Audience participation as the framework of activities for museums and heritage institutions

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Introduction

In last decades cultural heritage institutions have become more open than ever and they have entering to the arena of civic education and engagement practices. Everyday hundreds of museums are asking from their self how to find and bring new and numerous visitors to museum and how to include new individuals and communities to the museum in sustainable way? These questions mean to analyze subjects as - communication and cultural participation, which are related nowadays to the new technologies and new media.

Estonian museums are currently part of the „first wave" in using information and communication technologies (ICTs): they are mostly related to the digitalization of their collections, and to the provision of digital information in web. There are different degrees of optimism in museums, on hoping, how digitalisation will help to fulfil the basic functions. Some museums have chosen the way, where the needs of the users have been putting to the primary place, in choosing what and how to digitalise and how to bring users to create content into the museum. Creative activities of the internet users, like generating content in the museums, are potentially also linked to democratic participation in the public sphere of society, although the connections are not direct.

When we consider democracy beyond the traditional understanding of participating in political activities (voting, protesting or signing petitions) we see two important aspects. First, public and civic institutions in general have recently begun to perceive pressure to become more open and democratic. And second, the more the public is involved in any institutionalised aspects of our society, the more democratic the society is. Citizenship, by giving voice to a diversity of concerns, seeks to modify the identities of those participating within a common dialogue (Mouffe, 1993 via Stevenson, 2007). I am considering participatory practices as part of general democratic practices, and considering information and communication technologies as the new opportunity to find additional ways in involving people to the heritage institutions and to the society.

In the paper I will start with the discussion of how democracy and participation in the heritage institution meet in the notion of cultural citizenship. Then I will give an overview of the Estonian context mostly to argue that although I use examples of Estonian memory institutions I still consider the examples general enough to be used for discussing participation and user-generated content in the heritage institutions. Next I analyse the internet users, their willingness to contribute content online, and also their expectations to the heritage institution's online sites. I will close the article with some examples as to how a user-centred approach can foster participation.

Theoretical approach to participatory practices and civic culture

In the context of this paper, I consider participating in the heritage institutions, generating content and sharing the responsibility for the heritage as part of democratic process. I look at the democracy and democratic practices with using the maximalist approach to the concept of democracy (Carpentier, 2007) where democracy is also considered outside its traditional institutional and political frames and democratic practices are perceived as part of our everyday activities. The argument towards such an approach to democracy is in "democratising democracy", meaning that if we limit our understanding of democracy to pre-defined institutional roles, then alienation, limited participatory possibilities and alienation of state are consequences often to be observed. Thus we view heritage institutions as places where participatory democracy has to be used and upheld in order to practice democracy.

One possible way to approach the connection of content creation practices with participation, democracy and empowerment is through the domain of 'participatory culture' and the concepts of 'civic culture' and 'cultural citizenship' (Hermes, 2006). The framing concept of 'cultural citizenship' will help to see why engagement and participation, often seen as political tools of civic engagement, need to be conceptualised in the context of heritage institutions.

Personal meaning-making and bringing one's voice to the public happens in the domain of 'civic culture'. 'Civic culture', in Peter Dahlgren's terms (2003), can be seen as a central concept, seeking to understand people's opportunities to act in the role of citizens and their daily experience of citizenship: civic culture points to those features of the socio-cultural world – dispositions, practices and processes – that constitute pre-conditions for people's actual participation in the public sphere, in civil and political society (Dahlgren, 2003: 154-155).

Daily experiences of citizenship can be seen as a separate domain – that of the cultural citizenship. According to Hermes (2005: 10), cultural citizenship can be defined as the process of bonding and community building, and reflection on that bonding, which is implied in partaking of the text-related practices of reading, consuming, celebrating, and criticizing offered in the realm of (popular) culture. This definition makes it possible to see the connection of cultural citizenship with both active consumption of popular culture and productive practices in everyday life (for example, leading to new and important citizenship practices in new media contexts (see Hermes, 2005)). Burgess, Foth and Klaebe (2006) demonstrate that everyday creative activities like chat, photosharing and sotrytelling can constitute cultal citizenship taking the form of what Habermas (1996 via Burgess et al. 2006) terms 'episodic publics' – the ephemeral everyday encounters where citizens negotiate shared concern.

