

# ICOA855: DIGITAL TOOLS FOR CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT IN HERITAGE CONSERVATION: A DEMOCRATIC TOOL OR ELITIST EXERCISE?

## Subtheme 03: Protecting and Interpreting Cultural Heritage in the Age of Digital Empowerment

**Session 2:** Use of Digital Technology for Dissemination and Interpretation

**Location:** Silver Oak 2, India Habitat Centre

**Time:** December 13, 2017, 16:15 – 16:30

**Author:** Aishwarya Tipnis

*Aishwarya Tipnis is the principal architect of an eponymous architectural practice based in New Delhi working on making the past relevant to the future through a diversity of projects on architectural and urban heritage conservation in India. She has spearheaded two of the pioneering cross-disciplinary digital heritage projects in India, the Dutch in Chinsurah as well as the Heritage & People of Chandernagore Project.*

**Abstract:** Digital tools and social media have provided every individual a platform to express their opinions, share information, photographs as well as research. Although the potential of application of digital tools to make cultural heritage conservation a far more inclusive process is immense; the challenges are complex and differ for most cultural contexts. While many cultures have successfully employed the use of digital tools and technology for provoking citizen engagement in heritage conservation; in India it has mainly been used for dissemination of information rendering it an elitist rather than a democratic tool. In semi-urban India, where the community is insular with limited exposure to social media and the internet their impact, strategies for crowdsourcing have to be bespoke sensitive to the psyche of the local community. How can the digital technology empower the ordinary citizen to manage his own heritage in such diverse economic and cultural climates? What then becomes the role for the conservation professional?

This paper adopts a case study approach of the Dutch in Chinsurah Project and the Heritage & People of Chandernagore Project; to examine the challenges in the application of open source digital media technology and social media for heritage conservation and citizen engagement. It shall also consider how heritage, memories and narratives shall be carried forward through the use of digital technologies into the future and help shape the development of semi-urban towns through the use of digital technologies.

**Key words:** digital humanities, citizen engagement, crowdsourcing, dissemination

## Overview of digital technologies for citizen engagement in heritage conservation

In the last decade, digital tools and social media have provided every individual a platform to express their opinions, share information, photographs as well as research. Although the potential of application of digital tools to make cultural heritage conservation a far more inclusive process is immense; the challenges are complex and differ for most cultural contexts. While there has been considerable research on citizen heritage and methodologies for provoking participation through digital technologies. (Lewi and Smith, 2016:2-6; Han et al, 2014: 1144-1155), the bulk of the research has focussed on innovative heritage media for application in building conservation, documentation and interpretation of heritage places.

The engagement of the ordinary citizen with heritage conservation through digital tools in India has largely been accelerated and dominated by the social media such as *Facebook*, *Instagram* and *Whatsapp*. While Facebook and Instagram are largely popular among the youth (15-35 years), who are technologically savvy and living in the metropolitan areas, Whatsapp has a larger reach to the semi-urban and rural population in India. Across the country there are several activist and enthusiast groups on Facebook and Whatsapp that discuss local issues of heritage, environment and social concern. Digital tools allow these groups to directly have access to the change makers, politicians as well as civil servants and assist in bringing about physical change on the ground.<sup>1</sup> Another manifestation of the popularity of social media tools for spreading awareness about heritage, has been curated heritage walks<sup>2</sup>, photo-walks on Instagram, propagated through mobile applications such as LBB(little black book)<sup>3</sup> that bring together people to explore the many hidden facets of the tangible and intangible heritage of the metropolitan cities. The very nature and construct of these walks, which are largely held in English and charge a substantial sometimes exorbitant fee make them exclusive and in many ways elitist, targeting only the affluent section of the society.

The question therefore is in semi-urban and rural India, how can digital tools be employed more efficiently to develop a collective consciousness for heritage conservation given that the community's exposure to social media is rather limited. Lewi and Smith have drawn parallels between digital tools for citizen engagement with citizen science, designed to bridge the gap between expert driven scientific knowledge and the needs and concerns of the citizens. The main types of digital tools when co-related with citizen science can be divided into three types: curated sites (Contributory), content hosting sites (Collaborative) as well as social networking sites (Co-Created). (Lewi and Smith, 2016:2-6).

