

Arts and Influence:

Untangling Corporate Engagement in the Cultural Sector

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Abstract

A growing interest in cultural heritage by the corporate sector has offered new opportunities to safeguard, protect, and present both tangible and intangible heritage. Through strategic investments of capital, expertise, and technology into the cultural sector, corporations offer an opportunity to revitalize a sector beleaguered with precarious government funding and unpredictable public support.

Google Arts and Culture, a non-profit initiative of Alphabet, Inc. created a robust digital platform to provide unprecedented access to the collections of museums and cultural institutions around the world through high-resolution images and virtual tours. Dispatching teams of photographers with cutting-edge technology, Google Arts and Culture provides, pro bono, what were previously expensive projects for cultural organizations to undertake.

While investments from and engagement by corporations like Alphabet may seem to be a boon to the cultural sector, they present a myriad of complex legal and ethical challenges. In order to provide desirable open access, these initiatives commoditize cultural heritage into intellectual property and digital assets. The rights to this property are shared with the corporate sponsor, but to what degree does that same sponsor have an obligation of stewardship? Further, does even the curation and selection of partnering institutions advance a specific advantageous economic narrative for the corporation?

The involvement of corporations in charitable work has come under fire recently. Critics of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programs suggest these practices are only marginally effective and draw attention away from the socially detrimental externalities of a corporation's core business.

This paper examines the core questions created by corporate involvement to safeguard and present cultural heritage.