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Illicit trafficking of antiquities on the internet.

Abstract

With the continuous growing of online marketplaces, criminals have found new avenues to sell stolen or looted cultural artifacts. By doing so, it becomes easier for traffickers to make deals and it becomes more challenging for cultural heritage institutions and governments to protect their heritage resources. Either authentic antiquities or fake objects can be found frequently on online auctions, e-commerce websites such as eBay, and social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube. This is a process where stolen cultural properties can enter the international art market behind the eyes of the police and law enforcement agencies in addition to using fake artifacts to fraud inexperienced buyers who try to buy stolen artifacts. This paper looks at the increasing risks threatening cultural heritage by means of internet, particularly through social media and online auctions. By highlighting Egypt's antiquities as a high demand in the black market and since Egypt's heritage is essential for several museums worldwide, the contribution offers deep understanding of the problem and explores significant considerations in addressing this issue, importantly for improving collaboration between cultural heritage organizations, governments, internet websites and platforms, and law enforcement agencies to effectively share the responsibility tackling this global challenge.

Keywords

Fighting illicit trafficking; Illicit trafficking on the internet; Selling antiquities on social media; Antiquities black market; Sale of stolen artifacts.

Introduction

Illicit trafficking is a persistent threat to cultural heritage. This is a global issue which stresses cultural heritage protection institutions in many countries in the world, above all those which are located at areas under political or social conflicts. The middle East suffered from growing levels of art and antiquities looting during and after the so called “Arab Spring” in the second decade of the 2000s. This resulted in more stolen antiquities entering the international art market. On top of that, the increasing use of internet including e-commerce websites, online auctions, and social media platforms made it easier for looters and traffickers to reach buyers and to sell stolen artifacts easily, quickly, boundaryless, and in complete privacy.

1. Antiquities trafficking on social media and other websites

Social media is an undeniably significant tool in the communication with mass audiences and it is constantly increasing (Hartshorn, 2010). In October 2018, Mark Zuckerberg, CEO and cofounder of Facebook (now Meta), confirmed that 2.6 billion users were using at least one of his products - at least once a month, including WhatsApp, Messenger, and Instagram (Kozłowska, 2018). Facebook is the most popular social media platform in Egypt. It's accessible, free of charge, and it gained high presence since 2011 when Facebook posts about local protests have gone viral and turned into a national revolution.

The benefits of Facebook and other social media websites in supporting cultural heritage in Egypt is of great importance. They are typically used for cultural heritage advocacy as well as to engage with the public. However, Facebook is seen as one of the most social media websites used for antiquities trafficking in ancient Egyptian artifacts (locally and internationally), that antiquities dealers and buyers largely use social media platforms to sell and buy stolen artifacts. Areas in conflict such as Syria, Iraq and

Libya are facing the same threat. Additionally, stolen antiquities can be found on other social media platforms, such as YouTube. This is also a place for scammers to find greedy people who are looking for illegal rapid wealth. Inexperienced buyers get nothing or at least they get fake objects.

Those websites also act as spaces for exchanging knowledge on how to perform illicit digging, or what are the tools and devices needed for this and how to get them. Sellers usually publish images or videos of looted artifacts accompanied with a proof of recency, such as a calendar page or newspaper. Sometimes they publish images and videos of objects which are still *in situ* as an extra verification of authenticity and the recentness of the discovery.

E-commerce websites play the same role as a mediator between the looters/sellers and the buyers. For example, eBay is well known for selling Egyptian antiquities on online auctions. However, eBay claims that it cannot monitor the sale of looted antiquities on their website (Campbell, 2013). In this case, eBay helps shortening the trafficking chain to two points only: the looter/seller and the buyer – while the website – in this case- might be seen as a facilitator for the entire process.

