

# Some implications of digital social media for heritage practice

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## **Some implications of digital social media for heritage practice**

There is a rapidly growing array of digital and social media that promise to enhance people's connections to heritage places through increased access to information, new experiences created at historical sites and new forms of participation. These technologies range from web-based archives to mobile interactive guides and Facebook nostalgia sites. As many commentators and institutions have claimed, and many developers have now demonstrated, mobile and digital technologies offer significant innovations for traditional interpretation techniques, and opportunities to both reinforce and to challenge perceptions of tangible and intangible heritage values and archival relevance.

Through their emphasis on ubiquitous connectivity, co-production and online participation, many of these new tools seek to provide both repositories of information and digital communities through which memories, stories and experiences can be articulated and shared. They can thus potentially 'open up new ways of exploring and articulating a community's relations with the physical and social settings ... thereby enabling a form of social production of heritage as the locus of our sense of place' (Giaccardi & Palen 2008: 282). And when successful, these kinds of shared digital platforms can function as a way of either creating and / or archiving intangible heritage artefacts and stories situated within the tangible fabric of buildings, sites and places (Giaccardi & Palen 2008: 283; Conrad 2013: 462).

In this paper we attempt to tease out some of the motivations, potentials and limitations of mobile digital applications in heritage interpretation by investigating some recent examples sites. We have undertaken this work in parallel with the creation of a digital application ourselves, supported by the Australian Research Council and by the City of Port Phillip in Melbourne, for the local area of Port Melbourne (which is ongoing and not the subject of this paper).

We have a particular interest in investigating what part these digital technologies might play in the, by now well documented, turn towards ‘bottom-up’ vernacular history that is assumed to be more community-driven, collaborative and participatory in its production and consumption (Robertson 2012: 7). As Robertson and Dicks (Robertson 2012: 7; Dicks 2000: 37) have characterised, a bottom-up approach aims to address the ordinary and the everyday, so as to ‘offer ordinary people now’ the chance to ‘encounter ordinary people then’.

We add the question here that asks whether – through digital mobile enabled interpretation – these encounters between past and present can be more effectively situated in ‘ordinary places’ rather than confined to prescribed museums and sites of identified significance. As Atkinson (Atkinson 2007: 537) writes: ‘Rethinking memory as a less bounded and continually reconstituted process steers attention towards the less spectacular places where social memory is produced and mobilised.’

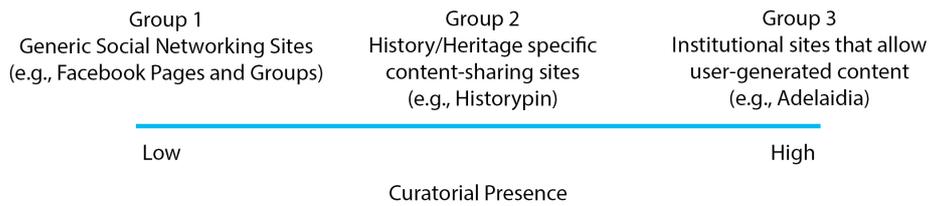
Digital innovation in interpretation and presentation of heritage has also been regarded as a key strategy in turning around the forceful critiques that emanated in the 1990s and early 2000’s of heritage ‘over-production’, towards an active acceptance that heritage is potentially everywhere, is for everyone and we are all heritage experts (Schofield 2014: 2). However – as many others have expressed and as we are very aware of – attempts to pursue community-based and localised heritage that are largely outside of professionalised and institutionalised directives and practices are typically problematic on a number of levels (Waterton & Smith 2010: 10; Robertson 2012: 1). Indeed, as this paper will explore, digital communities and applications that focus on the dissemination of local heritage, histories and memories, share many of the issues that have been critiqued within more traditional, ‘authorised’ sites of heritage interpretation and custodianship. And in practice it is difficult to draw clear-cut distinctions between bottom-up community driven and top-down institutionally derived digital sites – just as the distinctions are highly blurred in heritage management and interpretation. With a focus on local sites and communities, that is

seen as a means of achieving broader aspirations towards more ‘accessible’ and ‘democratic’ versions of heritage, the practice becomes also more diffuse and less easily marked than traditional sites of significance (Schofield 2014: 2).

