



Introduction

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The purpose of this volume is to bring together new research highlighting how the trafficking of cultural heritage and human ancestral remains operates on smaller or “lesser-known” English- and non-English-language social media and e-commerce platforms. It was born out of two main realizations. Firstly, heritage crime of all types remains relatively understudied and the fight against it under-resourced compared to other categories of illicit online trafficking, such as wildlife, drugs, and CSAM (Child Sexual Assault Material). Secondly, as academic research concerning heritage crime grows and frontline law enforcement agencies increase their understanding of the depth and breadth of cultural heritage trafficking in the digital age, it is becoming apparent that online trafficking (of all categories) occurs within an online “ecosystem” of interconnected platforms. Research and reporting repeatedly demonstrates that poor internal regulation and the “legal liability shield” against even criminal user content that the US Communications Decency Act § 230 provides to all US-headquartered platforms has allowed a wide variety of crime to flourish (e.g., Allison and Martin 2024; Carvalho et al. 2023; Elkhazeen et al. 2022; Harrington et al. 2023; Hodgson 2024).

Most media attention paid to online cultural heritage trafficking has focused on the proliferation of public and business pages and private or secret groups on Meta platforms, especially Facebook and Instagram (e.g., Pester 2022; Huffer and Graham 2023; Tahir and Tabhika 2024), even despite antiquities, historic artefacts, and human remains all being against platform terms of service (Arraf 2020). However, the role of e-commerce platforms, live auctions, brick-and-mortar stores’ websites, etc., as places where heritage trafficking occurs has been known for at least two decades (Lidington 2002; Chappell and Huffer 2014). Researchers and law enforcement alike, while monitoring Meta platforms, are also noticing that cross-platform sales and advertising are becoming relatively commonplace in the trafficking of items and people alike (e.g., Nam et al. 2023; Sebahg 2021). This includes not only the same sales post showing up in multiple locations on Facebook and on the original poster’s Instagram, eBay, or Etsy accounts, when they

have them. Furthermore, dealers can use Facebook pages or groups, YouTube, TikTok, or similar short- and long-form video platforms merely to advertise their collection, linking to sales on other platforms or directing viewers to the websites of brick-and-mortar stores or live auctions.

As the social media and e-commerce landscape worldwide continues to face calls (or actual legislative pressure) to be externally regulated and held liable for criminal or harmful content, response has usually involved ignoring the problem, adding new features, promising changes to the algorithm, incorporating new initiatives to use AI to detect harmful content, or enabling the rise of off-shoot platforms such as Instagram's Threads. By these means, the interconnected "ecosystem" by which all black- and gray-market trafficking occurs becomes increasingly complex. At the current juncture, we know that the online movement of cultural property is much bigger than any one e-commerce platform and increasingly reliant on the unregulated spaces within social media. However, a comprehensive understanding of how trafficking networks form and disband, their offline geographic extent (i.e., which borders and jurisdictions must be crossed to get items purchased online from seller to buyer), and how high-profile dealers reach and influence new customers will be incomplete until sufficient attention is paid to a much wider range of online spaces.

Like, Subscribe, Bid, Retweet, and Upvote: Understanding the Entire "Ecosystem"

The interconnected "ecosystem" of platforms on which trafficking in cultural heritage occurs today includes eBay, Etsy, YouTube, TikTok, Snapchat, still active first-generation platforms such as Tumblr, a wide range of smaller or region/language-specific e-commerce platforms, online auction sites or aggregators such as Catawiki, Invaluable and Live Auctions, and, to a lesser extent, Twitter/X. On Meta platforms, prices for suspect or illicit goods are required or voluntarily provided within the text of sales posts, or written on the images themselves, negotiated in the comments, or indicated via number and object emojis. Final negotiations usually take place via direct messaging (now end-to-end encrypted). On most e-commerce platforms, however, the original asking price or ever-increasing bids are publicly visible on the listing itself, sometimes requiring one to create an account first. Expressions of interest or price enquiries within the comments sections on short- or long-form videos can also lead to final negotiations on social media platforms, WhatsApp or similar messaging apps, email, or offline.

