

Decolonizing Digital Spaces: A critical look at the use of technology to mediate decolonized interactions within museum & source community collaborations

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Abstract

The purpose of this formative research was to understand how digital spaces can be utilized to decolonized source community and museum collaborations. Through a critical review of the literature on collaborations of this nature and technology's role in the communication and interactions that enable them, this study identified six technological functions necessary to create decolonized digital spaces for collaborations – to enable dialogue, decenter museum goals and motivations, allow for polyvocality, enable accessibility, provide online security, and enable sustainable methods of communication and interactions. This reflexive qualitative study then created a case study for the Horniman Museum's recent digital collaboration with community researchers in Kenya, in order to examine to what degree, if at all, these technological functions were present within the digital experience. The case study was composed of a content analysis of an in-depth interview with a member of museum staff and a content analysis of three of the participating museums' public artefact databases. Themes within the content analyses emphasized that the need and presence of the six identified technological functions within the Horniman Museum's digital collaboration. Modelled after Hogsden and Poulter's conceptual contact network, my research culminates in a proposal for a contact network specific to the needs of the Horniman museum and their community partners. This research aims to provide a springboard for further research with the potential to create a technological ecosystem that satisfies all of the six identified technological functions to decolonize digital spaces.

State of the Art

Through a robust review of the literature, this research aimed to understand the nature of source community and museum collaborations, how these collaborations can potentially enforce neo-colonial practices, how reflexive research practices are being used to decenter museums, technology's role in the communication between communities and museums, and object digitalization methods (Brown & Peers, 2005) (Boast, 2011) (Basu 2013) (Lynch, 2011) (Finlay, 1998).

A large portion of the literature looks to understand the colonial nature of present day source community and museum collaborations. However, most of the literature is written through researchers' and museum staff perspectives, further marginalizing community voices (Krpmotich, 2014). Museums are criticized for being asymmetrical spaces for community collaborations to take place in. Meanwhile, digital spaces are suggested to have the potential to decolonize these practices (Hogsden and Poulter, 2012).

This review of the literature identified six functions that must all be met by technology to create decolonized digital spaces for source communities and museum collaborations; these are to decenter museums, enable dialogue, enable polyvocality, provide accessibility, provide online security, and enable the future sustainability of communication and interactions.

This research adds to the state of the art through its unique focus on the technological functions needed to create decolonized digital spaces for source community and museum collaborations.

Introduction & Background

The Project: The Horniman Museum and Gardens is partnering with the Pitt Rivers Museum, the Word Museum in Liverpool, and the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology Cambridge to run a decolonization project titled *Rethinking Relationships and Building Trust around African Collections*. The project's mission is to work with community researchers in Kenya and Nigeria to understand the history and meaning behind the objects within their collective African collections, in order to decide how these artefacts can be provided with future care. Due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, the project was forced to shift onto a digital setting. Communicating and interacting online with the community researchers to launch and carry out this collaboration added another layer of complexity to the sensitive nature of source community and museum collaborations.

The objectives for this research were to understand:

- The nature of online communication tools and online collaborative spaces within the context of source community and museum collaborations.
- How these digital spaces could be used within the Horniman Museum's collaboration to decenter the museums' goals and motivations, while elevating source community voices.

Research Methodology & Results

Research Question: How can technology be utilized to create digital spaces for source communities to interact amongst each other, with museum staff, and digital objects in a decolonized manner?

Methodology: Due to the sensitive nature of this research, I did not interview the community researchers directly. I designed an in-depth interview with a museum staff member to understand how technology played a role in community researchers' communication with each other, in their communication with museum staff, and in their interactions with digital objects.

I, then, performed a content analysis on three of the four participating museums' websites in order to understand what interactions the websites afforded the community researchers.

Results: Themes that arose from these two content analyses showed a presence or a lack of the six identified decolonizing functions. All but one of the communication tools utilized by the museum served three or more of the identified functions. The museum websites only enabled one of the identified functions.

Recommendations

Communication Tools:

