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# BEHIND THE SCENES OF DIGITAL HERITAGE ACCESS PROMISES

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*by Zinaida Manžuch*

Large-scale digitisation has brought cultural heritage objects and materials from the remotest places of the world to our computer screens. At first sight, this innovation seems to make cultural heritage accessible to everyone like never before. However, technological advances have not eliminated social inequalities between powerful and marginalized communities and ethical issues in communicating cultural heritage. These issues became much more vivid and obvious when the spread of cultural heritage reached the global scale.

Having started several decades ago, digitisation of cultural heritage brought a widely praised promise of global accessibility of cultural materials for the benefit of learning, cultural diversity and dialogue, thoughtful re-connection with the past and enjoyment. Engagement with the vision of global accessibility of cultural heritage brought to life large-scale digital portals – such as Europeana, delivering over 50 million of cultural heritage objects to online users. With the European Commission Communication *i2010:Digital Libraries* (2005) that had a profound influence on the policies of member states, it was assumed that digitisation, online accessibility, and digital preservation of cultural content "will make it easier for citizens to appreciate their own culture heritage as well as the heritage of other European countries, and use it for study, work or leisure. It will thus contribute to complement and support the objectives of European Union action in the field of culture"[1]. In parallel U.S. Library of Congress with the support of UNESCO developed "World Digital Library" aimed at similar goals of promoting wide cultural dialogue and understanding and using digital content for a variety of purposes. Smaller or bigger national digitised heritage portals become almost mandatory attributes of promoting national cultures to mention few examples, such as Memory of the Netherlands, Digital Public Library of America, Deutsche Digitale Bibliothek, e.Paveldas in Lithuania, the native country of the author.

However, is cultural dialogue, understanding and diversity just a matter of applying appropriate

technological solutions? Currently, the growing number of reflections on inequalities reinforced by digitisation of cultural heritage shows that it is definitely not the case. There are lots of obvious and less visible subtle ethical issues behind the promise of global digital heritage access.

These inequalities and ethical issues have different manifestations. For instance, they expressed as silences or one-sided stories in the digitised collections of cultural institutions, like archives, museums and libraries (often called memory institutions). Communities that are treated as 'minorities', 'marginalised' or 'different' often face biased perspectives on their past in mainstream narratives delivered by memory institutions. It gave birth to digital community archives that employ digitisation to provide an independent and more comprehensive view on their own past[2]. On a positive side, the digital community archives movement, in line with the growing number of tools allowing internet users to generate digital content, inspired the vision of participatory cultural heritage institutions that would empower internet users to become co-creators of digital heritage collections and their interpretations. Although attractive, this idea is quite challenging in terms of accommodating and moderating conflicting perspectives on one's heritage and past, especially, when it comes to trauma experiences. Furthermore, the movement also should find a solution for ensuring accessibility of these participatory tools.

Another noticeable trend covers ethical issues arising in digitisation of cultural heritage of indigenous communities when the content is made public, unfairly exploited for commercial purposes or misinterpreted without consent of heritage originators. Interestingly, the World Intellectual Property Organisation advised digitisation as a tool for indigenous communities to protect their traditional knowledge and cultural expressions through recording them and becoming copyright holders[3]. Codes, guidelines and practices relating to the recording, digitization and dissemination of TCE. Accessed 22 May 2018 http://www.wipo.int/tk/en/databases/creative_heritage/ ]. Moreover, pre-dominant Western worldviews are reflected in the records about digitised cultural heritage of indigenous communities. These experiences led to lively discussions and questioning the neutrality so much valued in professional codes of ethics of archives, libraries and museums. Several working solutions emerged as a result of these professional reflections: e.g., developing cultural protocols to guide digitisation of indigenous materials and let originator communities execute control upon access and other decisions; designing digital platforms enabling the communities to manage their cultural heritage online (see Mukurtu), and developing new standards for description of indigenous materials in collaboration with heritage originator communities.

And finally, one of the most complicated digitisation promises is digital repatriation, or digital return of cultural collections that were displaced from communities that originally created and cultivated them. Digital return leads to further complications and increasing inequality when digital access conditions and literacy level of the community that should benefit from the use of digital collections are neglected. Inaccessible digital content, biased interpretations, lack of interest in sustaining such digitisation initiatives that are beyond the scope of national policies reinforce inequalities instead of

promoting inclusiveness.

To summarise, this snapshot of ethical issues and discussions in digitisation points to a larger lesson that is still to be learned – how to accommodate different perspectives, values and worldviews of myriads of communities to co-exist and communicate in our globalized world in a more inclusive and fair way. Rephrasing Ramesh Srinivasan in his recent book "Whose Global Village? Rethinking How Technology Shapes Our World" this lesson is about "what can be gained when we balance the local and the global in ways that respect the sovereignty of grassroots voices in informing global communication"[4].

Based on the materials of:

Manžuch, Z. (2017). Ethical Issues In Digitization Of Cultural Heritage. Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies, 4(2), 4.

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2. Flinn, A. (2007). Community histories, community archives: some opportunities and challenges. Journal of the Society of Archivists, 28(2), 151-176.
3. WIPO [no date
4. Srinivasan, R. (2017). Whose Global Village?: Rethinking how Technology Shapes Our World. NYU Press.

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