Illicit trafficking research that focuses on specific platforms outside of Facebook and Instagram is expanding, but some topics and platforms have seen more attention than others, and most research continues to target English-language platforms. Twitter/X has seen some attention for the proliferation of drug or wildlife

content, but very little concrete research into heritage crime (e.g., Dundler 2019; Clarke et al. 2019; Katsuki, Mackey, and Cuomo 2015; Xu et al. 2019). YouTube has received somewhat more attention for permitting and recommending questionable content that arguably encourages trafficking or cruel behavior (e.g., El Bizri et al. 2015; Harrington, Macdonald, and D’Cruze 2019; Jyoti 2024; Moloney et al. 2021; Gondhali et al. 2024), bolstered by a general user-led push toward professional content and the use of “response” videos to amplify or contradict the content of other creators (Kim 2012; Lewis, Marwick, Partin 2021).

The content on TikTok and Snapchat, being newer image and short-form video platforms, is also relatively uncharted territory where heritage is concerned, but Graham, Huffer and Simons (2022) examined aspects of the human remains trade vis-à-vis one specific dealer. Most trafficking-related research or investigative reporting to date has focused on drug or weapon content (Levine 2022; Love 2023; Walsh 2024; Whelan, Noller, and Ward 2023). Heritage crime on Reddit is also just beginning to be examined, but it is known anecdotally (Leeson 2024). Trafficking of any kind outside of the English-language internet, as well as country-specific e-commerce platforms and more secretive platforms such as VKontakt or Telegram, is also beginning to be investigated (Huffer et al. 2022; Xu et al. 2020; Toomes et al. 2023). Most multiplatform illicit trafficking research or investigative reporting has also not involved heritage crime (e.g., Hall, Koenraadt, and Antonopolous 2017; Haupt et al. 2024; Losey et al. 2022; Malik 2023; Pytka, Moore, Heenan 2023; Salter and Hanson 2021), but it does provide precedent for why no category of online crime can be fully understood through research on one or a very few platforms only.

The Online Antiquities Trade’s Origins— What Led to Today’s Situation?

To understand what makes today’s online heritage crime (i.e., the global trade in antiquities, human remains, Indigenous material culture, historical artifacts, etc.) unique, and how and why it is now a multiplatform “ecosystem,” it is important to look to the past. By “the past” we mean the mid-1990s, when today’s e-commerce giants—eBay (as AuctionWeb) by Pierre Omidyar (Rothman 2015), and Amazon (as an online bookseller service called Cadabra) by Jeff Bezos (Hopkins, 2023)—were founded. Stepping even further back into the murky early internet days, it is arguable that e-commerce as a concept began in 1979, when Michael Aldrich demonstrated that televisions could be connected to nascent computers for commerce purposes (Aldrich 2011).

As e-commerce began in both theory and practice, the late 1990s and early 2000s saw the possibility for instantaneous online gratification and both B2C (business-to-consumer) and C2C (consumer-to-consumer) commerce expand,

especially with the launch of services like PayPal in 1998. This was albeit not without (ongoing) controversy and initial conflict with preexisting services such as eBay (Jackson 2004). Various other related platforms serving English- and non-English-speaking markets, such as Alibaba, Etsy, Marktplaats.nl, Weibo, Taobao, and others, all launched before 2010.

Thus, licit and illicit e-commerce already had numerous platforms on which it could be conducted before social media or long- or short-form video platforms entered the picture. It was already becoming a global phenomenon before these other platforms not initially designed for e-commerce nevertheless became “weaponizable” by those who realized that algorithms were ideal for expanding one’s customer base. One of the first articles to recognize in writing that the internet and e-commerce would open a vast new frontier in the antiquities trade was Lidington (2002). As readers of this volume will come to see in the forthcoming chapters, this prediction has proven correct. While eBay and other e-commerce platforms grew in market share and user base from the mid-1990s onward, and the categories of cultural heritage available increased immensely, illicit trade of certain categories of item were exposed and faced generally effective bans (Kim 2012; Vergano 2016). Halling and Seidemann (this volume) present a detailed analysis of what human remains trafficking on eBay looked like before the ban. However, the trade in many other categories of antiquities continued apace and continues to this day.

