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Geopolitics of Digital Heritage

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Chapter I

Introduction

Over the past two decades, digital technology has fundamentally transformed the way cultural heritage is accessed and consumed. In the contemporary media environment, cultural heritage circulates on a global scale, becoming “a mobile assemblage of things, dynamical processes and interactions characterized by functional flow, conflict, friction, intensities, turbulence and emergence” (Cameron and Mengler, 2015: 59). Moreover, contact with cultural heritage is underpinned by vast information infrastructures that enable data networking, storage and sharing. While they are usually invisible from the user perspective, practices such as mass digitization and aggregation have been recognized as defining concepts of our time (Bonde Thylstrup, 2018). There have even been calls for a “global infrastructure for digital cultural heritage” (Povroznik, 2018). Such practices increasingly structure the way we speak, think about and engage with heritage.

This Element highlights a particular aspect of digital heritage, taking large-scale data aggregation as its focus. Aggregators are systems that collect, format and manage metadata from providers such as galleries, libraries, archives and museums (GLAMs), and offer federated access to that data via online portals and websites (Bettivia and Stainforth, 2019). Metadata refers to the descriptions of digital objects and records to facilitate their discovery in online archives. Drawing from Michel Foucault’s understanding of the notion of the archive – first, as a more general epistemological category or knowledge production system; second, as a cultural and political reality marked by power dynamics – the book defines digital aggregators as complex systems of “utterability” which shape “the law of what can be said,” exhibited and displayed (Foucault, 2002: 186-188). Here, we analyze four of the largest and most well-established aggregators of cultural heritage data: the state-sponsored public crowdsourcing campaign, Singapore Memory Project; the National Library of Australia’s Trove; the European Commission-funded Europeana, which connects 4000 cultural institutions across Europe; and the biggest corporate aggregator in the world, Google Arts & Culture. The volume of digital heritage content they have managed to consolidate between them is staggering, amounting to hundreds of millions of items. This huge scale and reach have been achieved by government and corporate actors with political agendas and aspirations that impact heritage presentation in the international arena.

In line with Foucault's (2002) conceptualization of the archive as a sociological phenomenon and a governmental technology, heritage is usually understood “as a socio-political process that codifies and orders, preserves and exhibits, reconstructs and erases, and serves as a medium through which ideologies are both advanced and resisted” (Winter, 2023: 130). Chiara De Cesari proposes the term “heritage regimes” to refer to a set of “implicit or explicit principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures” that “regulate areas of international relations,” shaping the politics of heritage discourses even on the transnational

level (2013: 401). Likewise, digital heritage has been defined as a predominantly political concept and practice (Winter, 2022a; McCrary, 2011). These political dimensions have been studied in various ways and dispersed over professional and media boundaries (Parry, 2010; Lewi et al, 2020). Early research on the subject examined the influence of new and emerging digital media in museums and cultural heritage institutions (Parry, 2007; 2010). Fiona Cameron and Sarah Kenderdine (2007) were among the first to stress the need for a critical theorization of digital heritage and note its reshaping of political power in the cultural sector. Since then, the scholarship has expanded to include the impact of mass digitization projects (Bonde Thylstrup, 2018), the uses of big data in heritage (Bonacchi and Krzyzanska, 2019), and the role of heritage infrastructures in online environments (Freire et al., 2018; Lähdesmäki, 2019).

The critical turn in heritage studies (Harvey, 2001; Smith, 2006; Harrison, 2013) has brought to the fore the power dynamics of digital heritage regimes and the role of digital platforms in reproducing authorized heritage discourses (Bettivia and Stainforth, 2019; Taylor and Gibson, 2017). Recently, Tim Winter has started an important conversation on the “geocultural power” of digital heritage, or the “capacity to write and map geocultural histories” in light of digitization as “the dramatic expansion in scale and volume brought by the digital, forg[ing] new pathways for knowledge production and affective dissemination” (Winter 2022a, 933). He interrogates how these geocultural histories “are to be written, mapped and documented? And of course, by whom?” (Winter, 2022a: 934). Winter’s research has important implications for digital heritage and how power is spatialized and distributed globally. This Element makes the case for the significance of digital heritage to contemporary geopolitics. It investigates how digital heritage aggregation emerges as an expression of geopolitical interests by state and non-state actors.