This paper discusses two projects by Aishwarya Tipnis Architects that have employed the use of digital technologies with the aim of engaging diverse audiences in heritage conservation in the semi-urban cultural landscape of the Hooghly Region in West Bengal. A unique cultural landscape along the River Hooghly in West Bengal of erstwhile European trading posts of Danish (Serampore), French (Chandernagore), Portuguese (Bandel), Dutch (Chinsurah) and British at Calcutta fondly known as the

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<sup>1</sup>Kashmir News Service (May 25, 2017). "Tassaduq for fresh push towards good governance through effective grievance redressal" *Kashmir News Service*

<sup>2</sup>[www.delhiwalkfestival.com](http://www.delhiwalkfestival.com) (2017).[online] [Accessed October 30,2017]

<sup>3</sup> [www.lbb.in](http://www.lbb.in) (2016) [online] [Accessed October 30,2017]

*Europe on the Ganges* by the locals has been recognised to possess immense cultural value (Das and Chattopadhyay, 2014). The Government of West Bengal has been keen to develop this region as a tourist zone and efforts are being made by multiple agencies in this regard.<sup>4</sup> These erstwhile trading posts have now grown into small towns which form a part of metropolitan Kolkata (Calcutta). The local community comprises of educated citizens mostly engaged in service who travel daily on the suburban trains to Kolkata for their jobs. These towns are now lucrative as they offer affordable housing for these daily commuters and thus find themselves at the centre of incremental developer led urban development. The cultural landscape once dotted by palm trees and ground plus one storied spacious mansion or town houses is rapidly being replaced by piecemeal developments of multi-storied housing. The layered history of these towns and their urban fabric seem to be inconsequential to this new wave of urban development that threatens to make these suburban towns generic clones of each other and rob them of their individual identity and sense of place. (Tipnis, 2015:115-122)

The first project Dutch in Chinsurah <[www.dutchinchinsurah.com](http://www.dutchinchinsurah.com)> is a cross-disciplinary digital humanities project that aims to define the heritage of a place through documentation of tangible and intangible heritage. As part of the project, we developed a website as a medium to spread awareness and disseminate the academic research conducted as part of the project. The second example is a self-initiated collaborative citizen engagement and heritage conservation project that relies on an interactive web based platform for creating a "web-home": a repository of oral histories, memories, and stories about Chandernagore <[www.heritagechandernagore.com](http://www.heritagechandernagore.com)>. Both the projects employ different strategies and there are many lessons through these experiments with digital technologies which can inform participatory heritage conservation in urban India.

### ***Engaging with the Digital World: Experiments with Dutch in Chinsurah***

Chinsurah was an erstwhile Dutch trading post along the River Hooghly in West Bengal, which gained prominence between the 17th-19th centuries, it was passed on to the British in 1825 in exchange for some islands in the Malay Peninsula.<sup>5</sup> As part of the 'Shared Built Heritage' <[www.culturalheritageconnections.org](http://www.culturalheritageconnections.org)>, the Embassy of the Kingdom of Netherlands commissioned us in 2013 to develop a comprehensive listing and mapping of what remained of the built heritage of the Dutch in Chinsurah. Our project had to rely heavily on primary research since firstly not much was written about Chinsurah and secondly on ground stood a largely British town.

We worked with the students of history from Presidency University, Kolkata to conduct historical research that led us to maps of Chinsurah in the archives at Netherlands as well as in Kolkata. Using a combination of urban geography, architecture and history helped us demarcate the present location of the erstwhile Fort Gustavus<sup>6</sup>, as well as decipher the urban morphology of the town. Digital tools came to our rescue we were able to overlay the historical maps using open source Google technology. While conducting the architectural mapping of the town, we also realised that most people were not aware of the history and heritage of the town. There were many narratives of the rich merchant families that had built

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<sup>4</sup>Express News Service (October 2, 2015). "UNESCO : Need public participation to preserve Hooghly's heritage" Indian Express, Kolkata Edition

<sup>5</sup>Treaty of London was signed in March 1824 and Chinsurah was officially ceded to the English on 7<sup>th</sup> May 1825. [www.dutchinchinsurah.com](http://www.dutchinchinsurah.com) (2014). [online] [Accessed October 30,2017]

<sup>6</sup>Fort Gustavus, built by the Dutch as their factory was destroyed by the British in 1829 [www.dutchinchinsurah.com](http://www.dutchinchinsurah.com) (2014). [online] [Accessed October 30,2017]

the town, but these oral histories needed to find place in the authorised discourse of the history of this European trading post.

