

LIBRARY CATALOGUE IS NOT A COMMUNITY! USER CONTRIBUTIONS TO ONLINE SERVICES OF ARCHIVES, LIBRARIES AND MUSEUMS

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Abstract

The importance to provide users with a possibility to contribute to the online services of archives, libraries and museum and the chronic lack of popularity of such functions are two parallel truisms that contradict with each other. This paper reports of a pilot study of user motivations to contribute to online services of ALMs. The findings suggest that reasons to contribute vary considerably between individual contributors but also that many of the services provided by memory institutions are not necessarily considered by users as relevant arenas of engagement. It seems that the users and institutions alike have difficulties to pinpoint the role of the existing services. Two possible ways forward could be to focus on developing services with specific social relevance in particular well-defined contexts, and establishing, framing and communicating the social relevance of existing services in more explicit terms.

Keywords: user motivations, crowdsourcing, commenting, archives, libraries, museums, public sphere

Introduction

The importance to provide users with a possibility to contribute to the online services of archives, libraries and museums (ALMs) and the chronic lack of popularity of such functions are two parallel truisms that contradict with each other (Huvila, 2015). Commenting and contributions have been suggested to provide means to engage users, democratise ALMs, perform their role as public (memory) institutions (Jansson, 2017), improve collections and collection metadata (Graf et al., 2018), and to cut costs of the curation of the collections (Huvila, 2015). A number of case studies of projects eliciting and analysing user comments (e.g. Huvila, 2008; Liew, 2014; Ridge, 2014; Biella et al., 2015) can be found in the literature but significantly less is known about the motivations of

why users contribute to these services (exceptions e.g. Kipp et al., 2017; Liew, 2015). A similar lack of knowledge of motivations applies also to other forms of participation in the work of heritage institutions (e.g. Cushing, 2018). Engagement with ALMs can be at least partly motivated by same incentives than participation in other online services (cf. Crowston and Fagnot, 2018; Kipp et al., 2017; Semaan et al., 2015; Brabham, 2012) and communities, and commenting in a physical environment (e.g. Winter, 2018) but at the moment, little is known about the respective significance of different motivations and especially about motivations that are related to the public role of the institutions.

The aim of this paper is to survey the field and provide a starting point for future studies of user motivations to contribute to online services of ALMs. The study is based on an analysis of findings from an exploratory pilot study conducted as an online survey in Sweden and Finland.

Material and data collection method

The material for the study was conducted using an online survey targeted to individuals who had commented or contributed at different online services provided or hosted by ALMs including blogs, wikis, Facebook, Instagram and, for instance, Flickr accounts, without ruling any specific social media services out, maintained by these types of institutions. Commenting was specified in the invitation to include commenting, writing reviews and other types of contributions when individuals create or share new information related to the contents of the online service. Invitations to participate were distributed to relevant Finnish and Swedish ALM-related mailing lists and communities on major social media sites including Facebook, GoodReads and LibraryThing. In addition, major online services in the two countries, including Finna, Kirjasampo, Helmet, eKirjasto, Bibblan svarar, bokcirklar.se, makupalat.fi, platsr.se and Kysy kirjastonhoitajalta were contacted and asked to distribute the invitation in their channels. The survey questions focused on the motivations to comment and platforms where respondents made contributions (open ended questions), attitudes towards and views of comments and commenting (questions on a five-point Likert-like scale) and demographics.

Altogether (n=) 38 respondents took the survey. The mean age of respondents was 45.9 years with the oldest born in 1947 and youngest in 1999. 78.9% (30/38) of the respondents were female. They were highly educated with 57.9% (22/38) having earned a graduate degree. The mean of self-perceived social class of the respondents on scale from 0 to 10 was 6.1 (SD 1.9). 23.1% (9/38) of the respondents filled in the survey in Swedish and the rest in Finnish.

As a whole it is apparent that the data represents a very small convenient sample with an unknown bias. In spite of the limitations, it is still useful for a preliminary analysis of what types of motivations and attitudes towards contributing in online services held by ALMs individuals might have.

Analysis

The data was analysed by the author using descriptive statistics in SPSS 25.0. Open-ended answers were analysed using content analysis. The results of the analysis of the statements in a five-point Likert-like scale are reported in Table 1.

Table 1. Statements on opinions and views on comments and commenting.

Statement	N	Mean	SD
I am commenting regularly (in one or multiple services)	38	2.34	1.32
My comments are sincere	37	4.65	0.54
Me and others have an equal discourse power in commenting	37	3.68	1.06
I can comment freely on my own discretion without being restricted by moderators of the service or by other people	37	3.62	1.26
My viewpoint is influenced by other people's comments	37	2.86	1.21
Other people's viewpoints are influenced by my comments	37	3.16	0.93
My comments are read by people from different social groups	37	3.22	0.92
Other people's comments seem generally well justified	37	3.30	0.78
The possibility to remain anonymous can eliminate worries about commenting freely	37	3.89	1.17
The possibility to remain anonymous make commentators more equal to each other	37	3.27	1.19
The possibility to remain anonymous can decline the sense of responsibility of commentators	37	4.08	0.92
Comments are mostly respectful	37	3.51	0.99
Comments need to moderated more than at the present	37	3.05	0.91
Other people's comments seem generally trustworthy	37	3.35	0.92
Commenting complements the contents of the service you are using	37	4.00	0.88
Commenting prompts the services you use to become better	37	3.76	0.95
The possibility to comment is an instrument that contributes to the freedom of speech.	37	4.19	0.88
The possibility to comment is an instrument that contributes to democracy	36	3.81	0.95
Commenting improves the reliability of the services you use	37	3.54	0.93
Commenting renews the contents of the service I am using	36	3.58	1.02

The analysis shows that the most of the respondents considered that the comments are sincere, that the possibility to comment is an instrument that contributes to the freedom of speech, the possibility to remain anonymous can decline the sense of responsibility of commentators, and that commenting complements the contents of the service. At the same time, however, the most of the respondents indicated that they were not commenting regularly (even if there was some variation), or that their viewpoint would be influenced by other people's comments.

