

# Engaging the Public: A Review of Citizen Science and Participatory Research in the Humanities

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## Abstract

In recent years, citizen science and participatory research have emerged as powerful tools for bridging the gap between academic inquiry and public engagement, particularly within the humanities. Traditionally perceived as domains reserved for scholars and experts, the humanities are increasingly embracing collaborative methodologies that value the knowledge, perspectives, and contributions of non-professional participants. This paper presents a comprehensive review of citizen science and participatory research in the humanities, examining how these approaches redefine the relationship between researchers and the public. By highlighting historical foundations and contemporary shifts, it explores how public involvement can enrich research on culture, history, literature, heritage, and social identity. The study draws attention to the theoretical frameworks that inform participatory approaches, such as co-production of knowledge, epistemic justice, and inclusive research ethics. It also examines the tools and digital platforms that enable wide-scale collaboration, from crowdsourced transcription and annotation projects to open archives and interactive storytelling platforms. Moreover, this review discusses the practical and institutional models that support participatory research, including museums, libraries, community archives, and online humanities labs. Through illustrative case studies, the paper showcases successful examples of citizen engagement, including heritage mapping, oral history projects, and collaborative curation efforts. While acknowledging the immense potential of participatory methods, it also critically reflects on challenges such as data reliability, representation, consent, and the digital divide. Ethical considerations and questions of authority and recognition remain central to evaluating these models of engagement. In conclusion, this review argues that citizen science and participatory research offer the humanities new pathways for social relevance, democratic knowledge production, and sustainable community partnerships. By placing public collaboration at the heart of research, the humanities can evolve into more inclusive and impactful disciplines that resonate with contemporary civic life and cultural memory.

**Keywords:** Citizen Science, Participatory Research, Humanities, Public Engagement, Knowledge Co-creation, Cultural Heritage, Digital Collaboration.

## 1. Introduction

In recent decades, the boundaries between academic scholarship and public engagement have begun to blur, leading to a transformative shift in how knowledge is produced and shared. Nowhere is this more evident than in the growing field of citizen science and participatory research within the humanities. While citizen science has traditionally been associated with natural and environmental sciences, such as bird watching, weather monitoring, or environmental data collection it is increasingly being embraced within the humanities. This expansion signals a broader transformation toward inclusive, collaborative, and socially meaningful scholarship (Bonney et al., 2014). Its adoption in the humanities signals a broader movement toward inclusive, collaborative, and socially engaged scholarship. Participatory research defined by the active involvement of non-professionals in the research process offers opportunities for mutual learning, shared authority, and democratized knowledge production.

This shift is not merely a change in method it reflects a deeper rethinking of the role of the humanities in public life. Technological advances such as open-source platforms, collaborative digital tools, and social media have made it easier than ever for individuals to contribute meaningfully to projects involving literature, cultural memory, historical documentation, and visual archives (Simon, 2010; Liu, 2013). From crowdsourced transcription of ancient manuscripts to mapping personal stories related to historical events, public involvement has become an essential part of many scholarly endeavors. These practices not only enrich academic work but also ensure that diverse and previously marginalized voices are recognized and preserved (Cifor and Gilliland, 2016).

Moreover, participatory research addresses broader concerns about the relevance and transparency of academic work. With growing public skepticism toward universities and experts, engaging non-academic audiences is now understood as a key ethical responsibility of scholars (Leavy, 2022). Collaborative projects encourage trust, foster interdisciplinary exchange, and often lead to socially impactful outcomes that extend beyond academia. For example, working with communities to record local histories or restore cultural heritage can foster a stronger sense of ownership and identity while creating research outputs that serve the needs of real people (Ridge, 2014; Baca, 2016).

Ultimately, this new wave of public engagement within the humanities is driven by values as much as by research objectives. Inclusion, respect, transparency, and empowerment are becoming essential principles guiding scholarly practices. By embedding these values into research design, the humanities can respond more effectively to contemporary societal challenges whether they relate to cultural preservation, social justice, or collective memory. Participatory methods help to redefine scholarship as a shared and evolving process, in which knowledge is co-produced rather than simply disseminated. As such, citizen science and participatory research are not just alternative methodologies they represent a paradigm shift in how the humanities understand their purpose and practice in a changing world.

This paper reviews the landscape of citizen science and participatory research in the humanities. Section 2 discusses the theoretical and conceptual frameworks that inform participatory practices. Section 3 explores the methodologies, tools, and models that enable public engagement. Section 4 highlights key case studies and practical applications. Section 5 examines ethical concerns, challenges, and emerging directions. Finally, Section 6 offers a brief conclusion on the future of participatory humanities research.

## 2. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Citizen science and participatory research in the humanities are grounded in theoretical frameworks that reimagine the production of knowledge as a shared, inclusive, and socially situated process. Unlike traditional top-down approaches to scholarship, participatory models emphasize collaboration, co-creation, and respect for diverse forms of expertise. This section outlines the key concepts and philosophies underpinning public engagement in humanities research, including the notions of epistemic justice, co-production of knowledge, and participatory epistemologies.

### 2.1. Co-Production of Knowledge

The concept of co-production refers to the collaborative development of knowledge by researchers and non-academic participants. It challenges the idea that expertise resides solely within academia and acknowledges the valuable contributions of lived experience, local memory, and cultural practices. In the humanities, co-production takes shape in projects where communities work alongside scholars to document histories, interpret artefacts, or reconstruct narratives (High, 2009; Ridge, 2014). This approach democratizes research by decentralizing authority and recognizing the legitimacy of multiple knowledge sources (Simon, 2010).

