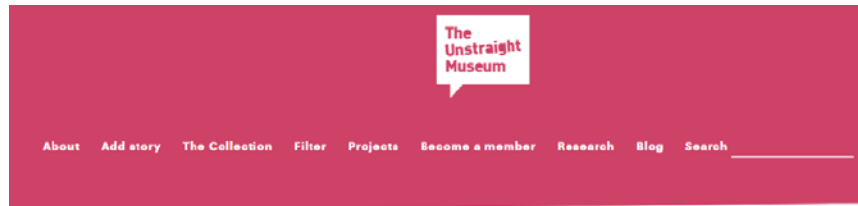# Sustainable Safeguarding through Participation:
Empowering Cultural Heritage and Institutional Crowdsourcing Engagement

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Heritage as a field of study, a means for intervention, and a language of recognition all share a common challenge regarding the representation of the individual and collective self: coping with the newness and performativity of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) while confronting its linear hegemonic narratives. Many contend that where subjectivities and diversity have been historically ignored, they can and should be encouraged through participatory methodologies that foster reflection, collaboration, co-authorship, restitution, and a democratic dissemination of cultural knowledge. This paper aims to draw from and add to this challenge, as much theoretically as concretely, by analysing the value of diverse participatory models of crowdsourcing heritage built and maintained by heritage institutions in the UK and Sweden. It will be argued how a deeper analysis of user-generated content, while paramount to inventory and dissemination, is itself a sustainable safeguard to the practice of ICH management, by enabling agency and communication.

Heritage Today

The initial framework for any call for research or action related to ICH practices should start with the basic conceptualizations and implications of modern heritage. Like the sites and practices it names and sanctions, heritage can be ambiguous but not, by any means, innocent. Like race, ethnicity, and culture, its definition depends on the same static elements of biology and geography as well as politics and hierarchy (Appadurai, 1996; Hafstein, 2012; García García, 1998). These terms are all single words, yet provide an entire language through which people make claims about the self, others, citizenship, spaces, and values (Hafstein, 2012).

A culture out of its context and away from the people who give it meaning is a mere representation (Bourdieu, 2007). Or, as Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2006) says, it is a performance, as interventions have turned "the habitus into heritage" and "heritage into cultural assets, cultural capital, and cultural good." This further demonstrates that what past policies, for example the UNESCO Convention for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2003, actually reveal is the historical essence of heritage, rather than culture itself (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004; Barañano & Cátedra, 2005). Therefore, heritage has become a catalyst to reconsider a new socio-political system of valuation (Appadurai, 1996; Hafstein, 2012; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998).

Though heritage remains a cultural resource that has been endowed with a new value as a local asset or world treasure, the complex relationship between cultural protagonists and their own culture still remains (García García, 1998). It is a redefined, restructured, reorganized, reinvented, and, in some cases, resurrected relationship between subjects and their own cultural practices, spaces, artefacts, and collective memories. Whether viewed critically or romantically, it is a "second life as exhibition" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004).

However, its newness does not diminish its cultural significance or academic value. Not unlike the spaces it breathes new life into; heritage is both material and symbolic as it involves collections and inventories as much as memory and perception, all of which continue to evolve legally and socially (UNESCO, 1989; UNESCO, 2003). And recent changes in agenda and policy (e.g., the 2015-2018 EU Work Plan for Culture, the H2020 Euro Commission) have restructured heritage more democratically to privilege accessibility, inclusivity, participation, diversity, and interpretative plurality, reflecting both a changing demographic landscape as well as the changing role of heritage institutions and safeguarding practices (Watson, 2007; Ames, 1992).

Therefore, there is a renewed urgency to focus on participatory methodologies that support socially inclusive ICH. Crowdsourcing heritage projects, particularly those built and maintained by heritage institutions, are unique new mediums of engagement within the sector. In many cases, they exhibit a dynamic potential to both represent and engage new, diverse, and marginalized audiences, while supporting more democratic and sustainable safeguarding practices. Thus, analysis of user-generated content (UGC), along with the institutions and users themselves, could demonstrate how complications of ICH definitions, inventories, exhibitions, and dissemination might be better circumvented by means of embracing similar dialogical participatory tools as part of a wider best practice.

Agency and communication

Aside from the theoretical implications, participatory tools could start to lay the groundwork for better ICH interventions that embody, rather than lack, agency and communication. By approaching tools that support a more comprehensive participatory methodology, practices which support more reflective users, societies, heritage institutions, and even safeguarding can be refined.

