Digital archaeology A democratic utopia

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Abstract: *In this article a brief account of a seemingly low-impact news-report and the ensuing debate on Facebook is used to illustrate how online meaning exchanges may lead to increased polarization, and deep disagreement, between two particular groups: metal-detectorists and archaeologists. In addition some issues for how to conduct ethical online research, such as when information should be seen as public or private, is discussed. I conclude by suggesting possible ways to decrease the existing divide between two groups with similar interests.*

Keywords: Digital archaeology, democracy, Facebook groups, deep disagreements, polarization, ethical online research, metal-detecting and archaeology.

Digitisation of cultural heritage and archaeological material has been seen by many as a quick fix for a more inclusive and “democratic” academic field (see Taylor and Gibson 2017 for references; Walker 2014:217–218). Almost 20 years have passed since the wholly online and open access journal *Internet Archaeology* dedicated its very first thematic issue to the topic of “Digital Publication”. In it, Ian Hodder (1999) expressed hope that the Internet could lead to an “erosion of hierarchical systems of archaeological knowledge” – paving the way for a new model of “networks and flows”. In the editorial, Judith Winters (1999) wrote: “On the web, rather than on the printed page, we can come closer to fulfilling our concerns about dissemination, we can more easily incorporate many ‘voices’ and facilitate the opening up of our work and our interpretations to critical

inquiry, immediately and on a global scale”. Hypertexts, with the possibility to connect a document to a vast digital world of information via links are a commonly cited example of a practice that enables multivocality and community engagement (e.g. Newman 2009: 180–181; see also Denning 2004).

Much hope was – and still is – put on electronic dissemination and communication. Within the somewhat overlapping branches concerned with “public” or “community” archaeology, digital interaction has been considered an almost effortless way to include some of the “voices” referred to by Winters. Faith that perhaps the *next* or latest technological innovation will finally offer solutions to our problems is still widespread (see e.g. Loader & Mercea 2011). The Internet, social media, and smartphones have indeed

given us new arenas for conversing, and they are accessible to a larger part of the public than pricey academic articles, but have they really changed *how* we communicate with each other (Miller 2012:159)?

As part of my ongoing PhD project, entitled “What’s the deal with things?”, I am investigating the relationship between archaeologists and metal detectorists in Norway. Much of the tension between the two has become visible on social media channels such as Facebook. A telling example of this is a seemingly low-impact news report and the ensuing online debate. In the following text this incident will be used to illustrate how online meaning exchanges may sometimes lead to increased polarization between two particular groups or communities with deceptively similar interests. This has created walls instead of breaking them down and has cemented already existing divides (Walker 2014:217–218). Contextual information is necessary, and a brief account of where the verbal altercation took place will be presented first.

FACEBOOK – A PUBLIC OR PRIVATE MEETING PLACE?

Technological advances and new digital platforms are introduced at a rapid pace. Our adaptation is happening almost as quickly, and a growing number of our everyday actions are taking place on the Internet. Regardless of one’s needs or wants, there seems to be an app for it (see Statista 2018). This also means that we as researchers are, to a large extent, playing catch-up. Neither our research tools nor ethical guidelines manage to quite keep up. Including information gathered from the Internet can provide valuable and perhaps even much needed insight into increasingly influential and social aspects that greatly

affect our respective disciplines (e.g. Walker 2014).

Facebook has become a place where much of the knowledge exchange and public debate about archaeology in Norway is taking place. This is not a conscious choice by any of the country’s archaeological institutions, and it has happened gradually without any critical debate (cf. Bonacchi and Moshenska 2015; Walker 2014). With its (current) over 4,400 members, the public¹ Facebook group “*Arkeologi i Norge*” (“Archaeology in Norway”) is now the largest forum for archaeologists in the country, and it is administered solely by one person. Its (current) description states that it is intended as a “meeting place” for the various branches of archaeology. Many members are, however, not archaeologists, which also makes it a meeting place between archaeology and parts of the public. Sharing articles, videos, and news that may be relevant to the group is encouraged. Students and researchers frequently ask for tips about literature and parallel material relating to a specific topic. Sometimes, a post sparks debate and engages both archaeologists and non-professional members.