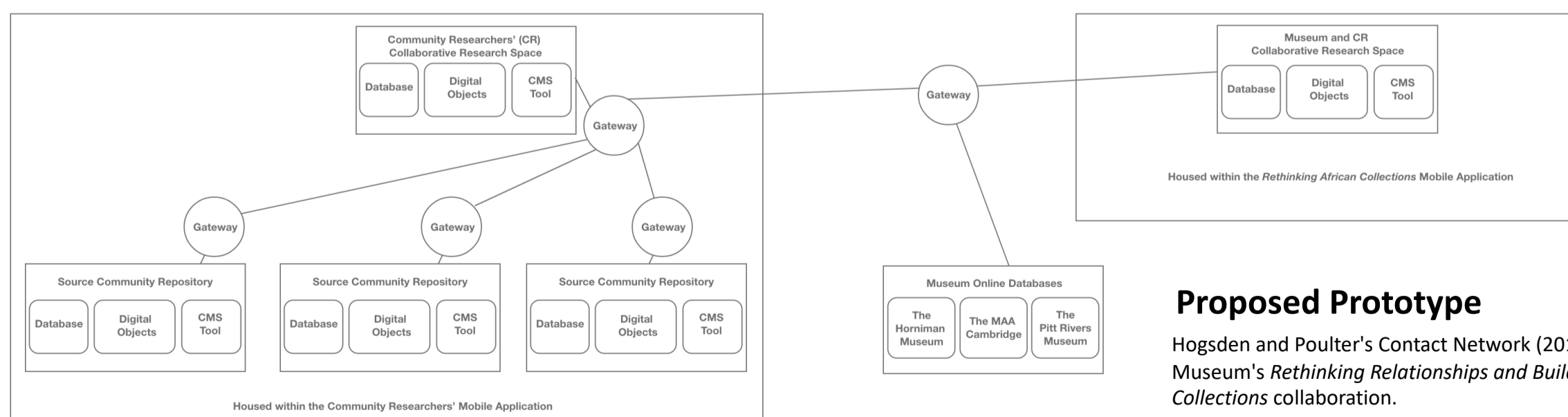
- Use asynchronous communication provided through instant messaging applications like WhatsApp to engage in fast and immediate responses, but also to provide researchers with spaces for deeper reflection on topics (especially surrounding sensitive topics) that are covered face-to-face or through video-conference meetings (Salter, 2017).
- Utilize video-conferencing tools, like Zoom or Skype, as they provide a similar feeling to meeting face-to-face with others. These tools encourage more diverse thinking among those in the conference and have the power of making users feel comfortable since they are in their own personal space – taking away certain social pressures of meeting in person (Salter, 2017) (Lacono et al., 2016).
- Utilize Breakout Room features in video-conferencing tools, like Zoom. These spaces give source communities space and privacy to discuss and engage virtually with their cultural heritage with members of their community.
- Work with community members to suggest that they schedule Zoom meetings and Breakout Room amongst themselves. Dialogue amongst the researchers will allow them to build trust with each other and empower them to center their goals within the collaboration.

Collaborative Spaces:

- Create a collaborative research mobile application for the community research team.
- Create a collaborative research mobile application through which researchers and museum staff can create projects, share files, create discussions, collaborate on existing projects (Neil-Binion, 2015).
- Integrate Google Drive capabilities within the app's content management system (CMS) in order to implement a file-sharing ability within the application and utilize a tool that the community researchers are familiar with.
- Work with CMS tool's provider to implement a product that automatically saves files at regular intervals in order to protect files from potential malware and other online security threats.
- Work with a CMS tool that enables the creation of forums as an additional space within the collaborative space to hold discussions after Zoom meetings.
- Enact protocols on when images, videos, information, or 3D models of the artefacts should and should not be shared on social media tools like WhatsApp.

Object Digitalization:

- It is recommended that the museum and community researchers follow through with plans to create 3D printed representations of the objects in order to give access to the objects and data to the source communities they work with.
- Create 3D models of the objects that can be shared through the community researchers' application in order to give source communities digital access to their objects.
- Work with researchers within the the museum and community researcher collaborative application to better the use of participating museum online databases.
- Work with source communities to imagine what digital repositories for their specific community's objects would look like based on their specific ontologies and knowledges.



Proposed Prototype

Hogsden and Poulter's Contact Network (2012) applied to the Horniman Museum's *Rethinking Relationships and Building Trust around African Collections* collaboration.

Conclusions & Future Work

Purpose: The purpose of this study was to understand how digital spaces can create environments for museum and source communities to carry out collaborations in a decolonized manner.

Contribution: This study contributes to the literature of this topic by identifying that the digital tools used for these collaborations must carry out six decolonizing functions – decentering museums, enabling dialogue, enabling polyvocality, providing accessibility, providing online security, and enabling sustainability of communication and interactions.

This research builds on a model of an established contact network, by Hogsden and Poulter (2012), to provide The Horniman Museum with a custom contact network that fits their unique project's needs, along with recommendations on how this contact network can be used to create a technology ecosystem of digital tools that work together to enable the six identified functions and decolonize their digital spaces.

Future Research: This research can be used to advocate for further research that can lead to change in museum frameworks and structures that center museum goals over those of communities, such as the current way that museum databases are structured, how museums communicate with community members, how digitized collections can enact more online security, how digital objects can be made more accessible to source communities in remote areas, etc. Furthermore, it can be used as a springboard for researchers to dive deeper into the six decolonizing functions to understand how innovative technology can help to decolonize collaboration practices.