

# Social Media and Community Involvement in Museums

## A case study of a local history wiki community

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**Abstract:** *The article focuses on a study of knowledge creation and organizing in a local history wiki. The background for this study was to understand how web 2.0 and social media might open new possibilities for museums to collaborate with communities and lay professionals in cultural heritage knowledge creation. Digital technologies provide tools that in many ways overcome challenges of physical collaboration between museums and amateurs. But technologies also bring in new aspects of ordering, categorizing and systematizing knowledge that illuminates the different institutional as well as professional frameworks that writing local historical knowledge into digital forms in fact represents.*

**Key words:** Digital cultural heritage, wiki and social media, collaborative knowledge creation, online local history.

During the past twenty years, there has been considerable practical and theoretical interest in the relationship between heritage sites and communities, and we are facing many new initiatives undertaken by museums, archives and heritage institutions with a view to community involvement. These are profiling museums as responsive, democratic and reflective institutions that promote civil participation of communities actively (Stevens, Flinn and Shepherd 2010). The interest can be traced back to the promotion of community development ideas in the 1950s and 1960s, which was understood as an opportunity to involve civil society in public policy (Crooke 2007). In addition to creating social practices

that could transcend institutional borders, the involvement of communities has also become an ethical issue in the ICOM Code of Ethics – where museums are defined as being in the service of the community, respecting their interests and working in close collaboration with communities “from which their collections originate” (Crooke 2007).

Social media have lately been embraced due to their potential to meet with this call for museums and heritage institutions to be responsive, democratic and reflective and subsequently take “museum conversation” beyond the museum (Black 2010). We find a considerable amount of practical and theoretical studies of the ways digital

4 technologies are being used by museums to involve visitors and communities (Witcomb 1999 and 2003, Cameron and Kenderdine 2007, Parry 2009, Bowers *et al.* 2007). Many studies show how museums are comfortable using social networking technologies, such as Flickr, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and blogging, and are welcoming the possibilities these provide to invite communities and participants into dialogues and sharing (Dicker 2010). Meanwhile, social media are yet to have a significant impact on museums' overall strategic approach to communication and engagement with visitors, audiences and communities. Museum communication remains fundamentally one-to-many and has been slow to recognise visitors as active participants (Russo *et al.* 2007). Studies of blogs authored by curators suggest that such activities do not align easily with the physical practices of curators, which are still strongly linked to collections, objects and their stories (Dicker 2010). It seems that the integration of social media into museums' curatorial and pedagogical practices preserves a situation in which these media are primarily used to engage visitors in short-term voting and rating, or to engage communities in collecting images. Accordingly, the social and institutional boundaries established by authority, authorship and ownership challenge the relationship between museums and its communities when social media are introduced (Russo *et al.* 2008).

Meanwhile, numerous cultural heritage communities such as local history organizations and genealogical societies, organizations and NGO initiatives have integrated social media technologies into their practices. This article draws attention towards these cultural heritage communities outside, and interdependent of, the museums' institutional frameworks and the

way they integrate social media to invite members and registered users to contribute with their local knowledge as well as their stories of private experiences related to historical sites, objects and places. As introduction of social networking technologies may give communities a role in new relationships between museums, policy politics and the cultural heritage knowledge field (Stuedahl 2009), it becomes emergent to ask how communities use these technologies, and how social media support or constrain the interpretation and writing of history and heritage, as well as how they enhance the collaboration between community members.

Local history organizations have taken interesting directions enhanced by wiki technologies, and this article reports from an ongoing study of a Norwegian Media WIKI-based site for the production and sharing of local historical knowledge from numerous districts and small towns around Norway. Launched in 2008, the [www.lokalhistorie-wiki.no](http://www.lokalhistorie-wiki.no) project has collected over 9593 articles and 10174 photos,<sup>1</sup> written in collaboration between 700 lay and professional local historians who have registered into the wiki. This community collaboration provides an interesting case for studies of how wiki technologies frame knowledge building in heterogeneous communities and how the structuring, categorization, writing and production of representations of historical knowledge take place between amateurs and professionals within this framework. The article will seek to answer the following research questions: How does wiki technology enhance and constrain collaborative activities of writing history and categorizing historical site, artefacts, photos and events – building historical knowledge and facts?

As virtual communities in the cultural heritage sector are increasingly seen as supplementing institutional knowledge (Affleck and Kvan 2008), it seems imperative that collaborative approaches get explored in ways that allow institutions and communities to work on an increasingly even footing and to augment the leadership role played by community groups when establishing partnerships (Perkin 2010). The last research question therefore asks how existing wiki communities can inform involvement of communities in museums?

