INA-MARIA JANSSON[1]

A Past for Everyone? Digital Participation as Method for Democratic Cultural Heritage Production

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1 Ina-Maria Jansson is an archivist at Uppsala University Library, Special Collections Division. She works with personal papers and digital born collections. Her research interests are cultural heritage formation processes, cultural memory, information structures and cataloguing practices at cultural heritage institutions.
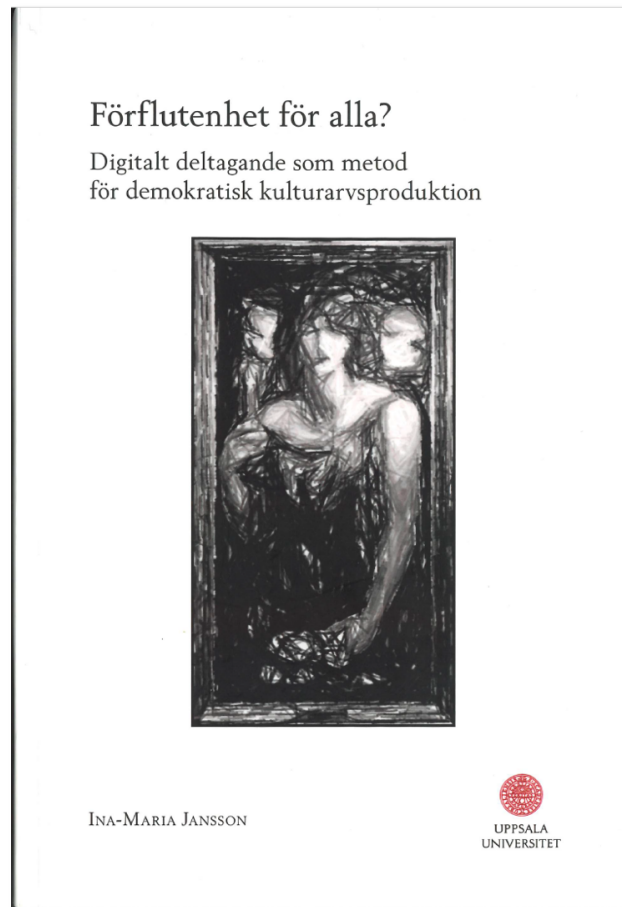Email: ina-maria.jansson@ub.uu.se.

Image 1. Front cover of the printed dissertation.

Introduction

This thesis inquires into the conditions for how digital participation can be a method to produce cultural heritage in relation to collections at cultural heritage institutions such as archives, libraries and museums.

Ever since the digitisation and online publication of heritage collections items and catalogues became possible, heritage experts have debated whether increased accessibility and possibilities for digital participation also would lead to a more democratic and inclusive cultural heritage. The idea that institutional heritage is in need of being democratised is based on the notion of how these institutions represent an authoritative type of heritage that is defined hegemonically by a social and intellectual elite, excluding the voices of many other groups of people in the society.

In this thesis, heritage is understood as being dependent of specific institutional information practices, and defined

by the way institutions collect, classify, contextualise and present cultural heritage. Such institutional processes of heritagisation are exemplified by archivalisation and musealisation and constitutes a special heritagisation process of objects and information. These processes are, together with professional expertise and authority, supported by institutional information structures.

Research problem

One of the limitations with earlier research is that participatory production rarely have been studied as a specific mode of producing cultural heritage. Consequently, the differences and relations between institutional heritage production and participatory production have not been discussed in terms of the apparent clash between the two different modes of heritage production. This is problematic given that such a clash ought to have consequences for how well those modes of production can operate together.

This thesis aims to explain how digital participation in the activities of cultural heritage institutions can produce cultural heritage in contexts of institutional production of heritage and the conditions for how participants can contribute to a more inclusive production of heritage.

The thesis combines perspectives from three different scholarly fields building on conceptual and theoretical understanding from information studies, cultural heritage studies and memory studies.

Aim and research questions

The three research questions of the thesis are answered through four studies. They are independent from each other and three of them are published in different scholarly journals. The first three (I, II and III) are empirical studies in which practical examples of participatory project in a cultural heritage institutional setting is studied. They are investigating the connection between information and cultural heritage and how information structures and participants influence each other. The fourth study takes, in contrast to the first three ones, a conceptual perspective to participation and

focuses on how participation have been problematised as a democratising practice in the academic literature.

Table 4 below gives an overview of the research questions and the studies through which they are answered.