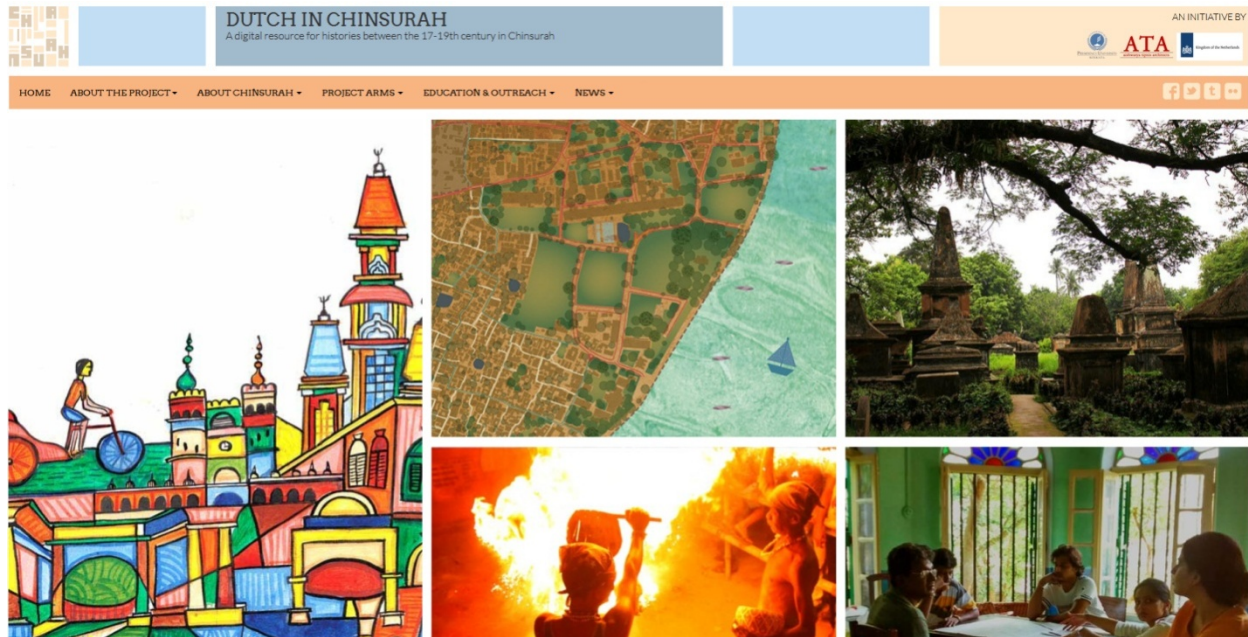


Fig.1– Screenshot of Dutch in Chinsurah website

In India, the application of digital tools and technology for heritage conservation is in its nascent stages, in 2016, Presidency University<sup>7</sup> launched an online archive of digitising memories and mapping the narratives of migration and exchange of the *Scottish Cemetery in Bengal, Digitising the untold empire* <[www.scotscemeteryarchivekolkata.com](http://www.scotscemeteryarchivekolkata.com)>. Jadhavpur University<sup>8</sup> created a digital archive of the tangible and intangible heritage of the Jews in Calcutta *Recalling Jewish Calcutta, Memories of the Jewish Community in Calcutta* <[www.jewishcalcutta.in](http://www.jewishcalcutta.in)> in 2015. Both these projects are a repository, a web-museum of stories and narratives around artefacts or tangible built heritage. Built by institutions for the purpose of disseminating information that was researched and curated by experts, these fall within the category of Contributory Sites as defined by Lewi and Smith.

