

Pille Runnel / Pille Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt /  
Piret Viires / Marin Laak (eds.)

# **The Digital Turn: User's Practices and Cultural Transformations**



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## The Challenge of the Digital Turn

*Pille Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, Pille Runnel, Marin Laak, Piret Viires*

The past fifty years or so have seemingly been a whirlwind of turns. There have been discussions in the social sciences and humanities about the linguistic turn, the cultural turn, the pictorial turn, the cognitive or performative turn. Doris Bachmann-Medick (2006) has found that the cultural turn can be divided into seven distinct turns: the interpretative turn, the performative turn, the reflexive/literary turn, the postcolonial turn, the translational turn, the spatial turn and the iconic turn. Most of them can be considered turns in scientific rhetoric and the apparatus of understanding, expressing new, transdisciplinary approaches which have enabled reconstruction of the objects of research and discovery of new ones. However, this book looks at the digital turn, in which, in addition to the changes in scholarship, ‘digital’ definitely also has a material and formal aspect to it, a significant shift not only in the forms, environments and technologies, but also in the much deeper influence on the socio-cultural relations and interactions that these new forms and environments support and foster.

The book you are currently holding has two sections: User’s Practices and Cultural Transformations. The aim of the book is to discuss how the digital turn in the cultural field has resulted in increasing attention being paid to users and their practices of consuming and creating digital content. At the same time this has resulted in some remarkable transformations both in cultural institutions as well as the forms and modes of cultural content.

The digital turn hereby implies that changes in the use and application of digital technology bring on changes in practice and in the relationships between cultural institutions and audiences. We approach the changes in society from the structural (institutional) as well as from the agential (audiences, users, individuals) perspective. Although it is clear that the rising importance of the digital or the new media influences cultural representations as well as forms of cultural participation and socialisation, the digital turn does not mean turning away or turning to a new direction of culture. The authors represented in this book share the view that there is no fear of new media pushing aside traditional cultural forms, acknowledging at the same time that the scope of this cultural change, involving both the digital and non-digital, is still far from understood (Lauristin). By offering their insights into this question, many of the authors in this book argue that the digital turn can be conceptualised only if seen as a part of the wider dynamic – the turn incorporates both digital and non-digital aspects of culture. Instead of celebrating a digital revolution we argue that what



we are seeing are evolutions within the cultural processes where the digital is only a part of the overall change.

The book brings together components of the classic model of text, producer and reader (Hall), where the practices embody the reading and producing of cultural heritage. These practices are seen as being on the intersection between individuals and structure, the embodied sets of activities that humans perform with varying degrees of regularity, competence and flair (Postill). In this book, the institutional practices and user (visitor, audience, author, etc.) practices meet.

User has a very open meaning in this book. On the one hand, users are ‘people who use’ the (digital) content of the heritage institutions, on the other hand, the usage itself is seen not as a passive consumption, but it has a distinct part in active meaning-making, production and participation.

The heritage institutions themselves can be seen as active users of existing digital environments (e.g. Facebook in the chapter by Schick and Damjkaer), creators of digital environments (e.g. Laak) as well as participants in cultural creation (Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt and Runnel). This points to the blurring boundaries of users and producers summarised often in terms ‘producers’ or ‘prosumers’. Users have the capacity to change existing understandings of cultural resources by adding layers of information to institutional representations (Casado-Neira) and challenge the public and the private through personal identity management, simultaneously flaunting and hiding information (Koosel). While several of the authors in this book discuss how the individual meets the institutional, Bannier and Vleugels look, in their study, at how in the framework of Web 3.0, the cultural content generated by institutions and users collides with a third kind of cultural content, generated by machines, an opportunity offered by the development of a hybrid, semantic and intelligent web.

These examples also point to the blurring boundaries of the institutional and individual, the contestations of the structure and agency dichotomy as the institutions become agents and individual agents become parts of the structural fabric of cultural institutions.

Despite this we must not forget that while a multitude of examples support the understanding of the user per se as a participant in cultural processes, digital heritage does not automatically lead to an interactive and participatory culture, as Mostmans and van Passel show. This book offers critical insights into the user as a participant by questioning, especially in the context of cultural heritage institutions, how much the availability of heritage content actually triggers or facilitates participation. Sometimes, the usage of cultural content is still limited by basic questions of access, and as Weisen shows in his article about the accessibility of digital culture for disabled people, the issue of access is still far from being solved.

