

Using wiki software to enhance community empowerment by building digital archives for intangible cultural heritage

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Abstract:

In recent years, the number of digital projects aimed at documenting and preserving communities' intangible cultural heritage (ICH) has grown considerably. Nevertheless, most of these resources do not provide a user-friendly interface which allows non-professional people to contribute to them. As a result, professional accounts of cultural heritage might miss out the finer-grained knowledge about communities' customs and traditions. This paper tries to show how the creation of community digital archives allowing an 'anyone can edit' approach on wiki software gives a better representation of communities' ICH, as well as representing an affordable and sustainable interactive digital presence for historical communities. This project has been developed from my doctoral studies and is closely related to the CURIOS Project at the dot.rural Digital Economy Research Hub (University of Aberdeen), which has been taking a different approach to how communities can maintain their digital presence.

1. Introduction

1.1 Problem statement

In the last thirty years, concern with the importance of heritage has risen considerably. The ascendancy of heritage is due to a combination of factors: the tendency of people to find in a nostalgic conceptualization of the past the stability and the reassurance that allow them to

easier face the destabilizing changes in postmodern times [1]; a celebration of the past by governments in order to strengthen national identities [2]; the birth of a “heritage industry” [3], and the connected process of heritage commodification [4].

Simultaneously, the extensive advancement of digital technologies and social media software has deeply changed the way in which heritage is understood, by questioning the traditional hierarchical system of its production and transmission because of new open access movements developed through the Internet [5]. Moreover there have been several new technology-driven applications that have taken place in the heritage area: for example, the building of digital archives and resource databases; the development of digital libraries and new platforms for digitising paper items; the opening of virtual museums; the creation of virtual reconstructions and simulations of the past [6]. Such innovations have brought about a significant improvement in terms of dissemination and access [5]; “Never before have so many people, in so many walks of life, been offered so many avenues to the past” [7].

As a consequence, even though community cultural heritage movements started to thrive in the 1980s, it is undoubtedly true that the Internet and digital technologies have fostered a solid increase in the number of community archives and have meant the establishment of a new dimension for the old ones [8, 9], especially because digital-based projects extend relationships beyond just place-based activities.

However, some digital cultural heritage projects are limited at present. Firstly, a large proportion do not allow contributions by ordinary people – namely, people who do not have acknowledged expertise in the field of collecting/preserving heritage. This may perpetuate the marginalisation and exclusion of some voices in the intangible heritage which is represented [8, 10]. Secondly, some digital archive projects have to cope with the challenge of long-term sustainability linked to temporary funding, which may lead to dependency issue [9]. Finally, even if the grassroots are involved, in most circumstances they may suffer from a lack of knowledge about the specific software [9].

1.2 Why not use a wiki?

The first step of this research has seen an attempt to reconcile the sociology background and the passion for the free encyclopaedia Wikipedia of the scholar presenting this study with the research purposes of the CURIOS Project (<http://curiosproject.abdn.ac.uk/>). In order to overcome the aforementioned barriers to engagement it has been imagined an ICH digital project based on wiki software that enabled whoever might be interested in digitally preserving ICH to collect written records about cultural memories, traditions, customs, rituals, and know-hows.

2. Wiki and ICH

2.1 Exploring the suitability

A wiki is a “web-based software that allows all viewers of a page to change the content by editing the page online in a browser. This makes wiki a simple and easy-to-use platform for cooperative work on texts and hypertexts” [11]. The main features are an edit button, which is usually available for every Internet user (but in some cases only for registered ones), the presence of discussion pages for every entry, allowing users to share their thoughts so as to contribute in a collaborative way, and a widespread application of categories and links between different articles to guarantee an intelligent consultation.

After the creation of the first wiki in 1995, it has become an incredibly popular platform, mostly thanks to the well-known Wikipedia. It is not difficult to deduce that the main reason of wiki's success probably lies in the easy participation. Writing a wiki article is no more difficult than writing an email, and the software peculiarities and conventions are much more accessible than any programming languages, whereas contributions (or 'edits') tend to look rather professional. Of course, because of their fully open nature, wikis may suffer from vandalising or deceiving contributions, however, as it has been realized by the author from the 7-year long experience on both Italian and English versions of Wikipedia, the action of the overwhelming majority of honest contributors tends to keep vandalism at bay, both by checking the reliability of information uploaded by others and by reverting inappropriate contents, a process that has been called “the wisdom of the crowd” [12, 13].