A categorisation of different motivations indicated by the respondents are reported in Table 2.

Table 2. Categorisation of the motivations to contribute.

Motivation	Mentions
Usefulness of comments	4
Interest in content	3
Community participation	3
Sharing of own experiences	3
Correcting mistakes	3
Strong opinions on the contents	3
Promote own opinions	2
Asking questions/information	2
Ease of commenting	1
Promote archives, libraries or museums in social media	1
Possibility to influence	1
Adding more information	1
Feels like a right thing to do	1
Contributing as a pastime activity	1

Among the most frequently mentioned motivations, there seems to be a fairly clear trend towards utilitarian and interest driven rationales together with an eagerness to share views when personal opinion on a particular item is especially positive or negative.

Services where respondents contribute are listed in Table 3.

Table 3. Online services where respondents have contributed.

Service	Mentions
Facebook	22
Online catalogue	13
Literature sites	8
Institutional websites	6
Kysy kirjastonhoitajalta (www.kirjastot.fi/kysy)	5
Instagram	5
Blog	5
Twitter	2
Kirjasampo (www.kirjasampo.fi)	2
Discussion forums	2
Youtube	1
Flickr	1
E-book portal	1

The most popular services mentioned by the respondents were Facebook and different online catalogue services with a commenting functionality. It is apparent from the data that some of the respondents answered on the basis of the contributions they had made on other sites than services hosted or maintained by ALMs including commercial literature sites such as GoodReads and private blogs. However, on the basis of the comparison of the responses between such respondents and others, it is unlikely that this bias would have a major effect on the findings of this study. A close reading of the open ended answers reveals, however, that respondents did not necessarily consider that the services provided by ALMs are especially relevant arenas for commenting and contributing. This view was supported by a series of comments on the survey itself where individuals asked for a possibility to take a survey on why they did not contribute to these particular services but did it elsewhere. There are also indications in the data that many of the respondents are archives, library or museum professionals with a direct vocational motivation to interact with these particular services.

Discussion and conclusions

The findings underline the earlier observation that a more systematic understanding of the motivations of contributing and commenting in the context of the web services of ALMs beyond anecdotal evidence from specific contexts and communities is needed. The significance of specific motivations vary a lot

between individual contributors and respondents see both opportunities and threats (similarly to earlier studies, e.g. Harju and Sainio, 2018) but there is still a rather strong consensus that commenting and contributing is relevant both as a form of engaging in content-related interests and as a social activity. Together the both findings relating to how commenting and contributing are perceived and the motivations suggest that the principal public value of the activities would relate, according to the respondents, to the production and elaboration of content rather than to the public value of an on-going discourse on these specific sites. This is not necessarily surprising in the light of how ALMs have been framed in the literature as institutions with documentation as their foundational cultural technique (Pagés, 1955; Buckland, 2017). Content production, or rather the use of things as documents, is how ALMs engage in public discourse rather than the other way round.

From the perspective of the development of participatory online services, probably the most significant finding of this study is that the services provided by memory institutions are not necessarily considered by users as relevant arenas of engagement. They are first and foremost conceived as findings aids and information repositories (as e.g. in Messo and Peltonen, 2017). The finding is in line with earlier observations of the uneven and generally low levels of participation in the online services provided by ALMs (e.g. Harju and Sainio, 2018). As one of the survey participants noted, a (particular) library catalogue “is not a community”. The requests, even if anecdotal, of the possibility to describe reasons of not contributing can be related to similar views. However, as the successful, both public and commercial initiatives to attract contributions from the public (e.g. Kipp et al., 2017; Ridge, 2014) demonstrate, the problem is not that it cannot be done. It is rather to understand and design effective incentives for participation, and defining and communicating a workable concept of the function of the online platform for its users. If the service is a catalogue for its users, the incentives for contributions cannot be the same as they would be for a community site. Incentives such as visible acknowledgements for significant contributions on the search listings, active elicitation of contributions as parts of events, or a possibility to earn minor rewards could be possible approaches to engage users in these contexts.

Apart from influencing the willingness to contribute, the particular ways of how an online service is perceived by its users have other repercussions. As demonstrated by the earlier literature, the experience and characteristics of the online space influences the discourse in them (Semaan et al., 2015; Janssen and Kies, 2004). Similarly, it has an impact to what extent the particular arenas can be expected to constitute a public sphere or a part of it, and to what extent they

remain as external to it. Quoting Raud (Bauman and Raud, 2015), it would be “really sad if [the] hope for the possibility of the public sphere turned out to be just an illusion contributing to the greater glory of the ‘system’ in the long run” (Bauman and Raud, 2015, p. 97) even if, or especially if, the system or activity would be either deliberately or unconsciously disguised and perceived as a public sphere.

In conclusion, the findings confirm the earlier suggestions that a more systematic understanding of user motivations is indeed needed for unraveling the potential and limitations of commenting and contribution functions in memory institutions’ online services. Otherwise it will be difficult to engage in mutual exchange and interpretation of cultural heritage (cf. Economou, 2015) and making this exchange a part of realising the public role of the institutions. The current results provide a basis for developing such studies. At the same time, the analysis seems to suggest that the users and institutions alike have difficulties to pinpoint the function and role of the existing services. Two possible ways forward could be to focus on developing services with specific social relevance in particular well-defined contexts, and establishing, framing and communicating the social relevance of existing services in more explicit terms.

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