

## Stolen Heritage

### Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Illicit Trafficking of Cultural Heritage in the EU and the MENA Region

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# *The Journal of Cultural Heritage Crime: An Editorial Project*

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**Abstract** Until 2018, Italy lacked a magazine specifically dedicated to crimes against Cultural Heritage: *The Journal of Cultural Heritage Crime (JCHC)* has proposed to fill this gap. The Journal combines a content-oriented web platform and a social media strategy (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn). The project primarily aims to spread accurate information and raise public awareness, thus contributing to tackling crimes against Cultural Heritage. It actively promotes cultural events (as a sponsor, patron, organiser or media partner) and fosters network-building with professionals and institutions (such as INTERPOL and the Carabinieri). Each week, the *JCHC* website features articles, flash news, books reviews, a press review (national and international), and a cultural events calendar; on the other hand, a customised communication strategy has been developed for each social media account. The engagement data and the different kinds of interaction show that the project can indeed be an effective tool in countering crimes against Cultural Heritage.

**Keywords** Online journalism. Art-crime. Information. Cross-media. Social media.

**Summary** 1 The Journalistic Background. – 2 The Editorial Project *The Journal of Cultural Heritage Crime*. – 3 The *JCHC* Website. – 4 The Social Media Accounts of *JCHC*.

## 1 The Journalistic Background

The last 20 years have witnessed an exponential growth of journalistic websites, and the possibility of browsing them on a daily basis has become a custom.<sup>1</sup> The attested typologies are several, as those belonging to editors, or

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<sup>1</sup> Bolzoni 2015, 23 ff.; Bellasio 2018, 164 ff.



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blogs and platforms. This phenomenon did not occur without repercussions, as it has happened and still happens in the lively debate among press professionals that discuss, for instance, about the fate of traditional journalism.<sup>2</sup> *Citizen-journalism*<sup>3</sup> first, and secondly the advent of social networks have further changed the modalities of news diffusion, highlighting the issue of source verification and, more generally, the deontology of the journalist: professionals of information are bound to take these aspects into high consideration. Thus, next to printed-paper supporters, the advocates of the digital revolution are now emerging, persuaded that newsstand journals are soon to disappear and get replaced by websites, and that a new way of practicing journalism should be conceived, notwithstanding the premises from which the journalistic profession took its start and using those technological tools which are now irreplaceable in the daily life of citizens.<sup>4</sup>

In the annual report on information consumption in Italy, the Regulatory Authority for Communications (AGCOM) points out how access to news by the public is increasingly redirecting to the Internet and towards the resources the web offers to its users.<sup>5</sup> The recent AGCOM survey describes the users' access to information through a cross-media approach, therefore through a combination of media. The report states that "in an all-round vision of the phenomenon it is possible to assert an increase in importance of a *mass medium* such as the Internet, which plays an essential role in this context". Hence the Internet is affirming its position in news retrieval as a major source. In fact, if television is assessed as the most widely used vehicle of information, the Internet is proving itself to be a growing force in the field [fig. 1].

Generally, most of the population accesses means of communication to keep informed; 80% of citizens use them on a daily basis, as they are the primary source for news [fig. 2]. Based on the data released by AGCOM, Italians are availed of information online through "algorithmic"<sup>6</sup> sources. This occurs especially on social networks and web browsers, the favourite gateways for those users who are leaving behind printed newspapers, which is undoubtedly less affordable, to access information through digital tools. It is estimated that these users are represented by 54.5% of the population [fig. 3]. Data analysis highlights the users' favour towards web browsers and so-

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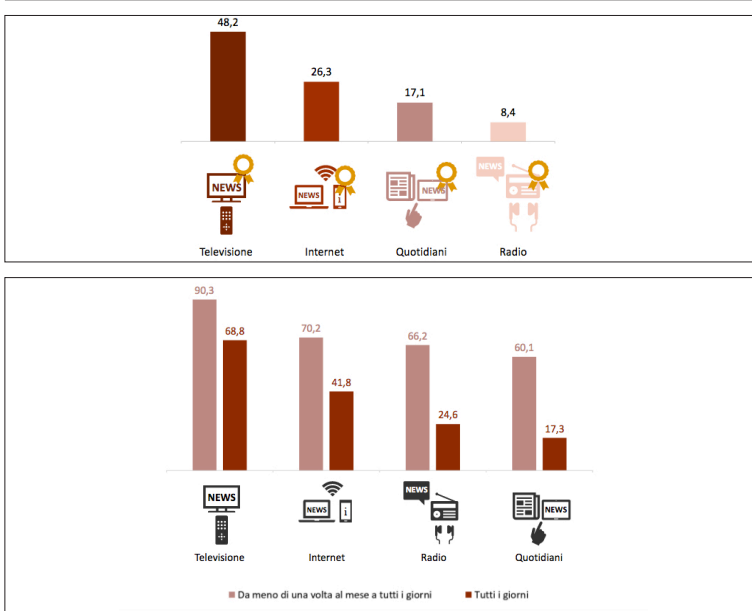
<sup>2</sup> Puliafito 2017, 24-31.