Through a close analysis of some examples, in this paper we aim to scrutinise overly broad claims about the wholesale mobilization of what has been described as a ‘participatory convergence culture’ in digital heritage interpretation: where the consumption and production of content is inevitably and effortlessly co-joined, available to everyone everywhere anytime and unmediated; ‘as much as a state of mind, a way of being in the world, as a series of technologically-enabled actions’ (Staiff 2014: 117). We ask if historical archival objects, records and facts are indeed readily converted into communal and shared memories simply by being made accessible on the internet. Is it unproblematic to assert that the sharing of the personal rapidly and inevitably escalates into the communal? Or rather in heritage terms, as Millar (Millar 2006: 122) suggests: ‘The act of creating social memory is the act of creating, capturing, preserving, and sharing the tangible objects: the touchstones, vehicles, and triggers that help us to remember and to know’. But equally, looking beyond these reservations, we ask if when created, applied and managed thoughtfully, virtual and digital communities and tools can deliver exciting potential to encourage what Affleck and Kvan (Affleck & Kvan 2008: 269) characterised as ‘a deeper engagement with the significance and meaning behind cultural heritage by both participants and observers.’

### **Selected Applications**

To explore our questions, the remainder of this paper examines a small sample of digital heritage applications and websites that have been deployed over the last five or so years to consider the ways they might facilitate heritage or otherwise. In reviewing these applications in the light of issues discussed above, we identified three distinct groups shown in Figure 1, and it is by comparing and contrasting their modes of operation and implications that the main arguments are developed here.