#### CONCEPTS OF COMMUNITIES AND INVOLVEMENT

The responsiveness museums have established to meet communities and the cultures they represent has taken many and diverging forms of re-contextualising and re-localizing cultural heritage objects and knowledge (Message 2006). Still, critical voices have been raised claiming museums are “floating above the community”, and are not as hospitable as we expect them to be (Hazan 2007). This points to the complex processes of boundary crossing and partial connections that collaboration between museum institutions and communities involves (Meyer 2010). These communities represent groups of people linked by a shared interest, who collaboratively build knowledge and negotiate facts about historical artefacts, sites and events outside the museum, but are still deeply related to the institutional frameworks that museums and heritage institutions represent. Also, the critique challenges the traditional understanding of museums as places that attempt to achieve some form of homogeneous order by classificatory, aesthetic or narrative means (Hetherington 1999), and push the issue of community

involvement in museums into considering new forms of collaboration as well as re-contextualising museums’ knowledge responsibilities into new forms of engagement and involvement.

The multiple forms of communities, community dynamics and social actions related to communities are highly linked to the character of community in question, as well as the perspectives used in studying them. Communities can be understood as social spaces for the formation of identity, they can be understood as tools in local and national government and they can be understood as a form of social action (Crooke 2007). The symbolic, the political and the civic communities are involved in societal and political processes at different levels, and as such ask distinguished and specific questions related to the type of knowledge building featured by community engagement. Models of engagement can be highly successful, but without caution can also result in unsustainable projects that might erode the trust of communities (Perkin 2010). Understanding the character of the community thus clearly deserves attention, as do its forms of engagement, how it comes to be assembled concerning the work, the politics, the materialities, the identities and the uncertainties that go into the formation and maintenance of a community (Meyer and Molyneux-Hodgson 2010).

Moreover, involving communities also calls for a deeper understanding of the knowledge building processes that are prevalent and that might affect involvement endeavours. Understanding communities in the heritage sector might need other perspectives and approaches than studying – for example – the involvement of communities in health sector policy. The notion of *involvement* of

6 communities also needs to be specified: is it part of a trajectory where communities are invited by museums into developing the knowledge frameworks for curating exhibition, or the societal activities related to visitor programmes, are communities involved in the collecting and documenting activities on a practical level, or are they involved in the indexing and categorizing of objects as well? These are only brief examples.

There are several related concepts of communities that are relevant for an analysis of cultural heritage communities, such as the one we meet in the local history wiki in our study. Overall, the different concepts point to different goals and orientations of the community, such as the policy-relevant knowledge denoted by the concept of epistemic communities (Haas 1992), which is used in studies of how activist groups and self-help groups are emerging in the health sector (Akrich 2010). Or the more activity-based concept communities of practice, which is a concept that involves the knowledge production that takes place in informal settings inside and between collectives. Communities of practice have developed a repertoire of languages, routines, sensibilities, artefacts, tools, stories, styles, etc. in building a shared understanding of what their community is about (Lave and Wenger 1991).

The notion of communities of practice has been used to describe the connections and collaboration between amateurs and professionals related to museums collection (Meyer 2010 and 2008) and exhibition development (Høg Hansen and Moussouri 2004), arguing that these also consist of partial connections in which participants not have clearly defined roles. These collaborations are based on the enrolment of lay people in the

professional knowledge building in museums, and have been used as examples in the discussion of re-thinking museums in terms of their relation to wider society (Meyer 2008). Collaborations between lay people and professionals is boundary work, in which the practices of amateurs and professionals are articulated, performed and protected. Protection of time builds one practical example, where amateurs collaborate in a different time frame from professionals. Collaborating in their leisure time, amateurs seem to refuse deadlines and devices that bind them to the time regime of museums' practices. For collaborators, deadlines can be disabling since they limit or at least clearly frame their activities. Also, amateurs' spatial situatedness leads to located performances of (for example) collecting data as based on other criteria than those used by professionals. Private life and the practical restrictions this poses for collaboration are one concrete example (Meyer 2008). When the museum and the collaborators work together, different spaces, times and practices are brought together – challenging the alignment and enrolment between amateurs and professionals.