From the memory institutions' perspective, the digital turn is closely connected to the representation of current cultural heritage. New research looks at the issues of digital memory, approaching the new media environment as a memory space. This aspect of memory and remembrance brings an additional, diachronic, dimension to storytelling and new forms of storytelling emerge in literary and cultural historiography (Laak).

Different chapters of the book discuss the transformation of culture through a variety of practices on the one hand made possible through digital technologies, and on the other hand, brought to light and made visible because of other changes in society. Thus many chapters discuss the possibilities of participation within these cultural institutions not only enabled by digital technologies, but as an indication that participation is an important issue also without technological components (Carpentier; Olsson and Svensson) and can happen in different ways. As a part of the same discussion, Kaun and Östman direct attention to the idea of the playful and fun as a way to foster engagement and belonging.

In this book, the archives, libraries and museums meet authors, individuals, tourists. The sociology and media studies perspectives meet the historical, literary and philosophical traditions. The aim of this diversity is to bring together different perspectives between the same covers, to share the positives of the interdisciplinary approach and to bring attention to the diversity of the field. The book takes the theoretical perspectives and examples of good practices and translates them into some universal ideas. At the same time, the forever-questioning nature of research translates into critical and analytical accounts of these practices. It keeps on asking whether the promises of new forms of culture, new online environments and changes in production and reception practices are significantly new. As the chapters in this book point out, different institutions are facing similar struggles, and not only can the best practices for the museums be found in other museums, but as Olsson and Svensson demonstrate we need to learn from others as well. They use the example of Moderskeppet, a web company representing the commercial sphere, analysing it as the best web practice to highlight the importance of interactivity and public contribution.

The discussions about the digital have mainly focused on the influence of technologies on the content – the artefacts, the texts and materials that have been made available online. In this book literary scholar Raine Koskimaa highlights how the invention of hypertext has given rise to a changed conceptualisation of the text itself. This, he argues, makes cultural logic gradually give way to the new logic of Castells's "Internet Galaxy". Koskimaa is supported by Markku Eskelinen, who moves away from the old cultural logics (represented by traditional theories of inter- and transtextuality) and brings to our attention the new types of

relations between and within texts as well as theorising them from a cybertextual perspective.

We feel that the digital and overall participatory transformations within society have called for increasing attention to the people. from the people. Often the new aspects of the digital technologies are seen to be inherently social. The new Web 2.0 is conceptualised through contributory and participatory aspects of cultural production. However, in this book, in the context of literature and cyberspace, Viires and Sarapik bring to our attention the fact that the creation of digital text can still be analysed from the perspective of essentially individual and solitary processes. This is important despite the increasing collectivism and the shared authorship and reader-viewer interactions that are increasingly a part of the text creation process. In addition, Beyl explores how the writer appropriates weblogs as a communicative medium, to explore as a tool of self-conceptualisation and as a tool with which to (de)mystify the author's aesthetic role and position in society.

The changing practices of cultural production and consumption have also meant that many cultural institutions feel the need to reinstate their positions within the structure of the society. What is the role of the library, when every book is digitally available for download? What is the role and practice of archives, when digital technologies seem to enable endless storage capacities? What is the role of museums in a world where the aura of the original seems to be under siege? Who is included and excluded in the practices of culture making, who is the author (Viires and Sarapik)? Or is the author long dead as proclaimed by Barthes (Carpentier)? When the world has taken major turns in the past twenty-something years, are cultural institutions the places for learning for the future or should the musty old cabinets be locked and sealed for future generations? Many of these questions are related to the digital turn, and they are discussed in the different chapters of this book. For instance, Lepik discusses how calling people users, visitors, stakeholders or audiences will make the relationship significant and, to a certain extent, re-instate the position of the institution. Carpentier looks at the history of cultural participation to argue that the seemingly novel and unique changes in power relations proclaimed by the "death of the author" slogan have been a part of the cultural process throughout the 20th century. However, this still does not mean that discursive structures as the conditions of possibility for the organisation of participation are simple or solved.

The digitisation of heritage is still too often seen as an aim on its own because the technology seemingly enables wider access and better availability of materials. Volt and Andresoo, and Weisen, among others, discuss the variety of challenges posed by digitisation relating to issues of access, long term preservation, formats, etc. The book as a whole, however, attempts to bring the discussion towards the

wider cultural implications of these challenges. The digital turn has resulted in different discussions across paradigms and focuses; the idea of the book is to bring together some of these discussions to learn from each other. Too often in the practice of heritage institutions the digital turn is seen as an aim on its own: the digitisation process is seen as a mediation of culture and a change of format as the only way to promote culture. In this approach, the digital turn is separated from the rest of the cultural process, seen as being over as soon as cultural content has been made available to the public via the digital. It also denies the self-critical awareness of the cultural institutions and other related stakeholders and sees them as one among the multitude of agents in a wider socio-cultural process, involving both the online and offline. Digital is often still a destination point. In this book the authors aim to challenge this view. In the closing chapter, Farouk Seif argues that technology is not and should not be the destination of our making. Rather, we should be looking forward to a future that transcends virtual reality and incorporates technical and technological aspects of culture as a part of the authentic experience.

