the (sometimes surprising) juxtapositions that can happen when experiences are assembled collaboratively along the many-branched paths of a rhizome.

(n.d., online)

Undoubtedly, digital networks alter the way many people engage with each other and with ‘things’. Sunstein (2004) explains that a pertinent characteristic of established digital networks is the ‘dramatic increase in individual control over content along with a corresponding decrease in the power of general-interest intermediaries, including newspapers, magazines, and broadcasters’ (p. 58). A recent European report on the promotion of culture via digital means also suggests:

> With the growing importance of search engines, mobile applications, digital distribution platforms and channels, the role of cultural institutions in the value chain has changed, and continues to do so. Cultural institutions are still trusted sources of digital information and provide valuable digital products and services, but they are seldom the sole owners of the whole information life cycle from production to consumption, use and possible re-use or the sole owners of the stream from the institution to the user. Users co-produce, tailor and re-use the content to better serve their needs for self-expression, community building, learning and fun.

(Council of European Union, 2017, p. 26)

This means that despite the apparent infinite connectivity and the promise for serendipity on digital platforms, individuals nowadays have the capacity to accurately filter the content they encounter to match with their interests and points of view, a phenomenon commonly referred to as the ‘echo
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chamber’ or ‘filter bubble’. It is within this context that the silencing of the other becomes a very real possibility; a concern which has become a mainstream political issue in the last few years. By contrast, bodies such as public service broadcasters in democratic societies which intentionally gather and present multiple perspectives online can provide a more pluralistic and heterogenous set of information and perspectives. As Sunstein (2004) indicates, this is not to argue that general-interest intermediaries – and we can include several heritage institutions in this category – do not have their own ‘limitations and biases’ but to highlight that ‘people who rely on such intermediaries experience a range of chance encounters with diverse others, as well as exposure to material they did not specifically choose’ (ibid.).

This emphasis on individuation in online communications raises real concerns around the fragmentation of culture within digital networks ‘as infinitesimal differentiations based especially on political interests, taste cultures and advertising-driven demographic segments drive a seemingly exponential “niching” of online fora’ (Goode, 2010, p. 530) – although opposing views are also prevalent in this field (e.g. Dahlberg, 2007). Inevitably, it also raises the question of how we can conceptualise the position of heritage and intercultural dialogue in the digital public sphere or spheres. Van Dijk (2006), for example, promotes a more balanced view on the matter; he indicates that relations in network society ‘are ever more realised by a combination of social and media networks’, in which ‘offline and online communication become more and more combined leading to the emergence of a mosaic-like public sphere rather than a fragmented one’ (p. 39, italics in the original). Van Dijk speculates that this emerging form of public sphere will comprise ‘overlapping spheres that will keep common denominators’ (ibid.).

This optimistic approach to the potentialities of digital platforms is also echoed by Nuria Sanz’s (2018) discussion of heritage. Sanz argues:

[D]espite the visible growth of intolerance and anti-intellectualism in different parts of the globe, museums, with their inclusive and democratic vocations and their cosmopolitan interests, constitute a great opportunity to continue disseminating the message of the importance of plurality and diversity in the contemporary world.

(p. 52)

While we would agree in theory, we must ask what position heritage and cultural institutions will take in this new fluid and layered public sphere. From a positive and optimistic perspective, the common and shared heritage advocated by the EU policies could operate as the common denominator among diverse but overlapping public spheres – an example of this is
provided by Farrell-Banks in Chapter 5 of this volume. This would require museums to consciously inhabit the digital public sphere and negotiate its de-centralising character by materialising their capacity as distributed spaces for dialogue that transcend both social and technical networks. However, we argue that one of the key steps forward for European museums to achieve this potentiality is to deal with the misconception of dialogic space (both within their premises broadly and online) as neutral.

