

## Citizen participation which integrates technologies engaging with archaeology related issues

### Use of digital technologies in protest at the British Museum

Claire FRAMPTON, Enrolled on Associateship of the Museums Association, United Kingdom

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### Introduction

Anti oil sponsorship protest group BP or not BP organises protests in the British Museum, London, against oil company BP's sponsorship of exhibitions. They believe in alternative funding since they perceive that sponsorship by BP of arts and heritage projects distracts from climate change caused by the use of fossil fuels. It can be judged that during the protests the museum is a platform for free speech, in an atmosphere where the protests are allowed. Protests have featured creativity inspired by issues related to topics such as archaeology, and are designed to raise public awareness, encouraging citizen participation. Use of digital technologies: BP or not BP post the films documenting the protests on their website, and encourage people to take part in future protests. They also use social media site Facebook to raise awareness of their campaigns, and to raise awareness of other protests and media developments, relating to ethics and arts sponsorship. The protests feature interesting performances which makes them an exciting subject for photographers and journalists. The protests are usually covered by printed and digital media. People taking part and observing the protests also take photos using digital cameras and share these photos on social media. This can be viewed as an aspect of the recent phenomenon of engagement with museums and collections through social media, part of the integration of digital technologies into contemporary culture. Through the dissemination of information through technology, a story of the protests is built up outside the museum and beyond the protest which documents multiple viewpoints, preserving documentation of the protest on the internet, which can be viewed as a public archive.

This paper will present case studies exploring the integration of digital technology into different protests.

Case studies:

1. A BP sponsored exhibition in the BM where an environmental issue inspired protest relating to the 2016 *Sunken Cities: Egypt's Lost Worlds* exhibition. This major exhibition was on the discovery of

two lost Egyptian cities under the Mediterranean Sea, the museums' first large scale exhibition of underwater discoveries (British Museum, 2015). Critics of oil sponsorship of the exhibition argued that 'much of Egypt's coast is beginning to be seriously affected by sea level rise', relating this to the activities of BP and the use of fossil fuel (Rowell, 2016).

Protests in 2016 by BP or not BP in the BM against BP sponsorship of the exhibition was inspired by its' themes. Including protestors drenching themselves in water, highlighting the view that global warming causing rising sea levels will drown major cities in future years, and that BP contribute to this with their activities involving extraction of fossil fuels. BP or not BP 'flood[ed] the BM with a 200 strong splash mob featuring musical mermaids, oily pirates and a 40 foot kraken' sea creature similar to an octopus. Turning things back on BP in the protest a protester claimed that the splash mob aimed to 'flood' BP out of the museum. Citizen participation with technologies included: films capturing the creativity and vibrancy of the protests, posted on the bp or not bp website, documenting citizen observation and participation. This included footage of participants texting on phones, and photographers (bporotbp, 2016). An *Evening Standard* article reported a protest and development of the story on social media including a Twitter feed of photos within the article (Collier, 2016).

2. In February 2019, BP or not BP staged a protest in the British Museum about ethics relating to the temporary exhibition I am Ashurbanipal king of the world, king of Assyria November 2018-February 2019 (British Museum, 2018). The protest was against oil sponsorship and engaged with ethics surrounding objects in the exhibition perceived as 'looted' from Iraq (bporotbp, 2019). The protest also had an anti war sentiment. A film made by BP or not BP documented the protest, the main focus of the protest was 'a "living artwork" that circled the entire Great Court', this was 200 m long. The protest marked the 16 year anniversary of the 'demonstrations against the invasion of Iraq' (bporotbp, 2019).

The film documented the use of digital technologies by citizens present at the protest: use of digital cameras, phones etc. Technologies were also used by leaders in the protest, for instance use of microphones etc. This was the most prominent use of technologies I have yet seen at a protest.

3. An article on art.net in June 2019, in anticipation of an exhibition scheduled for Autumn 2019 at the British Museum, about the Trojan war shared the views of anti oil protest groups about BP sponsorship of the exhibition. This article was on the internet and an example of anticipation of protest before the opening of the exhibition, through digital media, since the sponsorship has already been criticised. The exhibition will include loans from museums in Berlin, focussing on German Heinrich Schliemann's 19<sup>th</sup> Century excavations (Pes, 2019).

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