Thus, this book looks at the range of different aspects of interrelations between technology and culture – but can we truly claim that this is the digital turn that we are facing? Many would see that the explosive growth of new technologies and platforms, processes speeding up and the increasing number of users are enough to justify the talk about the digital turn. The facts that these environments are increasingly considered normal and that our everyday lives are saturated with technologies are remarkable, but we think that they are still not a reason enough to talk about the digital turn. For us and for many of the authors in this book, the digital turn means a variety of complex changes in interaction with each other in our social and cultural environment. It means that the user is much more central to cultural processes, and the cultural elites have to consider a more diverse range of players in culture-making processes. The digital technologies make the public, the audiences and the users more visible. These interactions and produsages do bring new cultural forms, but as many of the texts indicate, they do not replace the old forms. Therefore we see that such a transdisciplinary book as this one, where the humanitarian and social sciences meet, provides a unique perspective on investigating the cultural processes in which the digital focuses the attention of the user on the collective and multi-party aspects of culture-making and consumption. The turn to the digital changes not only cultural forms and interactions, but also the institutions and their relationships with audiences. Therefore the two sections of this book, user practices and cultural transformations, are interdependent and can thus only shed adequate light on the true nature of the digital turn together.

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# **Orienting the Heritage Institution towards Participatory Users in the Internet**

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## **1. Introduction**

This paper looks at different experiences Estonian heritage institutions have in recruiting active participants in their work. The focus is mainly on providing services through online channels and including active participants in the work on museums, archives and libraries. We base our discussions on the work done in two research projects: “Developing Museum Communication in the 21st Century”, and “The Problems of Transformation and Reception of Cultural Heritage in the Digital Age”, which both look at the changing relations between audiences and heritage institutions. We will base our discussion on the empirical case studies, using four different heritage institutions in Estonia as examples and as the basis of analysis – the Estonian National Museum, the Estonian Literary Museum, the National Archives of Estonia and University of Tartu Library. We have combined several research methods and looked at several types of respondents over different points in time. The paper aims to be a more reflexive overview of audience relations and participation in heritage institutions.

In using the notions of ‘audiences’ and ‘users’ interchangeably, we assume that audiences are active despite the communication channels used. In increasing use of ICT solutions in heritage institutions, audiences are assigned the even more active role of ‘users’ or ‘producers’, as used by Axel Bruns. Coming from a media studies perspective we approach the audiences in the heritage institutions from these angles. We place this article at the crossroads of different disciplines in the hope of adding value to the practical applications on which we are working.

## 2. Active audiences and heritage institutions

Active audiences and participation are not entirely new phenomena in the context of heritage institutions (see also Carpentier). Many museums have built their collections, i.e. their specific body of knowledge, using objects and information sourced from the people. Archives depend on the public for the provision of documents and libraries use groups of readers or reader statistics to help formulate their collection policies. However, in all of these cases the heritage worker plays the role of gate-keeper, moderating and limiting the participation for particular purposes.

This expert or gate-keeper position originates from and at the same time also produces a way of understanding of the concept of 'heritage', which implies that cultural heritage is 'real'. Kristin Kuutma, Estonian researcher of heritage politics, who analyses how the notion of heritage is constructed, states that

[c]ultural heritage becomes real when someone identifies it as such, which denotes a process of knowledge production that involves academic research. ... The awareness of heritage is epistemologically related to scholarship of history, art, ethnology, folklore, etc. – heritage is a certain way of knowing cultural objects, sites or practices (7-8).

Heritage is thus related to expertise and symbolic power.

According to both public understanding and the cultural heritage politics framework, the maintenance and safeguarding of the perceived common heritage has belonged to the realm of the heritage institutions. Through the role appropriated by this approach to cultural heritage, these institutions have also been instruments in the development of a sense of collective identity and citizenship and are thus arenas for the distribution of socio-political capital.

In the current article we look at this set of issues from one particular perspective, asking how and why this perceived role of heritage guardians can also serve as an obstacle or barrier to involving people to the field of the heritage in contemporary societies. More widely, this discussion is related to questions about whom does heritage empower and the question of whether it is possible to use the Internet to attract wider audiences to be engaged in the use and creation of heritage.