**Networked heritage and the question of neutrality**

References to museums as neutral spaces are common both in European policies and EU-funded research (e.g. Bodo, Gibbs and Sani, 2009). For example, a 2008 report on advancing intercultural dialogue within cultural institutions asked how cultural institutions could create ‘neutral spaces for intercultural encounters [. . .] where everybody will feel safe, welcome and comfortable’ (Council of European Union, 2014, p. 26). On one hand, it could be argued that the value of the online museum or heritage organisation is precisely as a trusted platform on which different perspectives can be brought into contact and alterity can be experienced. Given the increasing tendency for people to seek out and engage only with content online that reflects their own perspectives (the filter bubble or echo chamber effect described earlier), it might be argued that the museum or heritage organisation’s ability to be a genuine broadcaster of views rather than narrowcaster is its most valuable asset.

However, neutrality is not, as the political theorist Iris Marion Young (1997) articulates, a particularly useful starting point for dialogue; dialogue, she argues, emerges from more asymmetrical moral and social relations between people and, crucially, it requires individuals to be transparent about their positions for dialogue to be effective. An important distinction here is whether we are discussing individuals holding views and being transparent online about their positionality, or the museum or heritage organisation as an institution which – it is commonly said – can give space to the views of multiple individuals’ perspectives while not endorsing a single viewpoint. This is, itself, an enormous topic of debate at present in museological circles. We are thinking here of online campaigns such as ‘Museums are not neutral’ and those who argue that museums always inevitably adopt a position (e.g. given their historic involvement in colonialism and the acquisition of cultural property in times of war) so that neutrality is not a possibility. At the same time, the opposite point of view is that museums should seek to remain objective and present multiple perspectives for the public to make their own judgements. This can be summarised in the idea of the museum as a platform which hosts a range of voices and enables them to be heard in,
and by, the public. This idea was encapsulated by Tony Bennett as far back as 1995 in *The Birth of the Museum*, where he wrote:

> [I]t is imperative that the role of curator be shifted away from that of the source of an expertise whose function is to organize a representation claiming the status of knowledge and towards that of the possessor of a technical competence whose function is to assist groups outside the museum to use its resources to make authored statements within in it.  

(Bennett, 1995, pp. 103–104)

The point here is that neutrality is not a precondition for polyvocality; a commitment to the latter, however, would require cultural institutions to reflect on their own positionality and willingness to play the part as described by Bennett.

Similarly, we recognise that scholars of digital culture have already argued that the Internet, and digital technologies at large, cannot be viewed as a neutral platform for exchange and debate, but are seen to actively shape debates through the technological limits and affordances built into its platforms (Graves, 2007; Papacharissi, 2002). Like their physical counterparts, museum and heritage organisations online will need to consider the limits of the debates and viewpoints they would be prepared to host if they were to really function as a platform. For example, institutions will need to consider the ethical and legal nature of their position if drawn into online debates about contentious objects. In an era of ‘fake news’, they will also need to consider with renewed urgency what position they will adopt around ideas of truth, opinion, facts, interpretation and personal perspective. Such concerns are made apparent in Farrell-Banks’s (Chapter 5) contribution to this volume, in which he explores the role that the use of Twitter plays in fuelling right-wing populism’s appropriations online of *Magna Carta*.

Despite these significant issues, we observe that several EU policies on intercultural dialogue continue to be optimistic about its ability to cultivate dialogue through digital culture. In one of the few documents to actually make the links between dialogue, culture and the digital explicit – a study carried out for the European Commission on how ICD is understood and operationalised by member states – ‘virtual realities’ and ‘digitalised cultural products’ are described as ‘play[ing] an important role in fostering intercultural dynamics’ and ‘new forms of trans-culturalism’ within the arts and cultural sector (ERICArts, 2008, p. 30); furthermore, ‘virtual environments’ as a whole are conceptualised as ‘important spaces for intercultural dialogue’ (ERICArts, 2008, p. xii), with only passing reference made to their ability to inspire conflict between participants and perpetuate structural inequality. In the recent policies about the role of digital technology
in culture, some concerns are also expressed; for example, the brief *Final Statement of the 10th Council of Europe Conference of Ministers of Culture* (Council of Europe, 2013) stresses ‘the importance of the digital revolution’ as ‘crucial to the viability of creation and cultural diversity’, while also warning about its capacity to defuse culture and to ‘influence strongly the cultural environment’ (p. 2). Furthermore, the *Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on the Internet of Citizens* (2016), also declares the need to ‘exploit’ the positive potential of digital culture, ‘while safeguarding against related threats such as infringement of privacy, breaches of data security, hate speech or manipulation’ (online). However, the dominant direction of travel in these documents is towards an overly future-oriented articulation of digitisation of culture and development of digital literacies as means to safeguarding cultural diversity, boosting creativity and unlocking financial prosperity. Claims like these appear to sidestep the challenges raised by the utopianism of so-called net neutrality and its contemporary impacts by advocating instead the mass digitisation of ‘all relevant human creative expression for future generations’ (*Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers to member States on the Internet of citizens*, 2016, italics added); hence, addressing the challenges of cultural diversity in the digital public sphere through the promise of profusion of digital cultural assets.

