Orienting the Heritage Institution towards Participatory Users in the Internet

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1. Introduction

This paper looks at different experiences Estonian heritage institutions have in recruiting active participants in their work. The focus is mainly on providing services through online channels and including active participants in the work on museums, archives and libraries. We base our discussions on the work done in two research projects: Developing Museum Communication in the 21st Century, and The Problems of Transformation and Reception of Cultural Heritage in the Digital Age, which both look at the changing relations between audiences and heritage institutions. We will base our discussion on the empirical case studies, using four different heritage institutions in Estonia as examples and as the basis of analysis – the Estonian National Museum, the Estonian Literary Museum, the National Archives of Estonia and University of Tartu Library. We have combined several research methods and looked at several types of respondents over different points in time. The paper aims to be a more reflexive overview of audience relations and participation in heritage institutions.

In using the notions of ‘audiences’ and ‘users’ interchangeably, we assume that audiences are active despite the communication channels used. In increasing use of ICT solutions in heritage institutions, audiences are assigned the even more active role of ‘users’ or ‘produsers’, as used by Axel Bruns. Coming from a media studies perspective we approach the audiences in the heritage institutions from these angles. We place this article at the crossroads of different disciplines in the hope of adding value to the practical applications on which we are working.
2. Active Audiences and Heritage Institutions

Active audiences and participation are not entirely new phenomena in the context of heritage institutions (see also Carpentier). Many museums have built their collections, i.e. their specific body of knowledge, using objects and information sourced from the people. Archives depend on the public for the provision of documents and libraries use groups of readers or reader statistics to help formulate their collection policies. However, in all of these cases the heritage worker plays the role of gate-keeper, moderating and limiting the participation for particular purposes.

This expert or gate-keeper position originates from and at the same time also produces a way of understanding of the concept of ‘heritage’, which implies that cultural heritage is ‘real’. Kristin Kuutma, Estonian researcher of heritage politics, who analyses how the notion of heritage is constructed, states that cultural heritage becomes real when someone identifies it as such, which denotes a process of knowledge production that involves academic research. … The awareness of heritage is epistemologically related to scholarship of history, art, ethnology, folklore, etc. – heritage is a certain way of knowing cultural objects, sites or practices (7-8).

Heritage is thus related to expertise and symbolic power.

According to both public understanding and the cultural heritage politics framework, the maintenance and safeguarding of the perceived common heritage has belonged to the realm of the heritage institutions. Through the role appropriated by this approach to cultural heritage, these institutions have also been instruments in the development of a sense of collective identity and citizenship and are thus arenas for the distribution of socio-political capital.

In the current article we look at this set of issues from one particular perspective, asking how and why this perceived role of heritage guardians can also serve as an obstacle or barrier to involving people to the field of the heritage in contemporary societies. More widely, this discussion is related to questions about whom does heritage empower and the question of whether it is possible to use the Internet to attract wider audiences to be engaged in the use and creation of heritage.

Our analysis has indicated that heritage institutions have a perceived expert position, which can in the current situation, when technology permits open and wide participation at low costs, become an invisible barrier to audience participation. The Internet seems to provide ample opportunities to engage the public in a dialogue with the heritage institutions; however, two-way communication assumes not only the existence of a communication channel, but also willing parties who are interested in communication. We claim that here the way in which heri-
tage institutions are perceived, and act, as gatekeepers may be part of the reason why audiences/users would not be that keen on participating and contributing. We are not arguing that this role should be left behind as many researchers have also shown the audience or users would still like to be distant from key decision-making and leave it to the experts (see, for example, Davies). Rather, the challenge is in empowering audiences, the prerequisite of which is an acknowledgement of the barrier between the two by the heritage institutions and their active search for ways to overcome it.

Next, we will have a look at Internet users in order to understand better different potential users of the applications provided by the heritage institutions. We will critically examine the supposedly active user, at whom many of the content creation applications are aimed. We argue that in order to activate participation in heritage institutions, people should not be left to find their way around, rather this needs to be a conscious attempt from the heritage institutions to create participation spaces that are user friendly and engaging.