Our analysis has indicated that heritage institutions have a perceived expert position, which can in the current situation, when technology permits open and wide participation at low costs, become an invisible barrier to audience participation. The Internet seems to provide ample opportunities to engage the public in a dialogue with the heritage institutions; however, two-way communication assumes not only the existence of a communication channel, but also willing parties who are interested in communication. We claim that here the way in which heritage institutions are perceived, and act, as gatekeepers may be part of the reason

why audiences/users would not be that keen on participating and contributing. We are not arguing that this role should be left behind as many researchers have also shown the audience or users would still like to be distant from key decision-making and leave it to the experts (see, for example, Davies). Rather, the challenge is in empowering audiences, the prerequisite of which is an acknowledgement of the barrier between the two by the heritage institutions and their active search for ways to overcome it.

Next, we will have a look at Internet users in order to understand better different potential users of the applications provided by the heritage institutions. We will critically examine the supposedly active user, at whom many of the content creation applications are aimed. We argue that in order to activate participation in heritage institutions, people should not be left to find their way around, rather this needs to be a conscious attempt from the heritage institutions to create participation spaces that are user friendly and engaging.

### **3. Internet users and uses**

Together with the increase in Internet users and the rise of Web 2.0 (O'Reilly) the arrival of active users has been hailed. The Internet today enables the use of more and more user-friendly technologies in order to actively foster participation in creating and providing content online. Web 2.0 applications such as blogs, social networking sites, and photo and video communities provide increasing opportunities for everyone to become their own publisher and have visibility in the online environment. However, not everyone wants to put him or herself online. When analysing the largest video-based user-generated content environment, YouTube, Cha et al. point out that in general users of this environment are rather passive in using Web 2.0 features like commenting or rating the content.

Jakob Nielsen has made a famous observation on participatory content online stating that in most online communities ninety percent of users are lurkers who never contribute, nine percent contribute a little and one percent account for almost all the action. Similar tendencies can be seen in Estonia where by the end of 2008, seventy percent of Estonians used the Internet and of them only 38% had only ever tried to upload a photo – the most common content production activity of all – while only ten percent had ever commented on an online news item (Meema). The challenge here is to forgo the hype of participatory media and look deeper at the ways and styles of participation. Active audiences in the Internet are first and foremost either seeking information necessary for their work or personal lives or communicating with friends and peers for leisure and entertainment purposes. Because outside the Internet museums, libraries and archives play only a small part in an individual's life, expecting a dominant role for them in the online environment is



unrealistic. However, one has to keep in mind that providing online access to heritage materials or opening the collections to participation, work can be done in order to locate the most appropriate target group for whom some kind of heritage related application might be the most important Internet application ever.

In a number of previous studies (see for instance Keller et al.; Laak; Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, Aljas; Runnel; Runnel et al.), we have analysed Estonian Internet users and found the six most common Internet user types (see fig. 1). Here one can see that, in general, uses can be divided into two categories – information related uses and entertainment related uses. Most active users can take advantage of the Internet and implement it for both kinds of uses, while most passive users use the Internet so little that their usage is not signified by either of these uses.

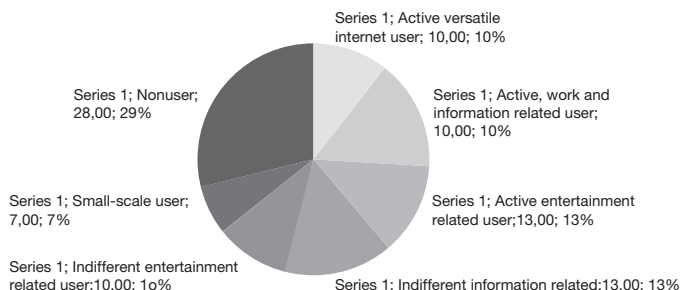


Figure 1: Estonian population in 2008, based on their relationship with the Internet.

Individuals tend to employ ICTs as tools with which to use existing entertainment services, to find information and to communicate. However, the use of the Internet to promote civic society and engaging in participation is marginal. The problem here is with the basic composition of user types. Active work and information-related users are most inclined towards democratic participation outside online environments. They use the Internet mainly to retrieve information and to perform work-related tasks. In addition, most of our interviewed heritage institution workers feel that they belong among the information-related users. This means that their conceptualisation of Internet services is also mainly centred on providing information. From the heritage institutions' perspective, they are the prospective users of various databases, probable readers of longer texts and are more likely also to ask for professional help and guidance.