In light, however, of these emerging tensions between neutrality and positionality, selectivity and profusion of digital cultural products and cultural diversity and trans-culturalism, one needs to reflect on (a) what the responsibilities are for cultural institution, (b) whether the discourses around intercultural dialogue and digital heritage are compatible ones and (c) what is at stake.

**Heritage organisations and their dialogic responsibilities in the digital public sphere**

This chapter so far has focused on the two fundamental characteristics of dialogue that are being reshaped in digital culture: (a) the conceptualisation of, and engagement with, alterity, and (b) the re-definition of the dialogic space afforded by cultural institutions in a networked digital public sphere. In this concluding section, we aim to articulate our reflections on two areas of renewed museum responsibility emerging from the earlier discussion drawing on Bakhtin’s and Levinas’s notions of answerability and responsibility.

The first area of renewed museum responsibility arises from the policy’s emphasis on the value of ‘mass digitisation’ of European cultural and heritage assets. To be clear, we do not advocate for less urgency and investment
on digitisation schemes – these schemes are the lifeline for cultural production in the digital public sphere. Instead, we want to draw attention to the risks in what Alexander Badenoch (2011) defines as a ‘moral encoding of the mission of digitisation’ in EU’s digital strategy, which, he argues, is ‘reminiscent of the role of the nineteenth century museum in displaying the progress of the nation-state’ (p. 301). This is echoed in Taylor and Gibson’s (2017) critique of a common claim in relation to digital heritage that access to digitised collections and materials is itself a means to democratisation. They suggest that what we need to ask is not just whether individual and communities have access but also what kind of access they have and whether the power dynamics unravelled in digitisation processes lead to the reproduction of the hegemonic structures already present in museum collections. The implication of their line of argument is whether, inadvertently, profusion of digital cultural assets by long-established (national and supranational) institutions through digitisation will render some of the less relevant, and subsequently less preferable, forms of heritage even less discoverable.

We argue, however, that in this policy context and the fast-configuring space of the digital public sphere, digitisation should be re-conceptualised as a process, rather than a set of techniques and tools, that allows institutions and communities to engage with the dialogic ethics of answerability in Bakhtin’s work. Answerability draws attention to the relational and situated character of being in the world and acknowledges reciprocity as the inherent process through which the self is formed as unique – ‘a non-alibi of Being’ (Bakhtin, 1993, p. 42). As Murray (2000) explains, in Bakhtin’s work, ‘the self is called into responsibility by the Other – whose very presence is the originary source of the ethical imperative – and the self retains its freedom of ethical response through its answerability for its actions’ (p. 134). For the digitisation of European heritage to overcome the risk expressed earlier by Badenoch, we argue that cultural institutions should engage in a particular balancing act between the urgency for a ‘demand-led’ (Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on the Internet of Citizens, 2016) approach to access to cultural heritage, advocated by the policy, and the interpretation of access, not as a call for delivering digitised assets for intercultural dialogue, but as a means for delivering a dialogic ethos per se. The latter requires cultural institutions and supranational bodies, like the EU, to embed dialogue between institutions, individuals and communities in digital heritage policies as a process for decision-making rather than as the outcome of it.