In respond to the changing nature of crime during the 21st Century, Egypt initiated the Police of Internet in 2002 to specifically address electronic and informational crimes (حمارة الحق, n.d.) and for fighting internet crimes. Currently, the Police of Internet is largely appreciated by Egyptians for their efforts in monitoring and thwarting internet crimes, and in particular social media crimes. They also cooperate with the Police of Tourism and Antiquities regarding any online content about looted artifacts. Such cooperation led to a continuous arrest of antiquities looters (Youm7, 2011). Moreover, the Department of Repatriated Antiquities under the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities watches online overseas auctions looking for possible looted Egyptian antiquities on sale.

2. Social media facilitating antiquities trafficking

A report published in 2019 by the Antiquities Trafficking and Heritage Anthropology Research ATHAR (ATHAR Project, n.d.) expressed that Facebook, in particular, has turned into a sprawling digital black market which supports traffickers after nearly two years of research and a detailed case study on Facebook groups based in Syria. This international project which aims to investigate and study the digital underworld of transnational trafficking and organized crime in the Middle East and North Africa is led by a group of international anthropologists and heritage experts who argued that Facebook unintentionally facilitates illicit trade in antiquities from across the Middle East and North Africa by expanding the communication means of criminal networks worldwide. Their report focused on some features of Facebook which enable looters to get their job done perfectly and, at the same time, makes it very difficult for archaeologists and for the Police to stop the looting activities. Some of the features they mentioned are:

- Facebook's "Groups" which are capable to control a contained content, allowing antiquities looters and buyers to communicate efficiently and discretely. Those groups can be even private or secret which means that invited people only can see the content and the entire group can be hidden from all search results;
- Encrypted messaging gives the looters opportunities to communicate privately and exchange information and make deals;
- Live streaming gives the looters the chance of publishing live videos showing looted artifacts, sometimes in situ, proving the authenticity of the finds and getting more audience engagement and interactivity;
- Easy and secured payment mechanisms make it easy for buyers to pay secretly for looted artifacts;
- Facebook "stories" which are posts which only remain for 24 hours, after this they move to the user's stories archive and no other user can see them. ATHAR

report included a Facebook “story” showing a video for a looted relief offered for sale and posted on 13 April 2019. The “story” was captured by ATHAR 30 minutes after it was posted. If not detected, the “story” would have disappeared after 24 hours and no information about it would be available unless it showed up again at some place;

- The ability to create multiple profiles - including fake profiles – which makes it easy to traffickers to hide behind fake names and information.

While it is extremely difficult to have control on what each user publishes, it is noteworthy to mention that the majority of the most popular social media platforms have no accountability for illegal activities (Gretchen & Al-Azm, 2019) since they are based in the USA and work according to the 1996 Communications Decency Act Section 230 (Federal Communication Commission, n.d.) which means that they are not responsible for any content posted on their platforms by third-parties. This means that there are no legitimate to compel Facebook or other websites to take actions in regard to posts or comments on looted artifacts.

In addition, online secured payment methods can actually help traffickers to get their work done effortlessly. For example, Meta Pay (was Facebook Pay) is a payment method users can choose to pay for buying goods or services on Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and Messenger (Meta Pay, n.d.). They can also connect their accounts on different Meta social media accounts and pay from here to there, such as using Meta Pay between Facebook and Instagram. Today, Meta Pay works in 144 country (73.8% of the world’s countries) and soon to have more apps in other countries around the world. This means that once the looter publishes something about looted antiquities on social media, the buyers can buy them and pay without leaving the social media app/website. Meta of course protects the privacy for purchases and clearly stated on their website that “*What you buy is your business*”. All of this supports the financial transactions between traffickers and gives them more privacy and protection.

However, Meta cancelled its plan to launch a cryptocurrency in December 2021 (Bursztynsky & Rodriguez, 2021). No doubt that Meta cryptocurrency would have been a great choice for traffickers as it is undisclosed and unquestionable and therefore the authorities cannot track them.