<sup>3</sup> Bolzoni 2015, 56 ff.; Partipilo 2018, 47.

<sup>4</sup> Puliafito 2017, 35-8.

<sup>5</sup> AGCOM 2018, 1-4.

<sup>6</sup> AGCOM 2018, 51.



**Figure 1** Main sources of information for Italians (2017; % population). Source: AGCOM 2018, 6

**Figure 2** Different media as a source of information (2017; % population). Source: AGCOM 2018, 14

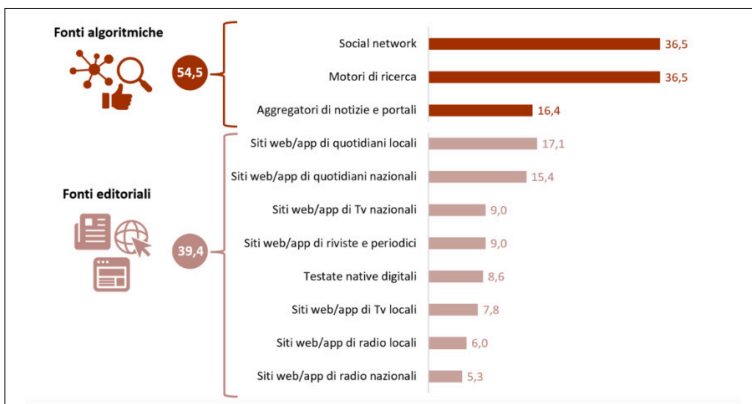
cial networks. These tools are placed respectively third and fourth in the list of information sources considered most reliable, fully replacing other mass media.

An interesting data in the report is the one concerning the “media diet”<sup>7</sup> of underage people, who “only” access information via social networks. Furthermore, around a quarter of underage people does not feel necessary to get informed, or it does so exclusively through most well-known social platforms.

Thus, thanks to the diffusion of new digital technologies, access to the web is now considered a mass phenomenon. Although, if the pluralism of information must be guaranteed, both in regard to the information offer and information demand, it is necessary to supervise and hinder the negative episodes that find in the web a rather fertile ground.

Specialized professionals of the field have been entrusted, since forever, to pledge on a deontological basis a proper dissemination of news. Accurate information, however, is obstructed by the spread of pathological phenomena as fake news, that has become a synonym of misinformation and has spared no field. Nowadays, the Eng-

<sup>7</sup> Leckner - Severson 2018.



**Figure 3** Access to information through algorithmic and editorial sources (2017; % population). Source: AGCOM

lish term ‘fake news’ seems to describe a novelty where, as a matter of fact, the phenomenon has been the same for a long time.<sup>8</sup> If anything changed it is the speed by which fake news is spread thanks to the advent of the web, with the extremely damaging consequences that we are getting to recognise. To contrast such cultural decline, journalists have to face the arduous task of guaranteeing correct information. This is the reason why the proliferation of self-managed blogs and online information spaces requires specific attention and proactive monitoring. This is especially useful to instil trust and awareness in readers and take a distance from any form of improvisation.

## 2 The Editorial Project *The Journal of Cultural Heritage Crime*

*The Journal of Cultural Heritage Crime (JCHC)*, launched in September 2018 after a ‘trial’ year, takes its proper place in this context as an online editorial project. *JCHC* is the first website in Italy [fig. 4] to be conceived as a portal of in-depth research regarding the protection of cultural heritage, with a specific attention to actions against illicit trafficking in artworks, as well as the recovery and restitution of illicitly removed cultural objects. A special focus is also dedicated to the measures to contrast the black market of archaeological artefacts and works of art. Furthermore, the recovery and restitution of these stolen or looted items is of major importance.

<sup>8</sup> AGCOM 2018, 57; Puliafito 2017, 87-90.