The second area of renewed responsibility for heritage institutions arises from their re-location in the context of the digital public sphere and the need for them to re-think the boundaries of the dialogic spaces they wish
to create, as well as their role in them. In other words, how far should these sites go in accommodating the zeitgeist of contemporary opinion and when, by contrast, should they stop becoming response-able to segments of the public? In response to this dilemma, Sanz (2018) asserts that within digital network society, ‘contradictory and alternative networked institutions and communities should be embraced instead of being rejected or perceived as dysfunctional, and re-interpreted as creative agencies and challenges’ (pp. 182–183). She sees this as an opportunity to ‘add to an institution’s contemporaneity and relevance’ but also as an inescapable implication of digital media reality, in which

it is impossible to insulate a portal from conflictual networks, and those acting within organisations now freely draw from a wide range of digitally-connected networks which always limits the effective hegemonic functionality of old established institutions.

(ibid.)

Such issues are raised in all chapters of this volume and, particularly, in Chapter 5 by Farrell-Banks.

In our view, this conundrum is an opportunity for cultural institutions to reconsider their role as civic institutions within an expanded and fluid digital culture. The Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on the Internet of Citizens (2016) asserts:

[D]igital culture’s positive potential should be fully exploited in helping build a culture of democracy, democratic citizenship and participation, while safeguarding against related threats such as infringement of privacy, breaches of data security, hate speech or manipulation.

Applying a positive reading to this call, we observe an aspiration within the European Commission to capture a more future-oriented digital civicness, through its redefinition of citizenship away from legalistic frameworks and into a ‘general sense’ of ‘people or persons’ that puts a ‘human rights approach’ at its centre (Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on the Internet of Citizens, 2016). Similarly, the report prepared by ERICArts (2008) in the materialisation of intercultural dialogue policies in European Union member states maintains:

[S]uccessful ICD projects are to be found in “shared spaces”; both institutional spaces and non-institutional spaces. Within institutional spaces they are those which strive to ensure equality of participation by all groups at levels of both governance (making decisions) and
management (execution of the project) and which bring the activities of minorities and migrants in from the margins and into mainstream organised spheres. [. . .] Non-institutional spaces such as the neighbourhood, city streets, train stations, public parks, marketplaces etc., but also virtual environments, are important spaces for intercultural dialogue. It can be easier for people to understand how they themselves could become innovators of change, if ICD activities become part of the lived daily life experience rather than a separate activity.

(ERICArts, 2008, p. xii)

However, the suggestion that the museum might re-configure their dialogic space to become a platform for many-to-many communication within and beyond their institutional boundaries (in-situ and online) – a broadcast model common in social and other online media (Russo et al., 2008; Carpentier, 2011) – does not mean that we automatically revert to the thesis of heritage as a neutral stage for these interactions. Indeed, although Levinas’s subject in dialogue may be somewhat passive in their relation to the other, they are still based on a reactive approach to communication, insofar as they are expected to engage in reflexive change as a result of their encounter with the other. Illman (2011), reflecting on the benefits and the pitfalls of the use of Facebook for interreligious dialogue in Finland in the wake of the vandalism of the Vietnamese Buddhist temple discussed earlier in the chapter, suggests that dialogue in this context is better understood as ‘non-indifference rather than reciprocity’ (p. 56). In this respect, Illman observes the purpose of the solidarity space on Facebook for those involved seemed to be ‘to fight one’s own indifference’ by offering ‘a suitable way to move from indifference to non-indifference’ but without going as far as ‘acknowledging responsibility or acknowledgement of the asymmetrical relationship between self and other, as Levinas urges’ (ibid., pp. 56–57).

The challenge for European cultural institutions is how to negotiate the line from indifference to non-indifference for themselves and their publics, and to decide whether a seemingly institutional disinterestedness and a preoccupation with access and openness applied to digital practices on the basis of pre-existing articulations of the self is still a sustainable position if they wish to become actors in the digital public sphere. The opportunity now is for European cultural institutions to move away from conceptualising the digital public sphere as a space to be filled with assets and one-off encounters with diversity, or as a carrier for dialogue, and towards imagining it as a place in which these institutions can redefine their existing communicative practices and relationships with their communities and experiment with new ones.
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Note

1 In May 2015, Europeana became one of European Commission’s Digital Service Infrastructures.

References


Digital and dialogic heritage practices