The Dutch in Chinsurah Project, conceptualised in collaboration with the Presidency University was an indigenous project developed with multi-disciplinary local technical expertise. The collaboration between history, urban geography and architecture brought about a unique website that allowed the research about the history and evolution of the town to be presented in an animated gif form while the architectural mapping was presented in the form of geo-referenced Google maps, with information about the listed buildings with their photographs. A separate section of the website was created for the Dutch Cemetery<sup>9</sup>, describing each of the graves, their tombstones, and history of the people buried there. We decided to engage with the local community, particularly the youth, to understand their perspective of how they interpret the town. Additionally, based on community engagement, we generated a heritage walk route

<sup>7</sup> A collaboration with University of St Andrews Scotland, UK under the UKIREI(UK- India Research and Education Initiative)

<sup>8</sup> A collaboration with Mayanooth University, Trinity College Dublin and School of Cultural Texts & Records (SCTR) at Jadhavpur University

<sup>9</sup>Project undertaken by Presidency University

and map and trained some local students to guide this walk. This was made available for free download from the website. The Dutch in Chinsurah website was further supported by a *Facebook* page, wherein people could share their comments and ideas.

The project led to creating awareness about the built heritage of Chinsurah, the website serves an online repository of information. Other professionals and enthusiasts used the site as a platform to conduct parallel activities; two Dutch citizens living in West Bengal developed an enterprise around cycling tours which included some of the landmarks of Chinsurah. Two publications about the Dutch Heritage in Chinsurah were launched in 2014. Additionally as a direct take-away from the project, the Embassy of the Kingdom of Netherlands executed an interpretation and signage project, building plaques and information signage about the built heritage sites, which were then erected in Chinsurah in January 2017<sup>10</sup>.

*Fig.2 & Fig.3 – Interpretative signage installed in Chinsurah for the landmarks*



<sup>10</sup>Press Trust of India (January 22,2017), “ *Heritage landmarks in WB’s Dutch town get special plaques*”, Business Standard, Kolkata Edition



### ***Collaborative Mapping: The Heritage & People of Chandernagore Project***

The Heritage & People of Chandernagore project was a self-initiated collaborative mapping project in 2015, with the objective of not only identifying the built heritage of the town but also the intangible heritage and identifying what the local citizen perceived and valued as their heritage. The project came about almost as an outcome of the apathy towards the heritage by the local government, while there were sporadic efforts by local civil society to preserve these buildings through multiple *Facebook* groups. Digital technology was adopted as a cost effective medium that would bring together all these efforts and develop a web-home for the heritage of Chandernagore. While conceptualising the Heritage and People of Chandernagore website, we were very conscious of developing interactive digital tools that allowed adding or updating information by the users since local people were the focus of the project. A call for applications was placed on social media for "citizen historians", enthusiasts who were interested in volunteering and collaborating for building the historical narrative of Chandernagore. Their task was to go from door to door, collecting oral histories and narratives, sometimes captured on video and sometimes in written format. The citizen historians then added their blurbs on the project blog, made videos which were widely shared on social media, attracting many comments and suggestions.



*Fig.4– Citizens historians collecting oral history for Heritage & People of Chandernagore Project*

In our quest for understanding how we could involve the citizens in the digital world, we found that digital technologies have encouraged participation of citizens and enthusiasts towards co-creating heritage content built around nostalgia, as online archives of ordinary people's memories or association with a particular event or a place. As described by Lewi and Smith, the second category of digital tools are content-hosting sites ,built specifically for documentation and sharing of heritage content where the visitor is also the contributor of the bulk of the data. (Lewi and Smith 2016 2-6). We explored sites such as history pin [www.historypin.org](http://www.historypin.org) launched 2010 and Sepia Town <[www.sepiatown.com](http://www.sepiatown.com)>, which are content hosting sites that host rich media such as old photographs and videos contributed by the users. We found that these are usually developed on "open source" Google technologies and use location as the key attribute in data collection. Some of the sites that we found of interest were 1947 Partition Archive <[www.1947partitionarchive.org](http://www.1947partitionarchive.org)> launched 2010, an online archive that involves collecting stories of the partition of India survivors in the form of interviews from across the world, Empire Faith and War<sup>11</sup> <[www.empirefaithwar.com](http://www.empirefaithwar.com)> an exhibition and research project funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund in the UK in 2014 to mark the centenary of World War I and the Indian Memory Project <[www.indianmemoryproject.com](http://www.indianmemoryproject.com)> launched in 2010, which is an online curated archive of photographs and narratives that aims to trace the history of the Indian subcontinent via photographs and letters found in personal archives.