Although heritage production has historically functioned as a top-down system, citizens all over the world have historically wielded the legal language of

heritage to make their living spaces or local histories more inclusive and democratic (García Canclini, 1999). Encouraging that dialogue today requires a historically different approach which, it could be argued, effective and creative crowdsourcing has started to provide a global population of cultural protagonists.

On the one hand, many conservationists and anthropologists have supported resolutions to top-down ICH management involving restitution: a return of cultural knowledge to subjects and groups. This return is understood and defended as a mediating tool that enables critical self-knowledge as well as dialogue between cultural actors, experts, and conservationists (Ames, 1992). With a return of institutionalized knowledge, subjects can be recognized and affirmed by their own sense of personal identity and history.

On the other hand, it could be argued that by allowing user-subjects to be part of the dialogue that constructs these representations, namely through recognition of agency and communication, the need for restitution is circumvented. After all, in this way, safeguarding is not only bottom-up, but more inclusive and arguably more accurate. For example, in the case of co-curatorial crowdsourcing projects, cultural actors are, at the very least, invited to be a part of the dialogue that describes and represents them. Equally important, they can actively aid experts in contextual clarification. By having cultural knowledge communicated and defined in a more bottom-up fashion, it can actually foster more inclusive research and exhibitions involving text, context, and participation (Bourdieu, 2007; Clifford, 1999; Pearce, 1992).

In this way, according to Watson (2007), institutions may not only change their role and public perception, but enable additional understanding as to how meaning is constructed. Most importantly, by recognizing and promoting agency and communication through the medium of crowdsourcing, (dis)engaged audiences from diverse backgrounds can start to regain or re-establish their voice.

Call for research: Crowdsourcing ICH

As Ridge (2013, 2014) indicates, this is where crowdsourcing can be much more than a simple open call for digitizing content and increasing inventories. Similar to recent museum use of transmedia storytelling and Web 2.0, these initiatives support highly sustainable decentralized mediums that, when used effectively, can be a viable means of deep, long-term engagement with countless benefits to both ICH experts and practitioners. For instance, user-generated heritage can contextualize and enrich research while offering free and accessible lifelong learning opportunities and collective memory tools (Holley 2010; Ridge 2014; Shahani et al., 2008; Hedges and & Dunn 2018; Ortega and & Bayón, 2015). Furthermore, this type of grassroots safeguarding can be practiced while engaging with identitarian projects and building stronger connectivities with communities and heritage institutions, making crowdsourcing a much stronger contender for in-depth interdisciplinary research.

In order to better understand and maximize the potential of these new practices, researchers should start to consider crowdsourcing heritage initiatives that look beyond productivity (e.g., transcribing, basic georeferencing). In fact, most research to date has almost exclusively focused on this type of crowdsourcing, where participants are simply human capital, converting mostly tangible heritage inputs into digital public good outputs for archives (Ridge 2013, 2014).

If participatory methods are to remain valuable and widely practiced by all types of heritage stakeholders, research needs to consider more complex and long term interventions that are not easily valued or justified through analytics (e.g., hours logged transcribing material), but meaningful deep engagement (e.g., long term engagement with material, changes in self-knowledge and cultural understanding, lifelong learning, growth of social

networks). For example, crowdsourcing that privileges co-creation and authorship, social inclusion and plurality, through diverse methods and participants, is a starting point for approaching both value and impact analysis.

The following examples from the UK and Sweden are experimental interventions that exhibit real potential regarding crowdsourcing engagement tools for better participatory practices. While they are not, specifically, about ICH projects, they are designed to disseminate cultural knowledge freely and democratically and may provide free space for both local and national ICH participation. Moreover, they use crowdsourcing as a medium to support more sustainable, inclusive, and reflective safeguarding as well as societies.

The UK: Libraries

Crowdsourcing is becoming more and more common place in UK heritage institutions. The British Library represents just one of many with various projects operating on a national level. Over the years, they not only have embraced the technology to digitize heritage content, but invited UGC from all over the UK to contribute maps, sounds, and oral histories (e.g. British Library Sounds). However, within its use of the medium, the emphasis has remained on the short-term, online, and tangible.

