

Master thesis in the postgraduate program “European Culture Heritage”,
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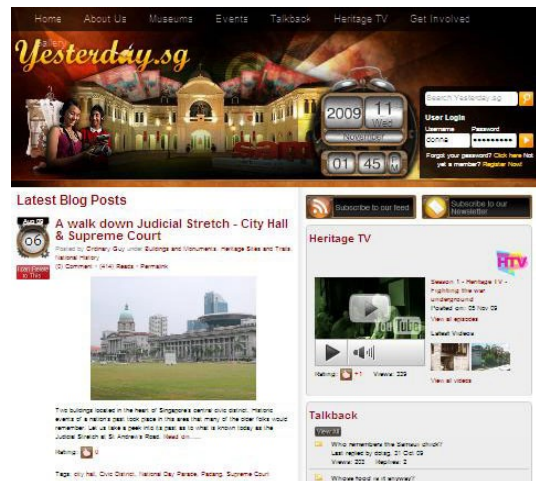
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Built Heritage on yesterday.sg

Topic

Yesterday.sg as a governmental weblog organized by the National Heritage Board (NHB) of Singapore is collecting stories and memories of the national heritage. The web site was initiated in 2006 as an aggregator of weblogs and in February 2009 developed into a platform for social interaction. The aim of the thesis was to examine yesterday.sg for its understanding of built heritage. The following research questions were therefore investigated on: 1. Are governmental activities on conservation and preservation echoed on yesterday.sg? 2. Which understanding of built heritage is present? 3. Does the NHB succeed in activating non-governmental participants? 4. Does an argumentative exchange on built heritage take place?



Scholarly discussion

While nowadays cultural institutions as museums present themselves in weblogs extensively, listings at Technorati or www.museumblogs.org hardly exhibit entries of weblogs to built heritage in contrast. As of now the potential of blogs through „its interactive communication, that supports bi-directional exchange“ (Schmidt 2006) remains to a large extent unused for built heritage institutions. While within the museum range the effects of blogs are progressively scientifically worked on (et al. Russo, Peacock, Simon), research is missing so far within the range of built heritage.

Derivation

The thesis first introduces the built heritage of Singapore, how the government dealt in the past with it and how it administers it today in two ministries legally and strategically differently. In the second part the partizipative potential of blogs is described after the model of Simon (2007) and is then specified in the Singaporean context by outlining the goals for participation of an expert paper on New Media by the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts and by presenting the local blogosphere on heritage.

Methodology

Due to its empirical approach to describe inter-subjectively and systematically (Früh 2007) a quantitative content analysis with qualitative aspects was chosen. For the preparation of the analysis the entries in the three blogs on yesterday.sg consisting of one text, one image, and one video blog were confined thematically, temporally and formally. As a result 96 entries of 20 bloggers and 40 commentator nicknames in the range of seven months remained in the data set. Beyond that the entries were divided into the three author groups „NHB“, „Friends of Yesterday“ (FoY) - as a group of citizens, organized by the NHB - and „citizens“.

Findings and Discussion

The content analysis showed that the interest in topics was differently articulated depending on the groups of participants. The main objective of the so called author group NHB consisted in marketing its subordinate museums as well as the history of the city state. Built heritage with a portion of 17% was nevertheless the third most important topic. Within the data set the NHB pursued own topics like the Japanese Occupation from 1942-46 and a revised understanding of history before 1819. Both topics provoked little resonance at the groups of participants from FoY and citizens. They introduced however the constantly changing city landscape as the most commented entry as well as questions about possibilities of action regarding the threatening destruction of the last existing village Lorong Buangkok. An unexpected finding was that none of the participants mentioned conservation or preservation as a topic. Also in the selection of the presented buildings conservation was secondary: only 40% of the entries discussed protected buildings. Only regarding the building period of the heritage the entries appeared corresponding to governmental activities: most presented buildings (83%) were dated from the colonial period between 1819 and 1959. A further surprising result concerned the emotional tenor of the contributions: the view of the participants on built heritage was not purely nostalgic (29%) but equally curious (32%) or neutral (29%) despite many destruction due to a rapid development of the city state. Most contributions (75%) were written as personal empiric reports after a visit of the site. In this regard the result of the analysis corresponds with results from studies about motivation of bloggers in various other countries (e.g. Herring et al. 2004, Trammell et al. 2006, Schmidt 2007).

The users reacted with at least one comment to 27% of the entries. On the average the comment rate was 2.7 times. In only one case of the analysed entries a controversial dialogue arose among the commentators and thus the exchange of opinions remained an exception. The fact that built heritage would offer cause for a more intense exchange showed the controversial contribution to the city landscape, the questions for a potential preservation of the last village as well as the brainteaser to before/after pictures. Nevertheless the integration of non-governmental participants on yesterday.sg can be evaluated as throughout successful. Structurally the activation succeeded by the creation of the Friends of Yesterday (FoY) as a NHB related group of participants. Further more it aggregated not only entries from 13 blogs of the local blogosphere but activated as well half of the original authors of the to comment or blog on yesterday.sg. Quantitatively the activation succeeded in more than one regard: citizens did not only form the largest group of bloggers, but they were also those, whose entries triggered most comments and placed 39% of the entries.