3. Social media companies respond to illicit trafficking on their websites

Facebook (now Meta) finally acknowledged in June 2020 that its platform served as an online bazaar selling looted artifacts from the Middle East (Mashberg, 2020). Later in the same month, Facebook added historical artifacts to its prohibited trades (Meta, n.d.). However, you can continue your search for looted antiquities, even though this is no longer allowed on Facebook. All what you need to do is to press “see the results anyway”.

While Facebook started to delete groups dedicated to antiquities trafficking thinking that this is a good step on fighting illicit trafficking in historical goods, the company has been accused of deleting evidence of war crimes in conflict zones since it deleted groups and profiles of extremists in Syria rather than sharing such information with authorities (Warner, 2019). Moreover, the materials published on social media can sometimes be the only information available about looted artifacts, in particular *in situ* materials which offer a chance to record the early stages of looting. The criteria on how Facebook select those groups are not clearly recognisable. ATHAR project commented that only four groups which they investigated were deleted while other groups were still active on Facebook, adding that they observed Facebook group members who have close connections with terrorism organizations which refers to some concerns regarding extremists who destroy archaeological sites and museums and sell some other collections to finance their activities (BBC News, 2018) in addition

to fears that the money can be used for buying weapons or equipment (Sargent et al., 2020).

4. International cooperation, challenges, and responsibilities

Both museums and auction houses have a responsibility to conduct due diligence to make sure that their new acquisitions or consignments are legal. This includes a provenance check as well as an investigation on all the documentation related to prospective purchases, i.e., excavation reports, evidence of donation or earlier purchases. Sellers of looted artifacts usually claim ownership using fake documents referring to fabricated dates or provenance.

Even with fighting illicit trafficking is becoming a global case, several museums and heritage institutions possibly may not see fighting illicit trafficking on the internet as their responsibility. Therefore, only few projects or research in this area can be spotted while most of the research projects focus on the artifacts themselves or other institutional work. The importance of research projects in fighting illicit trafficking on the internet is critical in all stages of monitoring, documenting, and reporting, which challenges building strong collaboration between a variety of stakeholders including museums and cultural heritage institutions, governments, law enforcement agencies, auction houses, and owners and providers of e-commerce websites and social media websites.

While the International Council of Museums ICOM's Red Lists for Cultural Objects at Risk illustrate types of artifacts most vulnerable to illicit traffic (ICOM, n.d.), the idea of fighting illegal online trade of historical goods recently started to find supporters among museum leaders, funders, and art-related organizations. The British Museum's Circulating Artefacts (CircArt) is one example of a museum project supporting the fight against illicit trafficking in antiquities, with special focus on artifacts from Egypt and Sudan, in addition to organizing a set of training sessions and workshops in London,

Cairo and Khartoum promoting a deeper understanding of antiquities trafficking aiming to protect, detect and recover more heritage at risk and to enable a wider transmission of skills and expertise (The British Museum, n.d.).

According to the British Museum, the project - which was launched in April 2018 and was completed in February 2021 - was a partnership with cultural organisations and universities in Egypt and Sudan, and law enforcement agencies with the support of auction houses and dealers. CircArt aimed to create a digital research system to study the objects in the antiquities trade and to collect information from auctioneers, dealers, collectors, government bodies, law enforcement agencies and museum de-accession lists and allowing specialists around the world to supply data to the database (British Council, n.d.). The project team researched more than 50,000 objects advertised on the open market and on social media with priority given to objects traded before issuing the UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property in 1970. Researchers found that at least 15% of the artifacts appears to be traceable to illegal excavations which means they were result of looting activities.

More than 1,200 images and videos of recent digging were posted online including a variety of artifact categories and inscribed blocks taken from tombs and temples statues, and hundreds of fragments of artifacts (The British Museum, n.d.). This is particularly important because looters sometime break larger artifacts into small pieces and sell each piece separately so no one can identify the larger piece anymore, for example, to cut out the faces of coffins so they can't be identified either as parts of coffins or mummy masks.