2.2 Benefits for the users

Considering its user-friendly nature, together with the presence of discussion pages, the possibility of creating linking categories, and the admission of both texts and images, wiki software might perfectly fit what it is required to supply members of local communities with a software allowing bottom-up contributions which would make them feel owners of a digital archive that would include their customs and traditions as a content. In particular, wiki software might offer to communities the following advantages for the purpose of digital cultural heritage archives.

2.1.1 *Better representation of the ICH at issue*

Using wiki software may permit a better representation of the community cultural heritage, which is developed from a grassroots approach thanks to the wiki 'anyone can edit' feature. This might also solve the problem of marginalization and underestimation of “non-elites,

the grassroots, the marginalised" [8] in heritage archives. Moreover, a more egalitarian form of contribution may be a valid way in which to build a long-lived digital community heritage resource.

2.1.2 Widening public engagement

Wiki may also maximize public engagement by permitting an extremely sustainable and free participation, without cost or the necessity of expertise. Since wiki is an easy form of software to handle, possible usability barriers to engagement such as the ones that may occur in metadata-based projects can be bypassed. The wider the community engagement, the better the purpose of going beyond "a simple digitisation of artefacts" [14], to achieve a reflection of "how the community remembers itself" [14], could be fulfilled.

2.1.3 Fostering reflexivity

As stated earlier, a key aspect of wiki is the provision of discussion pages, so that it is possible for users to discuss records without compromising the integrity of the core database. Wiki can foster people's reflexivity and make them more confident about where they come from. In order to create a sense of living culture and keep it alive, people might need knowledge, collaboration and opportunities, rather than a particular philosophical or intellectual framework.

2.1.4 Low costs and longevity

Wiki appears to be one of the lowest cost options for creating and maintaining an efficient database [15]. The deployment of wiki software for collecting and preserving ICH may bypass the potential lack of longevity related to the provisional nature of funding [14] by using one of the free wiki platforms which are available (e.g. Wikia¹).

2.1.5 Further technical benefits

It is possible to mention further benefits regarding the application of wikis for cultural heritage purposes. As mentioned above, the easy interface and the consistent editor are two main reasons [16]. Besides, the intrinsic multimediality of the software, which allows different types of data such as text, pictures, videos, and external links, may guarantee a deeper description of the artefacts at issue. In particular, Leclercq and Marinette [16] have identified the wiki's narrative structure, that is the fact that the software keeps track of every database's modification, as being more suitable than a more common database centric approach, because in the latter the database is built in the first stages of data

¹Wikia is a wiki hosting service which derives its income mostly from advertising.

entering and, for this reason, it might be not able to allow users to keep pace with a fluid entity like intangible cultural heritage is.

2.2 The state of art

Thanks to the aforementioned benefits, wiki software has been already identified by others as a convenient platform to achieve a collaborative management in the museums or the cultural heritage sector [17]. An example of this are Museums Wiki, built for staff to collecting museum materials, and Amersham Museum Wiki, which is about the history of Amersham, Buckinghamshire. These cases make clear the suitability of the tool for the purpose of collaboratively achieving a common goal; however, they either restrict the contributions to professionals or provide the core contributions from experts with marginal grassroots participation included. On one hand, this can perhaps guarantee an higher quality of articles and strongly limit vandalism, but on the other hand it also limits a potentially great number of genuine contributors with a specific and, maybe, exclusive knowledge.

In the institutional context, the GLAM ('Galleries, Libraries, Archives, and Museums') project must be mentioned. It aims at involving cultural institutions in sharing their cultural heritage trough the major Wikipedia by editing and improving articles on it. In doing so, they take advantage of the tremendous popularity of the website to make their information more visible in this era of information and communication explosion [18]. The biggest project of this sort is Europeana Awareness, which partnered 48 cultural organizations to encourage them in raising public awareness about their heritage's content [19]. These programs encompass cultural heritage expertise². Nonetheless, they are centralised and administrated by Europeana Foundation, a leading governing body that promotes collaboration between museums, archives, and libraries. Hence, they leave no space for bottom-up approaches, engaging non-professional people only as readers.

