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Book Review

Museum Diplomacy in the Digital Age, by Natalia Grincheva, Routledge, 2020, 164 pp., £31.49 (eBook), ISBN 9781351251006

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This fascinating book applies the theoretical foundations of diplomacy scholarship to the context of online museum spaces. Drawing on two key principles of diplomacy — national projection and cultural relations — it demonstrates that museums' online activities can offer new avenues for contemporary cultural diplomacy.

Grincheva describes "the evolution of digital diplomacy from a complete failure to a promising success" through the story of three significant museum initiatives from around 2010. The Australian Museum's Virtual Museum of the Pacific aspired to share and promote the cultural heritage of the Pacific Islanders. The British Museum's History of the World in 100 Objects was a multimedia project which employed digital technologies to engage global publics in new cultural experiences. Finally, she considers the YouTube Play project, a collaboration between Google and the Guggenheim Museum to identify, celebrate and document the most popular video cultures of the 2000s via an online competition.

The book is an exemplary comparative study of these three museum-led initiatives and convincingly demonstrates their many entanglements with governmental and corporate agendas, interests, and narratives. She shows, by careful analysis of these three examples, how cultural relations work (or don't).

As she says, museums are leading cultural heritage institutions and can be important diplomatic actors on the world stage, whether or not they position themselves as such. Their link to policy agendas is clear. Historically, museums have been key actors of cultural diplomacy, as well as vital hosting spaces of official high-level diplomatic events at which international agreements have been negotiated and signed. Today, online spaces created by museums have become important media channels for projecting cultural and political

discourse beyond national borders.

The many issues of heritage diplomacy also play out in these digital initiatives. While online museum spaces can project a museum's interests and perspectives to the world, these digital environments are of course not neutral, being shaped by the histories and values of the museum institutions and by the museum's relationship to national histories and contemporary foreign policy agendas.

One of the many strengths of this book is Grincheva's approach to examining how museums develop online initiatives in this complex context and assessing what the outcomes are. She painstakingly analyses the three initiatives to tease out what it was in their design and execution that led to their success or failure, and suggests what lessons can be learned. For policymakers, the most important lesson is that online museum spaces can communicate strong messages that complement the cultural and even political agendas of their nation states. Their ability to project the cultural values, traditions and histories of their respective countries make them important channels of unofficial diplomatic communications to international audiences. For academics, it provides in-depth consideration of fundamental changes in museology which have taken place in a short timeframe, but which have complex social, educational, political and cultural effects.

All this is extremely valuable, but at the same time, it is clear that the analysis of digital projects and influence poses methodological challenges. The book is structured around three in-depth case studies. There is a paradox here. It can of course be questioned what conclusions can be drawn from such a small sample. At the same time, even three cases generate huge quantities of data through digital interaction, between enormous numbers of participants, scattered across the world, contributing in different languages. This amount of information makes investigation highly time-consuming. Indeed, Grincheva says that the analysis of the comments in the YouTube Play project would be a good subject for a book in its own right. Her approach therefore has its strengths and its weaknesses, perhaps lending itself more to an academic and museum audience than to policymakers who need to understand broader trends based on more up to date analysis. She has clearly put in the time to do all this, and more, but this inevitably leads to the book being a discussion of a world that has already changed politically, technologically, and culturally since the initiatives she describes took place.

Technologically, the digital is now banal — at least in the richer parts of the world. This is shaping our ideas of culture and its meaning. We are increasingly living in a world which realises Bill Gates' 1995 vision of a device called Interactive Home Systems, which would fulfil the functions of the encyclopaedic museum — but now as home entertainment. "If you're a guest," Gates wrote, "you'll be able to call up portraits of presidents, pictures of sunsets, airplanes, skiing in the Andes, a rare French stamp, the Beatles in 1965, or reproductions of High Renaissance paintings, on screens throughout the house." (1995) This vision has now come to pass. The average person supposedly touches their phone more than 2,600 times a day. At the touch of an app, there is always a potentially interesting thing

available at the swipe of a finger — an encyclopaedic museum in every pocket.

This can collapse different levels of culture into a single, on-demand media space. The three projects discussed in this book pre-date but also illustrate this shift. The discussion of the YouTube Play project is particularly relevant, but already seems from a simpler age. In the last 10 years the pace of change has impacted on audience perceptions of museums and of culture itself.

Recent research by Culture Track suggests that, at least in the USA, today's audiences have an ever more democratic definition of culture, which may be leading culture to the point of extinction. Activities that have traditionally been considered culture and those that haven't are now on a level playing field, with audiences torn about whether the label "culture" is even applicable. For instance, the research found that more than a third of art museumgoers did not think that art museums were a cultural experience.[1)]

The implications of this are, however, less dramatic than they appear at first sight. Culture Track's research also shows that audiences want culture to transform their perspectives and believe that: "…culture is a positive force. But in this complex moment when the value of culture for its own sake is not a given, it is up to cultural organizations to powerfully articulate and deliver on their essential purpose and impact." (Grincheva, 2020)

Despite recent digital acceleration, Grincheva's discussions remain highly relevant, particularly as she explores the complex relationships between museums and governments, museums and corporations, museums, history, technology, and the highly contested present. Given this complexity, the challenge for museums of remaining true to their essential purpose is a serious one.

This is a rich book which is about much more than this quick sketch suggests. It is also a useful book for museums, governments and researchers to draw on when considering the way ahead.

References

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1) See, for example, Culture Track's research into audiences in American museums: https://2017study.culturetrack.com/home

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