

Digital project meets analog community –

Expectations and experiences of a digital citizen science project on GDR history

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Abstract

Our Citizen Science platform aims to involve interested contemporary witnesses in order to gather information and sources about an everyday history of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) that are difficult to obtain using classical historical methods of research. The following article shows the discrepancy between project expectations and experienced reality in the interaction between society and science.

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1. Introduction

Current social, science-based and policy debates, as well as many funding initiatives, call for social participation in the scientific research process. Digital technologies have created new opportunities for a public science approach that enables dialog with an interested public to become an integral part of the research process: Science not only for the public, but also with or by the public (Smolarski and Speit, 2018). While Citizen Science is already firmly established in the natural sciences, the humanities, with a few exceptions, are often still at the beginning of this process (Göbel et al, 2020; Oswald and Smolarski, 2016; Finke, 2014). With the help of this dialogical model of interaction between science and the public, the development of a Citizen Science platform aims to activate and channel the public's interest in the humanities and social sciences through digital tools and also to productively integrate it into the research process (Carius et al., 2018; Pettibone and Ziegler, 2016). Based on the GDR cinematic history collection located at the Interdisciplinary Research Center for Historical Media at the University of Erfurt, this project aims to involve interested citizens in research processes such as data collection, processing and evaluation in order to obtain and bring to light new sources, material and knowledge.

2. Research Process

In detail, the project will give an interested public the opportunity to contribute their own experiences of cinema history during the period 1949 and 1990 to the research process with the help of a web application. The project is particularly interested in relevant documents, such as letters, newspaper reports and photos or very concrete facts about the locations of cinemas and film screening venues.¹ This will provide access to information and sources about an everyday history of the GDR that cannot be obtained in any other way due to the fact that many of these documents belong to contemporary witnesses and it is not able to be realized with classical historical research methods on this scale. The project is not only concerned with bringing new sources to light, but also with asking questions about the narratives and interpretations of meaning in which these sources are integrated. The ideas of the respective counterpart, which significantly influence the way of exchanging sources, are to be discussed and debated among an interested public.

This raises the question as to how to make the joint research and interpretation as convenient as possible for both sides. Furthermore, the possibilities of social participation will be explored by reconstructing the different narratives and constructions of meaning in which the knowledge is embedded and examining how these may relate to each other. Methodologically, the Citizen Science platform constitutes a central research tool for this project in the field of GDR history. As a method of accessing people's knowledge stocks and "knowledge things", the platform is an innovative instrument that can open up new dimensions of exchange.

It is therefore particularly important for this project to find an appropriate public that can be involved in the research process through the digital platform in the long term. Since the start of the project, this has been achieved through traditional channels of communication, such as informational events, press work and partnerships. In addition, the project has been promoted

¹ <https://projekte.uni-erfurt.de/kinoinderddr/index.php>

through well-known social media channels such as Facebook and Twitter as well as through a blog on our project webpage² and a digital project newsletter.

3. Results

The communication and science-based evaluation programs affiliated with the project have shown that although the potential outreach of a digital platform is considerable, the desired target group has not yet been digitally reached to the extent that was initially estimated. At the project kick-off event the participants, who had an average age of 54 and consisted of 42% men and 58% women, were asked how they had found out about the event. Nearly half of all respondents said they were told about the event through friends and acquaintances. Another third had found out in the daily newspaper and the rest via flyers. None of the participants became aware of the event via the specified digital channels, such as Twitter, Facebook or the project-blog.

Participants were also asked about the channels they would prefer to use to participate in the project. Approximately half of the participants chose the newsletter or the blog on our project page. Very few opted for the social media platforms. Interestingly, the majority of participants expressed a desire to attend further events and to talk in person about their cinema experiences. Moreover, the respondents indicated that there was a great deal of personal interest in the topic of "cinema in the GDR". In particular, keywords such as "childhood memories", "forbidden films", "DEFA", and "memories of films and actors" were listed most frequently when asked about their motivation for attending this event.

4. Discussion and Challenges

These findings were further developed within the project community on an interdisciplinary basis and are now being incorporated into the technological and infrastructural implementation of the Citizen Science platform. The new format "Stories" is now to be integrated in the project platform in order to generate a hybrid function between the narrative component and the uploaded sources. Here, interested contemporary witnesses will be able to share their personal cinema experiences and write their own individual texts and stories. In this way the advantages of digital communication can be used, all while respecting the preferred channels of participation indicated above and avoiding the potential rejection of the project.

In order to build a further bridge between the interested public and the project, narrative interviews and eyewitness surveys will be used to introduce the platform to members of the public who may otherwise not be aware of the possibility of their involvement. In addition to generating new sources and information, the goal is to redirect the interested public to the digital channels via analog formats in order to reduce reservations about getting involved. Furthermore, interest

² <https://projekte.uni-erfurt.de/ddr-kino/>

in participation will be actively increased with the integration of a ranking list and gamification elements.

The most suitable contemporary witnesses are people who have particularly exciting perspectives on the everyday history of cinema in the GDR. For example, contemporary witnesses who were active in the production of animated films have already been identified. People who ran their own cinemas in the GDR, who experienced cinema in the context of school, or for whom cinema simply had a special private or professional significance are also of particular interest to the project. The information obtained will then be made available to a wider public in the form of blog articles on our project page as well as presented on the platform in the form of information and source material. In this way the platform itself can be showcased as promotional material.

To date, apart from the project employees, more than 70 committed users are registered on the platform. They have entered more than 300 cinema locations and have already mutually validated a large part of them. The knowledge made available in this way thus functions both as a multiplier and as an invitation to the target group yet to be reached (Thomas et al., 2019). It is hoped that this will help to overcome digital barriers and to generate new knowledge on the Citizen Science platform. In this way, the project seeks to design and implement the entire research process of Citizen Social Science in a participatory manner.

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