There are multiple, varied, more-or-less-engaged and inclusive ways of being located in collaborative participation (Lave and Wenger 1991, Meyer 2008). Involving collaborators in the scientific work of museums makes it clear that the connections between amateurs and professionals are fragile. "When they do science, where they do science, how they do science and with what tools they do science is what differentiates collaborators from museum staff members and more generally, amateurs from professionals" (Meyer 2008: 48). Involving communities in museums' knowledge work may therefore produce demarcations between

amateurs and professional that requires boundary work.

Reports from projects that involve new communities, such as indigenous people, point to the inadequacy of standard collection documentation (see Verran et al. 2006, Verran 2007; Brown 2007; Witcomb 1997 and 2003; Cameron and Robinson 2007) as examples of how categorization involves boundary work when involving new collaborators. These studies also show how multiple categories can be integrated and play a role for involving new communities in the indexing. In historical studies of development of classification systems at Berkeley's Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, a more pragmatic view of categories as tools in boundary work is put forward. The studies show how understanding of categories might be heterogeneous in that they work as boundary objects, in the sense of flexible concepts that build a common framework for defined communities (Star and Griesemer 1989, Bowker and Star 1999). The development of categories in online cultural heritage communities, as well as the role of technology in this development, therefore makes an interesting entry point for understanding the role of technology as tools for boundary work and knowledge building between amateurs and professionals. We need deeper studies of how the online collaboration and knowledge building in fact takes place, to understand how time, space and materiality might have different shapes and roles in online communities of practice than in physical collaborations between museums and their communities.

#### WIKI AND CULTURAL HERITAGE COMMUNITIES

With the advent of digital technologies, new social practices emerge, such as user-led

content creation. New forms of community develop that are defined through voluntary, temporary and tactical affiliations and that are held together through the mutual production and reciprocal exchange of knowledge (Jenkins 2006). In what has been defined as convergence culture (*ibid*), everyone is a participant, although participants may have different degrees of status and influence. As with understanding online communities, understanding members as participants that are both producers and consumers of content has caused the evolution of new concepts to capture the co-creative engagement of online community members: "Producers engage not in a traditional form of content production, but in *produsage* – the collaborative and continuous building and extending of existing content in pursuit of further improvement" (Bruns 2008: 21). In Wikipedia, the *produsage* principle becomes clear in the work with unfinished articles in a continuing process. Related to wiki communities, the concept of *produsage* speaks directly to the perceived affordances of wikis as emerging knowledge spaces that are collaboratively created and edited, and where the form of knowledge representations significantly departs from encyclopaedia, which encapsulate the current state of accepted knowledge. The content creation of wiki spaces is an always incomplete and continuing process that relies on constructive participation. Contrary to the discussion of encyclopaedia, this builds an ability to arrive at a full and complete definition of any topic (Bruns 2008).

The concepts of *produsage* and co-creation may not give a basis for understanding the novelty of knowledge production in online cultural heritage communities *per se*, given that historical knowledge and memory have always been cumulative and modified through

8 articulatory practices that stand in relation to the context, as for example the technology (Reading 2003). Meanwhile, online heritage and the writing of history in wiki form require structuring and categorizing the past, and give room for establishing new structures that might give communities opportunities to develop their own indexing of knowledge.

#### WIKI COMMUNITIES – BRIDGING EXPERT AND LAY KNOWLEDGE IN LOCAL HISTORY

The wiki community we are studying was launched by the Norwegian Institute of Local History in 2008. This is an independent public institution partly financed by the Norwegian Ministry of Culture. Founded in 1955, the institute has kept its purpose of promoting local and regional activity through providing services, research and documentation with a focus that spans from local historical interest and engagement to professional and academic interest. The institute collaborates closely with the Norwegian Association of Local History, founded in 1920 and established by 421 local history associations, comprising 80,000 individual members among local historians in Norway. The political and historical background and goal for the community of local historians evolving at the local history wiki is therefore closely related to the Norwegian modern local history movement that took shape in the early 20th century. The cultural and ideological background can be traced back to the agrarian populist and national democratic movement of the time (Alsvik 1993). There was a reinforced local history trend from the 1970s onwards, connected to the general upsurge of (leftist) populism, regionalism and the emphasis on history from below (Burke 1992).

The Institute is connected to most history departments of universities and colleges in Norway, since staff historians have been engaged in major local history projects. In Norway, the publishing of “Bygde” books (book collections rendering the history of the rural, urban district or town) or the farm and family history accounting for individual farms and families are financed by public authorities of the municipalities and mostly written by professionals. In addition, approximately 300 local history annuals – in which local history amateurs dominate – are published every year.

