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Ambitions and relevance of the citizen humanities

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The citizen humanities address human culture and critically analyse ideas, values and assumptions by involving members of the public in academic research. Challenging values and assumptions is crucial for solving global challenges that require paradigm shifts. Illustrated by different citizen humanities approaches, this article demonstrates how the relevance and the ambition of the citizen humanities manifest in different ways. The citizen humanities may crowdsource academic research or consider a plurality of perspectives and knowledge, find research gaps together with participants or put paradigms (also in research) under scrutiny.

1.   Introduction

Citizen science enjoys increasing popularity in the natural sciences and is gaining ground in the social sciences and the humanities as well. Therefore, in addition to the term 'citizen science', the notions of 'citizen social science' [1] and 'citizen humanities' [2] are increasingly being used to differentiate them from natural science projects. Although the notion of citizen humanities is rather new, the contribution of members of the public to academic research in the humanities and to endeavours in the cultural heritage sector enjoy a long tradition [3].

While all these forms of citizen science have (the ambition) in common that they aim at advancing knowledge and gaining new findings, their objects and subjects of investigation differ. While the natural sciences address nature, the social sciences deal with social life and the humanities with human culture. In addition to the different research objects or subjects, these three fields of academic inquiry also rely on different paradigms and research methods.

2.   Defining the citizen humanities

The question arises: Why do we need a term for the citizen humanities if the term 'citizen science' is already established? One reason for this is related to language. For example, in the German language the term '*Wissenschaft'* encompasses all fields of academic inquiry, including natural sciences, social sciences and the humanities. However, in the English language, the humanities are excluded from the 'sciences' [4]. Therefore, coining the term 'citizen humanities' for citizen 'science' projects in the field of the humanities is reasonable. Moreover, it is worth noting that also other terms for the citizen humanities are used, such as "academic crowdsourcing in the humanities" [5].

Projects in the field of the humanities are also increasingly listed on citizen science project platforms, such as *SciStarter*, *Zooniverse*, *Bürger schaffen Wissen*, *Österreich forscht* or *Schweiz forscht*. There, projects from all fields of academic inquiry can be found. However, there are also project platforms that focus on citizen humanities projects only, such as *MicroPasts*, *Artigo* or *LanguageARC*.

3.   Examples of citizen humanities projects

Projects in the field of the citizen humanities engage participants in various tasks, ranging from critical discourse (raising questions, challenging and scrutinising existing paradigms, independent exploration by the participants, etc.) to forms of engagement that are more suitable for the 'crowd', e.g. transcription of (old) documents, annotation or cataloguing. The latter may be supported by gamification aspects [3].

To illustrate the different forms of participation in citizen humanities projects, some examples are given in the following. In the fields of history and archaeology, different approaches to citizen science can be observed. These approaches range from community-driven 'research' to researcher-initiated and researcher-led projects. The first category of community-driven research encompasses, e.g. re-enactment of historical events that require thorough prior research, or public history and public archaeology. The second category of researcher-led projects are usually guided by a research question or assumption. Here, participants may transcribe, annotate or categorize historical records or archaeological finds [3]. An example for the latter is *Scribes of the Cairo Geniza* project that asks participants to decipher medieval and pre-modern script fragments in Arabic and Hebrew. Here, the tasks include sorting of fragments according to script type and level

of difficulty as well as transcribing and finding key phrases. Since these fragments are available in a digital format, the 'crowd' can be asked to fulfil these clearly specified tasks from the comfort of their homes. This way, the participants help to shed light on human life of the past. Examples for community-driven research are local history research or genealogy, where persons engage in family history, trace lineages or compile and catalogue historical objects and records. Another example are persons without training in lexicography who collect lexemes in (local) dialects to create a dictionary.

4.   Ambitions and relevance of the citizen humanities

Since the humanities study human culture, also aspects of thinking, action and artefacts in humans are addressed in citizen humanities projects with the objective of critically analysing ideas, values and assumptions. By putting values and assumptions under scrutiny, the citizen humanities can contribute to solving global challenges, since the solution to societal challenges usually requires paradigm shifts in thinking, values, ideas and revalidation.

The tasks of the citizen humanists may encompass the raising of (new) research questions, challenging existing research paradigms or initiating and conducting explorations on their own. While these require a deeper engagement and long-term commitment of the participants, other forms of the citizen humanities may rather address the 'crowd'. In these projects, participants may not assume the same level of ownership of the project, since their contributions may be limited to small tasks, such as the transcription of (ancient) documents, specimen labels, etc. or the annotation, categorization or cataloguing of records. Moreover, citizens have been contributing in different ways to the GLAM (galleries, libraries, archives and museums) sector to preserve and analyse cultural heritage. When being conducted by cultural heritage institutions, projects may also focus on the preservation of cultural heritage (without a clear research question in mind).

In contrast to the natural sciences, the citizen humanities do not necessarily concentrate on the description and explanation of phenomena but rather on understanding, the relevance and situatedness of phenomena [3]. They aim at creating new knowledge about human culture, while (in some cases) they also unveil, process and make accessible hidden knowledge and data (also for future generations). The results may be new collections, platforms or visualisation methods as well as the adaptation of existing standards and infrastructures to non-academic needs. The citizen humanities may also aim at including a diverse range of local knowledge and expertise as well as a plurality of perspectives (also on research topics and research processes). Another objective in the citizen humanities may be to further develop critical thinking and the ability to constantly reflect on phenomena under investigation in a citizen humanities project. The understanding of phenomena and interrelations, competences of reflection as well as critical and networked thinking can help to instigate a change of values and behaviours that is needed to meet global challenges. If the universality of assumptions and values are challenged, phenomena can be interpreted in a different way.

Nevertheless, similar to (other) citizen science projects, the citizen humanities face several challenges. A challenge that may be rather characteristic for the citizen humanities is the recognition of the relevance of fundamental research (compared to applied or application-oriented research). Citizens may challenge the significance of a citizen humanities project if it does not have a direct application. This is also related to the added value of a project for society, which may have to be justified by the researchers. Therefore, a citizen humanities project needs to be

framed in a way that is meaningful to the participants, that shows both the academic and societal relevance and that demonstrates the added value to the participants. To achieve this, the research design has to be adapted to the framework conditions, and the mutual exchange between the researchers and participants emphasised. The citizen humanities can help reveal, acknowledge and use treasures of knowledge hidden in the GLAM sector, in the digital realm and the minds of people to achieve transformation, not also to tackle societal challenges but also provide impetus for change in knowledge systems and academia.

5.   Conclusion

The citizen humanities are already an integral part of the citizen science landscape. The challenges are similar to those of other citizen science projects, while researchers and participants are united by a common interest or passion for the research topic. The relevance and the ambition of the citizen humanities manifest in different ways, for example, by crowdsourcing academic research or drawing on the population's local knowledge, finding research gaps or putting research topics and research processes under scrutiny as well as considering a plurality of (critical) perspectives.

References

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