Defining the Geopolitics of Digital Heritage

The term geopolitics was first coined in 1899 by Swedish professor of political science Rudolf Kjellen (Björk and Lundén 2021). He defined it as a new approach to international politics that emphasized the important role of geographical territory and natural resources in shaping competition between nation-states on the world stage. Geopolitics referred to strategic actions by national governments to secure their interests in the international arena. At the beginning of the 20th century, the study of geopolitics attracted stronger academic attention, opening new avenues for a more in-depth investigation of the politics of geographical space and the allocation of valuable resources (Powers and Jablonski, 2015). However, the negative connotations of the term and its associations with imperialism and social Darwinism, were also consolidated. As such, the British geographer Halford Mackinder framed geopolitics in terms of a grand strategy of land-based and sea-based powers (Knutson, 2014). This definition acquired even stronger significance during the Cold War when geopolitics mainly referred to great power rivalries and their territorial tensions, interventions, and struggles for ideological influence.

By the end of the 20th century, geopolitics was severely criticized for serving the interests of major powers, as well as for focusing exclusively on nation states as the main unit of analysis

(Al-Rodhan, 2014). Moreover, the rapid advancement of digital communication technologies started to enable instant connectivity among different societies, challenging the terms of strict geographic borders and leading to the emergence of new multilateral institutions and non-state political actors (Kelley, 2014). Geopolitics in the digital era started to be defined by many actors, including large transnational media corporations, like Google and Facebook, regional or sub-state actors, digitally mobilized communities and even individuals or so-called influencers (Hulsman and Liedtke, 2019). These changes, accompanied by the rise of “de-territorialized” threats and opportunities, pushed nation-states to increasingly operate beyond their immediate geographic territories. In the digital realm, cyber warfare, cyber-attacks and cyber espionage started to create high-level political tensions and shaped international crises (Bjola and Pammen, 2019). Political mobilization, economic opportunities and provision of national security migrated to the digital arena. As a result, social media mobilization and digital diplomacy started to play an increasingly significant role in world politics, where the position and power of different actors in the global information space define political outcomes (Bjola and Holmes, 2015).

Digital geopolitics is a new phenomenon that brings together two opposing trends. First, it involves the power politics of territorial units, including traditional nations or regional actors, that are increasingly operating in the digital domain. Second, it encompasses decentralized transnational networks and communities, as well as powerful non-state actors, including media giants with a reach far beyond politically fixed geography (Bendiek et al, 2019). While nation-states continue to hold military power, dominate macroeconomics, and decide on their own internal security, they also have to account for the influence and power of other actors and movements, unfolding in cyberspace (Hulsman and Liedtke, 2019). Furthermore, their power positions and economic gains now directly depend on digital infrastructures and the capacity to “globalize” their own technological systems to shape international standards, products, rules and even social norms and cultural values (Saran, 2020). As Peter Van Ham indicates, social power embedded in global perceptions “has become an important factor in international politics, shaping expectations as well as policies” (2008: 240).

This position is based on earlier assumptions articulated by communication scholars (Castells, 2008; Ronfeldt and Arquilla, 1999), who have argued that in the 21st century, public opinion is a new superpower. This phenomenon could also be analyzed through the lens of soft power, a concept coined by Joseph Nye. It refers to intangible forms of power such as culture, ideology and institutions. In the context of the knowledge-based global economy, soft power is a more sophisticated tool to influence international politics, in contrast to military or economic coercion (Nye, 2004). A country can generate soft power if it can exploit culture, information and technology to inhabit the mind space of another country. In terms of technology, digital geopolitics has become a new arena of political struggle, where information serves as a major weapon of power and control. Strategic constructions and manipulations of informational environments continually replace traditional principles of geopolitics, including military might or economic regulations (Ronfeldt and Arquilla, 2020). The global interconnectivity facilitated by digital technologies allows for the unlimited flow of cultural information, directly reaching people from different parts of the world (Potter,

2002). Strategic management of these global flows of information involves different actors in the culture wars for domination and control over human attention (Curtin and Gaither, 2007). As a result, in the digital age, power in the international arena depends on the actor's capacity to shape global informational environments, mobilize online publics and manage cultural representations shaping human values and identities.