3. Internet Users and Uses

Together with the increase in Internet users and the rise of Web 2.0 (O’Reilly) the arrival of active users has been hailed. The Internet today enables the use of more and more user-friendly technologies in order to actively foster participation in creating and providing content online. Web 2.0 applications such as blogs, social networking sites, and photo and video communities provide increasing opportunities for everyone to become their own publisher and have visibility in the online environment. However, not everyone wants to put him or herself online. When analysing the largest video-based user-generated content environment, YouTube, Cha et al. point out that in general users of this environment are rather passive in using Web 2.0 features like commenting or rating the content.

Jakob Nielsen has made a famous observation on participatory content online stating that in most online communities ninety percent of users are lurkers who never contribute, nine percent contribute a little and one percent account for almost all the action. Similar tendencies can be seen in Estonia where by the end of 2008, seventy per cent of Estonians used the Internet and of them only 38% had only ever tried to upload a photo – the most common content production activity of all – while only ten percent had ever commented on an online news item (Meema). The challenge here is to forgo the hype of participatory media and look deeper at the ways and styles of participation. Active audiences in the Internet are first and foremost either seeking information necessary for their work or personal lives or communicating with friends and peers for leisure and entertainment purposes. Because outside the Internet museums, libraries and archives play only a small part in
an individual’s life, expecting a dominant role for them in the online environment is unrealistic. However, one has to keep in mind that providing online access to heritage materials or opening the collections to participation, work can be done in order to locate the most appropriate target group for whom some kind of heritage related application might be the most important Internet application ever.

In a number of previous studies (see for instance Keller et al.; Laaksamas; Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, Aljas; Runnel; Runnel et al.), we have analysed Estonian Internet users and found the six most common Internet user types (see fig. 1). Here one can see that, in general, uses can be divided into two categories – information related uses and entertainment related uses. Most active users can take advantage of the Internet and implement it for both kinds of uses, while most passive users use the Internet so little that their usage is not signified by either of these uses.

![Figure 1: Estonian population in 2008, based on their relationship with the Internet](image)

Individuals tend to employ ICTs as tools with which to use existing entertainment services, to find information and to communicate. However, the use of the Internet to promote civic society and engaging in participation is marginal. The problem here is with the basic composition of user types. Active work and information-related users are most inclined towards democratic participation outside online environments. They use the Internet mainly to retrieve information and to perform work-related tasks. In addition, most of our interviewed heritage institution workers feel that they belong among the information-related users. This means that their conceptualisation of Internet services is also mainly centred on providing information. From the heritage institutions’ perspective, they are the prospective users of various databases, probable readers of longer texts and are more likely also to ask for professional help and guidance.
At the same time, those who are more used to participating online, communicating and generating online content are among the younger users, and they can be mainly found among the entertainment-related user groups (see also Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, Kalmus and Runnel). One the one hand, they are more likely to contribute, and to participate in competitions and various online activities. At the same time, previous research also indicates that due to their lack of literacy skills, they would prefer to have information in digested, interpreted and easily accessible ways. Information related to school work or other particular tasks is most expected (Laaksamaslk). While more used to communication and entertainment, their critical skills are not that significant.

This indicates that the question of the roles of the consumer and the citizen also arises in the context of information and communication technologies. Although there are arguments that indicate inherent participatory potential in online technologies, which would give rise to active citizens, the actual uses of the Internet indicate a much more consumption-oriented behaviour. In different studies, consumers are traditionally associated with passive, mostly non-critical hedonism and the tendency to satisfy personal interests, whereas citizens are associated with active social thought and a sense of responsibility, enabling them to rise above narrow private interests (see also Gabriel et al.; Keller et al.).