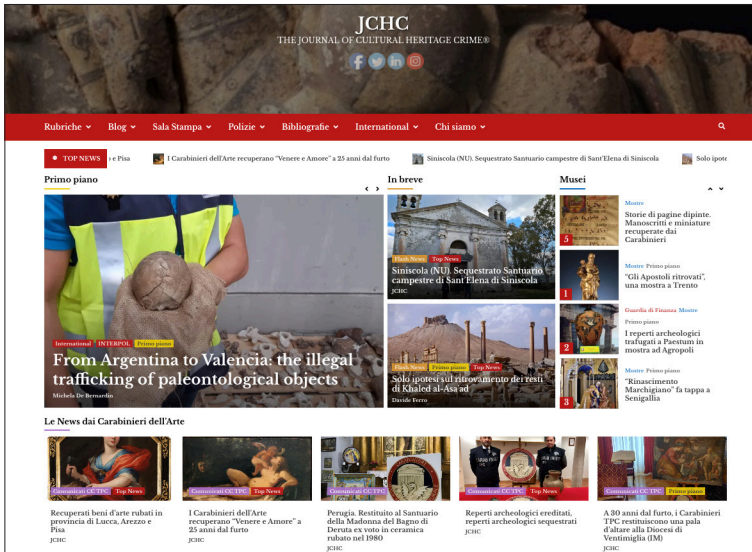


Figure 4 Homepage of *The Journal of Cultural Heritage Crime* website

The Editorial Staff of the *Journal* is composed of archaeologists, art historians, curators, palaeographers, archivists, art-security experts and jurists, all of which are active in the field of cultural heritage protection. Academics and experts from various backgrounds contribute to the project by providing readers with detailed and technical updates on the topics.

*The Journal of Cultural Heritage Crime* combines the articles featured on the website to a communication social media strategy.

The general lack of attention of the Italian non-specialised press towards this kind of offences and criminal activities, which only rarely take up the front page, urged the launch of this new editorial project. News involving our cultural heritage is almost always perceived as of secondary relevance, and when it hits the headlines, facts are too often misleadingly presented or partially recounted.<sup>9</sup> A typical

<sup>9</sup> See the multiple titles inopportunately dedicated to Pompei (for instance, *Pompei, gli ultimi scavi svelano il mistero: "Fu fondata dagli Etruschi"* [Pompei, the Latest Excavations Unveil the Mystery: "It was founded by Etruscans"] <http://www.rainews.it/dl/rainews/articoli/Pompei-ultimi-scavi-svelano-il-mistero-Fu-fondata-dagli-Etruschi-a8bcc2f6-3ecd-410d-ad80-f5dd04380d04.html>; *A Pompei il mistero della piccola Mummia* [The Mystery of the Little Mummy in Pompei] <http://www.arte.it/notizie/mondo/scoperta-in-francia-una-piccola-pompei-13299>; *Antica Norba: la piccola Pompei dei Monti Lepini* [The Ancient Norba: the Small Pompei of Monti Lepini] [https://www.ilmessaggero.it/viaggi/weekend\\_italiano/norba\\_resti\\_monti\\_lepini-5531070.html](https://www.ilmessaggero.it/viaggi/weekend_italiano/norba_resti_monti_lepini-5531070.html)), or those that suggest findings of treasures.

sensationalism, along with a widely inaccurate use of terminology, prevails on contents, which end up at times to be quite unreliable. The formerly cited approach is studied to feed click bait dynamics, and it consequently affects the quality of information.<sup>10</sup>

Moreover, it is discouraging to see, both on printed and online generalist newspapers, topics regarding cultural heritage featured under the show business column or, more generally, in the culture section. It is the so-called 'third page', usually to browse to catch new ideas on how to spend one's free time.

The purpose of the project is to reserve this type of news the dignity of the front page, and make up for the unexplainable silence around the crimes committed against cultural heritage by specialised magazines. By focusing on historic and artistic subjects or new, thrilling archaeological findings, also these magazines and journals fail to contribute to deepening the reader's knowledge on such relevant topics.

*The Journal of Cultural Heritage Crime* is set up as a public service providing information, in order to support those who are daily involved in the protection and valorisation of our cultural heritage. Its greatest ambition is to interact with and engage the general public, with the aim of raising awareness even in those who are not working in the cultural heritage sector jobs. To reach this goal, the great potential of *social media* must not be underestimated. If the press job is to provide information, *social media's* task is to communicate in an efficient way, without devaluing the news content.

