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Economic, social and cultural rights and the internet

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SYRIA

MITIGATING THE DAMAGE: THE DIGITAL PRESERVATION OF PALMYRA'S HISTORIC MONUMENTS

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Introduction

After more than five years of conflict and violence, the destructive outcomes of the war in Syria have devastated the country. The massive human tragedy is certainly the most disturbing: a report by the Syrian Center for Policy Research (SCPR) released in early 2016 estimated that over 470,000 people had been killed, one in 10 Syrians had been wounded, and more than 10 million were internally and externally displaced.[1] Moreover, the vast majority of the country's infrastructure has been destroyed. And, recently, the damages have extended to Syria's rich and coveted historic sites and national treasures.

While many historic sites have suffered significant destruction inflicted by both sides of the conflict,[2] this report will focus on the recent events that devastated the ancient ruins in Palmyra. This small city in central Syria holds significant symbolic status as a living record of the several civilizations that inhabited the area, dating back to the early second millennium BC.[3]

This report will briefly describe the events that caused the destruction in Palmyra. It will then discuss the efforts of many activists, scholars and volunteers to leverage digital media and the internet to mitigate the impact of this destruction and contribute to the preservation of an important cultural treasure for the whole world.

A cultural tragedy, with a sliver of hope

The historic ruins of Palmyra were designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1980. The site contains a wealth of Greco-Romano-Semitic architectural and cultural monuments, including the Great Colonnade, Agora and many temples and cemeteries.

On 20 May 2015, the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL) captured the city of Palmyra after a brief offensive and the withdrawal of government forces.[4] The capture immediately sparked widespread concern and worry about the fate of the historic ruins, given ISIL's record of intentionally destroying ancient monuments.

UNESCO issued a statement calling for the cessation of hostilities in the historic sites in the city: "It is imperative that all parties respect international obligations to protect cultural heritage during conflict, by avoiding direct targeting, as well as use for military purposes."[5] Other calls to spare the historic sites reminded the country of its obligations under the International Covenant on Social, Economic and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), which the Syrian Arab Republic ratified on 3 January 1976.[6] The British historian Dan Cruickshank called the capture a "cultural crisis of the highest order".[7]

Soon after ISIL took control of the city, reports emerged of the destruction of several cultural and historic artefacts, including the Lion of Al-l t statue (1st century AD)[8] and the Temple of Baalshamin (2nd century BC).[9] On 30 August 2015, ISIL demolished the Temple of Bel (2nd century AD),[10] which had some of the most preserved ruins in Palmyra and the region.

The frustration felt with the tragic news led many archaeological experts, volunteers and activists to search for ways to even slightly mitigate the impact of the destruction, and help preserve the cultural treasures for Syria and the world. With very few feasible options available, these individuals and groups turned to digital media and the internet

1   Black, I. (2016, 11 February). Report on Syria conflict finds 11.5% of population killed or injured. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/11/report-on-syria-conflict-finds-115-of-population-killed-or-injured

2   Curry, A. (2014, 3 September). Archaeologists Train "Monuments Men" to Save Syria's Past. *National Geographic*. news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2014/09/140903-syria-antiquities-looting-culture-heritage-archaeology /

3   https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palmyra

4   https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palmyra_offensive_(May_2015)

5   UNESCO. (2015, 25 May). UNESCO Director-General calls for immediate cessation of hostilities in Palmyra. en.unesco.org/news/unesco-director-general-calls-immediate-cessation-hostilities-palmyra?language=en

6   Davila-Ruhaak, S. (2016). Beyond the Destruction of Syria: Considering a Future in Syria and the Protection of the Right to Culture. *John Marshall Review of Intellectual Property Law, 15*(3).

7   Batchelor, T., & Virtue, R. (2015, 21 May). Call for 'drastic military action NOW' to save Palmyra from ISIS or 'all will be lost'. *Express*. www.express.co.uk/news/world/578660/Islamic-State-capture-ancient-city-Palmyra-fears-world-heritage-site

8   https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lion_of_Al-l%C4%81t

9   https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Temple_of_Baalshamin

10 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Temple_of_Bel

The Triumphal Arch before and after its destruction. SOURCE: GETTY IMAGES

with the aim to first understand the extent of the events, and to mobilise efforts to document and preserve the legacy of the damaged or destroyed artefacts.