The discussion above indicates that there are different types of expectations among Internet users. The playful and participatory potential is often coupled with less experience, less critical skills and more expectations towards easily digestible and accessible information titbits. At the same time, others expectations are more related to information retrieval, comprehensive databases and relevant knowledge made available for those who have skills to seek that information. To a certain extent, these demands are contradictory and pose a challenge to heritage institutions as to how to manage those expectations, especially given the circumstance of limited resources.

4. Heritage Institution Choices for User Generated Content

We have based the analysis on four organisations in Estonia, each of which has its own experience in participatory user engagement related to their different roles and functions as heritage institutions: first, the University of Tartu Library representing libraries, second, the National Archives of Estonia representing archives, third the Estonian National Museum representing the museum position, and fourth the Estonian Literary Museum representing a fusion heritage institution, since it serves the function of a museum, library, archive and research institute. Each of these institutions takes a different approach to their relationship with the public, and that approach is reflected also in their relationship to the digital environment.
4.1 Expert User with Knowledge

It can be said that archives and libraries are more public service-oriented and that their attitude towards users resembles primarily a provider-client relationship – both provide a service for the public and act accordingly in their client relations.

In our analysis the first institution, the University of Tartu Library (UTL) has differentiated their users based on their ‘relative proximity’ to the institution. Academic staff from the University of Tartu are given the greatest possibilities to contribute – their opinion is the sole factor on which the library purchases access to online databases, and staff opinion matters when adding to the library’s collections. Other users can also suggest books to the library, but their opinion has less weight. Ordinary users who are not institutionally affiliated to the library can leave anonymous comments on the library’s forums where they are used, if possible.

The rating system of the library’s books, implemented in the electronic catalogue of the library’s ESTER1 system, is available only to registered users, and the planned commenting option will only be accessible to those who have some sort of affiliation with the library. In addition, at this time the library does not have a clear vision as to what to do with the information potentially provided through the comments. The idea of collecting user comments seems to be considered mainly for the pleasure of the readers rather than the actual benefits it might have for the library collections.

The relationships with online users of the library’s resources are complicated as university staff often uses online resources without the conscious understanding that these are provided by the library and their connections are to the University of Tartu (log-in information for database access is central with all university information systems) (Lepik). This has created a situation in which a significant proportion of library users have not, for a long time (or never), set foot in the actual building of the library.

The main building of the library is seen as a studying and meeting place, but mostly useful for students. Some faculty members had lots of nostalgic memories about UTL (from times they were students of University of Tartu) but today they all have remained at a distance from the main building. (Lepik)

From the other side the amount of the materials in ESTER or other online resources provided by the University are huge, so with every search relevant information can be found in the databases. Employees of the University Library (Personal interview, February, 2010) used the fact that digital resources are not always very easy to find in order to strengthen their positions as experts. Only a correct search will give correct answers and results which presume users have

1 http://tartu.ester.ee/
studied information literacy courses beforehand, provided by the library to students and University staff. University Library employees argued that good literacy skills that can, in their view, only be obtained in connection to the library, are becoming crucial to survival in the information age.

4.2. Active Users with Good Literacy and Communication Skills

The second institution, the National Archives of Estonia, is positively proud of the fact that access through their digital collection and demand-based digitisation has enabled them to host significantly more visitors to their online collections and thus opened the archival resources to the wider public. The deputy state archivist and director of the historical archives Indrek Kuuben states:

> We have opened a new room for researchers, the virtual research room. In the archive we have 20 workplaces for researchers; in a day 40-50 people go there…. But since we have opened the online research room, there are 60 people in the morning and perhaps 500 a day in the Saaga\(^2\) genealogical database. So the use of archive materials has largely expanded. (I. Kuuben, personal interview, 8 April 2009)

While previously archives were hidden places, available for a limited number of researchers and writers who mediated the knowledge that they received from the archives to the general public, then with the advancement of the digital technologies, archives are using the opportunity to redefine their relationship with the public. There is an increasing interest in seeking personal, community or local area roots from the archives and digital technologies enable stronger personal relationships with the archival resources.