Main research questions	Sub research questions	Study through which the question is answered
1. How is cultural heritage produced through digital participation?	a) How does participatory created information influence existing cultural heritage collections? b) How is participatory created information influenced by being incorporated in heritage collections?	I, III
2. Under what conditions are participants able to change the institutional production of cultural heritage?	a) How do information structures shape the conditions and valuation mechanisms of heritagisation? b) How do participants question and negotiate those conditions?	II
3. Under what conditions can institutional production of cultural heritage become more inclusive?	a) How is digital participation problematized as an inclusive phenomenon in the literature? b) How can alternative understandings of digital participation as a problem incite change?	IV

Table 1. Overview of main research questions, sub-research questions and empirical studies.

Studies I–IV

PAPER I. ORGANIZATION OF USER-GENERATED INFORMATION IN IMAGE COLLECTIONS AND IMPACT OF RHETORICAL MECHANISMS

The first paper answers the question of how cultural heritage is produced through digital participation by studying cases of incorporation of participatory created heritage metadata into institutional collections. It questions participation as an open and democratic practice by focusing on the limiting effects of institutional information structures on

participatorily created information. The background of the study lies in how participatorily created information such as user comments in free-text format are especially propagated as empowering users and their influence on cultural heritage. However, as the study shows, in adjusting user-created information to suit the collection management system in use, rhetorical mechanisms of institutional information structures dictate the conditions for how the participatorily generated information is incorporated into the institutional information structures.

The empirical material of the study was collected in 12 interviews with professionals, who reflected about their work with administration of user-comments to be added to image collections as metadata. The experience of the informants spans over six different image database-systems. By analysing the professionals' statements about how the information structures affected the decisions they made in the moderation process of participatorily created information, several rhetorical mechanisms were identified in the systems. This article shows that the design of collection management systems can cause user-generated information to be discriminated and lead to decreased data reliability, searchability and even loss of crowdsourced data. In particular, personal memories and perspectives are among the types of information that are most negatively affected. To conclude, collecting user comments is a problematic method to use for adding multiple perspectives to cultural heritage collections. It requires carefully designed collection management systems in order to avoid distortion of user-created information.

PAPER II. CREATING VALUE OF THE PAST THROUGH NEGOTIATIONS IN THE PRESENT: BALANCING PROFESSIONAL AUTHORITY WITH INFLUENCE OF PARTICIPANTS

The second paper studies the conditions of how participants are able to influence the institutional production of cultural heritage. The paper investigates how participatory influence in an archive transcription project hosted by the Copenhagen City Archive is made possible by interaction between participants and archivists on an online platform. By studying what possibilities participants have to affect the processes, structures, and end usability of the information resource, their space for agency in relation to the archive institution is identified.

To be able to separate different levels of user influence, the concepts of maximalist and minimalist participation are used for theoretical framing of the study. They also offer a backdrop for understanding of the difficulties of automatically claiming participation as a democratic phenomenon, and help in clarifying that participation without possibilities of influencing its basic conditions cannot be counted as highly democratic.

The most of the material for paper II was collected from a discussion forum that is connected to the online transcription project *Funerals 1861–1912 (Begravelser 1861–1912)*. The project aims to transcribe handwritten funeral records from the city of Copenhagen in order to construct a database of research data containing Copenhageners' causes of death, professions and other living conditions at the time of creation of the records. Participating transcribers can communicate with the archive institution by writing in the discussion forum – a communication that elicits questions, suggestions for improving the database and participants' perspectives of what they hope to gain from participating in the project.

To analyse this communication, a framework inspired by Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) was used. The results show how participants used the forum to gain influence in the project, and how several elements of CBPR—shared influence, mutual development, and mutual use—were manifested in the forum. On the other hand, the results also point out that information structures pose several limitations to how institutions can adjust participatory projects in hindsight. The final decision to implement changes to institutional information structures also always rests with the professionals, not the participants. A conclusion from this study is that even though institutions aim for participatory influence, this aim can only be reached to the degree the institution has prepared their information structures to be flexible and welcoming of the changes that participants might suggest.

PAPER III. "I SHOT THIS PICTURE BECAUSE IT WAS VERY REAL": STRATEGIES FOR FRAMING AUTHENTIC PERSONAL EXPERIENCE IN A CULTURAL HERITAGE COLLECTION

This paper aims to increase understanding of how digital participatory collection works to produce cultural heritage, and specifically how it works to introduce dissonant perspectives to heritage into institutional collections. The study sets

out by introducing heritage dissonance as an inherent mechanism in all types of heritage, as opposed to the idea that it is present only in specific contested types of heritage. By separating between meaning-making based on two different rationalities; institutional and non-institutional, the paper suggests how dissonances in meaning-making of cultural heritage can be founded in institutional structures, for example, structures for managing heritage information.

The empirical material for paper III was collected in *Samtidsbild,* a Swedish digital museum platform created by Stockholm County Museum for collecting contemporary photographs from the public.