Although some resources claimed that the project succeeded to get the appreciation of several auction houses, dealers' associations, and dealers who have agreed to share images and metadata on the database making such information more accessible for research and making the art market more transparent (Culture in Crisis, n.d.), other resources have claimed that Egypt refused to cooperate with the project due to the

project's engagement with auction houses and dealers and insisted on removal of the logos of art trade organizations and auction houses from the press announcements regarding the database objecting to acknowledging auction houses (Cultural Property News, 2019). While some countries keep good relationships with art trade organizations, the negative effects of the art trade dominate its overall picture in Egypt for its continuous harmful impact on Egypt's past and present. In addition, there are several cases when Egypt had to stand-up against auction houses regarding stolen Egyptian antiquities being on sale on their websites (France 24, 2019). Besides, after so many decades of continuous suffering from the impact of the colonial policies regarding Egypt's past such fears might be understood to a certain extent.

CircArt can be evaluated as an example which sheds some lights on the challenges museums and cultural institutions can face involving international and collaborative projects, particularly projects on the subject of combating illicit trafficking. The great impact of successful projects comes in principle from the fact that all the project partners work together on achieving the project's goals. However, the conflict (and/or competition) between the project partners is able to trigger unintended resistance to the project related assessments and decisions.

Differences between international and local laws and regulations is an additional challenge. Case in point, antiquities in Egypt are public ownership and it is not allowed for individuals to own or to excavate/search for antiquities. Only few cases of people who own small collections of antiquities exist and such collections were acquired by their families before issuing the Egyptian Law for the Protection of Antiquities in 1983. Accordingly, no auction houses in Egypt can sell antiquities. On the other hand, individuals in various countries are allowed to own Egyptian antiquities and sell them at auction houses and therefore it is the responsibility of Egypt to perform an additional check on the status of the artifacts every time there is an auction in addition to facing accusation and misunderstanding of the public and the press in Egypt. In this context, the UNESCO's Database of National Cultural Heritage Laws (UNESCO, n.d.) stands as a valuable support compiling the national laws of UNESCO Member States,

including translation and contact details for the national authorities responsible for the protection of the cultural heritage, and offering all stakeholders an accessible source of information.

It is essential that museums and cultural institutions share information about illegal sale of artifacts on the internet. By doing so, they can combat illicit trafficking on the internet by identifying stolen artifacts in addition to possible traffickers. However, it is a fact that some museums and cultural institutions might not want to share every information about the collections in their custody even if they conducted due diligence, that they might still have some fears regarding missing information or inaccurate data in addition to the possibility of having objects in their collections which may have been acquired decades ago without proper due diligence. On the other hand, there are several cases when museums did report to local governments on looted artifacts on the internet market, i.e. archaeologist Marcel Marée, Assistant Keeper of Ancient Egypt and Sudan at the British Museum, and archaeologist Hourig Sourouzian, identifying the provenance of a stolen artifact out of six looted from Egypt and meant to be auctioned through Christie's auction house in London in 2013 claiming that it has been in a private UK collection since the 1940s, which means it has been moved out of Egypt before issuing the Egyptian Law for the Protection of Antiquities in 1983 (Sultan, 2013). Sourouzian, who used to conduct excavations in Luxor for many years, now had the artifact already on her database confirming that it was discovered in the year 2000. This is another example of auction houses involved in illicit trafficking – either unintentionally or knowingly – but at the same time it is a leading case of what sharing information can bring about.

Such cooperation must extend to law enforcement authorities as well as websites owners and owning companies either by sharing information about stolen artifacts or by official reporting if stolen artifacts are found on sale. Official reporting here refers to a more serious and human-based reporting tool rather than the usual automated/computerized tools such as those which can be found currently on social media platforms. For e-commerce and social media websites, monitoring for illicit trafficking

can be complicated since their staff normally have no knowledge in archaeology and, therefore, they need to cooperate with museums and cultural heritage institutions to understand the details of every case and to gain experts knowledge in addition to avoid conflict in how every institution thinks the best action could be. For example, it is essential to understand that it is extremely difficult to prove the ownership of artifacts resulting from illicit digging because usually the local authorities have no documentation about those artifacts. They have never been registered at a museum or a magazine or at an excavated site and so there is no prior information about them. The information which appears on social media can be in some cases the only information or evidence about those stolen objects. In this case, that evidence might be lost forever if there is no appropriate and timely cooperation between all parties.

