#iziTRAVELSiCilia, a Participatory Storytelling Project/Process: Bottom-Up Involvement of Smart Heritage Communities

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ABSTRACT

Launched in May 2016 on the izi.TRAVEL platform, the participatory project #iziTRAVELSiCilia has been recognized as a best practice of digital promotion and valorisation through storytelling and participatory processes. Involving thousands of people, in just over two years over 170 audioguides have been produced. #iziTRAVELSiCilia has become a real model of participation in the co-creation of cultural values, by practicing the principles set out by the Faro Convention, so revealing a serious impact on civil society made by this platform and its technologies. This project was soon transformed into a participatory process, involving just all the “heritage communities” cited by the Faro Convention and transforming them into smart heritage communities, from regional and local authorities to schools, without distinction of greatness and importance of heritage, but with the common aim of enhancing it.

KEYWORDS

Applications, Co-Creation, Creativity, Cultural Value, Digital Heritage, Digital Museums, Digital Storytelling, Faro Convention, Participatory Museum, Platforms

INTRODUCTION

This paper will address the participatory approach in the cultural heritage domain through participatory web platforms.

Specifically, the author will show how participatory methods and storytelling techniques have been used within the izi.TRAVEL website and app to promote digital cultural heritage, focusing on the pilot project in Sicily (Italy) known as #iziTRAVELSiCilia.

The first aim of the project was to use izi.TRAVEL as a digital tool to improve digital cultural contents for cultural heritage promotion, filling the well documented gap of Sicilian cultural heritage communication (Bonacini, 2012a).

The second aim was to set up good practices of participation and co-creation of digital cultural contents around museums and institutions. It implied the creation of museum audio-guides and audio-tours for cities and territories, involving all the “heritage communities” willing to join the project.

As declared by the Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society, well-known as the Faro Convention, in fact, knowledge and use of heritage are part of the citizen’s right to participate in cultural life as well as all the other Human Rights, defined in the Universal Declaration (1948) and guaranteed by the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966).
Cultural heritage contributes to the social, cultural and economic communities’ development, based on principles of a sustainable resource use.

The main purpose of the Convention is about integrating existing international instruments to strengthen the synergy between the “heritage communities”. These communities are called upon to cooperate with one another in order to promote a wide participation in the preservation and enhancement of the European cultural heritage. The introduction of the concept of “heritage communities” is, therefore, also an essential step in the Convention: “a heritage community consists of people who value specific aspects of cultural heritage which they wish, within the framework of public action, to sustain and transmit to future generations” (Art. 2b). Therefore, public institutions, as well as cultural associations, private citizens and so on, can be all considered heritage communities.

In introducing the notion of “heritage community”, the use of the word “people”, according to Zagato (2015):

...is decisive to emphasize the collective profile of the notion. The choice is confirmed by Article 4a) and b), dedicated to rights and responsibilities. The Parties recognize that: a) everyone, alone or collectively, has the right to benefit from the cultural heritage and to contribute towards its enrichment; b) everyone, alone or collectively, has the responsibility to respect the cultural heritage of others as much as their own heritage, and consequently the common heritage of Europe (p. 147).

By recognizing “the need to put people and human values at the centre of an enlarged and cross-disciplinary concept of cultural heritage” and “the value and potential of cultural heritage wisely used as a resource for sustainable development and quality of life in a constantly evolving society” (Preamble), the Convention invites, finally, the signatory parties to “foster an economic and social climate which supports participation in cultural heritage activities” (Art. 5d). And it also fosters them to “encourage everyone to participate in the process of identification, study, interpretation, protection, conservation and presentation of the cultural heritage” (Art. 12a).

This premise on the Faro Convention can be useful to frame the #izitravelsicilia project as a socially, culturally and intelligently sustainable heritage action. It can be considered similar but more innovative compared to other local heritage communities’ case studies, as those of Marseilles in France and Venice in Italy, where local people were involved in bottom-up narrative processes (Vattano, 2014); or the ones in the Balcan region, where local people need to rebuild their identity (Fairclough, Dragičević-Šesić, Rogač-Mijatović, Auclair & Soini, 2014).

Consequently, the author adopted the concept of “cultural democracy”, as defined by Evrard (1997) and Matarasso and Landry (1999), for some specific activities which have been carried out through this project: promoting the right to culture for everyone; encouraging pro-active participation in local cultural life; making accessible to everyone cultural resources and contents related to Sicilian heritage.

The goal of the project was to share knowledge by democratizing cultural contents (such as museums’ collections or data on archaeological excavations) and languages with a bottom-up project. But it also aimed to demonstrate how a participatory platform can provide new models of co-creation, storytelling and user engagement for museums and cultural institutions. Therefore, the principal aim of this project was to create and develop cultural participation, citizenship and social cohesion, by promoting new forms of relations between people and their heritage.

The paper specifically explores the methods and the results obtained by the #izitravelsicilia project in involving local heritage communities through a regional-scale participatory process. More than 3,000 people have been involved, from school children to museum directors (with an unbalanced
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