At the same time, those who are more used to participating online, communicating and generating online content are among the younger users, and they can

be mainly found among the entertainment-related user groups (see also Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, Kalmus and Runnel). On the one hand, they are more likely to contribute, and to participate in competitions and various online activities. At the same time, previous research also indicates that due to their lack of literacy skills, they would prefer to have information in digested, interpreted and easily accessible ways. Information related to school work or other particular tasks is most expected (Laak). While more used to communication and entertainment, their critical skills are not that significant.

This indicates that the question of the roles of the consumer and the citizen also arises in the context of information and communication technologies. Although there are arguments that indicate inherent participatory potential in online technologies, which would give rise to active citizens, the actual uses of the Internet indicate a much more consumption-oriented behaviour. In different studies, consumers are traditionally associated with passive, mostly non-critical hedonism and the tendency to satisfy personal interests, whereas citizens are associated with active social thought and a sense of responsibility, enabling them to rise above narrow private interests (see also Gabriel et al.; Keller et al.).

The discussion above indicates that there are different types of expectations among Internet users. The playful and participatory potential is often coupled with less experience, less critical skills and more expectations towards easily digestible and accessible information titbits. At the same time, others expectations are more related to information retrieval, comprehensive databases and relevant knowledge made available for those who have skills to seek that information. To a certain extent, these demands are contradictory and pose a challenge to heritage institutions as to how to manage those expectations, especially given the circumstance of limited resources.

#### **4. Heritage institution choices for user generated content**

We have based the analysis on four organisations in Estonia, each of which has its own experience in participatory user engagement related to their different roles and functions as heritage institutions: first, the University of Tartu Library representing libraries, second, the National Archives of Estonia representing archives, third the Estonian National Museum representing the museum position, and fourth the Estonian Literary Museum representing a fusion heritage institution, since it serves the function of a museum, library, archive and research institute. Each of these institutions takes a different approach to their relationship with the public, and that approach is reflected also in their relationship to the digital environment.

#### *4.1 Expert user with knowledge*

It can be said that archives and libraries are more public service-oriented and that their attitude towards users resembles primarily a provider-client relationship – both provide a service for the public and act accordingly in their client relations.

In our analysis the first institution, the University of Tartu Library (UTL) has differentiated their users based on their ‘relative proximity’ to the institution. Academic staff from the University of Tartu are given the greatest possibilities to contribute – their opinion is the sole factor on which the library purchases access to online databases, and staff opinion matters when adding to the library’s collections. Other users can also suggest books to the library, but their opinion has less weight. Ordinary users who are not institutionally affiliated to the library can leave anonymous comments on the library’s forums where they are used, if possible.

The rating system of the library’s books, implemented in the electronic catalogue of the library’s ESTER<sup>1</sup> system, is available only to registered users, and the planned commenting option will only be accessible to those who have some sort of affiliation with the library. In addition, at this time the library does not have a clear vision as to what to do with the information potentially provided through the comments. The idea of collecting user comments seems to be considered mainly for the pleasure of the readers rather than the actual benefits it might have for the library collections.

The relationships with online users of the library’s resources are complicated as university staff often uses online resources without the conscious understanding that these are provided by the library and their connections are to the University of Tartu (log-in information for database access is central with all university information systems) (Lepik). This has created a situation in which a significant proportion of library users have not, for a long time (or never), set foot in the actual building of the library.

The main building of the library is seen as a studying and meeting place, but mostly useful for students. Some faculty members had lots of nostalgic memories about UTL (from times they were students of University of Tartu) but today they all have remained at a distance from the main building. (Lepik)

From the other side the amount of the materials in ESTER or other online resources provided by the University are huge, so with every search relevant information can be found in the databases. Employees of the University Library (Personal interview, February, 2010) used the fact that digital resources are not always very easy to find in order to strengthen their positions as experts. Only a correct search will give correct answers and results which presume users have

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1 <http://tartu.ester.ee/>

studied information literacy courses beforehand, provided by the library to students and University staff. University Library employees argued that good literacy skills that can, in their view, only be obtained in connection to the library, are becoming crucial to survival in the information age.

