Legibility, agency, and negotiability

written by Jeremy Huggett | 03/02/2015

There's a lot of debate in the wider world about digital data – issues of access and privacy, the case of Aaron Swartz and open access to knowledge, the Ed Snowden revelations, and, at the personal level, the way that we all leave data trails behind as we traverse the Internet. Surrendering our personal data is difficult to avoid, even if we forswear Facebook, Google, and their like who build their business models on their ability to capture data about us.

In a recent paper by Richard Mortier et al, (2015), they argue that this new world of data requires a new kind of study of human-data interaction, looking at the implications of the data we generate in all kinds of different ways, knowingly or unknowingly.

They define three themes in human-data interaction which in slightly different ways have as much resonance for archaeological digital data as they do for the personal data Mortier et al are concerned with. They talk about:

- **Legibility** – this relates to the need for the implications of the data to be comprehensible – hence legible – so that people are aware of the data and make better decisions using them (Mortier et al. 2015, 5). While their focus is on the data trails from social networks and the like, it is equally relevant in the context of how we access archaeological data – our need to understand the kinds of assumptions that lie beneath the systems that gather, structure, and deliver archaeological data to our screens, as well as the background to the data themselves.
- **Agency** – this refers to the ability of people to act within the data processing systems (Mortier et al. 2015, 6). This ability to control, inform, and correct data and inferences is obviously vital when dealing with personal information, and may seem less significant in an archaeological context. But it is important for archaeologists to recognise the agency of the originators of the data (and indeed any subsequent reworking of the data), in order to understand the data collection process and consequently any "inherent biases due to contextual dependencies, temporal or other sampling biases, and simply misunderstood semantics" (Mortier et al. 2015, 6).
- **Negotiability** – this relates to the (lack of) power of the individual over their data which, they argue, is disproportionately in favour of the data aggregators that act as mediators and brokers for users (Mortier et al. 2015, 7). In their context, the concern is with rebalancing the dynamics of relationships between people and their data on one hand and the organisations collecting and holding and claiming ownership of those data on the other. In archaeology, it is perhaps more the realisation that the data that are increasingly made available to us is accessed via key gatekeepers, and negotiating access is often not as straightforward or clear-cut as it might be – both in terms of the shades of 'openness' on offer and the restrictions imposed by the interfaces to those data.

Consequently the legibility, agency, and negotiability of archaeological digital data are key issues

for our access to, understanding of, and subsequent use of, those data. This is especially the case as more and more archaeological digital data are made available to us online and we increasingly depend on them for the basis of the archaeologies we write (and indeed, we see those systems effectively beginning to write aspects of those archaeologies for us).

Reference

R. Mortier, H. Haddadi, T. Henderson, D. McAuley, and J. Crowcroft, 2015 'Human-Data Interaction: The Human Face of the Data-Driven Society', arXiv:1412.6159v2