

Open Public Humanities – towards linked open local history

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In the humanities, there are traditionally some subfields, like local and regional studies, where the engagement of citizens is responsible for a large part of the knowledge production. Currently, this work mostly follows traditional patterns of knowledge communication: publication in closed-access journals or by publishing printed monographs in very small editions. Works published in this way are therefore rarely perceived outside of the research community. Open and digital knowledge communication accompanying traditional channels not only increases the visibility of citizen science works but also facilitates their further use, reproduction and citability. A mix of open and digital methods is demonstrated by the example of the project "Kamptaler Sakrallandschaften": Complementary to the printed publication, all documented small monuments are recorded in a structured way in Wikidata, and the image material is stored under a free license.

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1. Introduction – through a jungle of terms

The public humanities are described as “oriented to nonspecialist audiences and nonacademic careers”.[1] The citizen humanities subsume the practices of public engagement in scholarly research and production: “Although the term is new, the concept of public participation in the humanities and in activities of cultural heritage institutions is old.”[2] The line between public and citizen humanities and various other terms in the field of public engagement in the humanities is fuzzy and not in all situations very useful.[3] Both concepts overlap at least in the claim to gain knowledge in the society. To reach this target, openness became a core principle of making both access to knowledge (open access) and the production (open data, open methodology) of knowledge itself more inclusive for a wider audience.[4] Also the seventh principle of citizen science published by the European Citizen Science Association defines that citizen science projects should be published (both data and final publications) “publicly available and [...] in an open access format.”[5]

In this paper the term “Open Public Humanities” could be also understood as “Open Citizen Humanities” – it makes no difference. The aim of open public humanities is to engage both citizen scholars and academic scholars in the field of the humanities to make their whole scientific process more open. To make use of the concept of open science: Make data publicly available (which means more than “free” online access), use open software and platforms like Wikis or Git[6] to make the research process transparent and traceable and also to document the results with such tools. These tools and platforms can be used as open platform, like contributing data and knowledge in the “Wiki*Verse” on Wikipedia, Wikimedia Commons, Wikidata or any other Wiki*Project or you install your own MediaWiki yourself. The same about Git. Use Gitlab or Github as version controlled and collaborative platforms to share data, files and knowledge.

2. The paradigm of the printed work

The “printed work” in form of “edited volumes and (online) journals which are (still) in great demand in the humanities.”[7] To analyze the scientific output of the public or citizen humanities with quantitative approaches like the analysis of scientific databases like Social Science Citation Index could go in a wrong direction. It could be possible that a huge number of works are published as grey literature or totally independent online with less or no interaction and linking to academic databases.[7] “The paradigm of the printed work” could be understood as a working hypothesis: in the citizen humanities, especially within local history written by citizens, the printed work (monograph or publication in closed access journal with printed edition) has a huge value. In a certain way to have a printed book seems for some local historians a great motivation to do their research, at least with such a physical product at the end, they have something to demonstrate other people, how many work they have done. Forms of online publications and furthermore publication formats under open license are fairly unknown. Such printed works were published outside the professional publication market and processes in small editions as “grey literature”.

For regional libraries collecting such grey literature produced through engaged citizens is a worthwhile but labour-intensive task. The publication of new works assumes the knowledge of the organizational structure of citizen science within a defined region (e.g. local museums or associations of local historians) and a detailed monitoring of regional press, where such

publications are announced irregularly. But not each private, unknown publication could be detected and brought into the library's collections. Maybe that is one of the reasons why libraries became more active themselves in the place of citizen science. Citizen humanists are one of the long-standing parts of the classical audience of libraries and archives. Starting to communicate more actively with this user group, libraries could offer them new possibilities in online and open science publication formats. Helping them to find the best publication form and to get a new audience in the own discipline, especially if the libraries play the role as a knowledge hub and meeting point for engaged citizens.[8]

3. Use Case

To get a better insight about the possibilities and opportunities of the transformation of classical printed publications in the citizen humanities to a more open and re-usable publication format a use case will be exemplified.

In the year 2020 the local history museum "Zeitbrücke" in Gars am Kamp announced online that the head of the museum Anton Ehrenberger started a project to catalogue all wayside shrines with the Kamptal region around Gars am Kamp and was planning to publish this illustrated inventory as a printed book.[9] This announcement was for the author of this paper the starting-point to ask for a cooperation and to make the whole inventory accessible in an open and re-usable way. Within two years all the small buildings were catalogued in Wikidata and the images were uploaded to Wikimedia Commons under a creative commons license.[10] Instead of making an own website with database and file storage, the "Wiki*Verse" allows both: bring all the data of this project in and re-use it directly or in any other (web-)based project for presentation.

The Wiki*Verse, with the online encyclopedic project Wikipedia is one of the best and well-known examples of citizen scientific engagement.[11] Wikidata as a free collaborative knowledge base[12] is an exciting place to store such structured data as it was given in the local history project about wayside shrines. A wayside shrine could be described by many different other concepts, e.g. the locational entities of the building (e.g. country, region, city or municipality, village), a creator, significant events (construction, renovation, destruction) or the motif. For many of those entities Wikidata knows already items, so a new wayside shrine could be easily linked to all its describing entities.[10] The data model is flexible and dynamic and both data and structure are licensed under CC-0.

The chance that in twenty years the Wiki*Verse with all its projects and content is still available seems to be much higher than by every self-hosted website. The content of all Wiki projects is part of so many other applications and content, that it could be understood as one of the central pillars of the entire internet. So, if a new research about wayside shrines in Kamptal will be done in ten, twenty or thirty years, the future citizen scientists could easily start with a big interoperable dataset with a detailed referenced corpus looking about differences: which buildings are missing, which ones have changed and all the images could be re-used.

4. Conclusion

Within local and regional history studies as a classical field of citizen humanities research results are still mainly published as printed work, often as grey literature in small editions without great coverage in libraries or indexing in scientific databases. Such publications cover a lot of knowledge but run the risk to fall in the long run under the threshold of perception, they are hardly

re-usable or even quoteable. Especially for the humanities data often could be stored and described in knowledge graphs, which allows a better re-use and analytic insights which hasn't detected by the research creators themselves. The possibilities of open (scientific) frameworks like Wikis of Wikimedia could be an interesting way of making the research in all its facets, that means the publication itself but also all the data including images, open accessible under free licenses like Creative Commons. Open research and data the "Wiki-way" will allow to start collaborative work or at least to make it easier for future scientists to reference and cite a certain work, to reflect about the research done or even to rebuild, rethink or make some corrections and additions if necessary. Citizen humanists are often motivated through having a printed publication at the end of their work; maybe if they get the experience how it is to be cited and re-used, that could be a good reason and motivation for many people to spend their valuable time for citizen science.

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