#### *4.2. Active users with good literacy and communication skills*

The second institution, the National Archives of Estonia, is positively proud of the fact that access through their digital collection and demand-based digitisation has enabled them to host significantly more visitors to their online collections and thus opened the archival resources to the wider public. The deputy state archivist and director of the historical archives Indrek Kuuben states:

We have opened a new room for researchers, the virtual research room. In the archive we have 20 workplaces for researchers; in a day 40-50 people go there.... But since we have opened the online research room, there are 60 people in the morning and perhaps 500 a day in the Saaga<sup>2</sup> genealogical database. So the use of archive materials has largely expanded. (I. Kuuben, personal interview, 8 April 2009)

While previously archives were hidden places, available for a limited number of researchers and writers who mediated the knowledge that they received from the archives to the general public, then with the advancement of the digital technologies, archives are using the opportunity to redefine their relationship with the public. There is an increasing interest in seeking personal, community or local area roots from the archives and digital technologies enable stronger personal relationships with the archival resources.

The databases are not easy to use and so in a way the user-generated content is created by genealogists and others interested in genealogy, who take digital archival materials and build on them additional layer of knowledge transcriptions and information networks. As Marlow et al. have also stated, people with good literacy skills have often started for personal organisational reasons and later moved on to the social benefits in order to help other users manage in the systems.

#### *4.3. Communicative users with simple literacy skills*

The Estonian National Museum and the Estonian Literary Museum look at the public not only as audiences of their exhibitions and consumer products and services, but also from the perspective of research disciplines, such as ethnology, folkloristics and anthropology. These disciplines have approached individuals and groups as subjects of research and as sources of collecting information.

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2 [www.ra.ee/saaga](http://www.ra.ee/saaga).

Online participatory options in the Estonian Literary Museum and the Estonian National Museum are more geared towards facilitating the dialogue with users – asking them to comment on and add to digital collections as a complex body of knowledge. As an example online database of Traditional Folk Calendar BERTA<sup>3</sup> asks people to provide their own ideas on how to celebrate traditional holidays. Until the spamming-robots conquered the initiative with their input, anyone could add, in a comment format, their knowledge and ideas concerning a particular national holiday. Here the comments interacted with each other and instead of remaining single contributions became integrated with the collection and the use of the database, making contribution easy for users with fewer literacy skills.

However, experience from the Estonian Literary Museum indicates that when participation is made too easy, this could also reduce the quality of the contributions.

When contemporary school folklore was gathered, those contributions made anonymously and in the online environment were less thorough and well-written than those which were contributed in the class-room environment under the watchful eyes of the teacher. (Piret Voolaid, personal interview, 9 April 2009)

Another example from the Estonian Literary Museum illustrates the linking of the collections by users of the Kreutzwald's Century<sup>4</sup> online project, in which the user can explore history in a non-linear way, thus creating (though not leaving a record of) her or his own trail through literary history. Here, one potential application of user-generated content is to store the trails of the digital content users and provide them as potential pathways to those interested in the non-linear narration of literary history. A great future potential also lies in recommendation systems supporting participatory activities, which goes beyond the model of commercial providers (e.g. Amazon) of outlining similarities between products by providing a social recommendation system recommending relevant marked units from the collections or additions from the users, based upon the material in which a user has already expressed an interest. Such social recommendation systems may also provide recommendations based on both familiarity/similarity, also enabling the conscious comparison and connection of objects, stories or comments which perhaps represent different perspectives and use other people's recommendations to help in the connections.

Although the Estonian Literary Museum has provided many interesting and open online collections, the materials in the different databases are organised by archives, which inevitably makes usage complicated to many potential users as it needs their previous knowledge to make the right search in the right database.

3 <http://www.folklore.ee/Berta>.

4 <http://kreutzwald.kirmus.ee>.

The Estonian National Museum had a campaign that took place both online and offline, aiming to document everyday life in 2009 – “Give Museum a Day from Your Life”. People were asked to document their April 14th, 2009, the 100th anniversary of the museum. Their contributions were included in the collections of the Estonian National Museum. Contributions to these kinds of initiatives need attention and time from the contributors. They know that the stories and pictures later became part of the museum’s collections and that adds a sense of value and motivation to audiences to participate. At the same time, the topic remained simple enough as everyone can claim to be an expert on their own and their family’s everyday lives. People could use the way of contributing that they found familiar, so there was 202 offline and 223 online contributions – in text, blog, video, photo or mobile positioning format. Before the public call for participation, museum staff performed exercises ‘collecting’ their own lives; these stories were provided as examples of different styles of participatory content to help people overcome the complications of starting and choosing the format.