The story of how the Norwegian Institute of Local History tried to provide technology to enhance community activities in several iterations informed us that efforts are needed to customize and match technology to actual community needs, ease of use and providing means for learning and development. As early as 2003, they opened a site on the Internet that was originally thought of as a site that could open up for collaboration with, and between, different institutions. This initiative was met with low activity and the institute reorganized the site to present the activities of the institute. In 2006, the institute started a local history network to connect people working with local history projects. These projects shared the common need for a methodology and solving practical problems. However, this initiative ended up being one-way interaction; the institute serving other institutions, organizations and people.

While considering re-editing the Norwegian Historical Lexica, the institute started to develop the idea of using a wiki format for organizing the contents. In 2008, they launched [lokalhistoriewiki.no](http://lokalhistoriewiki.no), which now has close to 900 registered users. Unlike a forum,

participating in a wiki requires that users are registered as clearly identified individuals. Individuals cannot participate in a wiki discussion without being registered. In addition, wiki collaboration is based on participants having different roles. These roles are defined by 4 “bureaucrats” for the wiki administration, 17 technical administrators and 12 vocational supervisors who help users with questions of method, defining source qualities, etc. as well as license questions, editing or closing pages – these being just some examples of the functions involved.

Reporting from the first steps of this longitudinal study of how the local history wiki is developing, this article will focus on how the co-construction of knowledge is evolving in relation to the development of concepts and categories that structure the wiki space. The wiki contains an own space for categorizing discussions. We have chosen an excerpt that evolved during summer 2010, in which professionals and lay historians negotiate about categories for ships, boats and marine vessels.

The discussion thread was started by one of the professional historians, beginning in June 2010 and stating that categorizing boat types is challenging, because most formal categories are built on categories in the registration systems provided by the Directorate of Fisheries, which does not cover all the historical boats and vessels in the Norwegian tradition. Pointing to the fact that in the future boats might be described in numerous articles in the wiki, the collaborator (here anonymised as AK) states that it might be wise to start making a system of categories that does not need to be reorganized. AK notes that a group from the west coast of Norway has started to build a structure of categories based on a registration structure on fishing boats provided by the local

museum, and publishes a hyperlink to the page as a proposal.

This structure contains information about localities in the municipality, formal category, attribute, name of the boat related to type of operation, name of type of boat, materials used in construction, building year, size, volume, name, year in which the motor was built, etc. The structure clearly captured both the material and the functioning aspects of the boat. All in all, the proposal suggested providing 15 subcategories for categorizing boats.

The request was immediately responded to by the administrators (anonymized as OU, SJ and IT), who discussed how the structure of categories could be built in more simple ways. Suggesting that marine vessels might be the main category, and then start building subcategories, the administrator OU tries to keep the amount of categories on a decent level. After some discussion with his fellow administrators, he suggests opening up for categorizing vessels after type. SJ asks how the type of vessels would identify the material character, the function and the use of the vessel. At this point, one of the collaborators points to the many vessels that are characterized by their functions (cargo ships, oil tankers, service –ships, etc.). At the end of the day the administrator OU proposes categorizing vessels by type, function, progress and construction.

Next day, the collaborator OH (the member of the community on the west coast that started the discussion, and also an active amateur expert in marine history) posts a new question into the discussion. He asks about using a structure of categories that is well known and widely used among people on the coast as well as in maritime communities. He points out that the index used by the Directorate is based



10 on well-known acronyms that have been used for 100 years, and that these concepts are integrated in the category system that his community has developed in collaboration with the coastal museum. He points to the importance of the system of categories used in the wiki being developed close to the categories that are well known and used in communities and museums outside the wiki – because, as he argues, it will be important that the concepts are used in their natural form in writing and storytelling.

The post from OH resulted in the administrator IT suggesting categorizing on the basis of type, function, material and construction. This was responded to by “Å”, arguing that this system will neglect the open traditional boats of Norwegian maritime history and suggesting that the categorizing enrolls type, function, material, construction and rig. Å also ends his post by pointing out that the wiki should develop according to normal thesaurus practice – and that it is important to clarify this early in the wiki discussion.

Two days later, the administrator IT asked whether the categorizing could start on a simple level – to be extended when it is clear what needs people in the wiki community have. Å answers by asking what would be fruitful for the wiki – seen in relation to the concepts used by management institutions such as the Norwegian Directorate for Cultural Heritage and the Cultural Heritage Act. The discussion thread ends here, and at the moment of analyzing this category discussion three months later, the *lokalhistoriewiki.no* has built the structures of categories related to vessels based on locality, vessel according to period and vessels according to type, and boat types.

