A grassroots initiative for digital preservation of ephemeral artefacts: the Ghostsigns project

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ABSTRACT
Interest in the potential of crowdsourcing in the cultural sector is growing. Research has been focusing on crowdsourcing initiatives launched by organisations for commercial (e.g. Amazon Mechanical Turk) and for non-commercial purposes (e.g. Wikipedia). Intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors have been also largely explored. Nevertheless the territory of crowdsourcing grassroots initiatives seems still underexplored, as well as the related motivational factors. The paper presents the preliminary findings on the motivations to contribute to the Ghostsigns project which started as an amateur initiative, before becoming included in the formal collection of the UK History of Advertisement Trust. This work suggests that cultural institutions could benefit from understanding what makes grassroots initiatives work in order to design better ways to facilitate active engagement.

Categories and Subject Descriptors
J.5 ARTS AND HUMANITIES

General Terms
Human Factors.

Keywords
Crowdsourcing, motivations, cultural heritage.

1. INTRODUCTION
Wikipedia is commonly cited as an exemplar crowdsourcing project, despite the considerations of Jimmy Wales, one of its co-founders: "One of my rants is against the term 'crowdsourcing', which I think is a vile, vile way of looking at that world. This idea that a good business model is to get the public to do your work for free - that's just crazy. It disrespects the people. It's like you're trying to trick them into doing work for free". The notion of crowdsourcing has been broadly adopted and used to define different crowd-solved tasks operations, but it seems to be ambiguous: it certainly derives from the process of outsourcing part of a business activity to an external provider, but it has been used to identify a wide array of initiatives, even when no rewards are foreseen.

The *Ghostsigns project* represents one of those "no rewards" examples (Ghost signs are the typically faded remains of advertising that was once painted by hand onto the brickwork of buildings). Whereas many examples of crowdsourcing launched by GLAMs (Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museums) are well known [1][4], the Ghostsigns project is a bottom-up initiative, started by a single person, spread thanks to the social software, and subsequently reconfigured and included in the History of Advertisement Trust (HAT) collection.

Research has largely focused on crowdsourced institution-driven projects, attempting to define a taxonomy of the initiatives [4] and the extrinsic/intrinsic motivations to contribute [2][3]. However crowdsourced grassroots initiatives are still underexplored [6]. The limited research in this area shows that those initiatives "are generally more successful in interacting with their relevant online communities than memory institutions are"; hence they "can inform the library, archive, and cultural heritage community about best practice in constructing online resources, and reaching relevant audience in the process" [6].

Focusing on the motivation of the contributors, the paper argues that the case of the Ghostsigns project may generate valuable recommendations. It also suggests there is a value in further investigation of the crowdsourced grassroots initiatives, as good practice to promote the active engagement of the general public in the cultural heritage domain.

2. THE GHOSTSIGNS CASE-STUDY
2.1 Context
In 2009 the partnership between the Ghostsigns project and the HAT led to the creation and launch, in March 2010, of the Ghostsigns online archive, documenting over selected 700 digital records of the original artefacts in United Kingdom and Ireland. The archive has been built through the collective contribution of 560 photographers, who have been sharing over 5700 pictures through a dedicated Flickr group, active since 2009. The creation of the photos collection answered the need to preserve, at least digitally, the original artefacts. The Ghostsigns project was launched by Sam Roberts who, having a personal interest in the wall painted signs, started to ask friends and family if they had photos or information on Ghostsigns. Going beyond the word of mouth, in 2007 he created a blog to spread and gather information and, in 2009, he created a Flickr pool and contacted Flickr members (who were sharing advertisements wall signs photos). Beyond the Flickr pool, the Blog and the websites, the Ghostsigns project has benefited from the deployment of other Web 2.0 tools: notably Facebook (428 members), Twitter (229 followers) and YouTube.

