Open data and the transformation of archaeological knowledge

written by Jeremy Huggett | 29/01/2016

[To interrupt the blogging hiatus, here's the introduction to a recently published paper ...]



Since the mid-1990s the development of online access to archaeological information has been revolutionary. Easy availability of data has changed the starting point for archaeological enquiry and the openness, quantity, range and scope of online digital data has long since passed a tipping point when online access became useful, even essential. However, this transformative access to archaeological data has not itself been examined in a critical manner. Access is good, exploitation is an essential component of preservation, openness is desirable, comparability is a requirement, but what are the implications for archaeological research of this flow – some would say deluge – of information?

Gavin Lucas has recently pointed to the way archaeological reality can change as a consequence of intervention: as archaeologists change their mode of intervention so reality shifts and interpretations change (Lucas 2012, 216). If this is true of archaeological practice, to what extent might the change in our relationship to data – the move from traditional modes of creation and access to digitally-enhanced methods – represent a potential paradigm shift in our archaeological reality, or place limits on future changes? As more data are 'born digital' with access to them open to an increasingly wide audience, is it realistic to assume that archaeological knowledge itself remains unchanged in the process? How does our relationship with archaeological data change as the observations, measurements, uncertainties, ambiguities, interpretations and values encapsulated within our datasets are increasingly subject to scrutiny, comparison, and re-use? What are the implications of increasing access to increasing quantities of data drawn from different sources which are more or less open, more or less standardised, and increasingly reliant on search tools with greater degrees of automation and linkage? Given the fundamental – and frequently contested – nature of archaeological data, it is surprising that the implications of open access to those data remain largely uncontested. Instead, archaeology's digital haystack represents a largely unexplored set of practices mixing old and new in the creation of new infrastructures which transform the packaging, presentation, and analysis of the past. Examining this entails revisiting the notion of the 'archaeological record' within the context of the new technological frameworks, and considering the consequences of this digital data intervention.

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