## DISCUSSION

While the open structure of the wiki platform clearly provides the technological means that enhance the negotiations – crossing time, making the multiple contributions visible, providing access to participate in discussions from multiple viewpoints – it still seems that the administrators are given an important degree of authority, in that it is their responsibility to find solutions that solve the challenges of establishing a category structure that is simple and easy to use for all. It is also their job to find a granularity of categories professional enough to provide a conceptual level that makes the wiki sufficiently specific for professional knowledge building.

The vocational supervisors appointed by the Institute of Local History have the role of checking the articles to adhere to professional criteria, and they have competencies in history and/or in related fields. Supervisors can also discuss relevance, use of methods and questions related to resources with authors of articles in the wiki, and will check referencing, validity and source criticism related to published articles. The technical administrators have the role of adjusting wiki technology, helping new users and following up on new publications in the wiki. They can delete or re-publish pages, they can lock pages, they can block individual users, they edit messages in the system and they can import from other wikis. As such, they have a double role as both technical and administrative gatekeepers, and their boundary work contains technical and systemic challenges as well as professional evaluations.

The discussion of categorizing boats, ships and vessels mentioned above shows the importance of administrators (IT, S and OU) and supervisors (AK), who started the



discussion. We also see how the collaborators (OH, GE and Å) participate by providing their knowledge in the field. Interestingly, what we do see in this thread is that collaborators are not in the periphery of practice – instead they are in the centre of the discussion, providing their experience and practices as well as negotiating the quality level of categorizing a new field in the wiki. Being lay people, they demonstrate a high level of competence, and they also show how their competencies lean on formal indexical systems used by maritime institutions and museums. The argument of using existing indexing because this is what is well known to people indicates that the boundary between lay and professional knowledge in this field is not important for practical reasons. Rather than observing a boundary between lay and professionals in the categorizing of vessels, we observe a boundary related to the multiple requirements that are related to the wiki. We see how the role of wiki administrators to keep the amount of categories at a low level collides with the shared responsibility they have with the collaborators and supervisors to keep the quality of the wiki at a high professional level. As such, we need to study the practices of administrators of wiki in their endeavours to align conflicting interests and controversies to understand how the writing of local history and heritage crosses boundaries between communities, museums, institutions and technology.

Our observation of the negotiation of categories tells us that in fact we observe several communities of practice that are involved in building the knowledge space of the wiki; the administrators, the vocational supervisors and the collaborators. Each of these communities is involved in knowledge development with other communities outside the wiki. Developing a

policy of categorization for the wiki therefore becomes a complex alignment of diverging practices and considerations. The participants in this discussion thread are well aware that the outcome of the discussion, achieving a solid tree of categories that will structure future articles about marine vessels, will in fact decide whether this wiki will be interesting for coastal historians and historians of coastal culture as well as for communities and museums outside these. Because they are in positions of responsibility regarding the growth of the wiki, the participants in this discussion are therefore also aware that the discussion has a policy level. As such, the wiki community could be defined as an epistemic community that has a recognized expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge (Haas 1992), in which normative and principled beliefs inform the administrators, according to prescribed qualities of a wiki.

The knowledge building on *lokalhistorie-wiki.no* can as such be understood as being based on negotiating practices between several diverging communities – the community of historians as well as the community of wiki administrators. These negotiations become on the one hand an epistemic discussion in which the quality of knowledge structure will be an important part of building trust for new participants to become involved in the wiki community, as well as for building the wiki as a knowledge space that connects well with diverse communities. Apart from this constraint, we also see that the collaborative negotiations on *lokalhistoriewiki.no* enhance discussions that illuminate relations to institutional frameworks and to official knowledge systems as well as to multiple community knowledge. This might characterize

12 the cultural heritage field apart from the knowledge production in other wiki spaces, such as Wikipedia, and we need further studies to understand if and how cultural heritage communities differ in their uptake of technology and how this gives new opportunities for knowledge creation and sharing. For now, only brief contours of a complex and intertwined network of relations between actors, institutions and communities are drawn that calls for deeper understanding of the epistemic collaborations and reliance in the cultural heritage field. For museums to find entry points into these community negotiations, it is essential to understand what role they may fill and it might be necessary to turn the question of involvement around, asking how museums can be involved in the knowledge building of networked communities.

## NOTES

1. Statistics from January 2011.

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