A recurring topic that has caused some tension since its creation in 2007 is the private use of metal detectors to search for automatically protected cultural heritage.² Writing different versions of “metal-detecting” in the group search field yields a large number of posts with long threads underneath them. This debate and its factions, while local, will be familiar to archaeologists across the world (see e.g. Makowska *et al.* 2016; Pitblado 2014; Thomas 2012; Wessman *et al.* 2016), albeit with some national nuances caused by variations in laws aimed to protect cultural heritage. Active metal detectorists, people that use metal detectors to search for protected cultural heritage, and archaeologists have

been the main participants and instigators of the discussions, with both sides often veering towards polemics – “repeated contradiction and gainsaying” (see Kraus 2012:92). Often, a parallel debate will take place in an equivalent group, reserved for historically motivated metal-detecting in Norway, “*Metalldetektor og historie*” (“Metal Detector and History”). Its member count as of August 2018 is more than 4,500, and the group is closed.³

ETHICAL ONLINE RESEARCH

A potential cause for the lack of qualitative online research within some disciplines, as of yet, could be the varying and largely context-dependent ethical considerations that have to be made. It can, for example, be difficult to ascertain whether information available online about people should be considered public or private. Frequently, it can be considered both or something in between (NESH 2014:4). When, why, and where a post was written and who is reading it are factors that influence this perception. Users in a Facebook group may be prepared for reactions on a comment from other members, but they may not always be aware that friends or family of those people could also be seeing the comment and be reacting to it in their news feed.

The National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities (NESH) stressed that “the stricter the forum’s restrictions on access, [...], the greater the participants’ expectations of protection or anonymity” (2014:4). This differs from how we usually view other public spaces, such as parks or squares that are generally accepted as public, as other people can see and hear individuals. There is therefore a greater tolerance for observation and data collection in these arenas (e.g. NESH 2016:14).

It is interesting to note that Norwegian law and judicial precedent take a very different stance. Statements made online are considered public when posted in a place where it has the potential to reach more than 20–30 people (Ot. prp. nr. 90 (2003–2004), Pt. 3(12.2.2.); The Penal Code 2005, Chap. 2(10)(2)). Status updates made on a personal Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter profile and posts on pages or within groups, closed or not, exceeding this number of friends, followers, or members can therefore be quoted freely with the poster’s full name by the press (Fredriksen 2015). Now, possible legal implications are one aspect and ethical ramifications are another; while something may not be illegal, it can still be considered unethical when done in the name of research.

It was largely to make this distinction clearer that NESH updated their guidelines for research ethics in 2016 (NESH 2016:4). There are, of course, many so-called grey areas, and ethical guidelines are continuously adapting to a changing technological landscape. Sometimes, the potential benefits of research will outweigh the need to protect the anonymity of the individuals involved. In this particular case, to err on the side of caution, the outline of the debate below is based on how it unfolded in the open group, “Archaeology in Norway”, and no individual users will be directly quoted in the text.

LOOTERS AND BADGERS

News about illegal metal-detecting at an ongoing archaeological excavation in the southern part of Norway was nationally broadcast via NRKs⁴ TV and radio channels, and news site (Jakobsen 2017). The excavation leader and county conservator described the incident and stated that a police report had been filed, while an environmental

Fortviler over plyndring av fortidsminner

Fortidsminner kan være plyndret fra et arkeologisk utgravningsområde i Kristiansand.
Noen har søkt med metalldetektor etter verdifulle gjenstander – om natta.

Utgravningsområdet på Egsjordene i Kristiansand.
FOTO: ODD RØMTELAND / NRK

Odd Rømteland
Videojournalist

Marianne Jakobsen
Journalist

Publisert 11. okt. 2017 kl. 05:

Fig. 1. Headline on NRK's website "Despair over looting of antiquities". The text reads: "Antiquities may have been looted from an archaeological excavation in Kristiansand. Somebody has used metal detectors to search for valuable objects – at night" (translation by the author). 11 October 2017, 05.30. Screenshot from the website nrk.no, reproduced with permission.

coordinator at the Agder police district asked for tips from the public. Right before 7 AM on 11 October 2017 the news article was shared in "Archaeology in Norway" with the caption "A metal detector has been used to search at our excavation site in Kristiansand. The police are now involved and we are hoping to receive tips that can contribute to solving the case". The post immediately attracted attention, and in the end had 47 comments. It was shared 15 times, and 145 people "reacted" to it.

Instead of tips, the debate very quickly became about whether the evidence held up to scrutiny. Several people argued that the published photographs, which depicted the holes that had been dug overnight and were described as traces of metal-detecting activity, were more likely the result of badgers searching for earthworms. Some questioned

the archaeologists' ability to differentiate between animal and human activity and demanded better proof to be presented. If not, they claimed, the metal-detecting community was owed an official apology, as some felt the news reports were incriminating all metal detectorists. Pictures of "known" badger holes were posted, followed by comments mocking those who thought the disturbances pictured in the news article could be anything other than animal-made. Five hours after the original post, the project manager for the excavation posted a longer explanation, including details of the disturbances at the site that had not made it into the news article. Comments were still published for another 24 hours and did not stop until a third warning to end the discussion was issued by the group administrator.