The databases are not easy to use and so in a way the user-generated content is created by genealogists and others interested in genealogy, who take digital archival materials and build on them additional layer of knowledge transcriptions and information networks. As Marlow et al. have also stated, people with good literacy skills have often started for personal organisational reasons and later moved on to the social benefits in order to help other users manage in the systems.

4.3. Communicative Users with Simple Literacy Skills

The Estonian National Museum and the Estonian Literary Museum look at the public not only as audiences of their exhibitions and consumer products and services, but also from the perspective of research disciplines, such as ethnology, folkloristics and anthropology. These disciplines have approached individuals and groups as subjects of research and as sources of collecting information.

Online participatory options in the Estonian Literary Museum and the Estonian

\(^2\) www.ra.ee/saaga.
National Museum are more geared towards facilitating the dialogue with users – asking them to comment on and add to digital collections as a complex body of knowledge. As an example online database of Traditional Folk Calendar BERTA\(^3\) asks people to provide their own ideas on how to celebrate traditional holidays. Until the spamming-robots conquered the initiative with their input, anyone could add, in a comment format, their knowledge and ideas concerning a particular national holiday. Here the comments interacted with each other and instead of remaining single contributions became integrated with the collection and the use of the database, making contribution easy for users with fewer literacy skills.

However, experience from the Estonian Literary Museum indicates that when participation is made too easy, this could also reduce the quality of the contributions.

When contemporary school folklore was gathered, those contributions made anonymously and in the online environment were less thorough and well-written than those which were contributed in the class-room environment under the watchful eyes of the teacher. (Piret Voolaid, personal interview, 9 April 2009)

Another example from the Estonian Literary Museum illustrates the linking of the collections by users of the Kreutzwald’s Century\(^4\) online project, in which the user can explore history in a non-linear way, thus creating (though not leaving a record of) her or his own trail through literary history. Here, one potential application of user-generated content is to store the trails of the digital content users and provide them as potential pathways to those interested in the non-linear narration of literary history. A great future potential also lies in recommendation systems supporting participatory activities, which goes beyond the model of commercial providers (e.g. Amazon) of outlining similarities between products by providing a social recommendation system recommending relevant marked units from the collections or additions from the users, based upon the material in which a user has already expressed an interest. Such social recommendation systems may also provide recommendations based on both familiarity/similarity, also enabling the conscious comparison and connection of objects, stories or comments which perhaps represent different perspectives and use other people’s recommendations to help in the connections.

Although the Estonian Literary Museum has provided many interesting and open online collections, the materials in the different databases are organised by archives, which inevitably makes usage complicated to many potential users as it needs their previous knowledge to make the right search in the right database.

The Estonian National Museum had a campaign that took place both online

\(^{3}\) http://www.folklore.ee/Berta.
and offline, aiming to document everyday life in 2009 – “Give Museum a Day from Your Life”. People were asked to document their April 14\textsuperscript{th}, 2009, the 100\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of the museum. Their contributions were included in the collections of the Estonian National Museum. Contributions to these kinds of initiatives need attention and time from the contributors. They know that the stories and pictures later became part of the museum’s collections and that adds a sense of value and motivation to audiences to participate. At the same time, the topic remained simple enough as everyone can claim to be an expert on their own and their family’s everyday lives. People could use the way of contributing that they found familiar, so there was 202 offline and 223 online contributions – in text, blog, video, photo or mobile positioning format. Before the public call for participation, museum staff performed exercises ‘collecting’ their own lives; these stories were provided as examples of different styles of participatory content to help people overcome the complications of starting and choosing the format.

The idea that editing existing content is easier than starting from scratch connects well with Mark Carnall’s observation that online museums are typically very content-light, which makes it difficult to attach the contributions of the public to specific pre-existing structures. Contribution to online content is related to the network effect (Liebowitz et al.), meaning that the resource becomes more valuable when there are other people consuming the same good. Thus Internet users expect and like to contribute where others are and where some prior content exists. The more available information there is, and the more opportunities there are to link, add, comment on and tag the information heritage institutions have online, the more valuable the resource is for individual users.