Other international projects<sup>11</sup> are active in protection of cultural heritage, the *Journal* is the first to specifically focus on the Italian heritage addressing the national public. Nonetheless, the platform has recently integrated new content in English, French and Spanish, with the clear intent to host facts and opinions about heritage protection from an international background to promote the public's active engagement.<sup>12</sup> It tries to contrast crimes against cultural heritage by raising awareness in the public opinion with meticulous and updated information. New technologies and a cross-medial approach allow the *Journal* to spread its original content through a variety of digital means. The website hosting the editorial project is a remarkable archive where topics are broken down into different categories and sections. Videos, images and links to other relevant websites have a dedicated space too, thus enriching the scope of the information provided and adjusting it to the individual readers' needs.

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<sup>10</sup> Puliafito 2017, 276; D'Eredità-Falcone 2018, 191-5.

<sup>11</sup> For instance, ARCA (<http://art-crime.blogspot.com>), *Trafficking Culture* (<https://traffickingculture.org>), and the EAA Committee on the Illicit Trade of Cultural Material (<https://heritage-lost-eaa.com>).

<sup>12</sup> Jenkins-Ford-Green 2013.

Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn and Telegram are cornerstone elements to efficiently reach out to a broader public.<sup>13</sup> The communication strategy employed on *social networks* guarantees, along with the main activities offered by the portal, the widespread diffusion of the news. The possibilities offered by digital technologies cannot be underestimated as they play a crucial role in how the users achieve the information. Customers of social platforms are led to the portal through the posts published on the *Journal's* accounts, drawing from the variety of contents proposed by the editorial staff. Thus, besides the direct search on web browsers, also social media accounts represent a frequent link to the *Journal* portal. Another important aspect is the *re-posting* activity of content curated by institutional pages involved in cultural heritage protection. To conclude, on the social media accounts of the *Journal*, comments and reports on risk and damage situations for monuments and works of art are always welcome and encouraged.

### 3 The JCHC Website

With respect to the past, an intelligent exploitation of new technologies allows a more immediate access to information; setting up a website seemed the most appropriate solution to launch news in real time. *The Journal of Cultural Heritage Crime's* homepage is the most dynamic section of the platform. Conceived and programmed as the showcase of the *Journal*, it offers a synthesis of diverse, daily updated contents. The features [fig. 5] of the *Journal* correspond to the various chapters into which we can break down the wider topic of crime against cultural heritage: theft, plagiarism and forgery, damages, raids, abandonment, international trafficking in cultural heritage, seizures, recovery and restitution of stolen and looted artefacts.

Newly published articles are highlighted in the “Primo Piano” section. They show in the upper portion of the page, on the left, following the very ‘architectural’ principles of communication preach: whoever lands on the *JCHC* homepage will visualise this area first, always highlighted.<sup>14</sup>

The feature “Interviews” represents an opportunity of productive exchange between the editorial staff and specialists and leading actors of the cultural heritage field, which is always enlightening to understand at best the dynamics regulating the illicit activities against it.

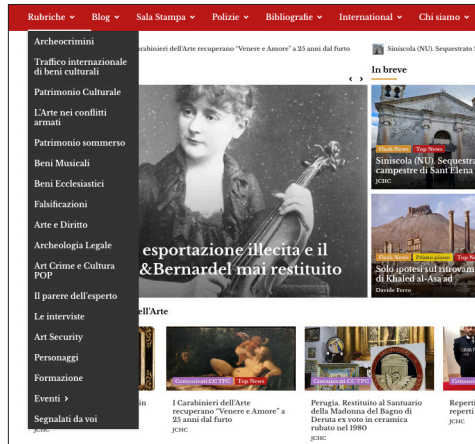
The *Journal* never neglects to inform readers on events, exhibitions, workshops, conferences or specific seminars about the protection of cultural heritage. Just as well as, in the “Education” feature, the *Journal* suggests educational proposals by universities and pres-

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<sup>13</sup> Mandarano 2019, 73 ff.; Santoro 2018, 211 ff.

<sup>14</sup> On functional planning of websites see Badaloni 2016.

Figure 5  
Sections of The Journal of Cultural  
Heritage Crime website



tigious institutes, which aim at keeping the interested public updated on such evolving topics.

Bestsellers, movies and television shows are also often based on facts related to cultural heritage crimes which are of interest to the Journal: especially artwork thefts, the world surrounding collectors and auctions, the international traffic of cultural heritage, the preservation of heritage in conflict areas. These topics have a great storytelling appeal. The portal, then, also provides reviews and dedicated articles to inform on new publications editorial publication or interesting movies and documentaries.