DEEP DISAGREEMENT

How could a seemingly innocent plea for help stir up such strong feelings? For a conflict, argument, or discussion to arise there needs to be disagreement. Usually, these are easily resolved, as they are prone to be minor conflicts about facts, and there would normally be an agreement about how they should be solved (Fogelin 1985:3). Disagreements are certainly nothing out of the ordinary. Some sort of conflict, argument, or discussion is an everyday occurrence for most, and they can even be intense, long-lasting, and unresolvable without necessarily being *deep* (Fogelin 1985:5). For that, a lack of *common ground* – a set of shared beliefs or knowledge – is necessary (Kraus 2012:92). For the uninitiated, the news about potentially illegal metal-detecting was unremarkable. In *Archaeology in Norway* it was seen by some as yet another attack by a haughty academic environment aimed at the entire metal-detector community.

A major concern for some of the participants seemed to be that the incident would “add fuel to the fire” for those who opposed private metal detection. One user also alluded to an earlier event when detectorists had been accused of wrongdoing, and the culprits did indeed turn out to be badgers. Responses from parts of the metal-detecting community showed a general mistrust of archaeologists, their intentions, and knowledge. In that sense, the debate mirrored a trend of growing distrust towards science among the public (e.g. Nisbet *et al.* 2015). Although a few archaeologists commented that the observations were made by experienced field workers, who had been on the excavation site for several weeks, the validity of the report was still questioned. Such reactions were likely a culmination of an already underlying polarized debate.

The private use of metal detectors to search for protected cultural heritage has been both criticised (e.g. Gundersen *et al.* 2016) and heralded (e.g. Maixner 2015; Skre 2016) by heritage management since the first metal detector finds were handed in to the archaeological museums in Norway during the early 1980s (see e.g. Harby & Uleberg 1992; Vibe-Müller 1982).

As the detecting-community grew and the number of metal finds increased accordingly, especially from 2010 onwards, the debate about the legality, possible benefits, and drawbacks of private metal-detecting intensified and coincided with a larger part of the population actively using Facebook (Vaage 2016:112–113). This resulted in a move of the debate from newspaper columns to an online forum. Two groups that, up until then, had primarily dealt with each other either face-to-face or via post or email now communicated directly. There was no bureaucratic involvement, and individual archaeologists and metal detectorists had to answer questions directly from the other. For a while, escalating debates seemed like a weekly occurrence. It was not until after the group administrator’s continued insistence that discussions about metal-detecting belonged somewhere other than in a group for archaeology that the frequency of exchanges declined.

CONCLUSION

When a disagreement runs deep, it is characterised by seemingly mundane factors being seen as controversial, and parties of a conflict strongly oppose each other regardless of the logic behind the arguments being presented (Memedi 2007:1). Well thought-through posts in a forum may fall flat simply because the other members do not believe in

112 the content or mistrust the intentions of the poster. Despite this, debates will frequently carry on and participants will “bluntly deny the rationality of the other side’s arguments and declare them plainly absurd” (Kraus 2012:94). Not surprisingly, the result is more often than not an exchange of increasingly polemic arguments, which only serves to deepen the divide. Perhaps this could explain the case outlined here. I would not suggest that such situations are *unresolvable* (Fogelin 1985) or that metal-detectorists and archaeologists in Norway should therefore stop debating altogether.

It may seem counter-intuitive, but the very same subject dividing “two polemic arguers” could be enough of a shared interest to create the common ground needed to resolve a disagreement. Even more common ground could be gained by subsuming “the competing positions under a more comprehensive or overarching problem” (Kraus 2012:102, with references). For archaeologists and metal-detectorists, this could prove to be an especially productive approach. Both groups undoubtedly share an interest in protecting cultural heritage. Instead of arguing, we could join forces and, for instance, lobby for more state funding reserved for the costs connected to metal-detecting finds (Skre 2016). This could result in objects from private detectorists being processed faster than they currently are. This would remove one of the biggest – and again, *shared* – frustrations for both groups. Detectorists would likely be less frustrated with a slow-moving find intake, where it frequently takes years before information about a specific find is available. Archaeologists would perhaps not feel that detecting finds were taking valuable time and limited financial resources from other mandatory assignments.

NOTES

1. Anyone can see the group, a membership list, and all posts (Facebook 2018).
2. The Norwegian Cultural Heritage Act of 1978 automatically protects all traces of human activity older than AD 1537. Sámi cultural heritage and standing constructions are offered the same protection when older than 1917 and 1649, respectively.
3. Anyone can see the name and description of the group, but only current members can see posts and a list of the other members (Facebook 2018).
4. Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation.

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