

Knowledge should not be lost! Interview with a volunteer

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Under the catchy slogan "Do you know more?", the ETH Library's Image Archive has been calling on interested members of the public since the end of 2015 to help identify, describe, and georeference historical images. The image archivist discusses with one volunteer why one should sacrifice one's free time for a crowdsourcing project.

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1. Introduction

As a visual memory, the ETH Library's Image Archive has an extensive and valuable collection of images with more than three and a half million historical photographs from science, research, and technology. A large selection of currently 780,000 images has been digitised and is accessible online. Since it is essential for the research and use of images to provide them with meaningful metadata, when the company archive of the former airline Swissair was taken over, voluntary pensioners contacted the Image Archive and offered their help to provide or improve missing, incorrect, or insufficiently specific captions. This marked the beginning of the first phase of crowdsourcing in the Image Archive in 2009. Over a period of four years, we carried out a so-called "controlled" crowdsourcing with about a dozen Swissair retirees; 120 interested persons had registered. Every week, 200 new photographs were uploaded to the image database, which the retirees could access by means of a password. A total of 40,000 pictures were processed. The effort involved in maintaining the database was great, but the benefits were immeasurable.[1]

Since December 2015, it has been possible to comment directly on each image in the E-Pics Image Archive (<https://ba.e-pics.ethz.ch>). Thus, so-called "open" crowdsourcing was introduced for all users. The label "Do you know more?" draws the attention of E-Pics users to this. It was not until an article in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* in January 2016 that the Image Archive's crowdsourcing really became known in German-speaking Switzerland.[2] Since then, around 30 very active volunteers have processed 120,000 images. A total of 1,400 people has submitted at least one comment so far, with women accounting for 12 %.

Finally, in January 2018, the third type of crowdsourcing was introduced: georeferencing of images on the collaborative platform sMapshot (<https://smapshot.heig-vd.ch/owner/ethz>). On sMapshot, in contrast to E-Pic's Image Archive, selected images are processed in their own campaigns at a time. So far, more than 120,000 images have been georeferenced in 22 campaigns, with a focus on oblique aerial photographs. On sMapshot, 20 volunteers are very active, and in total there are about 350 interested people who have processed at least one image. Many of the most active volunteers both comment on images on E-Pics Image Archive and georeferenced on sMapshot.

2. Methods

One of the most important factors for the success that has now lasted for more than six and a half years is the so-called "community management". It quickly became clear in spring 2016 that the volunteers needed to be informed and "managed" in terms of content. To facilitate communication, for example to point out new images (every Monday) or to report on identified images (every Friday), the weblog "ETH Library Crowdsourcing: news and experiences from the community" (<https://blogs.ethz.ch/crowdsourcing/en/>) was launched in May 2016. The monthly statistics (<https://blogs.ethz.ch/crowdsourcing/en/deutsch-statistik/>), which are important for the volunteers, are also published there, or all publications, lectures and the media review can be accessed.

In addition, an annual crowdsourcing event takes place, if possible, on site at the ETH Library. This thank-you event also serves as an opportunity for exchange and networking between

the staff of the Image Archive and the volunteers and among the volunteers themselves, who often know each other by name, whether on the blog or on the platforms.[3]

Other community management measures include testimonial videos with six representatives of the top 10 who describe in the videos how they go about commenting on the images (https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLmbz3oRqGMsvFg_Y41WEc8qjOLJJcF7D6).

To learn more about the motivation, time commitment and socio-economic background of volunteers, an online survey was conducted among volunteers in January/February 2017. (<https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000401438>). 193 people filled out the questionnaire completely with about 40 questions. The main results are curiosity and interest in historical images, fun, playing detective, knowledge, metadata, crowdsourcing, and project work are among the strongest motivating reasons for participating in crowdsourcing. The average year of birth at the time was 1955, and for the top 10 it was 1950. An above-average proportion of respondents have university degrees, of which 16% are ETH alumni.[4]

As shown, a not inconsiderable and stable number of people have been participating in the various activities for several years. Why this is so can certainly be explained to a large extent by the community management. To confirm the answers to the written questionnaire and to find out about other aspects, we chose to interview a long-term volunteer directly in this paper. The volunteer's high level of commitment was important to us in the selection process. Thomas Pfister has been a regular volunteer since the beginning and is also involved in our blog and forum as well as other crowdsourcing projects. In addition, we wanted to offer participants at the *Austrian Citizen Science Conference* the opportunity to directly interview a volunteer.