In this Element, we understand geopolitics as an interdisciplinary field of study combining knowledge across geography, political sciences, and international relations. Geography in this regard includes not only location or topography, but also elements of human and political geography, which in their turn usually refer to cultural boundaries, culturally significant and religious landmarks and sites that define the virtual borders of nation-states, communities and societies (Al-Rodhan, 2014). Colin Flint points out that “geopolitics is not just a way of seeing. It is also the actions and outcomes that simultaneously transform spaces, places, and politics” (2017: 302). In his view, geopolitics constitutes both a practice and a representation (Flint, 2017: 36). As such, it is based on complex interrelationships between, on the one hand, physical space and, on the other, the conduct of foreign policy within this space that creates a new geographical representation of the world (Ó Tuathail and Agnew, 1992)

Scholars of critical geopolitics (Agnew, 2007; Ó Tuathail, 2005) have divided geopolitical studies into “formal” geopolitics, based on theories and doctrines, “practical” geopolitics including official documents, and so-called “popular” geopolitics. The latter refers to a way of imagining geopolitics and expressing it through popular culture, mass media, and everyday communication (Dijkink, 1998; Dittmer and Bos, 2019). However, the digital era and its impact on global communications and politics has compressed three different dimensions into one. Jason Dittmer and Nicholas Gray (2010) suggest that digital geopolitics emerges at the crossroads of formal, practical, and popular geopolitics. As a form of cultural representation, digital heritage sits at the intersection of the popular and the political. Winter's notion of geocultural power describes aspects of this phenomenon and its ability “to advance values and ideals” as an “architecture for norm setting and advancing particular worldviews that are deployed to impose a sense of directionality on international affairs” (2022b: 394). Moreover, as Daniel Herwitz observes, “political history is itself an object of heritage making” (2012: 3). Understanding the political past and present is in many cases shaped by a set of heritage artefacts, exhibitions and collections that constitute the cultural memory and legacy of an individual society or community. “Justice becomes, in the realm of heritage making, a new kind of contest between storytelling, medium, and power. Heritage is a window into the relation of aesthetics to politics” (Herwitz, 2012: 3).

Indeed, the ability of digital heritage to represent history, environments, and values “makes it possible to manipulate information in both spatial and temporal ways, then transmit it to remote viewers” (Kalay et al, 2007: 3). Digital re-presentations provide a new form for cultural heritage and consequently invite new interpretations, which have very strong geopolitical implications (Kalay et al, 2007). While human life remains tied to specific spaces, times and places, representations created by digital heritage media change the ways in “which space, time and place themselves appear, and are understood, and so too, the way in

which human existence appears, is understood, and is experienced” (Malpas, 2007: 19). One of the key tasks of heritage sites, either physical or digital, is helping audiences to engage meaningfully with them. Yet, as Jeff Malpas points out, it is questionable whether digital heritage enables “greater engagement with the site or the artefact as such, or it, instead, enables a greater level of engagement only with the reproduced site or artefact” (2007: 20), which is already heavily charged with new political meanings and interpretations.

Digital heritage, by virtue of how it is collected and displayed, destroys heritage artefacts’ sense of being in place. This “shifts away from the particular place through which a singular encounter with the work is possible, towards a generic and uniform space that enables a universal accessibility of the artwork from anywhere within that space” (Malpas, 2007: 21). Through becoming something more generic, digital heritage evokes the obliteration of place. In the dissolution of the near and far in relation to heritage objects, audiences also lose a sense of the near and far in relation to themselves (Malpas, 2007), making this “empty shell” vulnerable to occupation by new political meanings. In the same manner as the curation of physical cultural heritage objects, digital heritage presents a range of critical issues to be resolved in relation to authenticity, censorship, image manipulation and ideological control (McCrary 2011).

The Production and Deconstruction of Digital Heritage Geopolitics

The Element reveals and explores the affordances and implications of digital heritage through the practice of digital heritage aggregation. Here, aggregators are positioned as “history machines” that do not merely preserve and share in digital form the cultural heritage of societies but, in fact, construct new temporal and spatial realities. The “epistemic” nature of heritage data and, more importantly, its ability to be digitally organized and re-interpreted through different representations is what makes it political. It becomes critical in geopolitical terms, especially when it concerns cultural and political borders, contested territories, cross-cultural engagements, and proximities as dimensions of political geographies. As such, digital heritage aggregators are vehicles for shifting epistemic paradigms, eliding, or constructing the cultural identities of communities.

