

Online trafficking of cultural objects from crisis zones and conflict zones and open-source analysis of the illicit trade

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Challenges in analysis of illicit trafficking of cultural objects

Trafficking in cultural property is one of the ‘new and emerging crimes of concern’ for the UNODC (2013). Yet opinion on the involvement of profit-driven organised criminals and political criminals, from terrorists through paramilitaries to states, is divided within law enforcement agencies and experts (cf. van Gessel and Finkelberg, 2016) as well as between them and antiquities market representatives and market-aligned think tanks (e.g. CCP, 2018; CINOVA, 2018).

This uncertainty persists due to a dearth of monitoring and intervention by law enforcement agencies and research and analysis by experts, plus a growth in falsification and hearsay among activists and journalists and propaganda from states or their proxies and allies. It also persists due to the ever-greater scale of online trafficking, which confounds efforts to track it.

Potential for analysis of illicit trafficking of cultural objects

Still, there is secure evidence that these commodity flows are intertwined with population displacement, organised crime, conflict financing and terrorist financing. By systematically searching for open-source data in reports by governments, academics, professionals and citizens, it has already been possible to document conflict antiquities trafficking – the financing or facilitation of political violence with cultural assets – in South America, the Caribbean, West Africa, Central Africa, East Africa, North Africa, Southern Europe, Western Europe, Eastern Europe, West Asia, South Asia, South-East Asia and East Asia (Hardy, 2019a). In relation to online trafficking, for example, it has been possible to document sale and bartering of ancient artefacts, contemporary monuments and fake antiquities by activists for irregular armed forces in Ukraine (e.g. Recknagel and Sharipzhan, 2014, which thereby enabled the identification of participants and verification of “content” on Facebook that “isn’t available at the moment” anymore), by rebel fighters in Syria (e.g. Soguel, 2014) and transnational jihadist networks (e.g. Paul, 2018: 9-10).

Regardless of who is involved and how, cultural objects are being looted and stolen from zones of crisis and conflict, including West Africa (Dune Voices, 2015), West Asia (al-Azm and Paul, 2018) and Eastern Europe (Hardy, 2016), to supply established markets in Western Europe and North America and emerging markets in West Asia and North Africa. Open-source analysis may exploit evidence that is generated by practically undisrupted online social organisation of extraction and online trafficking of cultural assets, as well as records that have been produced by observers, in order to support evidence-led policy and intelligence-led investigations.

Evidence base for development of policy to counter trafficking

Adapting simple (albeit time-consuming) search procedures that have been developed through a range of regional studies (e.g. Hardy, 2016: 218-219; 2019b), it is possible to identify testimony from participants, research, analysis, reporting and commentary. These include notes within studies of other problems, which were practically unidentifiable before the advent of searchable online platforms for publications such as Google Books. For

instance, Blumenthal (1989: 118-119) investigated Italian organised crime groups who smuggled narcotics into the United States, but identified members of Turkish organised crime groups who smuggled antiquities as well as narcotics out of Turkey.

Search terms are typically open-ended, to account for variations in vocabulary, grammar and translation, though closed search terms may be used for particular subjects. Foundational searches typically include combinations of terms for territories; terms for cultural goods, such as antiquities, art, artefacts and cultural property; and terms for illicit activity, such as looting, theft, smuggling and trafficking (and potentially illicit activity, such as metal-detecting and treasure-hunting). Searched platforms are typically extensive too, to encompass as much potential evidence as practicable, including Google Scholar, Google Web, Facebook Pages and Facebook Groups, as well as other relevant platforms such as Instagram, Twitter and YouTube. Where key sources are identified, such as online forums for treasure-hunters or police officers, they may be subjected to intensified data-mining.

These research methods have identified (websites that led to) smartphone app channels with thousands of members, and national and regional online forums and social networks with tens of thousands of members, around the world. There are more than 66,000 in one Farsi-language community on Instagram, more than 93,000 in one Russian-language community on vKontakte, more than 111,000 in one Turkish-language community on Facebook.

Beyond the communication of transnational communities through regional languages, there is notable regionalisation of networks through crises and conflicts. For instance, Turkish-language communities for cultural goods from Turkey are becoming Turkish-and-Arabic-language communities for cultural goods from Turkey and Syria (and beyond).

Through these online communities, their members equip each other; they teach each other how to identify “productive” sites, how to use detecting devices and digging tools, how to avoid injury and death from collapsing holes and poisonous gases, how to assess objects and where to sell them; they form collaborations; and they buy/sell and exchange objects with each other. These communities sometimes constitute or facilitate “couchsurfing” arrangements, treasure-hunting cooperatives and other resource-pooling and/or profit-sharing collaborations, which range from local to transnational enterprises (cf. Hardy 2019b).

As is also visible through open-source research, retired and serving law enforcement agents, security officials and politicians frequently appear to be involved, sometimes across the front lines of conflicts. To conclude with the words of one treasure-hunter, who highlights how impunity is compounded by corruption and progress has been slowed or stalled, “this business has no party; if your arse is protected, dig; if your arse isn’t protected, do not get into this”.

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