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CULTURAL HERITAGE INFORMATICS, OLD IDEA OR EMERGING DOMAIN?: STUMBLING INTO A SHARED DEFINITION FOR RESEARCH AND TEACHING - PANEL

Abstract or Résumé:

This is a 90-minute roundtable discussion, moderated by Shirin G. Alamdari. With Hannah Turner (UBC); Stacy Allison-Cassin (Dalhousie), Isto Huvila (UU), Andrea Thomer (UArizona) and Diana Marsh (UMD Maryland). The term, Cultural Heritage Informatics, is being used widely in Information fields and by Information Studies Scholars and programs. This panel will address the questions: What is Cultural Heritage Informatics? Why do researchers and institutions stumble with a definition? Does Cultural Heritage Informatics define a methodology, a subject interest, or a set of technical practices? What kinds of ethical considerations could we, or should we, have?

1. Introduction

This panel, in a roundtable format, will engage with the growing field of Cultural Heritage Informatics. As iSchools and heritage institutions stumble for definitions, researchers continue to work across informational systems within heritage projects; new concerns have been raised for the field of Information Science and Informatics. This roundtable will address the question: What is Cultural Heritage Informatics? Why do researchers and institutions stumble with a definition? Does Cultural Heritage Informatics define a methodology, a subject interest, or a set of technical practices? What kinds of issues are being raised in the field and in teaching programs? As researchers who work and teach the intersection of cultural heritage and information science, we will discuss this term and attempt to define it as a field. This panel welcomes serious engagement

from the audience in this roundtable, and there will be ample time to discuss the key concepts and ideas.

Cultural Heritage Informatics is a term used by institutions and researchers to define a set of ideas that do not often speak to or with each other. Since the early 90s; much Cultural Heritage Informatics work has encompassed work and scholarship in two spaces: institutional repositories - like museums, libraries, and archives and the challenges they face (Marty 1999; 2000; 2011); and on using new digital technologies to create, model, represent, document, or preserve cultural heritage, broadly considered. Originally a take on museum studies and museum management, which has come to intersect with ideas of “informatics” (as in, something relating to the intersection of people, computation, and information); the discourse has evolved. In his book, *An Introduction to Museum Informatics*, Paul Marty brought together a group of scholars whose work addressed the sociotechnical issues that arise when working in and with museums (2008). Fields that deal with similar issues are digital humanities (Benardou et al. 2010), museum studies (Krmpotich and Somerville 2016; Parry 2007, 2010; Cameron 2007), material culture studies and anthropology (Brown and Nicholas 2012; Bell, Christen, and Turin 2013; Cameron and Kenderdine 2007; Hennessy 2009; Were 2014), archival studies (Fenlon et al. 2023; Christen, Merrill, and Wynne 2017), and the broad field of heritage studies (Harrison et al. 2020; Hou et al. 2022).

The term, Cultural Heritage Informatics, is also being used widely by Information Studies researchers and within iSchool programs. It denotes a set of assumptions about what heritage is, and how heritage is constructed as an object of study. The now very famous work by Michael Buckland, *Information as Thing*, drew attention to the idea, (a well-worn concept in anthropology and material culture studies), that things in and of themselves have come to stand as evidence (Buckland 1991). Revisiting this work, Kiersten Latham complicated this and tied some early work in material culture studies to more specific museum work (Latham 2012). However, it has even until recently been framed clearly in the context of an evidentiary regime which sees artefacts or objects (material culture) as evidence or, in Buckland’s sense, as documents. Most recently, scholars have sought to understand the connection between memory, heritage, and information (Modrow and Youngman 2023). Providing a series of definitions, Modrow and Youngman note that there are disjointed definitions on the subject, and argue that cultural heritage is instead an “information *process* and *product* shaped and maintained through acts of collective remembering” (Modrow and Youngman 2023, 666). Kawooya and Taylor define Cultural Heritage Informatics as a field of study and a practice that “deals almost exclusively with artifacts and resources in digital form” (2014, 57). Where now there is little or no distinction between digital and non-digital knowledge - and access to digital representations of objects is no longer seen as a long-term solution to returning knowledge to communities of origin; we need to plot the current challenges that Information researchers can address in this area.