2.2 Method
An online survey was carried out between the 9th and the 31st July 2011. The investigation aimed to explore the acquaintance and use of social media within and beyond the Ghostsigns initiative. 631 members of the Ghostsigns project mailing list were emailed to participate. The survey was also posted on the Ghostsigns Blog and notified to the: 428 Facebook fans, the 229 Twitter followers and the 560 Flickr members. A total of 103

questionnaires were received (closed/open form), representing a response rate of 16.3% (considering the mailing list contacts), which is typical compared to similar studies [2][3]. The content of the open questions on 1) the motivation to contribute and 2) the interest in ghostsigns have been explored.

2.3 Findings

The preliminary findings of the ongoing analysis are based on 67 participants' responses on the motivation to contribute photos to the Ghostsigns projects and on the 101 participants' responses on their interest in ghostsigns.

The feedbacks have been analysed and classified (Figure 1). The participants provided more motivations to contribute. Almost half of them declared that "sharing" (45%) was the main reason for their engagement. Another reason was to accept the invitation to contribute, received by the Ghostsigns project (37%), as well as to support the initiative (25%). Preserving the artefacts, at least digitally, represented a minor reason (18%), as did the personal interest/satisfaction to contribute (16%).
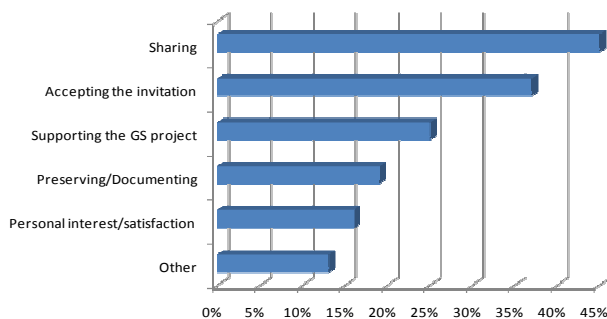

Figure 1. Motivations to contribute

Related research on motivational factors highlights the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. Intrinsically motivated activities are defined as those that individuals find interesting and would do in the absence of operationally separable consequences. Intrinsic motivation concerns active engagement with tasks that people find interesting and that, in turn, promote growth. When extrinsically motivated, people behave in a manner that attains a desired consequence such as tangible rewards or to avoid a threatened punishment. Comparing the current results to similar research, this work seems to confirm that intrinsic motivations are the main drivers of online active participation in the cultural heritage domain.
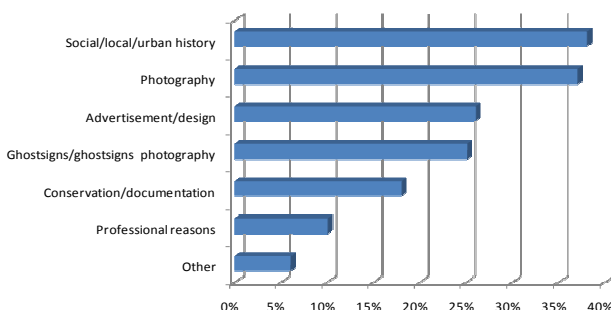

Figure 2. Interests in ghostsigns

The correlation between active engagement and personal interest is substantiated by the survey response on the participants' interest in ghostsigns (Figure 2). They expressed their interest in social/local/urban history (38%), in photography (37%), in advertising (26%), and in conservation/documentation (18%). 10% declared that they were interested for professional reasons; while the 25% emphasized their particular interest in ghostsigns and/or in ghostsigns photography.

3. CONCLUSIONS

The paper argues that the motivational factors in crowdsourcing initiatives, in the cultural sector, are largely intrinsic and need to be further investigated discretely from other crowdsourcing initiatives for commercial purposes. It would be interesting, as further research, to make a distinction between crowdsourcing initiatives for commercial and for non-commercial purposes, as well as between organisation- and non-organisation- driven, and compare the motivations of the contributors. "Harnessing the energy, passion, and interest of amateur digitization is of clear interest to the cultural and heritage sector" [6]; this paper suggests that cultural institutions could benefit from understanding what makes grassroots initiatives work to design better ways to facilitate active engagement.

4. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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