In contrast, the Glasgow Women's Library (GWL) has experimented creatively with various crowdsourcing methods and tools, bolstering their museum collections and archives along with their community. Over the years, they have provided several projects for participants to interact with and contribute to, covering a wide range of cultural issues and crowdsourcing methods.
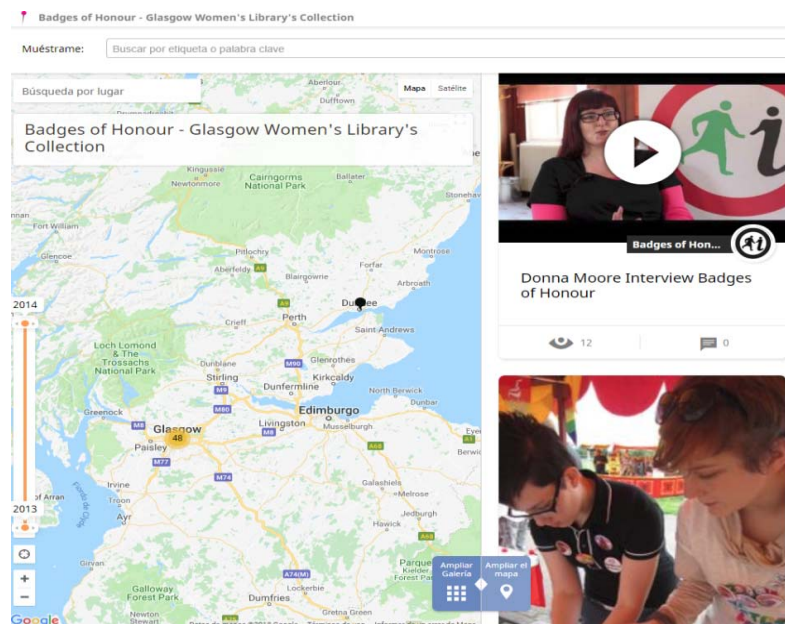

Photo 1: GWL uses Historypin, among other crowdsourcing sites, to post about one of their local onsite crowdsourcing projects: Badges of Honour (representations and stories of local women's civic activism).
https://womenslibrary.org.uk/discover-our-projects/

The GWL, a 2018 Art Fund Museum of the Year Finalist, has not only promoted national and regional crowdsourcing projects (e.g. Canmore-UK, Historypin, Women of Scotland), but even launched several of their own. They have encompassed various heritage themes related to geography, civic life, gender, sexuality, and lifestyle (e.g., Badges of Honor, Speaking out, and Women Making an Exhibition of Themselves). Most are user-driven, co-produced, and diverse interventions that enable participants to interact, negotiate, and contribute shared and divergent cultural heritage in person or online.

Possibly due to their own history as a grassroots community library, their understanding of the power of crowdsourcing could be considered quite advanced. Nonetheless, this site is incredibly revealing, as it is steeped in direct local participatory action and wider national and global safeguarding.

Sweden: Museums

Similar to the UK, Sweden has also embraced crowdsourcing as a tool to engage the public in the process of producing and managing heritage more democratically. Many initiatives, which have been influenced or created by the National Heritage Board, could be explained by the 2012 Diversity of the Historic Environment government bill. This globally unique bill emphasizes the need for inclusion, sustainability, and participation in national safeguarding (Swedish Ministry of Culture, 2012).

Photo 2: Platsr is a crowdsourcing PPGIS platform run by the Swedish National Heritage Board housing 4,516 "stories." Individual users and heritage institutions can upload, geo-reference, debate, and contextualize heritage content. https://app.raa.se/id/platser/

Though there is a wide and varied use of crowdsourcing throughout Swedish institutions, some museums, like the GWL, focus their projects on less producing-oriented and more engaging practices. There is evidence of community outreach activities aimed to bolster collections and inventories using UGC creating, sharing, narrating, and co-curating at museums across the country (e.g., the Unstraight Museum, Världskulturmuseerna - National World Culture museums). Across the board, they maintain and promote digital and local, ongoing and short-term crowdsourcing projects, web 2.0 infrastructures, a collaborative network of external regional institutions (e.g., national archives and museums) and global web projects (e.g., Platsr, FlickerCommons). And finally, all have experimented with themes regarding heritage groups on the margins, in regards to under-representations of culture, gender, sexuality, origin, migration, etc.