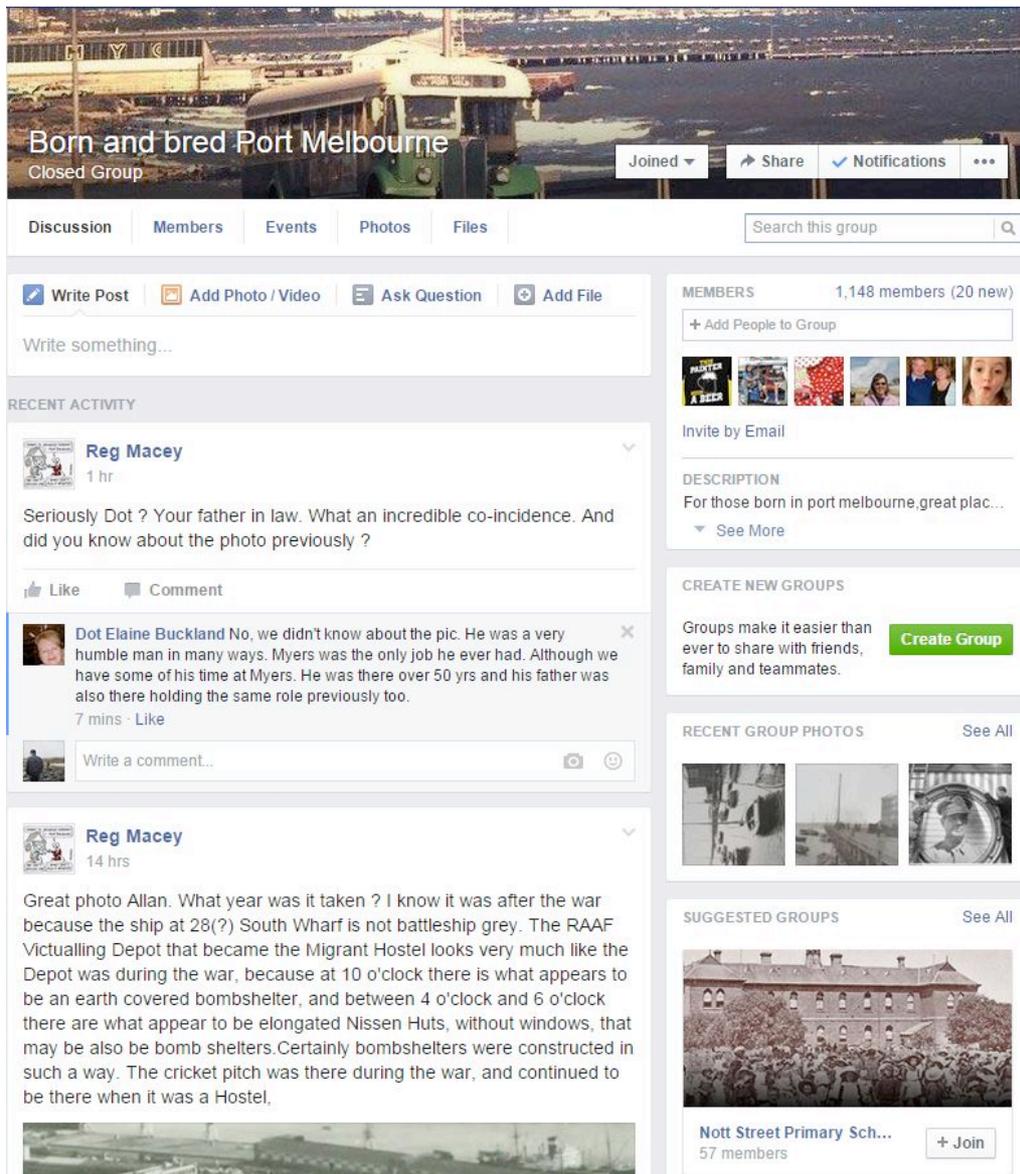


**Figure 1.** Three groups of digital sites that host public exchange on heritage [Source: Hannah Lewi, Wally Smith, Andrew Murray]

First, is the use of generic social network sites, principally Facebook groups, as a forum for discussion of the heritage of a particular place. These have popped up all over the world, with some Australian examples being: ‘Born and Bred Port Melbourne’ (BBPM), a page dedicated to sharing memories and ephemera about living in Port Melbourne; and ‘Northcote Hysterical Society’ (NHS) that collects historic images of Northcote. Facebook is, of course, not a dedicated heritage technology, and so this group represents the appropriation of a generic platform. Its central structuring device is the organisation of a grass-root community and their ongoing digital conversation, including memories, the sharing of historic photographs, and often nostalgic comparisons of yesterday and today, with reactions to planning and building developments (Gregory 2014). This group of technologies is included as a grass-roots extreme that proceeds without institutional presence, and the technological medium itself is now so commonplace to its users that it has almost become invisible.

Our second group consists of technologies which also provide an ‘open framework’ for community discourse, but which are purposely built for the documentation and sharing of heritage content. Prominent examples are:

\*‘Historypin’ was launched in 2010 as a joint venture between the NFP company Shift and Google. It is a map-based app and website, which allows anyone to contribute content, images, video, audio, stories, and pins it to the map, thereby creating a global network of stories.