The “Sala Stampa” (Newsroom) [fig. 6] highlights the weekly online press-review that includes in-topic articles published by national and international newspapers, as well as related blogs. The Journal’s platform works as news aggregator too. The collection of press agencies, in a dedicated section, has its own relevance, along with the news, grouped according to the topics.

A strong point in the project is the attention dedicated to the activity performed by the enforcement agencies [fig. 7], especially the Comando Carabinieri per la Tutela del Patrimonio Culturale, to which the portal reserves special sections. One of the formerly mentioned sections gathers all official reports by TPC regarding the operations of the Comando, with special attention to Territorial Units. The work of Polizia di Stato, DIA, Guardia di Finanza is highlighted too. Although they do not have a specific section for cultural heritage protection, during their investigations, these institutions come regularly across violations involving cultural heritage during investigations. These occurrences are punctually referred to readers. Special sections are also dedicated to international law enforcement agencies: INTERPOL, with its *Works of Art Unit*, and both the Spanish Guar-



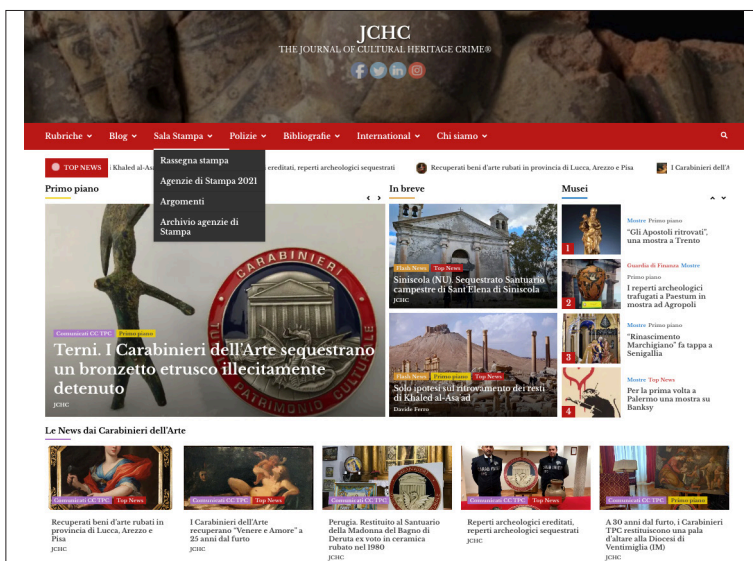


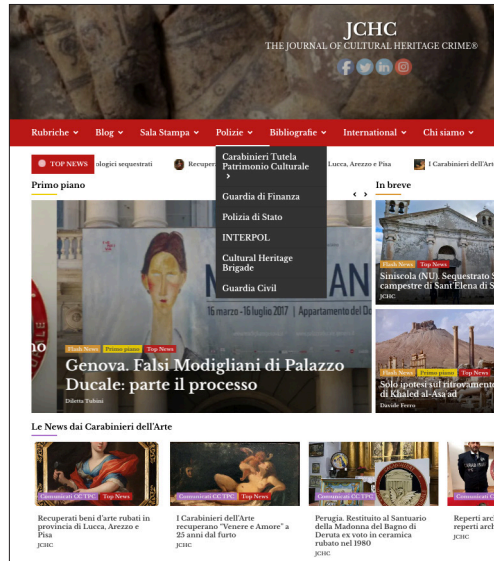
Figure 6 “Sala Stampa” (Newsroom) of *The Journal of Cultural Heritage Crime*

dia Civil and the *Cultural Heritage Brigade*, which, by contacting the *Journal's* editorial staff, expressed the will to report their activities in Spain to the international public.

At the moment, as formerly mentioned, the language employed by the *Journal* is mostly Italian. The conscious choice of Italian was due to the necessity of encouraging Italian people's involvement and interest towards a neglected heritage, which is not perceived as a symbol of cultural identity, especially by the youngest, who are often responsible for acts of vandalism.