A search for the practices of democracy and citizenship in everyday life appears in the discussions of the similarities in the roles of the active citizen and creative consumer, which some claim are intermingling. As the notions of consumer and citizen are often distinguished as complete oposites, yet there are indications that citizens can have a consumeristic approach to the democracy (Reinsalu, 2008) or that there are types of consumers who are taking a deliberative and responsible approach to consumption (Kalmus, Keller and Kiisel, 2009). William Uricchio (2004) incorporates the reconfigured relations between cultural production and consumption in participatory culture as form of cultural citizenship. For him, the sites of such participatory activities are, for example, collaborative communities which exist only because of the creative contributions, sharing and participation of their members (ibid) and cultural heritage institutions can provide such sites for such activities. Jean Burgess (2007) states that both everyday creativity and new media technologies represent spaces of hope for cultural citizenship, and thus radically exceed their traditional domains

of interest in the case where active citizenship and consumer co-creation are converging and are no longer separate domains of practice.

New trends to the participatory inclusion of the individuals and communities where the institutions (like libraries, archives and museums) are located are related to the new technologies. Participation in digital content creation is seen as one of the features of the general democratic developments in the society. Creative activities, like internet users generating content in the heritage institutions, are potentially also linked to democratic participation in the public sphere, although the connections are not direct (Runnel, 2009).

But the need to have people participating in the memory institutions primarily comes from the perspective of trying to make sure that people see themselves as participants in producing meanings to heritage and approaching their heritage as commonly shared. Too often the memory institutions are entrusted with safe-keeping a heritage while the aspect of the shared responsibility for common heritage of both the people and the institutions is often neglected.

At the same time, heritage can be considered as a problematic concept as Howard (2003:4) reminds us that heritage too often is nationalistic, exclusive and elitist, sexist and backward-looking, and excluding many groups and communities from having a heritage at all. Rather than sharing the joint responsibility, communities and heritage institutions take a consumer service approach to their relations with the public thus leaving a rather more passive role of the customers to their visitors. This leaves many communities either without a meaningful heritage, or their heritage is in the hands of few professionals.

Heritage institutions can act as laboratories for exercising and becoming familiar with participation, especially when content creation activities of visitors/users are based on the everyday issues, originating from people's own lives. Heritage institutions are becoming an arena of public participation and collective knowledge creation, acting therefore as democratizing agents in the society.

Participatory culture in Estonian context

The past 20 years have meant significant changes in all areas of life in Estonia – democratisation, market liberation, consumerism, and fast developments of technological shifts have all been parallel processes. In the case of Estonia we are dealing with an example in which civic participatory culture also started developing in parallel with, and was strongly influenced by, ICT development. Reinsalu and Winsvold (2008) argue that ICTs have strongly influenced democracy and e-participation and are therefore probably much more integrated in the Estonian people's concept of democracy and political participation.

This integration, however, has mostly taken a top-down form where institutions have created possibilities to participate in politics (e.g. internet based voting, websites to include citizen's opinions etc) and the possibilities of online participation have so far been focused on anonymous voting and culture of online commenting of the digital content. Development of e-democracy goes side by side with general social development, which expects the growth of civic society in Estonia and puts public participation very much on the political agenda (Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, 2007). Hence Estonia is in many ways a good example of a country where civic, cultural and political participation are developing hand in hand and the learning of participatory practices needs to be approached by all kinds of organizations at the same time.

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Similarly, using online technologies in order to bring democratic practices to the heritage institutions, Estonia is on the same footing as others. In some ways, especially in the context of national heritage, the experiences of Estonians can be considered exemplary, as many people have first-hand experiences in being subjects of local heritage collecting and consider "helping" memory institutions an honorary practice.