Since the origins of cultural heritage informatics as ‘cultural heritage + computers’; more serious concerns have been raised relating to data sovereignty and advancing Indigenizing principles in collections and informatics, namely the authority to control data, and to attend to colonial institutions and researcher responsibility and ethics. These principles respond to historical trends wherein statistical data about Indigenous peoples and Nations generated by government agencies, such as the U.S. census, were used in harmful ways (Kukutai et al. 2020). Where FAIR principles (findability, accessibility, interoperability, and reuse) have provided open principles for scientific data (Wilkinson et al. 2016), CARE principles emanating from

Indigenous stewardship models have focused on ethics within discussions of accessibility and reuse of cultural data (Carroll et al. 2020; CARE Principles n.d; RDA IG 2019; Walter et al. 2020). Further, across the cultural heritage sector, and reflected in the literature, there is increased emphasis on linked data and *linked open data* to facilitate the connection of cultural data across the broader Web (van Hooland and Verborgh 2014); cultural institutions' collections and metadata are being connected to the distributed linked data cloud through platforms such as DBPedia and Wikidata (e.g., Szekely et al. 2014), and other relational platforms such as Bionomia, as well as being represented as open data aggregations, accessible at scale to users and programmatic tools by APIs. Cultural Heritage Informatics has come to encompass much of the technical work surrounding these projects and attendant scholarship, but perhaps oversimplifies the diversity of these domains and threads of work.

In this session, we will reflect on the theoretical underpinnings to definitions like these, and draw on contemporary work in museum studies and Indigenous studies to broaden our understanding, or perhaps even craft a more accurate definition of what cultural heritage informatics is and what it could be. Through the questions and the perspectives of the panelists, we hope to welcome more scholarship into this conversation. We are interested in defining a set of emergent issues that researchers in this field are working, or stumbling, through. This work has ramifications with how researchers working and teaching in institutions can articulate practices and work that may not fit the boundaries of scientific paper publishing. This is not only an emergent issue for PhD thesis writing, tenure and promotion committees; but for how we see the possibilities of a field, and what societal or community outcomes the work of cultural heritage informatics can have. Can we, or should we, begin to articulate a set of ethical practices and concerns beyond definitional work?

2. Panelist Bios and Format

We intend to bring an International and Canadian perspective to this discussion. Hannah Turner is a settler Assistant Professor in the School of Information at UBC, and researches and teaches across museum and information studies. She is particularly interested in reparative documentation and records stewardship museums (Turner, 2017; 2020). Isto Huvila is a Professor in Information Studies at Uppsala University. His research intersects with issues in the cultural heritage sector, including archaeological data practices, and information studies (Huvila 2013; Huvila, Börjesson and Sköld 2022). Stacy Allison-Cassin is an Assistant Professor in Information Science at Dalhousie University, where she researches and teaches about equitable data practices in relation to Indigenous knowledges, and her current work examines linked data and vocabulary work in this space with the Respectful Terminologies Project (Allison-Cassin 2020; Allison-Cassin and Seeman 2022; Allison-Cassin and Callison 2023). Andrea Thomer is an Assistant Professor at University of Arizona School of Information, who researches the maintenance and evolution of knowledge structures and scientific data curation (Thomer et. al, 2022). Diana Marsh is Assistant Professor of Archives and Digital Curation at the University of Maryland's College of Information Studies, where she researches connecting Indigenous communities to colonially-held heritage collections, largely drawing on new platforms and linked data approaches (Marsh 2022; Sorenson et. al., 2023). The roundtable will be moderated by PhD student Shirin G. Alamdari. A series of pre-circulated questions will be asked to each of the panelists, and they will be asked to briefly reflect on these questions. Panelists will then be asked to respond to each other, after which the audience will be asked for input and questions. We hope this will be a lively discussion rooted in direct experience from research and pedagogy.

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