Understanding digital heritage aggregators as “an impressive array of simulacra, instantaneous communication, ubiquitous media, and global interconnectedness” (Cameron and Kenderdine, 2007), the Element explores relationships between geopolitics and the digital geographies and memories constructed by heritage media. Following De Cesari’s (2013) identification of heritage regimes, which constitute both the field of government and dimensions of international relations, and Winter’s concept of geocultural power, this book explores how culture, history and memory are organized through digital heritage aggregators in ways that exert power, “both within the confines of the nation-state and, crucially, beyond it” (2021: 1392). Geopolitics here consists of different forms of heritage governance, from state actors, like Australia’s Trove and Singapore Memory Project to intergovernmental actors, like Europeana, to the corporate deployment of neoliberal state extensions, as with Google Arts & Culture. ***Specifically, the monograph interrogates how these different actors shape the geopolitical representation of space, through digital heritage aggregation, and***

how the production of digital heritage shapes the political agenda of involved actors on the global map. Digital heritage in this way is understood as a means by which cultural and political geographies are coded and depicted.

For example, on the one hand, digital heritage has been an important tool for state-driven expressions of national unity and nation-building, nurturing a sense of empowerment and belonging (Grincheva, 2012; Herwitz, 2012; Winter, 2022). Being trans-territorial and translocal, digital heritage can communicate nationalistic narratives which acquire potency through their global circulation (Mankekar, 1999). They play a crucial role in “the creation and promulgation of nationalist affects” (Punathambekar and Mohan, 2019: 205). In this sense, the cases of Australia’s Trove and Singapore Memory Project aim to reveal specific strategies of digital national space construction, especially when they concern the establishment of national digital legitimacy and sovereignty. On the other hand, digital representations of heritage dramatically expand the scope of heritage regimes enacted by “new forms of transnational, neoliberal, and nonstate governmentality” (De Cesari, 2020: 31). These representations enable the process of “globalizing the local, packaging it in a common and neutral language with immediate status and recognition value on the global stage” (Herwitz, 2012: 5). This entry into the circuit of the global media space of the “heritage ecotourism market” offers “global comprehensibility and recognition” and makes local heritage objects “globally comprehensible, consumable items” (Herwitz, 2012: 5). The case of Europeana is illustrative here because it aggregates heritage across thousands of museums in Europe, removing it from local historical, cultural and linguistic contexts and bringing it “under one roof” in the European project.

Finally, the global media space has started to witness the phenomenon of “media imperialism” (Mirrlees, 2013) or “platform imperialism” (Jin, 2017), whereby a handful of digital media companies have become powerful actors who shape everyday social, cultural, and political lives of people all over the world. Their geopolitical ambitions are manifested in the creation of global markets of media consumption. Digital heritage “disneyfication” or commodification through their platforms’ aggregation give rise to new imaginative, globally converged geographies of heritage experiences, which lose their sense of place and time (Malpas, 2007). The case of Google Arts & Culture aims to explore the digital geopolitical dimension of these processes, exposing and revealing the obstacles, challenges and possibilities redefining global heritage geographies by powerful new actors on the world stage.

All four case studies in this Element interrogate digital representations of geographical space and their geopolitical characteristics. “Since space is the ontological core of geopolitics” (Turčalo and Kulović, 2018: 18), we view digital heritage aggregators’ production of space predominantly as a geopolitical statement, intervening in mainstream global discourses and international relations. Following the tradition of “popular” geopolitics, the volume understands the concept of space either as representative of geopolitical situations or as a stage on which human action is performed (Kaplan, 2012). The Element questions: What are the geopolitical motivations of the representation of space produced by digital heritage

aggregators? Who benefits from this and who is affected by the geopolitical narratives of digital heritage aggregators?