Participation and active audiences are not entirely new phenomenon in the context of heritage institutions. Many of the museums have built their collections using objects and information from the people, archives depend on the public for providing documents to them, and libraries have used groups of their readers (or reader statistics) to help to formulate the collection policies. For example in Estonian National Museum from the year 1931 has been created the network of correspondents were they have been answering to the questionnaires and collect data for the museum in the given subjects (http://www.erm.ee/?lang=ENG&node=57) and from the 2007 the network of photo senders (http://www.erm.ee/?lang=ENG&node=1055), who have been documenting Estonian everyday life by their cameras. However, in all of those cases the heritage worker has played the role of the gate-keeper, moderating and limiting the participation for the particular purpose.

Nowadays technology permits very open and wide participation at low costs, and helps to provide ample opportunities, to engage the public in the dialogue with the heritage institutions. Two-way communication assumes not only the existence of the communication channel but also willing partners who are interested in communication. Here the hierarchical and traditionalist nature of the heritage institutions may be part of why users would not be that keen on participating and contributing.

Museums, archives and libraries have been legitimate producers and guardians of common heritage and social memory, and through these roles they have also been helpers and teachers in developing a sense of collective identity and citizenship. However, the sense of expert power or the consideration of abstract "them" knowing better than regular man can become an obstacle of participation.

Users practices in online environment

User typologies suggest that various Internet usage practices - whether information search, social networking or participating in the public sphere - correspond, to a vast extent, to people's everyday needs, blurring the boundaries of the 'real' and 'virtual'. In the context of heritage institutions this raises an issue that, although one could argue that people would be more than happy to participate in the online environments, and often they also do, their participation is focused around their real lives. The user-generated content people contribute most is uploading and sharing photos of themselves, their family and their everyday life. As the memory institutions can only rarely be considered to be an inherent part of people's everyday lives, their online representations are also outside the normal "surfing routes" of average Internet users. Making sure that people to consider heritage as theirs is closely linked to getting people involved with the heritage through providing options for collecting, interpreting and re-using.

In general in Web 2.0 applications such as blogs, social networking sites, photo and video communities, are providing increasing opportunities for everyone, to become their own publisher and have visibility at the online environment. However, not everyone wants to put themselves online. Jacob Nielsen (2006) has made a famous observation on online participatory content stating

that in most online communities ninety percent of the 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 percent of Estonians used the Internet and of them only ten percent had ever commented an online news item. This indicates that the actual use of the Internet is mostly oriented on consumption and not on the creation of content.