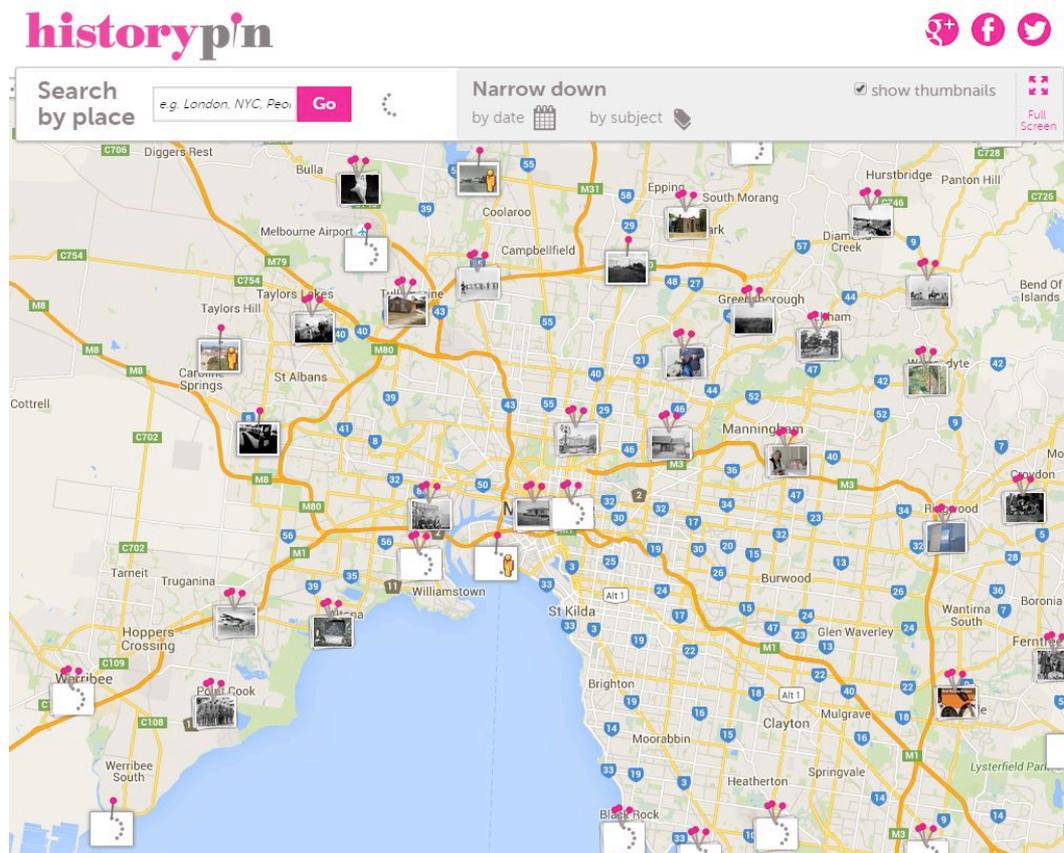


**Figure 2.** Born and Bred Port Melbourne, an example of a Facebook heritage page [Source: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/pamelajudd/>]

\*‘What Was There’ was launched in 2011 and was conceived by Enlighten, a digital marketing agency. It is a map-based desktop only site, which allows users to upload images to the map, and also overlay them in Google Street view.

\*‘SepiaTown’ was started in 2010 as an independent venture, and is a map-based, desktop only site which allows users to contribute historic images and pin them to the map. The \*‘Timera’ app and website was created in 2013 by a tech start-up in Russia, and uses ‘then and now’ photographic comparisons, allowing users to upload existing photos and create in-situ ‘then and now’ photographs, with the ability to comment and discuss them using social media functions.

Unlike the social network structure of applications like Facebook, these open heritage forums are organised around the collective accumulation of contributed content. Although they are purposed for heritage, they are mostly created by tech-companies usually operating outside of the traditional heritage arena. They explore, through technical innovation and social media capabilities, the ability for communities and users to make contributions to content and reactions to that content.



**Figure 3.** Historypin, an example of an open-framework site' [Source: <https://www.historypin.com>]

For our third group, we identified a number of digital applications and sites that explicitly present an institution as the host, convenor and orchestrator of heritage discourse. These also invite grass-roots contributions from the public, but now with more narrowly defined limits.