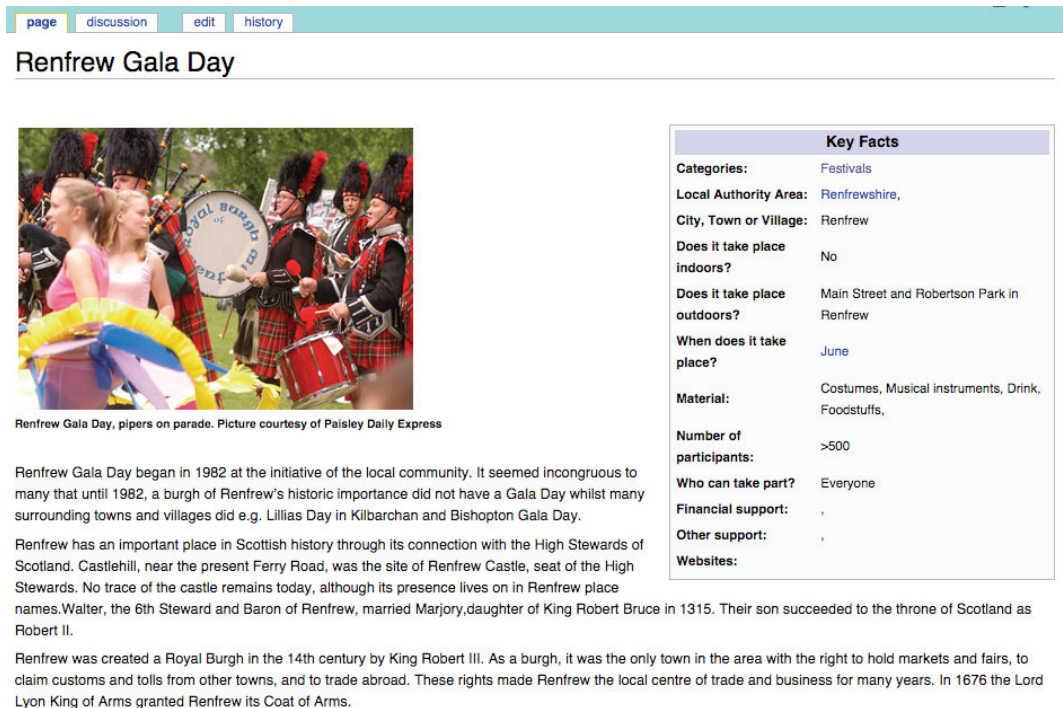
Two proper examples of wikis created in order to engage grassroots in collecting ICH are ICHPEDIA and ICH Scotland wiki. The purpose of both wikis is to allow digital conservation of intangible cultural heritage of Korea and Scotland respectively. Both are based to a bottom-up approach aiming at involving whoever interested in ICH by using the easy-friendly wiki interface. They refer to the 2003 UNESCO's *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Heritage* to identify domains of ICH inherent to the countries involved, such as customs, traditional skills, culinary traditions, sayings, social rituals, and festivals. ICH Scotland wiki is the case study for this paper.

²A comprehensive list of projects involving cultural heritage institutions and Wikipedia can be found at the following link: http://outreach.wikimedia.org/wiki/GLAM/Case_studies

2.3 Case study: ICH Scotland wiki

In 2008, the UK National Commission for UNESCO, together with Museums Galleries Scotland (MGS) and the Scottish Arts Council, commissioned research from Edinburgh Napier University to examine and map ICH in Scotland. After having carried out this analysis the research team thought that a web-based solution for the inventory would be the best solution to pursue facility of access and data entry, flexibility in terms of consultation, and durability [20]. A wiki was preferred to a relational digital database since the latter would have required a precise input date format.

Figure 1.
One article
on ICH
Scotland wiki



The screenshot shows a Wikipedia article for 'Renfrew Gala Day'. At the top, there are navigation tabs for 'page', 'discussion', 'edit', and 'history'. The title 'Renfrew Gala Day' is prominently displayed. Below the title is a photograph of a pipe band in traditional Scottish kilts and sporrans, marching in a parade. To the right of the image is a 'Key Facts' table. Below the image is a caption: 'Renfrew Gala Day, pipers on parade. Picture courtesy of Paisley Daily Express'. The main text of the article begins with 'Renfrew Gala Day began in 1982 at the initiative of the local community. It seemed incongruous to many that until 1982, a burgh of Renfrew's historic importance did not have a Gala Day whilst many surrounding towns and villages did e.g. Lillias Day in Kilbarchan and Bishopton Gala Day.' The article continues to discuss the historical significance of Renfrew, mentioning its connection to the High Stewards of Scotland and the site of Renfrew Castle. It also notes that Renfrew was created a Royal Burgh in the 14th century by King Robert III. The article concludes with information about the town's rights and its Coat of Arms.