The project website for Heritage and People of Chandernagore was therefore locally designed so it could gather information via crowd-sourcing where users could post content pinned on geo-locations of places connected to memories or associations similar to the other projects mentioned above. However, while conducting the survey, it became evident that majority populations in the town were not digital savvy and did not even own smartphones and clearly what had worked for the websites in the west was not going to work in semi-urban India. The strategy was therefore modified from being individual dependent to that of being technically assisted; citizen historians were encouraged to collect memories and use their infrastructure (smartphones and desktops) to upload the content on behalf of the community. The citizen historians also co-created a heritage trail through the town and developed their own map which was shared through the website. The primary objective of the project was to bring global attention to Chandernagore, this was covered by the local media and internationally shared through social media in France as well as India. In 2017, the Ambassador of France to India, H. E. M. Alexandre Ziegler visited Chandernagore and the website became a tool to give him an orientation of the history as well as the heritage of the town.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The aim of the project was to commemorate the largely forgotten contribution of the Sikhs during the war. The project included dissemination of the research via workshops, talks, a curated exhibition as well as a website.

<sup>12</sup>Sudeshna Banerjee ,( February 7,2017), "*French envoy bets on former colony- Bonjour new area of amity*", The Telegraph, Kolkata Edition



*Fig.5– The website used as a guide for leading the H.E. Alexandre Ziegler, Ambassador of France to India on a walk of Chandernagore*

The website continues to be a learning tool for the local schools as well as citizen historians who now empowered to conduct heritage walks on their own based on the content created by the website. The project's presence on social media (Facebook and Instagram) was considerably popular with people from the community and with those who had migrated abroad. This not only raised awareness about the town's heritage, but created a platform for the community to collaborate and generate historical contents supporting heritage conservation work. The popularity of the project has helped secure a place for Chandernagore, as part of Bonjour India 2018, the festival of France in India, where specific place-making interventions in the public space is being planned with French and Indian students working along with the local community. Additionally, the website has now been expanded to include information on all French heritage in India, and was used as a base for a student competition on Know your French Heritage<sup>13</sup>, where school children across the country were researching on the sites of French patrimony in the country.

## **Learning**

We observed that unless the projects are initiated by the Government or an institution, the sustainability of the project always remains challenge once the initial funding is exhausted. Our experience of the Dutch in Chinsurah website indicated that digital heritage has to be more interactive and engaging in nature for it to succeed in the long-term. We observed that as a static website, offering a curated content, while the enthusiasm from the community was short lived; the success of the website was largely as a repository of academic information. In the case of the Heritage & People of Chandernagore Project, since the nature of the project was more collaborative and there was a direct engagement of the community in co-creating some of the content, the enthusiasm lasted for a couple of months. However, once the euphoria subsided and the citizen historians moved on to other projects, the traffic on both social media and the website dwindled. Both these examples highlight that the primary issue is that of longevity, particularly the long-

<sup>13</sup>[www.ifindia.in/bonjour-india](http://www.ifindia.in/bonjour-india) (2018) [online] [Accessed October 30,2017]



term engagement and enthusiasm of the community. The websites and social media accounts for both projects are personally maintained by us even after the projects have wrapped up over 2.5 years ago; it is clear that without ongoing resources to maintain content and participation, the sites will not be sustainable. In conclusion, digital technologies have not only enabled easy access to information but also provided the platform to empower the ordinary citizens to participate towards the protection of their towns heritage. Given the susceptibility of technology to constant change as well as the recurring costs towards the maintenance and upgradation of digital heritage, its posterity still remains questionable. Furthermore, when adopting a strategy for a digital heritage project, it is pertinent to understand the target audience, its needs and capacities to ensure that the project remains inclusive at all times. We observed that digital projects often tend to become elitist, working brilliantly in metropolitan regions but failing in semi-urban or rural settings simply due to the lack of hardware such as smartphones. Additionally we learnt that care needs to be taken to understand the level of comfort of the community with sharing information on public platforms or social media to ensure its long term success. In conclusion, to achieve long term sustainability, it becomes critical that all digital projects are supplemented by traditional media such as newspapers and physical conservation projects with active participation of the community.