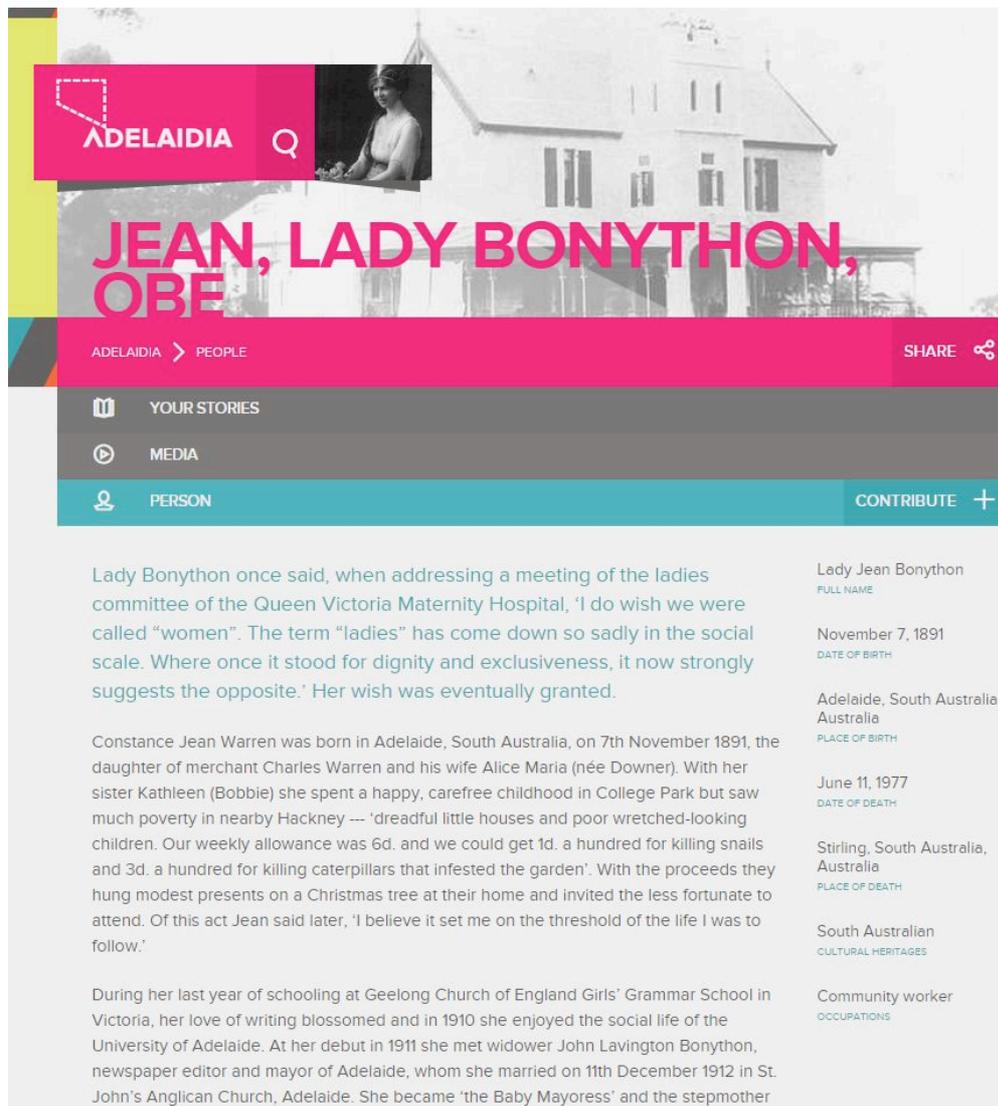
Prominent examples are:

\*'Adelaidia' began in 2014 and was created in partnership by History SA, the SA Government and Adelaide City council. The app delivers information and artefacts provided by History SA

on the history of Adelaide, including events, people and street histories. There is also a provision for users to contribute memories and images.

\*The 'City of Memory' application, which was functional from 2003-2008, was a website that located stories and memories about New York onto a map. Created by City Lore, a NY cultural heritage NFP organisation, it was funded by the Rockefeller Foundation. The site was populated with content generated from their archive and related heritage work, with users invited to contribute as well.

\*Melbourne's 'Lost 100' application was launched in 2012 by the National Trust Victoria, highlighting 100 buildings located in the Melbourne CBD that had been demolished or are at risk. Again, populated by the National Trust, the public is invited to add their stories, memories and responses to the entries.



**Figure 4.** Adelaidia, an example of a site where the institution is the host [Source: <https://www.adelaidia.com.au>]

There are of course many other relevant applications and sites, including ones that do not necessarily conform to our categorisation; for example, The London Street App from the Museum of London. But in choosing the above examples, and distinguishing the three groups, we hope to draw attention to how the relationship between grass-roots and institutional influences is being cast in the digital sphere. In some respects, all of the technologies we consider here share a common aim: to host a digital exchange of various kinds of knowledge, memory and experience of a shared heritage. They offer many possibilities in common, for example they can all be used on mobile smartphones to guide the exploration of places; many with the curation of tours that use content and situate it on a map-based walking tour: as seen in

Historypin (comprised of pre-loaded institutional content or user-generated content), City of Memory (pre-loaded curated tours) and Adelaidia (pre-loaded curated tours).

We will now briefly analyse the selected applications across the dimensions of Content Generation and Population; Levels of Engagement and Moderation; and Longevity.

