Detecting and cur(at)ing harmful language in cultural heritage collections

In Cultural Heritage, words matter: they are the first gateway for cultural heritage professionals and documentalists to reconnect heritage with people and provide an interpretation of various objects, all with different provenances and specific biographies. As heritage is political, so is language. When it comes to cultural heritage, we have identified an important issue that occurs in different collections: historical, outdated and sometimes offensive descriptions that reflect the cultural and societal norms and power structures of the various time periods during which they were compiled, but are no longer considered appropriate today. Despite being aware of the issue and harbouring the intention to mitigate it, many CHIs cannot update legacy metadata in their databases due to the sheer size and scope of their collections and the complexity of the endeavour. And here comes DE-BIAS, a project co-financed by the EU Digital Europe programme, that aims at promoting a more inclusive and up-to-date approach to describing collections and narrating stories and histories.

During its two-year run, the project will develop a tool that automatically detects offensive terms in cultural heritage metadata and provides information on their problematic background, using vocabularies that will pair biased language with contextual information and suggestions for appropriate terms. These vocabularies will be focused on three main topics: migration and colonial past; gender and sexual identity; ethnicity and ethno-religious identity. They will be developed by engaging with communities and giving them the space and the agency to change the way in which cultural artefacts have been described so far, due to obsolete colonial, patriarchal and hegemonic policies.

DE-BIAS proposes to improve collections descriptions, and cultural heritage metadata in general, by making existing bias visible, guiding users in understanding the original context of words and providing insights into how they are currently perceived. To do so, the project will define a multilingual vocabulary co-created with marginalised communities, researchers and cultural heritage professionals. It will develop an AI-powered tool for the automatic identification of bias in cultural metadata and integrate it in the Europeana website, the European platform for digital cultural heritage making available digitised collections from more than 4,000 institutions across Europe, and the newly established common European data space for cultural heritage. A wide range of capacity building activities and materials will foster the understanding and analysis of bias in collections and enable bottom-up work with communities to improve representation and involvement of people who don't feel museums and archives speak of or, worse, belong to them. The project aims to test its tools by analysing more than 4.5 million records in five different European languages currently published on Europeana, and automatically detect and flag item descriptions that contain derogatory language. Offering an explanation as to why a particular word is derogatory, and presenting alternative appropriate terms, thus offering a more inclusive user experience on the Europeana portal.

You can learn more about the project at https://pro.europeana.eu/project/de-bias and you can follow the project's hashtag **#DeBias** on social media for the latest updates.

Project partners:

Deutsches Filminstitut & Filmmuseum (coordinator) - Germany

Europeana Foundation - The Netherlands

Datoptron – Greece

European Fashion Heritage Association – Italy

Thinkcode – Cyprus

Michael Culture Association – Belgium

ECCOM Centro Europeo per l'Organizzazione e il Management Culturale – Italy

Katholieke Universiteit Leuven – Belgium

Archives Portal Europe Foundation - The Netherlands

Ministère de la Culture – France

Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision - The Netherlands

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