3. Results

To approach one of the four questions derived from the conference motto "Citizen Science – Why (actually) not?", "Why should I sacrifice my free time and participate in a research project?", a dialogue was held between Nicole Graf (NG), Head of the Image Archive at the ETH Library, and Thomas Pfister (TP), volunteer since 2016, at the centre of the talk:

NG: How did you get involved in crowdsourcing at the ETH Library? How did you learn about it?

TP: I read the article in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* of 18.01.2016 (<https://www.nzz.ch/zuerich/wer-kennt-die-berge-orte-und-fabriken-ld.7773?reduced=true>) with interest but didn't join in immediately. It was only when I saw a picture with "Disentis" written on it, which was obviously wrong – I lived there at the time – that I sent in a comment. I looked it up again, that was on 10 March 2016, and it was the picture "Mesocco (GR)" (Ans_08905, <http://doi.org/10.3932/ethz-a-000501361>). My original comment can still be seen there. Meanwhile, my comments have become much shorter and hopefully clearer.

NG: What made you decide to participate?

TP: My innate curiosity and enjoyment of historical images.

NG: What motivates you the most?

TP: Above all, I am very happy about the knowledge I gain thanks to my work. I have also developed a very sharp eye over the years. I see much more in a picture now than when I started. That's a skill that also helps in everyday life. But what really drives me (and I think this is true for most colleagues as well) is the incredible feeling when you finally find the solution after days and weeks. The sense of achievement is always intense and brings a new burst of energy. On the other hand, I recently attended a general assembly of an association in the canton of Graubünden. What's shining on the first page of the presentation? An aerial photograph of Master Mittelholzer from our archives! I was really thrilled and touched. Your and our work is being noticed. That is really important to me.

NG (to the audience): Did you hear that? He is talking about "our" archive!

TP: Yes, I also call you "my boss" ;-). It's really great how you managed to get "our" images out to the public.

NG: Thank you very much for the appreciation of my and the whole Image Archive's work! How do you go about it? Do you look for images? Are you triggered by a theme?

TP: Very differently. Often, I just like a theme, or I feel like going on a virtual trip. I've been to Iran, Afghanistan, Ethiopia and so on.

NG: When do you work? Do you work regularly? How long will you continue?

TP: When my children leave me alone, which is less and less. My working hours are very irregular. That's because real life always takes precedence, of course. Besides, sometimes I don't find pictures that really interest me. I plan to stay a picture detective for a long time. This work has become an important part of my life. Let's see how long I can hold my own against artificial intelligence.[5]

NG: How much time do you invest per week? When do you stop?

TP: It varies: 0-60 hours. I stop when nothing is going on and I'm just going around in circles, which happens from time to time.

NG: Are there also moments when you get frustrated? When and why?

TP: Yes, when I describe thousands of images that have already been described, but their metadata got lost somewhere. What is also frustrating is when you don't get appreciation. A few years ago, I worked for another archive for a whole month and was able to locate and describe about 100 images from the First World War. My input has not been processed to this day.

NG: What do you miss? What could be better?

TP: I would like to have a little more exchange with my crowd colleagues. Unfortunately, it seems that most of them prefer to work alone.

NG: Are you still involved in other projects?

TP: I was quite active in OpenStreetMap (<https://www.osm.ch/>) and Wikipedia for a few years. In recent years, both projects have been pushed into the background by my work for the Image

Archive. I started as a proof-reader at Project Gutenberg (<https://www.gutenberg.org/>), but I haven't been active there for more than ten years.

4. Conclusion

The commitment of volunteers, especially the top 10, is very high and cannot be appreciated enough. The importance of the resource-intensive investment in community management for the success of crowdsourcing cannot be overemphasised. It is interesting to note, and this becomes clear in the interview, that there was a high level of identification with the work and the image archive on the part of the volunteer interviewed.

References

- [1] Nicole Graf, Crowdsourcing. Die Erschließung des Fotoarchivs der Swissair im Bildarchiv der ETH-Bibliothek, Zürich, in *Rundbrief Fotografie*, vol. 23 (2016), no. 1, S. 24-32 (<http://www.rundbrief-fotografie.de/archiv/hefte/rf-89/artikel-graf>).
- [2] Adi Kälin, Wer kennt die Berge, Orte und Fabriken? in *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 18.01.2016.
- [3] Nicole Graf, „Wissen Sie mehr?“, Erfolgsfaktoren beim Crowdsourcing. Ein Erfahrungsbericht des Bildarchivs der ETH-Bibliothek, Zürich, in *Rundbrief Fotografie*, vol. 27 (2020), no. 1, S. 28-38.
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