### **Content Generation and Population**

Within our selected example sites of collected memory apps, there are some that are designed to provide an open, empty framework for content to be uploaded by users, and others that actively seed content material and sometimes even user-responses, in order to provoke reactions and interest in creating new content. The tools that provide open frameworks are typically those developed by tech companies - including Historypin, What Was There, Sepia Town and Timera. These tools all operate in much the same way by providing the ability for both individual citizens and larger institutions to contribute content that may also be responsive to particular events. Historypin, for example, partnered with Buckingham Palace to create an interactive celebration for the Diamond Jubilee, providing content from their archives and an invitation to users to contribute their own memories of Queen Elizabeth II.

Importantly, all content is presented with equal authority (i.e there is no hierarchical identification of 'amateur' or 'official' content). Whilst all these open framework applications have had considerable uptake, Historypin and Timera are by far the most successful in terms of the breadth of content contributions and sustained engagement. They appear to offer therefore a hybrid model that is able to sustain localised community-generated content, yet within more globally-applied technology platforms (Lenihan 2014: 208).

The Adelaidia, City of Memory and Lost 100 examples are different in that they largely populate their applications with information and artefacts up-front. (For example, The City of Memory

site was pre-seeded with official content from local institutions, and this content is demarcated from the user-generated content via colour coding on the map.) These apps have then been opened up to audience participation, typically in the form of a comment, the sharing of a memory related to the content, or photographs that show ‘then and now’ comparisons. In Lost 100 user’s can submit a story relating to a building, or overlay a historical image of the now-demolished building in-situ.

As these examples are created by cultural custodians, institutions, government and NGO bodies, their agenda differs somewhat to the more open framework tools as described above in that they typically provide ways for the institution to open up and animate their archives and collections, and promote broader, innovative engagement. (For example, Adelaidia). The promotion of community heritage through these kinds of apps is mediated through a visible institutional presence, but with the aim of exposing and curating content that is relevant to, and accessed by, local communities and individuals. Somewhat paradoxically therefore, these kinds of cultural institutions and heritage bodies aim to exert more influence over content generation than the much larger corporate-driven examples above.

As a counter to these applications, Facebook Heritage pages such as NHS and BBPM operate within the open framework of Facebook. However unlike the other open framework tools created specifically to provide a space for community heritage to unfold, Facebook is merely a universally recognised hosting platform and discussion board within a potentially broader but typically quite contained social network. The BBPM site, for example, was started by a community member as a place for Port Melbourne residents to come together and share stories related to their lives, and to keep track of each other. Unlike some other applications and sites discussed however, these pages are often closed, private, digital members clubs and therefore the heritage discourse is often difficult to penetrate and retain.

Again these differing methods of content generation and population raise questions over any neat categorisation of individual vs institutional contributions in a community heritage application, where institutionally curated and authored content may sit along side more exclusively community-generated entries.

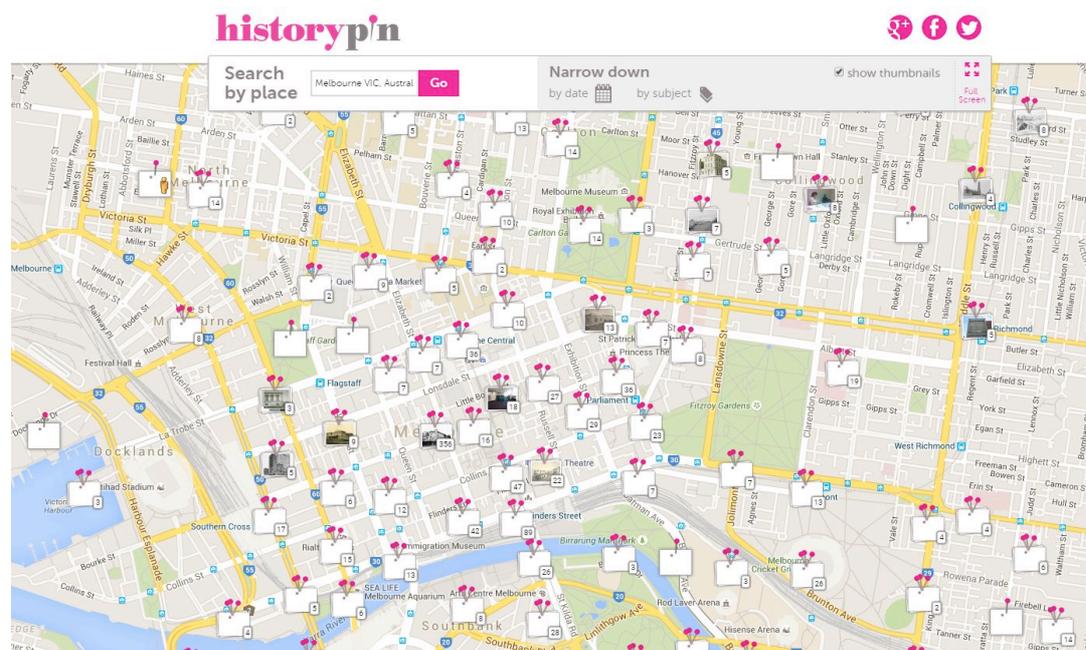
### **Levels of Engagement and Content Moderation**