In a number of Tartu University studies (see for instance Keller, Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt and Kalmus, 2009; Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt and Aljas, 2009; Runnel et al., 2009; Runnel, 2009), in been analyzed Estonian Internet users and found six most common Internet user types (figure 1). Here we can see that in general the uses can be divided in two – information related uses and entertainment related uses. Most active users can take advantage of the Internet and implement it for both kinds of uses, and most passive users use Internet so little that their usage is not signified by either of these uses.
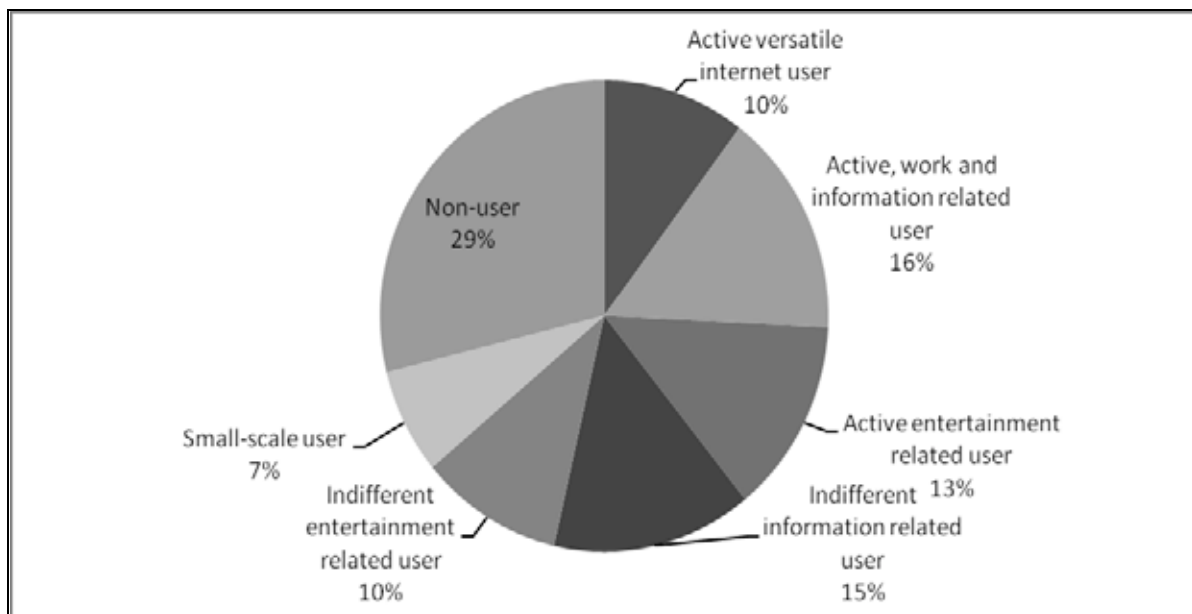

Figure 1: Estonian population in 2009, based on their relationship with the Internet. (Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt and Aljas, 2009)

Students and pupils (Personal interviews, 7-8 May 2007), with whom I discussed in the focus groups about their interest in cultural heritage available online, stressed that they were most interested in the heritage when it was related to some schoolwork. This means that they had a pre-given assignment when they went online and their expectations were that the information provided, would help them in a particular task. However, they also criticized the heritage resources for being too complex, too difficult to find and being geared towards the expert user rather than everyday user.

Employees of the University Library (Personal interview, February, 2010) used the fact that digital resources are not always most easy to find in order to strengthen their expert positions as experts. Librarians are in the process of redefining their roles as more and more people seek for information online rather than use the help of librarian to navigate catalogues. Hence, librarians are setting themselves a task of being the guide through the online resources and teach information literacy and information seeking skills as a renewing their position as guardians of the knowledge.

How to increase motivation to participate in cultural heritage creation

I will end the paper with the review examples of Estonian heritage institutions and underlying some practical aspects as experiences and answers how motivate users - to feel engaged with the cultural heritage and to use their time to contribute to museums. In arguments I lean to Nielsen (2006) ideas how it is possible to change a passive user to the active content creator.

Participation should be made as easy as possible

First is the idea that participation should be made as easy as possible. By showing people that contributing is easy, they might end up with contributions, which might be less valuable for the museum or institution, but would help in making participation as a habit.

In Estonian National Museum for last year's most of the exhibitions have been tagged in offline, in exhibition hall. There were pen and papers, what visitors could use and comment the exhibition while viewing it, and for that they did not need to learn new practices.

As an example a photo exhibition "1000 steps…" about museum photo collection, where visitors were given an opportunity to add free-form comments on the presented photos, and there were for that post-it-notes and pens. So using this low-tech solutions and familiar technologies, the visitors could participate to exhibition and the participation became as the side-effect of the visit. For the remark, I met some visitors who came back in the end of the exhibition for to read the other peoples comments.

However when participation is made too easy, it could also reduce the quality of the contributions. So eighty percent on the comments contributed, were the expressions of emotions as 'beautiful', 'great', 'I like', 'I would like to have that too'. But 20% of the remarks indicated to new knowledge what people got from photos, or photos activated new interests or questions. Also few discussions took place in this offline environment and few corrections were made to photo legends, for example: "It should be Artur Vasiksaat, because the name Vasikraat does not exist in Muhu".