## Biography

Aishwarya Tipnis is the principal architect of an eponymous architectural practice based in New Delhi working on making the past relevant to the future through a diversity of projects on architectural and urban heritage conservation in India. She has pioneered two cross-disciplinary digital heritage projects in India Dutch in Chinsurah and Heritage and People of Chandernagore.

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## Web links

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2. [www.dutchinchinsurah.com](http://www.dutchinchinsurah.com)
3. [www.heritagechandernagore.com](http://www.heritagechandernagore.com)
4. [www.jewishcalcutta.in](http://www.jewishcalcutta.in)
5. [www.scotscemeteryarchivekolkata.com](http://www.scotscemeteryarchivekolkata.com)

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7. [www.sepiatown.com](http://www.sepiatown.com)
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9. [www.empirefaithwar.com](http://www.empirefaithwar.com)
10. [www.indianmemoryproject.com](http://www.indianmemoryproject.com)

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# ICOA855: DES OUTILS NUMERIQUES POUR IMPLIQUER ES DANS LA PRESERVATION DU PATRIMOINE: UN INSTRUMENT DEMOCRATIQUE OU UNE VISION ELITISTE?

## Sous-thème 03: Protéger et interpréter le patrimoine culturel à l'ère de l'autonomisation numérique

**Session 2:** Utilisation de la technologie numérique pour la diffusion et l'interprétation

**Lieu:** Silver Oak 2, India Habitat Centre

**Date et heure:** 13 Décembre, 2017, 16:15 – 16:30

**Auteur:** Aishwarya Tipnis

*Aishwarya Tipnis est la principale architecte d'une pratique architecturale éponyme, basée à New Delhi, qui vise à tirer les leçons du passé pour l'avenir grâce à divers projets concernant la préservation du patrimoine architectural et urbain en Inde. Elle a dirigé deux des projets interdisciplinaires pionniers de patrimoine numérique en Inde, le premier, Néerlandais, à Chinsurah, ainsi que le projet « Patrimoine & Populations » (Heritage & People) à Chandernagor.*

**Résumé:** Les outils numériques et les réseaux sociaux fournissent à chacun d'entre nous une plate-forme leur permettant d'exprimer leur opinion, partager des informations, des photographies ainsi que des recherches. Bien que le potentiel d'application des outils numériques à la préservation du patrimoine culturel pour en faire un processus beaucoup plus inclusif soit immense, les défis qu'il pose sont complexes et varient, dans la plupart des cas, en fonction du contexte culturel. Alors que de nombreuses cultures ont eu recours, avec succès, à l'utilisation d'outils et de technologies numériques pour susciter l'implication des citoyens dans la préservation du patrimoine, en Inde, elle a surtout été utilisée pour la diffusion de l'information, ce qui en a fait un outil élitiste plutôt que démocratique. Dans l'Inde semi-urbaine, où la communauté est insulaire, avec un accès limité aux réseaux sociaux et à Internet, les stratégies de « *crowdsourcing* »<sup>5</sup> doivent être adaptées au psychisme de la communauté locale. Comment la technologie numérique peut-elle amener le citoyen ordinaire à gérer son propre patrimoine dans des contextes économiques et culturels aussi diversifiés ? Quel devient alors le rôle du professionnel de la conservation ?

Cet article procèdera par deux étude de cas, celles du projet néerlandais de Chinsurah et celle du projet « *Heritage & People* » de Chandernagor ; examiner les défis liés à la technologie des médias numériques en libre accès et aux réseaux sociaux appliqués à la conservation du patrimoine et à la participation des citoyens. Il doit également prendre en compte la façon dont le patrimoine, les souvenirs et les récits seront transmis aux générations futures, grâce à l'utilisation de ces technologies numériques et contribuer à façonner le développement des espaces semi-urbains en recourant aux technologies numériques.

**Mots clés:** *humanités numériques, engagement citoyen, crowdsourcing, diffusion*

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<sup>1</sup> Production participative, utilisation des internautes comme source d'information, pas d'équivalent accessible en français NDT