Photo 3: The Unstraight Museum, in partnership with Sweden's national museums and web 2.0 platforms like Platsr, collects and co-curates UGC for crowdsourcing projects like Unstraight + Newcomers (a project for and about LGBTQ refugees in Sweden). www.unstraight.org

Implications and Questions

Crowdsourcing, particularly involving deeper engagement, is not singularly defined or executed, nor is it a panacea to all challenges regarding safeguarding heritage. Rather, it is a tool that offers a rich starting point to understand the complexity and level of impact participatory methodologies can have in this sector. Considering some of the greater implications and questions is fundamental to approaching best practices.

Firstly, while in theory the medium of crowdsourcing is an open call for anyone to contribute, the dialogical open call within ICH may or may not support a more diverse user base. Furthermore, if there is evidence of more reflective and knowledgeable communities, it has to be questioned how this can vary across demographics, institutions, and individual projects. Regarding these three areas, and safeguarding itself, are two fundamental questions with much larger implications. Can participatory practices like crowdsourcing function as a restitutive bridge between people, institutions, exhibitions, experts, and conservationists in regards to research, exhibitions, and self-knowledge? How can crowdsourced ICH maintain/break with fixed hegemonic understandings of heritage and does its

value change for participants/professionals when self-generated?

Secondly, the issues of cost-value within all types of ICH crowdsourcing are essential to implementers, experts, and cultural actors alike. For instance, the cost of constructing any heritage exhibition, both literally and legally, begins with negotiation and compromise. Although crowdsourced heritage projects are highly sustainable, free, collaborative, accessible commons with no supposed imposition on participants, their infrastructure and maintenance online and offline are more tangible than the ICH produced. But, when analysing a limitation like cost, there is always a return to be valued. Despite a consideration for the immediate and long-term costs of maintaining ongoing crowdsourcing projects, there are, especially in the cases of the UK and Sweden, quantifiable returns in engagement such as attendance, donations, and volunteering. This begs a larger theoretical question which can have a direct positive return for the heritage industry. Can crowdsourcing increase the value of the intangible and make it both more visible and "visitable"?

Thirdly, aside from the value-impact on the industry, is the apparent and even greater value-impact for

academia. Crowdsourcing ICH is, after all, widely available user-generated representations of the self, produced and negotiated in real time. And, like the social construction of knowledge, heritage will inevitably have different significance to heritage professionals as well as active subject-contributors and passive subject-viewers (Pearce, 1992). Like the plurality of meaning associated with any object of material heritage, this type of ICH participation, whether more active or passive, will reveal different interpretations and motivations: duty, solidarity, nationalism, activism, artistic expression, social commitment, academic interest, etc. If researchers consider the pluralism of meaning making, along with an ethnographic emphasis on why subjects "decided to speak" (Pollack, 2006), this could lead to further insight into collective memories and subjectivities of cultural protagonists.

Finally, participation is a motivated experience with varied returns and validations for each participant. What ICH is actually contributed or negotiated will also reveal internalized perceptions of social realities, which, as conservationists know, evolve to have sometimes contradicting moral, scientific, nostalgic, historical, and aesthetic values. While academically rich, this information adds a new dimension for heritage professionals, for example, regarding curating. By including this participatory medium, there is a new space for new actors, information, and processes. For instance, there is a cultural actor with a small curatorial role. The implication of this new territory will also have to take into account how some memories are expressed "louder" than others. Or, it can help take a closer look at how asymmetrical, dark, fractured, minority,

controversial, or contradictory narratives can be exhibited.

Conclusion

Cultural heritage, whether exhibited or performed by an individual, collective, or institution, affects different interacting facets of life and thus demands in-depth, interdisciplinary research. Where heritage production has historically complicated the understanding of these resources, participatory methodologies using crowdsourcing tools can bring back more dynamic local dialogical context to the landscape simply by diffusing power and inviting diversity.

Where the absence of restitution has historically exacerbated the gap between heritage subjects and authorities, crowdsourcing used as a qualitative participatory tool seems to bridge the gap in a creative and inclusive way. By letting social actors be responsible for generating culture while self-critiquing and diffusing it democratically and sustainably, heritage institutions can simultaneously build cultural research and deeper relationships with their audiences by offering a constructive bridge between actors and heritage, digital archives and material artefacts, and cultural protagonists and heritage experts. Maybe then, through participatory best practices, safeguarding could be a source cultural empowerment and knowledge for all stakeholders.

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