The wish of the project's founders is to facilitate the creation of a network of heritage professionals, and to contribute to keeping them connected to the non-specialised public in order to disseminate accurate information. The target consists in sharing news by collaborating more and more tightly with Italian and foreign academics. For this purpose, our portal opened a new section, titled “International”. Articles in languages other than Italian will be collected here, expanding the range of topics dealt with by the magazine. *JCHC* has also developed strategic partnerships with two museums and a foundation: the Museo Archeologico Lanciani in Guidonia-Montecelio, the Museo dell'Arte in Ostaggio (MAIO) in Cassina de' Pecchi, near Milan, and the Fondazione Enzo Hrudy. All the dedicated, customised pages can be quickly reached through the homepage. This networking activity is significant, as it allows the organisation and sponsorship of events and informative conferences.

**Figure 7**  
 Sections dedicated to Law  
 Enforcement Agencies  
 on *The Journal of Cultural  
 Heritage Crime* website



## 4 The Social Media Accounts of JCHC

As it is certain that a high number of users keep informed through social platforms regulated by algorithms, it is plausible to think that most people entrust randomness in their retrieval of information. These alarming data, which lead the observers of the phenomenon to compare old and new media, highlight how traditionally intended press cannot be replaced by new means of communication. Anyone who wishes to properly get informed cannot exclusively rely on Facebook or Twitter. In fact, a difference exists between the old, experienced way of working in journalism and the new, forward-moving method. It should be emphasised how the relational sphere is the main innovation that characterises the most recently introduced media. As a matter of fact, social media create new communicative relationships: while some are destroyed, others are promoted, and pre-existing ones are remodelled. To build a meaningful relationship in a journalistic sense it is fundamental to establish a real contact with the readers<sup>15</sup> by informing them and respecting the profession's rules without ever losing sight of the deontology: telling the facts in a correct and exhaustive way.

In a relational dimension permeated by credibility, on any occasion in which a trust-based relationship is formed between those who supply information and those who make use of it, the requirements to

<sup>15</sup> Chieffi 2018, 306 ff.

satisfy the readers with quality information that emphasise substantial contents, and allow them to distinguish between actual facts and opinions,<sup>16</sup> are met. On the basis of the gained trust, it will consequently be crucial to avoid the scoops and the 'at all costs' engagement of the readers by using sensationalism, that goes to the detriment of journalistic accuracy. It is always necessary to mediate between an engaging tone and the truthfulness of facts, in order for the result to not become a *clickbait*,<sup>17</sup> a useful expedient to attract the reader's attention, while unfit to create the formerly described trust-based relationship.

The social media accounts of the *JCHC* Project follow the illustrated deontology. The type of social media that proved to be most effective for the *Journal's* purposes is Facebook, which counts 10,000 followers in fast and constant growth, and is the most followed page among those dealing with the same topics. The numbers attest to the efficacy of this specific communication means for the project's targets: indeed, the 'impressions' and 'interactions' show encouraging results. By 'impressions' we mean the amount of time our *posts* (statuses, images, links and others) have appeared on someone's screen, while 'interactions' refer to the number of times single readers have actively reacted to our posts, by leaving a comment, expressing appreciation, sharing our contents or simply by *clicking* on it. Followers of the *Journal* on Facebook are mostly Italian, but other countries have a representation too, albeit lower. The number of followers on Twitter surpasses 1,000. Data from this last platform show an interesting number of views (205,500 of single *tweets* in the last six months of 2020), of which 40% is from Italy while the rest from other countries. Interesting data on the type of connected users come from Instagram and LinkedIn as well. Instagram counts a total of 678 followers, almost all of them Italian. LinkedIn is the only social platform of the *Journal* that directly addresses the international community by using English for the posts. In this way the number of followers reached 1,300, with a remarkable feedback from beyond the Alps.

Overall, and considering the recent online of the *Journal*, data on engagement and followers' interaction proved how the project could actually be an effective instrument to contrast crimes against cultural heritage. The informed reader is a conscious citizen that knows how to fully appreciate the value of historical and artistic heritage, intended as cultural identity. Is it possible to educate the public to a culture of legality? In our opinion, the answer is absolutely affirmative: it can be done by following different paths: the first and most important one is education at all levels. Without a doubt, that can also be achieved through several different means: information, with

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<sup>16</sup> On the topic see Gamaleri 2014.

<sup>17</sup> See, for instance, Ron, Hassan, Yousuf 2017.

accurate facts, and communication, with a captivating storytelling of our historical and artistic heritage. Thus, *The Journal of Cultural Heritage Crime* must not be seen merely as an archive of information or a showcase of exciting news, but as an interactive, cross-media platform that intends to reach out to people, make them aware of the numerous threats our shared cultural heritage faces, and actively involve them in its protection.

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