Furthermore, sellers may use euphemisms or code words when they publish information about looted artifacts on the internet so they can escape algorithms which detect posts about stolen historical goods. This is particularly functional when sellers use non-western languages (i.e., Arabic) because normally social media and e-commerce websites are designed to match the western mindset more than other cultures. In this case, some help from experts in the field who can speak, read, and write the language related to the culture/place where the looting/selling occurs can advance a considerable impact on understanding published materials in their correct context.

Yet, governments have to understand the changing nature of the antiquities black market and how modern technologies involved into this industry require constant updates to laws, policies and strategies used to fight illicit trafficking and to protect cultural heritage from looting. Flexibility and collaboration with international efforts is vital, in particular by understanding that technology is not exclusive to looters but also people who fight looting can use it. To demonstrate, while The Art Loss Register (ALR) online database currently holds more than 700,000 of lost and stolen art, antiques, and collectibles, it depends on other sources to add items to the database on behalf of the victims of looting, such as police forces, museums, and others (The Art Loss

Register, n.d.). The INTERPOL's Stolen Works of Art database also serves as a tool to tackle the traffic in cultural property with more than 52,000 items on the database added by INTERPOL experts at the request of countries from which the artifacts have been stolen (INTERPOL, n.d.). This shows - once more - that only collaborative work can lead to an effective risk management tool that each institution affected by illicit trafficking can use.

Final considerations

Illicit trafficking in historical goods is a global issue that threatens our shared cultural heritage. While internet made it easier for traffickers to sell stolen artifacts, we have the same privilege to use internet to fight illicit trafficking. Besides, laws and regulations related to illicit trafficking are better to update and to adapt with the characteristics of today's life and technologies. International projects in this area are key elements for learning as well as for developing creative policies which can offer better results and for advocating stronger regulations. Collaboration is a must. A collaboration between all parties is necessary to provide a comprehensive understanding of the situation and to propose best action to each case.

Earlier conflicts proved the need for improved and dynamic policies to organize the relationship between online markets on various websites on one side and governments and cultural institutions on the other side. Experts from both sides should be available to work in partnership and to support each other's efforts as well as to improve each other's knowledge of the issue and the challenges they face. Each party should learn to share the responsibilities rather than pointing out others imperfection. The mutual commitment to the case is a keystone for successful projects. By nature, partners usually commit to projects which they were involved in from the beginning and during the planning phase. Creating a wide network of experts

against illicit trafficking in historical goods is a powerful asset which is capable of significant impact.

More support and participation for online databases of stolen artifacts or artifacts in the market means more information to be shared and more looting cases to be solved. For museums, auction houses, and collectors, more efficient and thorough due diligence is fundamental. Transparency is essential for developing capable approaches for sharing information and for understanding the challenges of acquisition and old days collecting policies. Moreover, good documentation is an urgent need for every collection and for every detail.

Raising awareness regarding the case and the pressure put on social media platforms proved the ability to force social media companies to change their regulations. It is vital to involve local and international communities and to bring them on board by enriching the community's knowledge about illicit trafficking of historical goods. User satisfaction is highly valued for social media websites and e-commerce websites. Therefore, keeping the users informed about this ongoing threat against our shared history is a meaningful tool to protect cultural heritage from looting.

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Wesam received education in Egyptology, Art History, and Museum Studies. Her current work particularly focusses on community engagement and the protection of Egyptian antiquities from illicit trafficking. Her PhD at Aarhus University in Denmark focuses on the community participation in protecting cultural heritage in times of crisis.