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# A Critical Response to “The value of mass-digitised cultural heritage content in creative contexts” by Melissa Terras, et al, Published in *Big Data and Society*

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# A Critical Response to “The value of mass-digitised cultural heritage content in creative contexts” by Melissa Terras, et al, Published in *Big Data and Society*

## **Abstract**

This is a gut-reaction response to the recent article “The value of mass-digitised cultural heritage content in creative contexts” by Melissa Terras, et al, published in *Big Data and Society* on April 6, 2021, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/20539517211006165>. I want to emphasize that this is an opinion piece and I therefore take a very relaxed tone, which I hope will translate into further discussion with colleagues on these complex topics. So, if you have read any of my other academic work, this will not be quite as polished. Please read on as if we were having a conversation!

## **Keywords**

visual resources, commercial vendors, digitization, collection access, technology, collaboration, staffing, entrepreneurship, exploitation, cultural appropriation, digital cultural heritage, reviews, opinion piece

## **Author Bio & Acknowledgements**

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This is a gut reaction response to the recent article “The value of mass-digitised cultural heritage content in creative contexts” by Melissa Terras et al, published in *Big Data and Society* on April 6, 2021, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/20539517211006165>. I want to emphasize that this is an opinion piece and I therefore take a very relaxed tone, which I hope will translate into further discussion with colleagues on these complex topics. So, if you have read any of my other academic work, this will not be quite as polished. Please read on as if we were having a conversation! Here goes:

I am not going to give a full summary of the article, because before you read on here, you should first go ahead and read the main article in its entirety. I'll wait!

Ok, you're back? Great; so basically, we saw the authors (Terras et al) investigate the potential economic, cultural, and social values of large-scale digitized collections within galleries, libraries, archives, and museums (GLAM institutions). They explore this topic through the example of a project called Creative Informatics, “which aims to enhance data-sharing and innovation across the creative sectors throughout the City of Edinburgh and local regions” (p. 1). The authors discuss the potentials for the reuse of digitized materials to stimulate creative innovation and generate economic growth. This is just a fancy way of saying that they are exploring the resources that would be needed to supply individuals (they call them “entrepreneurs”) with source material for projects that will make money. I wanted to write this response to say – HOLD ON A MINUTE! There are so many things to consider that are not mentioned in the original article.

I do think the authors have good intentions! And I commend them on the immense amount of work they have completed on the Creative Informatics project. But my initial reaction to this piece was “this seems gross, how about we definitely DON'T do that?!” The authors probably anticipated this response and quickly made the argument that innovation is going to happen anyways, so GLAM folks should at least make sure they have a seat at the table, or ideally run the show. I also don't want to come off as being anti-open access. I am very much in favor of releasing everything and anything within the bounds of intellectual property and cultural sensitivity. However, I noticed that there is a fine line here between promoting full open access to digital cultural heritage collections and specifically designing that open access towards profit-generating reuse. In my opinion, the two are dangerously conflated in the article by Terras et al.

I recognize that there are structural differences between the US and UK contexts. However, we do have a similar funding structure where national institutions (primarily museums and libraries) are funded by central or local governments, while independent institutions are owned by charities or trusts in the UK and by non-profits in the US. The only major difference that stands out here is that the authors are part of a hyper-local initiative in Edinburgh, working with Scottish source materials, on a rather small scale, within a controlled context and an abundance of “resources not normally seen within the cultural heritage sector” (p. 2). The projects they outline are great and seem like they are well-scoped, but the problems with their larger recommendations become apparent when I start thinking about how to apply these processes at scale, and particularly how this upscaling would affect institutions and collections that contain materials created by and that belong to marginalized communities.

While the article considers both social and economic value of digitized cultural heritage, I am going to focus on the economic aspects.<sup>1</sup> The main issues that I want to highlight, which are not discussed in the original article but that certainly deserve attention in this conversation, are: commodification as appropriation, opportunity exploitation for profit maximization, and the question of who benefits from these partnerships.

While the paper's abstract claims to "also problematise the act of considering such heritage content as a resource to be exploited for economic growth" (p. 1), I really feel that their problematization did not go far enough. I was expecting at least some mention of the big red flag that went up before I even finished reading the abstract: appropriation. Using digitized cultural heritage to generate surplus capital (i.e., financial profit) cannot happen in these contexts without the exploitation of labor, culture, and experience.

### **Commodification of Labor**

Digitization and subsequent description do not simply appear out of nowhere. We all know this because we are information professionals, and this is what we do. We are forced to advocate for our positions, our funding, and our resources, so that we can make such materials available.

I have written about the commodification of labor in the context of the repackaging of archival information for profit by large publishers such as Gale and ProQuest, specifically in a library context.<sup>2</sup> The relevant takeaway from that earlier article is that the sale and distribution of public information by commercial entities goes against the core values of cultural heritage institutions in their mission towards the provision of information as a public good. Terras et al briefly mention Gale and ProQuest. The main difference between the Creative Informatics project and these publishers is that the publishers are simply repackaging the raw data in a digital format and selling it to other institutions. The Creative Informatics project is focused on the creative reuse of this information in a new and transformative way, and then packaging that product as a novel experience for sale. However, the labor and resources needed to provide the raw materials for these transformations is identical in both scenarios.