We have found from our analysis that the levels of engagement across the selected apps has varied greatly. The distinctions between more open frameworks that allow for bottom-up generated content, and more top-down, institutionally seeded applications do become more apparent when exploring them over time, as levels of uptake are determined.

In general, apps authored by identifiable institutions and community and government bodies like Adelaidia, Lost 100 and City of Memory, rely on promoting user engagement and interaction with content through a social-media ‘response’ – users only engage by contributing their stories and memories anchored to a particular building or place as selected by the National Trust, so the band for participation is narrow. And in a number of these examples community engagement has been unsustainable, as evidenced by the lack of comments, memories and stories shared to date: Adelaidia has had 7 memories posted since its start in early 2014; and Lost 100 has had 51 ‘stories’ added since 2012. City of Memory had more success initially, but the project funding ran out in 2008, and so no new content can now be added or interacted with.

Within the more open framework applications, strategies for engagement are less directed and constrained. Historypin simply presents a Google map through which users choose to either mark a new location or add to an existing item on the map; therefore both the uploading of and response to content is controlled by them. Historypin’s engagement at a local Melbourne level, for example, is thorough, with at least 500 contributions in the CBD area. Posts cover an

incredibly diverse cross-section of contributions, with content equally uploaded by individuals and institutions, including the National Archives, Yarra Trams University of Melbourne Archives, The National Trust, LNSW, Museums Victoria, Monash University Oral History Project 'Australian Generations', VicRoads. And content includes social history, architectural and landscape images – past to present.



**Figure 5.** Examples of engagement within the Historypin site [Source: <https://www.historypin.com>]

Associated with this gathering of community contributions and an issue facing all platforms for discussion is that of content moderation. Typically we have found that apps linked with institutions and custodians are understandably more vigilant in moderating individual contributions of content and user responses, thus creating an obvious gate-keeper / custodian role, and a potential barrier to open participation, discussion and access. For example City of Memory has the following clause on its site ‘All entries will be reviewed and may be deleted for inappropriate or crude content.’ All the apps tied to identified custodians and institutions that we examined have enacted up-front moderation policies, usually with a several day lag time between uploading and posting. Some sites, like City of Memory, that were content moderated have now ceased to be active due to lack of funding and therefore lack of moderation.

In contrast, none of the open framework apps have an overt moderation system in place. These tools instead rely on self-policing based on social media conventions, removing explicit or defamatory content once alerted. With all 4 of our examples, the user is free to upload whatever material they choose, it is only moderated or reviewed if flagged or reported by a fellow user. However, when created largely by technical companies external to specific heritage motivations, questions of content ownership and longevity of any material and knowledge collected over time becomes an issue when discussing potential community-led heritage tools.

Therefore despite claims to a more universally accessible, ‘democratic’ model for future heritage interpretation based on social media expectations, we have found that re-launching platforms away from traditional custodial institutions, archives and community-run historical societies and so on, towards more open digital repositories requires a fundamental rethinking of curatorial models and conventions. As Han (Han 2014: 1152) has noted in his own Pennsylvania State University funded digital heritage app evaluation ‘Lost State College’; ‘most participants acknowledged that user-generated content was a valuable part of the historical information that could not be added or managed by the city officials.’ This perhaps demonstrates the potential rift between community and individual citizen participation and more authorised and curated content, as evidenced in the public’s apparent reticence to contribute to apps like Lost 100 or Adalaidia.