The idea that editing existing content is easier than starting from scratch connects well with Mark Carnall’s observation that online museums are typically very content-light, which makes it difficult to attach the contributions of the public to specific pre-existing structures. Contribution to online content is related to the network effect (Liebowitz et al.), meaning that the resource becomes more valuable when there are other people consuming the same good. Thus Internet users expect and like to contribute where others are and where some prior content exists. The more available information there is, and the more opportunities there are to link, add, comment on and tag the information heritage institutions have online, the more valuable the resource is for individual users.

The Estonian National Museum also ran a user-generated content experiment in the real exhibition space, where visitor participation was made easy. Visitors to the exhibition were given the opportunity to add free-form comments to the presented photographs using simple post-it notes and pens. Motivation for this experiment was provided through the promise of a prize draw in which participants could win a particular photograph as a printout for their personal use. Eighty percent of the comments contributed were expressions of emotions (such as ‘beautiful’, ‘great’, ‘I like’, and/or ‘I would like to have that too’).

However, from the heritage institution’s point of view, more valuable were the remarks that indicated the new knowledge that people received from photographs, or where the exhibited photographs activated new interests or questions. In addition, a few corrections were made to the photograph captions that the museum had, for example: “It should be Artur Vasiksaat, because the name Vasikraat does not exist on Muhu”. At the exhibition we also saw that through participation the visitor’s role extended, as many analyses on exhibition participation have recently shown (Ciolfi et al.).

## 5. Discussion

Institutions try to apply dimensions of those relationships that are based on previous experience, and try to apply the same to users of the online environments. Hence the options for online materials in archives and libraries are geared more towards providing digital content, with the institutions expecting users to be engaged in the discussions about the provided materials separately from the digital collections. At the same time, the museums in our case study focused on collecting and adding the contributions of museum collection users, with more attention being paid on the dialogue and the added value of user discussions.

In recent years, heritage institutions have invested significant amounts of time and resources in the digitisation of their collections and providing open and free online access to them. Institutions are adjusted to the idea that physical and virtual collections are different, and that the latter can provide more users or visitors.

Massive digitisation and the opening of collections to online public access has become central to the daily work of heritage institutions, necessitating changes in organisation activities. At the same time the institutions use the same communication patterns both offline and online, which originate from the traditional role and habits of communication of the heritage institution, resulting in its perceived expert position. The latter is a barrier for the audiences in using online collections or participating in online activities. The main focus of the activities has been on making the collections available, not on analysing new needs or re-evaluating the activities in new situations. There is a growing competition between the heritage institutions for online visibility with their digital collections; often those who have thoroughly thought about what material is offered online and to whom it is offered find more success and gain a more stable user group.

There have been arguments (Carnall) that say that memory institutions have had significant obstacles that have stopped them from being online to a great extent. These obstacles have included the genuine fear that people would stop coming to museums if they could access museum collections online (*ibid.*). The examples of the National Archives of Estonia and the University of Tartu Library show this is well founded.

The idea of becoming virtual might not be a pleasant one for some museums, especially not for art museums who cherish the ideal of the 'real thing' and its aura. But this development is inevitable because of the increasing digitisation of cultural heritage and the demand to make collections more accessible. Eventually, these trends will blur the differences between cultural heritage institutions, and in the long run these institutions will merge into one memory institution. A memory institution combines digital surrogates of the collections of archives, libraries and museums in rich interactive environments and allows access to the content regardless of the nature of the institution. The goal of the memory institution is to preserve this content for future generations and support its use and management over time. (Schweibenz)

These interlinked memory institutions, hailed by Werner Schweibenz above, show that important user motivation comes from the content itself. National museums and ethnographic collections particularly can claim to be ‘living’ museums where communities connected with the museum can add content to the collection, originating for example from the daily life of the community.

When looking at different Internet user types in Estonia we can see that most users consume information from the Internet. Only a small number of users participate in content creation. We have analysed ways in which heritage institutions communicate with the public and see the role of their audiences. It could be said that audiences are mainly handled as passive information consumers or users with good literacy skills. However, the offline activities of exhibition visitors show that people are willing to participate if the environment is familiar and the technology also supports their experiences of heritage and its interpretations.

Therefore, heritage institutions are facing challenges to find new audiences, in addition to enthusiast users, to activate online participation in producing and interpreting heritage, which also makes users knowledge producers and allows new personal interpretations of heritage.

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# **New Media and Changes in the Forms of Cultural Transmission: The Estonian Experience**

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## **1. Introduction**

At present, Estonia is witnessing the replacement of transitional culture by the late-modern cultural pattern of the modern network society. The reasons for such a cultural shift are affected by the trends in global culture, changes in the technological environment and the emergence of a new generation which grew up in a free and open society to be both the creators and consumers of culture. The present article explores how the rising importance of the new media can influence the forms of cultural participation and socialisation.

