

Call for panel

Metadata work with a thousand faces: Data care and behind the scenes labour in cultural heritage

Convenor: Quoc-Tan Tran (University of Hamburg), Discussant: Gertraud Koch (University of Hamburg)

In the past two decades, community-oriented and participatory approaches have contributed to the revitalisation of the social functions of memory institutions (libraries, archives, and museums) regarding the creation and preservation of cultural artefacts and public memory. Ordinary people are engaging not only in the cataloging of objects, data collection but also in volunteered thinking, problem definition, and interpretation. In that context, there is an increasingly complicated set of routine tasks that staff must perform to avoid jeopardising the daily operations of the institution or causing any detriment to its objects. The sites of behind-the-scenes labour are where human (and arguably non-human) errors frequently occur, conventions might be broken, and improvisation happens. A number of STS scholars (Borgman, 2015; Bowker & Star, 1999; Karasti et al., 2006; Suchman, 1996) have addressed the issue of data labour taking place in the background of knowledge work, with the increasing significance of the vital tasks of data input, organizing, cleansing, and, more recently, data care. This issue is nevertheless underexplored in the realm of cultural heritage, where the role of metadata workers has been highly underestimated. In the era of digitalised media ecologies, there are still unanswered questions, such as: Which infrastructure regimes influence the pervasiveness and informality of data labour? Which agents impose their rules on data circulation? Which are discursively non-present but still construct the space (or sphere) of circulation?

The proposed panel explores how various conceptions of metadata work and data labour have entered and been shaped by discursive formations in STS, heritage studies, economic anthropology, and anthropology of technology. It takes the infrastructural-ecological dimensions of data management, stewardship, and curation that have emerged over the last two decades in the humanities' engagement with a "infrastructural moment" (Fortun & Fortun, 2015) as a starting point to rethink the relationship between metadata work and the marginalisation of entities and actors who are frequently regarded as passive and not "even counted as part of the industry" (Suchman, 1996). The panel brings together library and museum professionals, heritage administrators, and researchers to discuss critically how the concept of metadata work has been studied, covered, and contested in different fields. It discusses how notions of data labour and circulation are conditioned by and manifest in practices of knowledge production by a diverse array of social actors – data contributors, data consumers, and data curators – in cross-disciplinary contexts.

The abstracts of paper proposals (300 words) shall be sent by the **31st of October 2022** to Quoc-Tan Tran at quoc-tan.tran@uni-hamburg.de

References

- Borgman, C. L. (2015). *Big data, little data, no data: Scholarship in the networked world*. MIT Press.
- Bowker, G. C., & Star, S. L. (1999). *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences*. MIT Press.
- Fortun, K., & Fortun, M. (2015). An infrastructural moment in the human sciences. *Cultural Anthropology*, 30(3), 359–367. <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca30.3.01>
- Karasti, H., Baker, K. S., & Halkola, E. (2006). Enriching the notion of data curation in e-science: data managing and information infrastructuring in the long term ecological research (LTER) network. *Computer Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW)*, 15(4), 321–358. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10606-006-9023-2>
- Suchman, L. (1996). Supporting Articulation Work. In R. Kling (Ed.), *Computerization and controversy: Value conflicts and social choices* (2nd ed., pp. 407–423). Academic Press.