Key Facts	
Categories:	Festivals
Local Authority Area:	Renfrewshire,
City, Town or Village:	Renfrew
Does it take place indoors?	No
Does it take place outdoors?	Main Street and Robertson Park in Renfrew
When does it take place?	June
Material:	Costumes, Musical instruments, Drink, Foodstuffs,
Number of participants:	>500
Who can take part?	Everyone
Financial support:	*
Other support:	*
Websites:	*

A final version of ICH Scotland wiki (<http://www.ichscotlandwiki.org/>) was set up in 2009. It provided several ready categories and about 100 pages (some of which were just drafts, or 'stub' in the language of Wikipedia) created from 2nd October 2009 to 12th August 2011. After the team completed the work, the wiki fell into abeyance, before being assaulted by spam bots in October 2013. MGS was contacted by the author in October 2013, when the two parts agreed to collaborate in clearing and revitalising the website.

3. Research design

3.1 Research questions

The research will be built around two major research questions. The first is about the possibility to utilise a wiki software as an effective digital cultural heritage resource broadly based on a bottom-up approach, which will be guaranteed by the fully open and free participation within the framework that wiki offers. The second is whether a digital resource so built and extensively adopted by a certain population to collect their own ICH would enhance community empowerment.

Recently, there has been an increasing interest in including the preservation of heritage among the strategies to enhance community development and empowerment [21]. Since a loss of heritage may lead to a loss of identity, the preservation of local heritage by communities can be interpreted as a right for them [21]. Community empowerment is here intended as a continuum through which to understand the growth of dimensions related to a broad involvement of communities in collecting ICH. Indeed, it is believed that grassroots participation in digital cultural heritage projects may enhance their access to historical knowledge otherwise unknown, a wider sense of ownership and custodianship, and their self-esteem deriving from the inclusive nature of the project [21, 22]. However, given that community empowerment is a multidimensional concept, members of communities will be involved either in confirming the aforementioned dimensions or identifying further ones of their participation in the project.

3.2 Methodology

In pursuance of a wide application of the premises of this study, several local communities in Scotland are being identified for the proposal of building an ICH wiki based on a bottom-up approach, so as to obtain case studies to investigate the research questions. Once a community will be identified, the primary objective will be to spread the use of ICH Scotland wiki among the population that can be considered gatekeeper of the intangible heritage at issue. The promotion phase will be accompanied by an instructive plan to educate people not familiar with wiki software; however, the platform has already been provided with self-instructional materials such as guides and videos. The aim is to allow members of a community to form a 'community of practice' thanks both to a common heritage [23] and to the shared task of collecting and preserving it digitally.

The fieldwork will take the form of Action Research (AR), which, very broadly speaking is "a form of enquiry that enables practitioners everywhere to investigate and evaluate their work [24]. The choice has fallen to this method because it is community-based and in some way

aimed at a form of community development [25]. Secondly, it involves actions [26], which in this case means creating and maintaining a wiki, taking the role of administrator of the website and dealing with the diffusion, the presentation and people's education about the software. Thirdly, AR enables sharing with communities the findings and stories, as well as what it has been learnt about the research during the process and how this knowledge is going to influence the overall approach. The aim is to foster their engagement by stimulating their curiosity.

The research will be broadly ethnographic. The reason of this choice lies in the fact that ethnography "has certainly proved a useful tool for identifying some of the factors that inhibit successful engagement" [27]. In particular, people whose activities and involvement will be believed to be particularly relevant to the research (key informants) will be interviewed in-depth, to obtain a better appreciation of the essence of their commitment as well as the benefits stemming from contributing. It is important to clarify that this kind of approach can have value only if users develop a sense of ownership on their contributions. As a second form of data-collection, participant observation will be carried out during every suitable occasion, such as training sessions or wider public events.

4. Conclusions

This paper has tried to demonstrate how wiki software can help to empower non-professional people to input community heritage projects in a user-friendly way.

The history of community cultural heritage suggests a progression from the formation of bottom-up movements to the implementation of digitisation projects. The latter added a broadening of audiences to the possibility of preserving heritage. However, a further step is necessary, that is the facilitation of user-led content. Since ICH is continuously evolving, because different individuals always produce ICH differently in different times and spaces [28, 29], a flexible tool such as wiki may be the right choice to capture it. Moreover, digitisation may involve people what are not in the community anymore or, more generally, diaspora people. In this sense a bottom-up digitisation project might put groups which are either geographically or socially remote in contact with one another.

Something to take into account is that without a consistent number of volunteers wiki projects struggle to take off. Moreover, this kind of project needs people who are enthusiastic, motivated and willing to protect their cultural memory digitally. As a result, the choice of the communities to involve will be crucial.

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