### **Longevity**

The larger issue raised by content moderation is that of the ongoing commitment to digital projects and their longevity. In discussing community archives, as Stevens (Stevens 2010: 61) notes ‘long-term engagement may still depend on the enthusiasm and commitment of a few strategically placed individuals.’ These individuals are usually placed within the collecting body, like a local history and heritage society, which ensures their stewardship a more straight-forward responsibility.

Because Historypin is created and run by a NFP company backed by Google, the longevity and sustainability of the project is somewhat secured with a more corporate business structure. This application also acts as an umbrella - frequently partnering with or inviting institutions to contribute content. They initiate projects, treasure hunts and tours, organise events and meet ups, thus ensuring continuing engagement and longevity.

Whilst this model has been successful for Historypin, it is an unsustainable business model for many other applications and sites, which have generally had varying success in keeping up interest and engagement – not unlike problems that face tangible heritage sites. SepiaTown and What Was There all experienced a rush of activity on release and generated a lot of content, but in the period since then, interest seems to have slowed. WWT still receives regular updates, but mainly instigated by the creators themselves or a small band of repeat users; SepiaTown is sadly all but unused. Without ongoing resources to maintain site content and participation, the applications collapse. And in these situations what happens to the afterlife and longevity of any valuable content collected? In contrast, the more top-down, institutionally led tools like Adelaidia and Lost 100 have more visible support and input from larger bodies, allowing for a continued commitment to resources and stewardship, if the apps are successful.

In contrast to these issues, Facebook heritage and nostalgia pages are flourishing, with content flooding individual community pages, generating vast stores of information. These pages are set up as self-moderated arenas, with no institutional support. Whilst operating under the Facebook platform, there is a level of autonomy within these pages unseen within the other apps and sites. Perhaps due to the perceived lack of boundaries, and the informal, social nature of the site, the level of activity is significantly higher than the most popular apps like Historypin or Timera.

## **Conclusions – Opportunities and Issues**

In conclusion, it seems demonstrable that these apps and sites when done well, can mark and raise awareness of forgotten places and local histories, and encourage meaningful experiences that mediate between tangible places and digital information and artefacts (Markwell 2004: 458; Han 2014: 1153).

However although all the apps we investigated do create an arena for community heritage contributions that attempt to instigate individual and shared memories about everyday people and places, there are obvious issues and trade-offs at stake in their design implementation and maintenance.

From our analysis and our ongoing design work to create our own local heritage app, some fundamental questions arise for the future of digital interpretation that aims to be open, community-orientated and localised yet also sustainable and engaging – with valuable content. These challenges are shared by all cultural and heritage institutions that have a contemporary agenda to be community-relevant and engaging yet operating within institutional and curatorial expectations of some level of authority and control over custody, collections, curation, dissemination and advice (Stevens 2010: 63; Tait 2013: 578). Our examples also demonstrate the perhaps all too obvious observation that levels of ongoing commitment and stewardship to moderate, curate and maintain sites are crucial if they are to be successful in the long run. This support may indeed compromise real and perceived levels of bottom-up engagement and citizen-ownership.

Facebook platforms and open framework sites established under technical companies like Google offer distinct advantages of flexible and more open content production, less moderation and more likely longevity and support. However questions arise over their potential value in

deriving and collecting real content that could contribute to historical and heritage understandings and experience for the general public into the future. Whereas others with higher levels of curatorial presence and value in content struggle to solicit meaningful community interaction. As Van Dijk (Dijck 2007: 2) has suggested, digital media therefore does not constitute a 'passive go-between' that simply disseminates any amount of content and dialogue, but rather like any other organising structure, mediates and thereby 'intrinsically shapes the way we build up and retain a sense of individuality and community, or identity and history.'

We conclude therefore that digital interpretation platforms share these basic conflicts – which may indeed be irreconcilable. And indeed they do not side-step, but rather accord with the anxieties expressed in large heritage organisations like UNESCO and ICOMOS about who owns, maintains and controls heritage information and experience.

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