Several Syrian archaeologists abroad swept into action. Amr Al Azm, the former head of archaeological research at the Syrian General Department of Antiquities and Museums, who currently lives in the United States and teaches at Shawnee State University in Ohio, is helping the informal "Syrian Monument Men" group of volunteers in their efforts to document looting of archaeological artefacts. The volunteers who reside in different parts of Syria and hide their identity to protect their work use simple tools like digital cameras and smartphones to capture cultural heritage crimes. They send the collected evidence to experts abroad like Azm, who in turn use it to pressure international organisations to track these artefacts in the hope of possible recovery from smuggling or the black market.

The Institute for Digital Archaeology (IDA)[11] is another initiative trying to use digital technology to protect cultural heritage. Jointly founded in 2012 by Harvard University, Oxford University and Dubai's Museum of the Future, the institute aims to build an open source database of high-resolution images and 3D graphics and models of archaeological artefacts to contribute to the preservation of the shared cultural identity and shared history.

The IDA team was able to put together a group of contributors on the ground and achieved a remarkable outcome of documenting most of Palmyra's ruins and ancient buildings. The group succeeded in gathering the necessary data about most buildings in Palmyra before their destruction. These data were processed by the IDA to produce high-resolution imagery and 3D models of the buildings or objects. The IDA makes the resulting images, 2D and 3D models available as open source materials through its Million Image Database.[12] This will enable other interested parties to use these materials to create content and an experience that will help preserve the Syrian cultural heritage.

An interesting example of what can be done using the digital materials developed and preserved by the IDA is the reproduction of the Triumphal Arch using large-scale 3D printing technology. The 5.5-metre-high replica is two thirds the scale of the original arch, and was unveiled at Trafalgar Square on 19 April 2016. The model was planned to tour several cities around the world before moving permanently to Palmyra where it will be installed near the site of the original arch.

The new model has already made a significant contribution to the global awareness of the scale of damage and destruction to the Syrian cultural and historic heritage as a result of the war. It cannot, however, compensate for the massive loss that

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11 digitalarchaeology.org.uk/our-purpose

12 www.millionimage.org.uk

Model of the Triumphal Arch created using 3D printing technology. SOURCE: BBC

has already occurred, as many experts have already stated.[13]

The innovative use of the internet to support the cultural preservation efforts has gone beyond the digital documentation and open access dissemination of images and architectural models. Conan Schmigel Parsons, an archaeologist from the United Kingdom who was alarmed by the news coming from Palmyra, decided to take positive steps in his own capacity. He embarked on a journey he called Saving Palmyra Digitally.[14] Parsons wants to create digital 3D reconstructions of the ruins of Palmyra using a digital imaging technique called "photogrammetry". To help launch his project, he turned to the internet crowdfunding platform GoFundMe to raise funds for the equipment and software he needs. As of writing, the Saving Palmyra Digitally campaign has raised GBP 793 (USD 1,026) on its way to its goal of GBP 1,800 (USD 2,330). However, Conan has already released several 3D models (including the Temple of Baalshamin and Trooper Potts VC Memorial) under an open Creative Commons Attribution licence.[15]

One fundamental aspect that underlies most initiatives to document the cultural and historical heritage in Palmyra is their adoption of an open approach to the content and digital artefacts they are producing. By releasing these artefacts under permissive licences that enable others to use, share and remix to create new and derivative works, the impact of the original work is greatly amplified, and the space for innovation is significantly widened. This openness will also assist the efforts to restore and reconstruct the actual sites in Syria when the war ends. The Million Image Database at the IDA allows any use of its resources without requiring attribution, and the works of Saving Palmyra Digitally only need author attribution to be reused freely.