## **2. Characteristics of the media as mediators of culture**

Researchers of communication have already for decades been addressing the question how the content and functions of culture are affected by the character of the media used for the creation and reception of cultural content. According to Marshall McLuhan the effect of the media on culture is of crucial importance because of the way in which people receive the message, what senses they use to receive it and how emotionally or rationally and how creatively they do it depends on the medium. Looking at the speed and scope of change in the forms of cultural transmission due to the expansion of the new digital media, McLuhan's famous sentence "the medium is the message" deserves new attention. To reiterate, McLuhan distinguished between the 'cold' and 'hot' media, depending on the level of creative input expected from the respondent. Thus, a book is a 'cold' medium, because the understanding of the text of the book, from seeing the abstract letter combinations to arriving at the undivided meanings encoded into them, requires active thinking from the readers and creation of their own mental images. TV, cinema and theatre are, in contrast, the 'hot' media because viewers receive prepared mental images, which do not require that much 'co-

creation' or 'heating' of the imagination. The culture that has been built upon book reading presupposes a longer period of learning and a relatively deeper intellectual effort, as well as better creation skills and a greater ability to interpret abstractions than the audiovisual culture, which is more supported by emotional effects, whole pictures and images, and symbol-like behaviour that copies reality. Or, in other words, the written word-centred culture that uses the 'cold' medium is rational and favours education hierarchies, while the character of the reception of sounds, pictures and images spread via the 'hot' media is more emotional, open and democratic. What could be from this viewpoint the effects of the digital media on the content of cultural transmission? From one side, they demand high level of rationality and specific skills for reading texts and data, from the other – they offer opportunities to use a rich world of images and sounds.

Conventionally we could, based on the media that predominantly disseminated culture in a certain period, distinguish between four different eras in the development of Estonian contemporary culture: 'the era of printed word' (which began in the middle of the 19th century with the publication of the national epic *Kalevipoeg* and the first nationwide newspaper, initiated by J. V. Jannsen):<sup>1</sup> 'the era of radio' (radio broadcasting started in Estonia in 1926 and this new medium acquired nationwide popularity in the 1930s and prevailed as the news medium up to the 1970s); 'the era of TV' (Estonian TV was established in 1958, and since the 1960s was able to bring into the living rooms of Estonian mass audiences not only local but also an international world of audiovisual images due to direct access to Finnish TV channels). These traditional media are challenged in 'the era of the Internet', which started on the mass level in Estonia in the mid-1990s with the famous 'Tiger-leap' project. These developments in diversification of the Estonian media world are depicted on the following scheme (see Figure 1). The arrival of each of these new media has changed the content and ways of popular participation in culture.

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1 The start of the national press era from the 2nd half of the 19th century was a crucial factor in the Estonian national awakening. It coincided with other important developments that facilitated direct participation of the broader public in modern national culture: the beginning of the nationwide song festival in 1869 and the establishment of the "Vanemuine" national theatre association.

	Late 19th cent.	1900- 1920	1920s	1930s	1940s	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s
Books	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
The printed press	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Song festi- vals, etc.	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Theatre		—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Radio			—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Film				—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Television						—	—	—	—	—	—
Computers, the Internet										—	—
Multimedia											—

Figure 1. Prevalence of different media in disseminating culture in Estonia.

Following ‘McLuhanist’ logic in understanding media culture, we can assume that the shifting of culture from one media environment to another not only initiates changes in the structure of the text but affects more deeply the meaning of cultural participation. When a message is recoded from one sign system into another (e.g. from a verbal system to an audiovisual one), the semantic fields shift, while at the same time the context of communication undergoes changes. Here, the effect of the medium is determined not only by its technical abilities to render a text in a certain coded format and using different senses for its reception (auditivity vs. visibility, linearity vs. hypertextuality, etc.), but also by the social qualities of the medium – the simultaneity or temporal difference in reception, individual vs. collective usage, institutionalisation of text-creation and reception, conventionality of certain ways of interpretation and usage and the canonisation of certain meanings, and the allowing of external control over the user.

Historically developed influential institutions are active in the cultural field, maintaining the stability of the normative meaning of culture, homogenising the expectations and judgements of cultural audiences, and preferring certain codes and ways of interpretation that prevail at the given time to other, more marginal ones. The effect of education as the means of canonising ‘proper understanding’ of culture was and continues to be the most important factor, but also art criticism as an institution has worked in the same direction (Bourdieu, *Cultural Produc-*