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Enhancement of niche cultural and social resources through crowd-contribution: the creation of the Ghostsigns online archive

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The History of Advertisement Trust (HAT) exists to collect and preserve the heritage of the UK advertising industry and to make it available for research and study. In March 2010 the HAT archive and library launched the Ghostsigns online gallery hosted on <http://www.hatads.org.uk>. Ghost signs are the typically faded remains of advertising that was once painted by hand onto the brickwork of buildings. Ghost signs initially appeared towards the end of the Industrial Revolution in the later years of the 19th century and eventually became widely popular in the first half of the 20th century. Their use declined from the 1950s onwards when the economics of production swung in favour of mass printed posters and billboards. This paper is part of an ongoing research project designed to explore interactions in social networks - mainly through online ethnography - in order to define the emerging connection model, thus enhancing knowledge circulation and co-creation and “lifewide” learning. From Wenger’s paradigm of the community of practice, theorised before the epiphany of the Web 2.0, through to Gee’s notion of affinity space, mainly linked to an identified territory, real or virtual, the research aims at shaping the new social configurations based on active involvement in cloud-based collaborative spaces. The interdependence of digital technologies and social facets is assumed in the paper: material (information, artefacts, etc.) and social (practices, interactions, etc.) factors are entangled and cannot be framed separately. The Ghostsigns online archive represents an inspiring case-study: documenting over 700 digital records of the original artefacts in United Kingdom and Ireland, it has been built based on the collective contribution of over 500 photographers who have shared over 5000 pictures through a dedicated Flickr group. First findings corroborate the “Pareto principle” in the Web 2.0 participation: most of the uploaded photos were provided by a small percentage of contributors. Furthermore, the results of the research, confirmed by the Ghostsigns case, indicate that participation in social networks seems “liquid” in the Bauman’s sense and a “variable geometry” connection paradigm is emerging in the cloud-attendance. The Ghostsigns project <http://www.ghostsigns.co.uk> has benefited from the continuous development and implementation of a mix of Web 2.0 tools (Blog, Facebook, Twitter, etc.), involving a relevant group of interest for an initially two-year run, niche initiative. While the opportunities of assembling archive complementarities for reuse must be further investigated, the outcomes demonstrate that past and present cultural and social assets can now be preserved (at least digitally) and valued thanks to open source software, social networks and crowd-contribution. The analysis of the cloud-based applications and the contributors’ profiles and engagement factors within the Ghostsigns experience, pave the way to the representation of a reference framework for the creation of cloud-based and crowd-contributed archives, notably for local collections, open-air artefacts, minor arts and ephemeral heritage. Although crowd-sourcing is an increasing research area, the impact and potentialities of crowd-contribution for humanities and art appear still underexplored.

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