In addition, we have to have always the clear vision, what to do with the information potentially provided through the comments. And, that the idea of collecting user comments, is not just for the pleasure of the readers, but could actually benefit the collections. As an example from Estonia comes from Estonian Literary Museum online database of Traditional Folk Calendar BERTA (http://www.folklore.ee/Berta/index.php). From the database you can find information about every date and traditional holiday, and users can provide their own ideas how to they celebrate different holidays. And the comments will be integrated to the actual collection.

Editing is easier than creating

Also in motivating to participate is important to remember, that for people editing is easier than creating. This was taken into consideration, when Estonian National Museum was preparing a campaign, which took place both online and offline, and the aim was to document everyday life at one particular day in year 2009, and was called "Give Museum a Day of Your Life". Before the public call for participation, museum staff made different attempts to collect their own days. And these stories were provided as examples of different styles - how write the story, or to make mobile positioning of a day, or to send video or photo diaries, blogs. These examples helped people to overcome the complications of starting at it also shares the idea, which is related to network effect – meaning, that users expect and like to contribute where others are and where some primary content already exists.

Promotion of quality contributors

Also important is to promote quality contributors, which would foster participation and is related to the idea, that motivations for participation are often social - for the tagging, for communicating and sharing, or for expressing opinion.

However, the users might not always consider these social motivations as the most important ones and they need also some social benefits. In museum context the contributions are more motivated when it's known, that these stories will be official parts of the museum collections. This has been used with the "Give Museum a Day of Your Life" action, when the contribution needed from people concentration and time. But they knew that the stories and pictures are being later part of the museum's collections. At the same time, the topic remained simple enough - as everyone can claim to be an expert of their personal everyday life.

Rewarding of active participation

The last remark in motivation the user is the rewarding of active participation. Estonian National Museum was collecting stories about the changes is concept of happiness. The campaign was made together with a magazine for women and with a new lifestyle centre. And the awards were coming from them – which were trips for 2 to Costa del Sol and the tickets to the film screening "Sex and the City 2".

The participation was popular in the expected target group (ladies from 20s-40s) and the partners and awards were part of this popularity. But in museum context this rewarding of quality contributions can potentially invite concerns, when a judge or jury decides on the "best" contribution. This might have drawbacks also, when considering that there are groups of people less likely to contribute, because, they might perceive their contribution not "good enough" for the judging.

Conclusion

In many ways, the key in participation initiatives has been the question about power relationships: who gets to decide on issues that really matter in society? Museums are traditionally viewed as experts, who "know" what to collect and what is cultural heritage, how we should preserve it and who should access it. Power-relationships are supported by other institutions – e.g. political structures of the society, through giving legal responsibilities to the cultural heritage institutions. To put it simply – people in the streets still believe in experts and do not perceive themselves holding the power of interpretation.

In order to move closer to participatory practices, museums need to share some of their decision-making with the general public. It takes effort to actually show that visitors/users have became authors (and subjects) of their own heritage, and instead of consuming academic expertise and validation, communication rather is located at the level of everyone's lived experience. The collections are not anymore for viewing, but the responsibilities of collecting, educating and interpreting should be shared. Involvement does not depend on institutional efforts only; the user agency and the complex interaction of the individual and institutional also have an important role.

The main agenda of the memory institutions at the twenty first century cannot focus solely on the provision of the digital collections and storing of the digital heritage, but it also has to focus on engaging communities and find new ways of community empowerment through participation and user generated content.

To achieve that wider democratization of the heritage institutions, besides partnership with individuals, the focus should be on partnership with communities. This takes democracy to new institutions, makes it mundane part of creative activities and also educates and motivates those who are less active in the traditional political arena.

The cultural sphere in general and cultural citizenship offer "paths", especially in current multicultural societies, for various communities to explore their identities, document their past, and use, display or reconceptualise it for the sake of future.

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