These questions inform our inquiry, which is undertaken on two interrelated levels of analysis: **(1) a power-critical perspective** of space that concerns policies and regulations enabling normalization processes in spatial construction through differentiations, attributions of meaning or hierarchizations; and **(2) a heritage media-oriented perspective**, which analyzes heritage aggregators as projectors of spatialized power, while themselves being identified as virtual spaces. Research was carried out by the authors in different parts of the world from North America (USA and Canada) to Europe and Asia Pacific, including Australia and Singapore as places of research residencies. We conducted semi-structured interviews with professionals involved in the case study projects, as well as staff from participating GLAMs, to gain insights into the motivations for large-scale data aggregation from an organizational viewpoint. These interview accounts were instrumental to complement and deepen our desk research on existing (inter)national discourses of digital heritage politics, conducted through a focused analysis of policy documents, strategic reports and websites across countries. The digital site of inquiry focused on contextual observations of the heritage aggregators – their online design, architecture, content, and operations – in order to deconstruct their geopolitical meanings and orientations.

This methodological approach and analysis of four case studies revealed that space-related differentiations inform (self-)positionings and “imaginative geographies” (Said, 1978), as well as constructing identities and “imagined communities” (Anderson, 1983). Digital heritage media thus constitute spaces of human memory and identity apparent in their differentiations, border crossings, inclusions and exclusions. All the case studies engage closely with issues of memory and heritage production and interrogate their meaning in the context of digital heritage aggregation. Considering that a phenomenology of remembrance is implicated in the dynamics of digital representations, each project – Singapore Memory Project, Trove, Europeana and Google Arts & Culture – demonstrates how these dynamics surface in the interfaces, design, content, and functionality of aggregators and how digital technologies of memory shape global media spaces.

Chapter Outline

The Element is divided into four chapters, focusing on each of the case studies. Chapter II introduces the Singapore Memory Project (SMP), a Government campaign to bring together heritage institutions, communities and publics through crowdsourcing national culture, memory and identity. Launched in 2011, the SMP aimed to collect and preserve Singapore’s culture, heritage and history, as well as promoting it globally for discovery and tourism. The chapter investigates the geopolitical context of Singapore, its national ambitions and concerns in the wider Asia-Pacific region. It reveals how the management of the SMP turned the public crowdsourcing campaign into a Government tool of nation-building, at the same time as it enacted a strategy of virtual enlargement for global audiences.

Chapter III looks at Trove and interrogates the geopolitical implications of digital heritage as a projection of national culture. Managed by the National Library of Australia (NLA), Trove is positioned both as a means of promoting Australian heritage regionally and internationally, and as a way of mediating and giving expression to the diverse narratives of the Australian people. The chapter analyzes the contradictions at play in the digital heritage of Trove, especially with regard to how the history of the nation is contested by the claims of First Nations Australians. The concept of Indigenous geopolitics is used to provide a counterpoint to the presentation of a unified national culture and draw attention to the limits of inclusion in government-affiliated projects.

Chapter IV turns to Europeana, arguing that it has been motivated by the geopolitical goal of constructing a heritage culture in the virtual domain of European identity. The project is revealing of present-oriented interests that centre on the idea of European culture as a destination point and a marker for greater social and political cohesion. In tandem with this move toward constituting a coherent transnational identity, Europeana has also been increasingly aligned with the EU's agenda to achieve digital sovereignty through the creation of protected "data spaces." The chapter shows that cultural heritage is instrumentalized in Europeana as a method of social integration, at the same time as it reflects the geopolitical aspirations of the EU to become a global economic sovereign power.

Chapter V shifts from aggregators devised as national or supranational governmental heritage sites, to a global heritage platform developed by the largest transnational media corporation in the world, Google. It explores the geopolitics of Google Arts & Culture (GAC), against a backdrop of digitization, globalization and decentralization of state powers. Google is identified as a new economic actor on the world stage, and GAC's ambition to bring "the world's art and culture online for everyone" (GAC, 2022b) is recognized as a dimension of Google's platform imperialism. The chapter considers the implications of mass heritage aggregation in light of Google global activities', geopolitical agenda and impact on global consumption of digital heritage that goes beyond the merely economic.

The Element positions digital heritage geopolitics as a new field of academic inquiry. It offers compelling case studies and insightful analysis to identify and describe different strategies of geopolitical space production via the media of digital heritage. Through these explorations it interrogates the future of mass digital heritage aggregation on different levels of implementation, from the urban in the case of Singapore Memory Project, to the national, as in Australia's Trove, to the regional in Europeana, and finally to the global as exemplified in the GAC platform.