

Extended Abstract: “Today’s top picks”: One network of canonization by Google Arts & Culture

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Abstract

This study examines mechanisms of canonization on Google Arts & Culture (GA&C) as an information system. As a self-proclaimed non-profit initiative, it provides participating cultural institutions with free access to digitization services, a content management system, and a publishing platform. Despite its philanthropic rhetoric, the platform is also playing the role of a gatekeeper in the cultural sector by attributing cultural value to select institutions. Building on the concept of canonization, this study critically explores the ways in which the platform’s interface and functional design contributes to processes of content selection, while at the same time making normative statements about appropriate user behaviors vis-à-vis its intended use. This study adopts a mixed-method approach that combines discursive interface analysis of the platform’s interface design and qualitative content analysis of a particular section of the platform called “Today’s top picks.” This study argues that: 1) by providing users with intentionally limited affordances, GA&C perpetuates a passive mode of cultural consumption mediated by its own proprietary technology; 2) despite its egalitarian rhetoric and purported role as a mere facilitator, GA&C consistently prioritizes content from well-known cultural institutions from developed nations. In both cases, Google’s expansive network of arts and culture, enabled by its interface and functional design, is deeply involved in the production of social discourse and consequently the processes of cultural canonization.

Keywords: Google Arts & Culture, museum, art canon, interface, information system

Introduction

As the COVID-19 pandemic shut down most of the world’s museums in March 2020, the need for access to cultural content online caused a surge in popularity of Google Arts & Culture (GA&C), the company’s self-proclaimed non-profit initiative whose “mission is to preserve and bring the world’s art and culture online so it’s accessible to anyone, anywhere” (Google, 2020). It provides participating cultural institutions with free access to digitization services, a content management system, and a publishing platform. Despite its philanthropic rhetoric of one network (of arts and culture) for one world, however, GA&C is also playing the role of a gatekeeper by attributing cultural value to select institutions, which in turn accumulate social relevance through being featured on this ever-expanding network (Pfisterer, 2018). Not only is GA&C implicated in the process of meaning making and cultural canonization, but it also sets the benchmark for future aggregators of digital cultural heritage (Kizhner et al., 2020). The overwhelming presence of one private company in the global cultural sector requires more critical scrutiny.

This study examines mechanisms of canonization on GA&C as an information system. While canon formation is often characterized by processes of selection, digital cultural heritage platforms differ from their physical counterparts in terms of display and presentation, typically subject to a uniformly designed user interface that conforms to certain aesthetic and functional conventions. Since web interfaces can serve as carriers of cultural logics and behavioral norms (Ash, 2015; Stanfill, 2015), GA&C’s user interface makes similarly normative statements by directing users towards its intended use. Based on this normative understanding of user interface, this study critically explores processes of canonization on GA&C, identifying the ways in which mechanisms of content selection and normative statements about user behaviors are being enacted through the platform’s interface and functional design.

Literature Review

Processes of selection are a necessary part of canon formation. Commenting on the film canon, Staiger (1985) considers the most important function of canonization to be “evaluative selection,” where canons “are supplied to members of a society as models for appropriate or inappropriate behavior,” and the criteria for appropriateness function as “disguises for achieving uniformity” (p. 10). The political function of the canon can also be attributed to art museums, which “justify their own institutional status along with that of the social order that maintains them” (Hein, 1993, p. 557). As a result, museums naturalize certain value judgments and confer “authority and a material and institutional facticity on the selective tradition” (Hall, 1999, p. 5).

The same politics of inclusion and exclusion equally apply to cultural agencies in the digital realm. Mak (2014) argues that digitizations of cultural heritage should be understood as discursive processes that could “constitute the infrastructures of meaning-making” (p. 1521). Acknowledging that canonization is “based on hierarchical power structures where decision-making is circumscribed to a reduced set of actors who are recognized as legitimate authorities,” Rodríguez-Ortega (2018) emphasizes the distinct nature of digital cultural heritage platforms:

[they] bring together several corpora of distributed cultural documents into a specific metadata structure, classification system, the use of terms, graphic and interactive interface, etc. They also build narratives about the canon on the basis of the cultural legacies recorded and how they are ordered, represented, and displayed. (p. 3)

In other words, the common framework in which digital cultural heritage platforms operate is not only one of cultural discourse (i.e., building narratives) but also one of information system (i.e., organization and access). It is based on this dual understanding that this study dissects both

GA&C’s interface and functional design and how cultural content is ordered, represented, and displayed on the platform.

Methods

This study adopts a mixed-method approach that combines discursive interface analysis of GA&C’s interface and functional design and qualitative content analysis of its “Today’s top picks” section. Stanfill (2015) argues that web interfaces both reflect and reinforce social norms about what users should and should not do. What she terms “discursive interface analysis” is an analytical method that reveals such assumptions by examining a website’s menu options, page layouts, and functionalities. This study adopts this method to analyze the affordances of GA&C’s web interfaces to uncover the intended use and mode of engagement. In August 2020, GA&C introduced the “Today’s top picks” feature, curating a daily selection of five “stories” at the top of its homepage, including exhibitions of a single artist/artwork, highlights from a city/nation, aggregated content based on particular topics, and interactive games developed by Google. This study has collected data about all content promoted in this section (currently about 2,600 entries), including date, title, URL, “author” (a cultural institution or GA&C itself), and, if applicable, the nation in which the institution is located. Data collection and analysis is ongoing, but this study seeks to present a critical overview of the cultural agenda set by GA&C, identifying the types of content and institutions it tends to prioritize.

Results

Considering canon as “a structure of power, a criterion of authority, and a legitimizing argument” (Rodríguez-Ortega, 2018, p. 3), this study analyzes the gatekeeping role of GA&C. Tentative findings include: by providing users with intentionally limited affordances, GA&C perpetuates a passive mode of cultural consumption mediated by its own proprietary technology;

despite its egalitarian rhetoric and purported role as a mere facilitator, GA&C consistently prioritizes content from well-known cultural institutions from developed nations. In both cases, Google’s expansive network of arts and culture, enabled by its interface and functional design, is deeply involved in the production of social discourse and consequently the processes of cultural canonization.

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