Social media’s rise was becoming exponential by the mid-2000s, with platforms such as MySpace and Tumblr demonstrating that peer-to-peer networking was popular and that communities of practice could be formed around common interests or subcultures with less anonymity and more multimedia content than chat forums allowed (Robards 2012; Angwin 2009; Bronstein 2020). YouTube was launched in 2005 at the start of the “Web 2.0” era, and it quickly supplanted earlier video-sharing platforms (Novak 2020). It was these earliest forms of social media that first attracted public and law-enforcement attention to the reality that organized crime of various types had taken root there (e.g., Womer and Bunker 2011; Stedman 2007; Schulz 2016). As Hardy (this volume, but see also, e.g., Hardy 2020, 2021) has made clear in his ongoing research, online forums and chat rooms, arguably the earliest means to form social networks online, continue to play a role in global heritage trafficking today.

The chapters in this volume provide snapshot case studies of what the current landscape across several platforms and several topics looks like, each rooted in the recent historical context of their particular topic. The thread of new research embedded in its socio-temporal setting that we weave through this volume paves the way for Graham’s conclusion, in which he discusses the possible future of online markets for heritage in the era of increased AI and neural network infiltration into our lives (and subsequent debate around its ethics and public responses to it).

Why Understanding Online Trafficking on “Lesser-Known” Platforms Matters

With the overview given above regarding what the online trafficking landscape currently looks like, its origins and development, and some similarities and differences between how specific categories of platform operate, this section further contextualizes the research presented in this volume by laying out our argument for why understanding these relatively understudied topics or locations of online heritage crime is so important. Especially at this juncture, when the global internet and the various uses of social media are more in flux and are being more actively critiqued than ever before.

Fundamentally, as other platforms continue to take market share from Meta (Kemp 2024) and Meta platforms and others face increased scrutiny, the question of whether other platforms will fill the void that buyers and sellers need to shape and maintain their online “personas” as trusted sellers or adherents to the ethical and cultural “norms” that guide specific trafficking communities (e.g., Dundler 2021, 2019; Kamleitner et al. 2019), remains poorly understood. It is a question that all concerned with counteracting cultural heritage (and all) online trafficking must begin to resolve now. Doing so will prove vital to policy and regulatory efforts against the “weaponization” of the internet overall, as well as provide data and information to the governing bodies of newer platforms (e.g., Bluesky, Mastodon) and payment apps that wish to actively prevent their platform or service from being exploitable for trafficking.

Understanding the interconnected online trafficking “ecosystem” on and beyond Meta platforms also matters because research is showing that, aside from the proliferation of CSAM, most categories of black- and gray-market commerce, including cultural heritage, do not need the dark web to change hands (e.g., Paul 2018; Stringham et al. 2023; Graham and Huffer 2023). There is also an open-ended question regarding how readily traffickers can “ad launder” money via posts or videos on numerous platforms to show off what they have or could provide if contacted obtaining ad revenue in the process (e.g., Papadogiannakis et al. 2024; Handby 2023). Research from marketing and e-commerce in general suggests that the number of positive online reviews given to sellers and the format of the reviews influences perceptions of trust and value that potential new customers have in sellers (e.g., Hamby, Daniloski, and Brinberg 2015).

The power of positive or negative reviews to affect both licit and illicit commerce is directly related to the proliferation of individual or organized “fake review” campaigns across the internet and various approaches taken to identify and counteract their proliferation (e.g., Sahut, Laroche, and Braune 2024; Shukla and Goh 2024). There is also the risk that content promoting pseudoarchaeology or “dark tourism,” originally posted on YouTube, Tik Tok, or similar platforms, goes “viral” and inspires looting or vandalism (Basaraba 2024; Feagans 2019). Underpinning it

all is the reality that, as collectors and dealers in cultural heritage continue to realize that Meta platforms are monitored by law enforcement and civilian researchers, other forums will be sought out as sellers consistently weigh risk vs. reward of using e-commerce or social media to conduct business.

Chapters in This Volume

This volume brings together both established experts and upcoming scholars to discuss, for the first time, research, and case studies of broad-spectrum heritage crime on several of the abovementioned “lesser-known” platforms. While certain chapters also focus on eBay or Meta platforms, the work within is unique and included due to either the category of heritage crime investigated or evidence for cross-platform sales demonstrative of the interconnectivity of the online cultural heritage trafficking “ecosystem.”