I suppose it could be assumed that each time the authors mention "resources" (e.g., the need for, the lack of, etc.) labor is included. When they do specifically address labor, their *only* consideration is that of the curators, creative partners, and technical support. Any mention of the people and processes of actually *generating* "mass-digitised cultural heritage" is absent. While creative and curatorial labor is valued above all else in this instance, we are left without consideration of the scanning techs, the catalogers, the infrastructure stewards/managers/designers, the conservators, the security guards, the reading room attendants. This is the labor that makes it possible to run a memory institution and that make it possible for any digitization effort on any scale. So, when the authors discuss the exploitation of cultural heritage materials, they are also assuming the exploitation of the labor of *people* in order to generate surplus value for a "creative partner."

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<sup>1</sup> So much has already been written on the social value, and my thoughts on that topic are articulated in my article "The Aura of Materiality: Digital Surrogacy and the Preservation of Photographic Archives" in *Art Documentation's* Spring 2017 issue, <http://dx.doi.org/10.17613/M6367S>

<sup>2</sup> See "Information as Capital: The Commodification of Archives and Library Labor" in *VR A Bulletin*, Fall 2018 <http://dx.doi.org/10.17613/M6QF8JJ6V>

There is an overall attitude throughout the article that mass-digitization within the GLAM context is generally ill planned, with little thought put into how the materials would be used, and that the initiatives are often put together piecemeal. I couldn't agree more; however, the authors then go on to criticize the way that GLAMs describe and promote digital collections, thereby making them neither findable nor understandable to non-GLAM audiences. They note that this is an issue of resources. Again, I totally agree. But then, instead of advocating for better description and/or discovery platforms that would eradicate these barriers (which would be the result of a lot of labor), the authors state that "business development support is needed" to reframe "established cultural economy activities around data" (p. 8). These partnerships would include "GLAM institutions and their expert staff that would describe, promote, and broadcast the existence of datasets" in order to "attract both the technological and creative industries." What?!

There is no mention of the fact that this would mark a massive shift in ideology for these experts, not to mention that I have never read a mission statement by a GLAM institution that includes generating opportunities for private entities to turn a profit. The authors are calling out the academic gatekeeping apparatus, and I also happen to agree with that (information is a public good!), but they are misdirecting their solutions (someone else's cultural heritage is not a raw material for capitalist activity!). I am no expert, but if the end goal is to stimulate economic growth, it seems like creating jobs would be the best use of resources. Their model generates very selective work, not permanent jobs, and it exploits and grossly overburdens an already overworked and underpaid workforce.

### **Commodification of Culture**

A dominant culture commodifying the heritage of a non-dominant culture is, by definition, appropriation. That's it. That's the statement. Just because a cultural or memory institution is involved in the creative process does not make it any less of an appropriation. Western GLAM institutions are rife with pillaged materials (particularly in the UK context), and even with careful consideration of what *is* and *is not* being made available for innovative reuse, there is a wide berth to cause a great deal of harm.

Let me step back and explain what I mean by this. What the authors are describing and advocating for in the article is a product that would make it easy for entrepreneurs to access and exploit information and experiences motivated by profit maximization. In the business world, this is called "opportunity exploitation."<sup>3</sup> This opportunity comes at a cost for GLAM institutions that can be boiled down to risk. There is one understated paragraph in the original article in the section "Data Governance, Law and Ethics" that states: "Those encouraging creative reuse of large-scale heritage data need to establish robust approval, monitoring and governance processes which should be considered aspects of, rather than being separate to, mass-digitisation programmes" (p. 7). This is an excellent point. Again, here is the assumption that creative reuse is going to happen anyways, and the institution should mitigate risk as digitization happens, not afterwards.

While the authors do acknowledge that GLAM partners need to foresee potential consequences and how to mitigate these risks, I want to emphasize the severity of the *overall* risk. In

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<sup>3</sup> A quick Google search brings up lots of resources to further define this term and its context in business literature.

my own metadata work at Cornell, we are moving towards generating internal guidelines for ethical descriptive practices. Our preliminary research has included surveying the vast work that has already been done by communities of color on this topic, particularly in the US. Almost everything I have read emphasizes collaboration with the community being represented, which leads me to believe that in order for the model proposed by Terras et al to succeed, the GLAM partnerships would need to face both directions: they should have a strong collaboration with the communities, *and* a robust approval and monitoring process for the creative/business partners.

So, what would these risks look like? On one side, if the cultural heritage of marginalized communities is included in these data dumps without the aforementioned approval, monitoring, and governance AS WELL AS community collaboration, there is the possibility for non-subject experts to deliberately and/or accidentally distort, misuse, and misinterpret materials. This already happens within the institutions themselves! It is already a problem! A very recent example of misuse and distortion (published in the same week as the original article) is artist Matt Loughrey, who published a series of images on the VICE website that were “edited photos of victims of the Khmer Rouge genocide to make them appear as though they were smiling.”<sup>4</sup> I could not imagine a better example of the highest level of risk. The main difference in this case is that the images were altered and published without permission from the museum or the families of the victims, which reinforces the importance of the collaborative and community effort needed. Again, while the authors specifically state that this is a consideration that should be taken into account, they do not give examples of what that collaboration might look like, nor the risks involved if this critical step is passed over.