Captions of contributed photographs were analysed in search for strategies of how participants bestow meaning and motivate their contributions as warrantable heritage in an institutional setting. The paper discusses also if these strategies are successful for introducing dissonant heritage interpretations to the institutional collections. The analysis is supported by a framework which rests on the theoretical premises of personal, emotional dimensions of meaning-making in heritage contexts – in other words, a framework to analyse non-institutional meaning-making. Constructing personal meaning of certain places or events are examples of how such emotional meanings can be generated. The results show that contributors' strategies for meaning-making of their contributions to *Samtidsbild,* despite the seemingly good opportunities of personal meaning-making remain within the bounds of an authorised discourse of heritage, without introducing dissonant perspectives. The participants' strategies of heritage interpretation are, however, based on personal experiences and emotive responses and emerges as an alternative to institutional rationalities of interpretation, displaying a more personal and authentic perspective of heritage.

The conclusion is that the most important function of *Samtidsbild* and similar initiatives might not be to collect dissonant heritage interpretations but rather to provide means to broaden the perspectives of institutional heritage by including input from individuals whose heritage values are already, to some extent, aligned with those of the institutions.

PAPER IV. CHALLENGING THE PROBLEM OF UN-DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION. FROM DESTRUCTION TO RE-CONSTRUCTION OF HERITAGE

Paper IV was spurred by the aim to contribute to the understanding of digital participation in heritage collections as a democratising practice. In a considerable part of the scholarly literature, digital participation is described as a problem because of the lack of participatory influence. Thus, it is suggested to fail to work as a method to shift cultural heritage processes to a more open and inclusive direction. The problem is traced back to various factors and conditions, of which the core seems to be the balance of institutional and professional openness versus the duty to preserve and safe-guard cultural heritage. The paper IV sets out to identify and question silent assumptions concerning how the insufficient influence of participants is conceived of as a problem.

The methodological approach for the study draws from Carol Bacchi's method for studying problematisations. Termed "what's the problem represented to be?" (WPR), this method puts emphasis on the analysis of different ontological elements of problematisations, including key concepts, binaries and categories. Three carefully selected scholarly texts made up the material for analysis, all of which incorporated a problematisation of insufficient participatory agency.

The results of the study show that participation is problematised based on the assumption that participatory agency risks jeopardising the protection of heritage and thus leads to parts of the public memory to become forgotten. To challenge the idea that participatory agency is destructive, the paper IV argues for elaborating an understanding of what forgetting entails for heritage. Framing forgetting as a potentially both harmful and generative concept enables a separation of destructive forgetting (e.g., destruction of historical evidence) and constructive forgetting (re-contextualisation).

The main practical implication of the paper IV is that by understanding forgetting as a potentially beneficial activity for the representation and construction of heritage, it provides a conceptual rationale for facilitating re-contextualisation in the design of multi-layered information structures for heritage collections.

Results and discussion

The thesis found that the possibilities to create inclusive institutional heritage collections through digital participation is limited and that the diversity of participants and their motivation to participate are dependent on cultural frameworks. If participation is a successful method to use for inclusion can only be decided case by case. It is dependent on who is to be included, why, and how well they identify with the cultural frameworks, which direct the cultural heritage definitions of the institution. However, the participatory frameworks do not necessarily need to be culturally or socially different for participation to have a diversifying and complementing effect on the collections. Even participation of participants whose majority share the frames of reference with cultural heritage experts at the institutions can lead to a diversification of expertise and negotiation of such institutional heritagisation practices as archivalisation and musealisation.

The findings also direct attention to that in order to facilitate diversification, institutions need to implement flexible information structures that provide support for user-generated information. This might require institutions to re-evaluate their approach to preservation and to open up for a more flexible method which recognises constructive forgetting and negotiation of heritage as part of their responsibility and day-to-day work with heritage collections. One of the biggest challenges for institutions is therefore how to tune in to such a more dynamic approach to heritage and how to prepare for participatorily generated suggestions and additions, while at the same time, keeping up with caring for integrity and preservation of heritage and heritage metadata.

One of the solutions proposed in the paper IV to this dilemma is to utilise the possibilities for incorporating complexity in digital structures. By increasingly working with more multi-layered structures that are able to document metadata-about-metadata (for example, to state provenance or time of edition) or extended possibilities to add contextual metadata, such as personal narratives, institutional information structures can be made to be more inclusive for participatory contributions. However, such complexity can also be expected to increase the demand for a more effective and flexible presentation of cultural heritage information to avoid exposing users, may it be experts or non-experts, to information overload.

Taken together, the described flexibility of institutional information structures can lead to a more *sustainable cultural heritage* in the sense that it can provide a solution that helps to create more inclusive cultural heritage for a more inclusive, democratic and conflict-free society. This could mean building an increased tolerance for contesting heritage meanings and accepting heritage negotiations. Acceptance of a messier heritage approach also entails the acceptance of change and even controlled and constructive destruction as a natural part of the heritage life cycle.

References

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