All these projects and initiatives have good intentions and are starting from the premise that Palmyra's heritage embodies the shared history of humanity, and its preservation and restoration are necessary for Syria and for the whole world. There is, however, an important issue that should be addressed: the vast majority of initiatives and their output are implemented and released in languages other than Arabic, the official language of the people of Syria. This can arguably limit access and the contribution of most Syrian citizens to these efforts, and reduce the benefits they can get from

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13 Turner, L. (2016, 19 April). Palmyra's Arch of Triumph recreated in London. *BBC.* www.bbc.com/news/uk-36070721

14 https://www.gofundme.com/6b4q5z94

15 https://sketchfab.com/palmyra3dmodel

their outcomes. Some experts and activists, such as Al Azm, are working on bridging this gap, but a systematic consideration of the inclusion of Arabic and the local residents can address the unintended consequences of this issue.

Conclusions

The stories above illustrate how digital technologies and the internet can become effective tools for the preservation of historical heritage and the protection and support of the cultural rights of citizens in war-torn countries. From documenting cultural heritage crimes to facilitating the tracking and recovery of stolen artefacts, to the collection of data and evidence to support the development of digital imagery, 2D and 3D models, to the reconstruction of buildings and artefacts using 3D printing, to crowdfunding to support these efforts, the internet plays a critical role as the enabler for grassroots mobilisation, international collaboration and open sharing and access.

These initiatives have successfully used the internet to respond to the incidents in Palmyra at a global scale. However, they unintentionally left out a critical element: ensuring that the processes used to gather data and evidence, document incidents and develop and disseminate digital artefacts consider the Syrian citizens as the primary beneficiaries of their efforts, and hence make these processes and their outputs accessible to them. Fortunately, this access barrier is mostly a language issue. But considering the importance of embedding Arabic in the works of these efforts, and in the results they produce, will go a long way in extending their reach and impact to the people of Syria – those whose lives have been most affected by the conflict and the destruction.

Unfortunately, what happened in Palmyra is not an isolated incident. In fact, several other historic sites of tremendous significance have also been destroyed or severely damaged because of regional conflict: the ancient ruins of the city of Nimrud in Iraq, many statues in the Mosul museum, and the Crac des Chevaliers castle in Aleppo. With very few viable options available for action, the internet provides a sliver of hope.

Action steps

The following considerations need to be taken on board when using digital technologies in preserving cultural heritage:

- The internet and its associated digital technologies provide unique opportunities to support and strengthen the efforts to preserve cultural heritage and greatly reduce the costs of these efforts and initiatives. Countries that have ratified the ICESCR must actively embrace digital technological advances to boost their cultural preservation efforts and deliver on their commitments to the Covenant.

- At the same time, internet content suffers from weaknesses in its linguistic diversity, which results in biases in the digital cultural heritage preservation efforts towards English content and dissemination. This linguistic bias needs attention from proactive stakeholders.

- As can be learned from Palmyra's stories, the internet can also facilitate collaboration and the mobilisation of resources to support the preservation of cultural heritage (including skills and content sharing, technology transfer and through crowdfunding).

- Most importantly, the internet promotes dialogue and debate over the diverse cultural heritage shared by humankind, which can lead to better understanding, tolerance and respect among cultures and nations.

Economic, social and cultural rights and the internet

The 45 country reports gathered here illustrate the link between the internet and economic, social and cultural rights (ESCRs). Some of the topics will be familiar to information and communications technology for development (ICT4D) activists: the right to health, education and culture; the socioeconomic empowerment of women using the internet; the inclusion of rural and indigenous communities in the information society; and the use of ICT to combat the marginalisation of local languages. Others deal with relatively new areas of exploration, such as using 3D printing technology to preserve cultural heritage, creating participatory community networks to capture an "inventory of things" that enables socioeconomic rights, crowdfunding rights, or the negative impact of algorithms on calculating social benefits. Workers' rights receive some attention, as does the use of the internet during natural disasters.

Ten thematic reports frame the country reports. These deal both with overarching concerns when it comes to ESCRs and the internet – such as institutional frameworks and policy considerations – as well as more specific issues that impact on our rights: the legal justification for online education resources, the plight of migrant domestic workers, the use of digital databases to protect traditional knowledge from biopiracy, digital archiving, and the impact of multilateral trade deals on the international human rights framework.

The reports highlight the institutional and country-level possibilities and challenges that civil society faces in using the internet to enable ESCRs. They also suggest that in a number of instances, individuals, groups and communities are using the internet to enact their socioeconomic and cultural rights in the face of disinterest, inaction or censure by the state.

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