Handby (chapter 1) explores how YouTube is used to buy and sell supposedly “ancient” manuscripts. The chapter takes a qualitative approach to examine how the manuscripts are advertised, the language used to describe them, the kinds of information their sellers reveal about themselves, and whether any patterns of interaction emerge in the comment sections of the videos that feature these so-called “ancient” manuscripts. The chapter, partially based on Handby’s doctoral research, investigates the presence of a particular subsection of the black market in antiquities on YouTube, an American video-sharing platform with over 2.5 billion monthly active users. The market for authentic or forged antiquities sold or advertised via YouTube has not yet been the subject of investigation and, therefore, remains a potentially underestimated factor in the persistence of the online trade and transfer of illicit or gray-market historical artefacts and the potential for platforms to also be vectors of false advertising and fraud.

Farrar (chapter 2) presents some of the only research to date examining heritage crime on Reddit. Examining the content of posts and comment threads within subreddits focused on arrowheads, metal detecting, and other such antiquities-collecting interests, the author considers two issues. Firstly, who are the users engaging in these activities, what are their motivations, and how do they reflect on their ideological position within the American political landscape? Secondly, with Reddit being a global platform, though more so within the English-speaking world, how are American views on legality and ethics of cultural heritage collection exported through the promotion of these activities?

Halling and Seidemann (chapter 3) present a new analysis of the nature and demographic profile of human remains circulating on eBay over multiple years after the alleged 2016 ban, delving into questions of “who” the trafficked dead likely represent, bioanthropologically speaking. Hardy (chapter 4) presents new research on an “old-school,” but still prolific, category of platform utilized by traffickers—

online forums. He takes research in a different direction by examining how looters, dealers, and collectors of antiquities exploit these specialist online forums, where interactions are organized around the subjects of discussion rather than the participants in the discussion. Hardy discusses the depth and breadth of these platforms as repositories of intelligence on aspects of trafficking networks not necessarily shared on more surface-web platforms. The content of these forum archival records is discussed within the context of the social and legal precarity that allows them to thrive.

Liu (chapter 5) examines the state of online cybercrime and heritage crime in China, both via state-owned social media such as Douyin and Weibo, as well as online auction houses—both poorly understood digital markets where heritage crime is concerned. Liu takes a “criminogenic thing” approach to an examination of the role of the objects or artworks themselves as facilitators of online crime. This analysis is contextualized through a reform-oriented analysis of the loopholes in current Chinese art market legislation, and how best Chinese civil society can respond. Finally, Rattenbury and Tynan (chapter 6) and Breda (chapter 7) together continue to expand global knowledge of today’s online human remains trade, both via forums not previously explored or only seen anecdotally, such as UK auction houses and their legal and ethical context (chapter 6), or how platforms themselves (in this case Facebook) shape the networks of kinship, friendship, and trust that form between buyers and sellers to create a microcosm of “oddities culture” within the broader social media “ecosystem” (chapter 7). Collectively, these final chapters (along with chapter 3) push forward what researchers, law enforcement, descendant communities, and the public can understand about “who” is collected and why.

It is our intent that this volume will provide everyone with a vested interest in online heritage crime with a more detailed understanding of how antiquities and human remains trafficking works outside of (but often connected to) the most well-known platforms. Putting focus on other platforms still understudied as sites of cultural heritage trafficking also allows us to step back and query the legislative and regulatory failings that have allowed not just Meta but all platforms to operate as a figurative “Wild West.” Indeed, tech companies’ business decisions over the past decade have facilitated the creation of one of the world’s largest digital black markets for trafficked artifacts.

Civilian researchers, NGOs, activists, law enforcement agencies, policy experts, and sometimes platform representatives themselves have a continuing need to appreciate the full extent of online heritage crime across the e-commerce and social media “ecosystem,” and the overarching policy and regulatory landscape most platforms operate within. Increased knowledge of the interconnectivity of platforms is especially important in cases where a platform (such as eBay or Etsy) has attempted to algorithmically ban certain items, and enforce these bans, only to find that buyers and sellers are finding ways to circumvent them using linked sales on other platforms. As platforms continue to rise and fall in popularity, legisla-

tive scrutiny slowly advances in many jurisdictions, and new platform “species” are introduced to the “ecosystem,” this volume is a valuable snapshot of where things stand now.

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