The Estonian National Museum also ran a user-generated content experiment in the real exhibition space, where visitor participation was made easy. Visitors to the exhibition were given the opportunity to add free-form comments to the presented photographs using simple post-it notes and pens. Motivation for this experiment was provided through the promise of a prize draw in which participants could win a particular photograph as a printout for their personal use. Eighty percent of the comments contributed were expressions of emotions (such as ‘beautiful’, ‘great’, ‘I like’, and/or ‘I would like to have that too’).

However, from the heritage institution’s point of view, more valuable were the remarks that indicated the new knowledge that people received from photographs, or where the exhibited photographs activated new interests or questions. In addition, a few corrections were made to the photograph captions that the museum had, for example: “It should be Artur Vasiksaat, because the name Vasikraat does not exist on Muhu”. At the exhibition we also saw that through participation the visitor’s role extended, as many analyses on exhibition participation have recently shown (Ciolfi et al.).
5. Discussion

Institutions try to apply dimensions of those relationships that are based on previous experience, and try to apply the same to users of the online environments. Hence the options for online materials in archives and libraries are geared more towards providing digital content, with the institutions expecting users to be engaged in the discussions about the provided materials separately from the digital collections. At the same time, the museums in our case study focused on collecting and adding the contributions of museum collection users, with more attention being paid on the dialogue and the added value of user discussions.

In recent years, heritage institutions have invested significant amounts of time and resources in the digitisation of their collections and providing open and free online access to them. Institutions are adjusted to the idea that physical and virtual collections are different, and that the latter can provide more users or visitors.

Massive digitisation and the opening of collections to online public access has become central to the daily work of heritage institutions, necessitating changes in organisation activities. At the same time the institutions use the same communication patterns both offline and online, which originate from the traditional role and habits of communication of the heritage institution, resulting in its perceived expert position. The latter is a barrier for the audiences in using online collections or participating in online activities. The main focus of the activities has been on making the collections available, not on analysing new needs or re-evaluating the activities in new situations. There is a growing competition between the heritage institutions for online visibility with their digital collections; often those who have thoroughly thought about what material is offered online and to whom it is offered find more success and gain a more stable user group.

There have been arguments (Carnall) that say that memory institutions have had significant obstacles that have stopped them from being online to a great extent. These obstacles have included the genuine fear that people would stop coming to museums if they could access museum collections online (ibid.). The examples of the National Archives of Estonia and the University of Tartu Library show this is well founded.

The idea of becoming virtual might not be a pleasant one for some museums, especially not for art museums who cherish the ideal of the ‘real thing’ and its aura. But this development is inevitable because of the increasing digitisation of cultural heritage and the demand to make collections more accessible. Eventually, these trends will blur the differences between cultural heritage institutions, and in the long run, these institutions will merge into one memory institution. A memory institution combines digital surrogates of the collections of archives, libraries and museums in rich interactive environments and allows access to the content regardless of the nature of the institution. The goal of the memory institution is to preserve this content for future
generations and support its use and management over time. (Schweibenz)

These interlinked memory institutions, hailed by Werner Schweibenz above, show that important user motivation comes from the content itself. National museums and ethnographic collections particularly can claim to be ‘living’ museums where communities connected with the museum can add content to the collection, originating for example from the daily life of the community.

When looking at different Internet user types in Estonia we can see that most users consume information from the Internet. Only a small number of users participate in content creation. We have analysed ways in which heritage institutions communicate with the public and see the role of their audiences. It could be said that audiences are mainly handled as passive information consumers or users with good literacy skills. However, the offline activities of exhibition visitors show that people are willing to participate if the environment is familiar and the technology also supports their experiences of heritage and its interpretations.

Therefore, heritage institutions are facing challenges to find new audiences, in addition to enthusiast users, to activate online participation in producing and interpreting heritage, which also makes users knowledge producers and allows new personal interpretations of heritage.

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