World Heritage Sites on Wikipedia: Controversies in a Context of Constrained Agency for Cultural Heritage Activism

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UNESCO World Heritage sites are places of outstanding significance, and often key sources of information that influence how people interact with the past today. The process of inscription on the UNESCO list is complicated and intersects with political and commercial controversies. But how well are these controversies known to the public? Wikipedia pages on these sites offer a unique dataset for insights into public understanding of heritage controversies. The unique technicity of Wikipedia, with its bot ecosystem and editing mechanics, shapes how knowledge about cultural heritage is constructed, and how controversies are negotiated and communicated. In this article we investigate the patterns of production, consumption and spatial and temporal distributions of Wikipedia pages for World Heritage cultural sites. We find that Wikipedia provides a distinctive context for investigating how people experience and relate to the past in the present. The agency of participants is highly constrained, but distinctive, behind-the-scenes expressions of cultural heritage activism are evident. Concerns about state-like actors, violence and destruction, deal-making, etc. in the World Heritage inscription process are poorly represented on Wikipedia’s World Heritage pages, instead hyper-local, and process issues dominate controversies on Wikipedia. We will consider how this kind of research, drawing on big data and data science methods, adds new dimensions to the debate on heritage controversies, especially its unique contributions, and also its limitations.