Alternately, the institution for whatever reason may decide to exclude marginalized voices from their data sets, or it might be the case that the specialization of the institution is not scoped that way. These scenarios are problematic for several reasons, but I want to highlight how it contributes to the widespread issue of Digital Colonialism. The term, also known as Electronic Colonialism, was coined in the 1970s in response to rapid technological advances and media domination from world powers such as the US, Japan, and Germany. It describes the profound economic, political, and psychological impacts on formerly colonized Third World and impoverished nations who “willingly yet unconsciously...vicariously assimilate elements of Western culture and...accept the imposition of American ideology.”<sup>5</sup> Artist Morehshin Allahyari takes the theory a step further to “define Digital Colonialism as a framework for critically examining the tendency for information technologies to be deployed in ways that reproduce colonial power relations.”<sup>6</sup> Her performances focus on 3D technologies and their use by Western institutions to appropriate cultural artifacts in a digital form.

I would argue that the method mentioned by Terras et al, audience-driven design (p. 6), only serves to perpetuate the desires and narratives of the dominant culture (not to mention the oppression, white supremacy, and erasure that led to white/Western culture becoming the default). They don’t mention this specifically, but they do note that “data-driven services that valorise

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<sup>4</sup> Joseph Choi, “Vice Apologizes for Publishing Edited Photos of Cambodian Genocide Victims Smiling,” TheHill, April 13, 2021, <https://thehill.com/homenews/media/547940-vice-apologizes-for-publishing-edited-photos-of-cambodian-genocide-victims>.

<sup>5</sup> “Electronic Colonialism,” *Wikipedia*, accessed April 28, 2021 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Electronic\\_colonialism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Electronic_colonialism).

<sup>6</sup> Morehshin Allahyari, “Digital Colonialism (2016-2019),” <http://www.morehshin.com/digital-colonialism-2016-2019/>.

audience engagement could prioritise the most attention grabbing or superficial aspects of a collection.” This is initially heading in the right direction, but then the sentence ends with... “and diminish the value and importance of a curator’s view in presenting a more nuanced story” (p. 8), which shows concern for the distortion of the narrative created by the curator, rather than the distortion of the materials themselves. There is a brief mention that the mediation that would come from robust approval and monitoring would “allow confidence in reuse, including unexpected interventions from creatives” and the “ability to respond to archival content issues, particularly around the identification of individuals” (p. 7). While these are excellent points, they only start to scratch the surface of potential risk and fail to consider that the best people to mitigate these risks might not actually be the curators or GLAM staff.

### **Commodification of Experience**

I only mention this because it ties back to appropriation. When generating, packaging, and selling experiences based on cultural heritage we should always be aware of the many ways that the experiences and heritage of Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) are often commodified and repurposed for widespread (white) consumption. BIPOC heritage, which includes their lived experiences, is already too often viewed as public domain.<sup>7</sup> I cannot speak to this topic beyond this statement as I am not an expert in this area, but I am educating myself about this because I believe it deserves to be part of the conversation about the “experience economy” (p. 3).

### **Big Questions Without Simple Answers**

The biggest burning question I have for any institution looking to generate profit-driving opportunities is: who benefits from these creative partnerships? The authors allude to “multiple impacts that constitute success: not only economic sustainability but social, cultural, and environmental” (p. 9). And, yes, there is a wide definition of success, but 1) mass-digitization contributes to the climate crisis and is therefore by default anti-environmental; and 2) who benefits socially and culturally depends almost entirely on the collaborators, the materials being reused, and where/how the profits are redistributed.

Are the communities represented in the material collections being served in some way? Is the final product a celebration of multiculturalism, or does it perpetuate colonial power structures? Will the profits be reinvested in the community the institution serves? These are the questions I would want to ask my own leadership if they decided to participate in a program like this. I would also ask, instead of leveraging digitized materials to make money, why not use the resources and do the work to collaborate with communities to make the collections more complete, more engaging, and more useful to everyone?

Sometimes it is all too obvious that we are all trying to operate under the false assumption that GLAMs are somehow inherently neutral. But that’s a myth. Data and description are not neutral, automation is not neutral, because people are not neutral, and people are the source of all this work. Terras et al come so close to this point when they talk about interventions with

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<sup>7</sup> For a more in-depth discussion of this in the Indigenous context, see Deidre Brown’s lecture on “Traditional Identity” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HYa2kxL9EFY>.

automation and data-driven services, but it doesn't go far enough to convince me that the ethics of this kind of exploitation are scalable to GLAMs as a whole. My own priorities, where I can exercise them professionally, are to center labor and marginalized voices, but alas, I am just an underpaid cynic living in a capitalist system and cash rules everything around me.