### 2.2. Epistemic Justice

Epistemic justice, a term coined by Miranda Fricker, highlights the ethical importance of recognizing and correcting inequalities in who gets to contribute to and shape knowledge. In participatory humanities, this involves creating spaces where marginalized voices can participate meaningfully, particularly those historically excluded from academic discourse. By enabling inclusive participation, projects can counteract forms of testimonial and hermeneutical injustice and open up richer, more representative understandings of the past and present (Cifor and Gilliland, 2016).

### 2.3. Participatory Epistemologies in the Humanities

Participatory epistemologies challenge hierarchical models of knowledge generation and promote horizontal relationships between scholars and citizens. In the humanities, this involves valuing subjective experiences, narrative traditions, and oral knowledge. Participatory approaches emphasize dialogue, reflexivity, and iterative feedback processes, leading to richer interpretations of texts, artefacts, and histories. These models also align with postcolonial and feminist methodologies that advocate for equity, collaboration, and cultural sensitivity in research (Liu, 2013).

### 2.4. Public Humanities and Cultural Democracy

Public humanities provide a foundation for participatory research by encouraging engagement with communities outside the university. They seek to make humanities research accessible, relevant, and responsive to public interests. Closely tied to the idea of cultural democracy, public humanities aim to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to contribute to cultural and scholarly life. This framework supports the creation of shared spaces for dialogue, creativity, and critical reflection, often through exhibitions, oral histories, digital archives, and collaborative storytelling (Ridge, 2014; Terras, 2015; Baca, 2016).

## 3. Methods, Tools and Public Engagement Models

Participatory research in the humanities is supported by a growing range of methods and digital tools that enable meaningful collaboration between researchers and the public. These approaches vary from analogue techniques, such as oral interviews and participatory workshops, to more technologically driven practices like crowdsourcing, digital archiving, and mobile storytelling (Simon, 2010; Terras, 2015). This section examines the methodologies and tools that facilitate citizen participation, as well as the structural models both institutional and community-based that sustain public engagement.

### 3.1. Participatory Methods in the Humanities

Participatory research methodologies include oral history collection, collaborative ethnography, community-based archival development, and co-curated exhibitions. These methods are rooted in dialogue and reciprocity, where participants contribute not just data but also interpretation, critique, and contextual understanding. Projects often begin with joint planning sessions and employ open-ended interviews, story circles, and visual methods such as participatory mapping or photovoice (Cifor and Gilliland, 2016). These qualitative practices reflect an ethics of inclusion and shared authority, aligning with cultural democracy principles (Simon, 2010).

### 3.2. Digital Tools and Platforms

Digital platforms play a central role in scaling participation and making it more accessible. Tools such as Zooniverse, Omeka, and Transkribus allow volunteers to transcribe, tag, and annotate historical materials. Geographic Information Systems (GIS) enable participatory mapping of heritage sites, while social media channels support storytelling and the sharing of cultural memory (Baca, 2016). These technologies not only facilitate engagement but also generate large-scale data sets for interpretive research (Liu, 2013; Pavlek, Winters and Morin, 2022).

### 3.3. Models of Public Engagement

Engagement models vary based on the depth and scope of participation. The table below outlines three major types of public engagement commonly found in participatory humanities projects:

Table 1: Three Major Types of Public Engagement

| Model                | Description                                                                  | Example Activities                               |
|----------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Contributory</b>  | Public volunteers contribute data to researcher-led projects.                | Transcribing documents; tagging photos           |
| <b>Collaborative</b> | Participants help design the project and interpret results.                  | Oral histories; co-curated exhibits              |
| <b>Co-created</b>    | Researchers and public co-develop all stages from planning to dissemination. | Community storytelling; digital heritage mapping |

### 3.4. Institutional and Community Support

Sustainable participatory research often relies on partnerships with cultural institutions like museums, libraries, and archives. These spaces provide physical and digital infrastructure, curatorial expertise, and long-term stewardship of materials. Equally important are grassroots organizations, local heritage groups, and citizen collectives that offer contextual insight and ensure that research reflects community values and priorities.

## 4. Case Studies and Applications

Real-world examples of participatory research in the humanities demonstrate how public engagement can enrich scholarly work, foster inclusivity, and generate new forms of cultural understanding. This section presents selected case studies from diverse thematic areas, highlighting how citizen contributions have shaped humanities research. These applications range from digital archives and oral history projects to community mapping and co-curated exhibitions.

### 4.1. Crowdsourced Transcription and Annotation

One of the most widespread forms of participatory humanities research involves the crowdsourced transcription of historical documents. Projects like Transcribe Bentham invite volunteers to help digitize the writings of philosopher Jeremy Bentham. Participants transcribe original manuscripts and annotate them for scholarly use, contributing to an evolving digital edition. Such projects not only increase access to primary sources but also allow the public to engage directly with complex historical texts (Terras, 2015).

## 4.2. Community Oral History Projects

Oral history projects provide rich platforms for storytelling and memory preservation. In the "Recording Lives" initiative in the UK, local communities collaborated with researchers to collect and preserve personal stories from working-class families. These narratives were archived in public libraries and used to reinterpret local history from the perspective of ordinary people. Oral histories empower contributors by validating their lived experiences and offering alternative views often absent from official records.

## 4.3. Heritage Mapping and Digital Archives

Participatory mapping enables communities to locate, document, and interpret cultural heritage in geographic space. For example, the "Mapping Indigenous LA" project involved Indigenous communities and UCLA researchers co-creating a digital map that includes landmarks, stories, and artefacts tied to Native histories in Los Angeles. By integrating GIS tools with Indigenous knowledge, the project challenges dominant historical narratives and foregrounds place-based identity (Pavlek, Winters and Morin, 2022).

## 4.4. Co-Curation in Museums and Exhibitions

Museums have increasingly adopted co-curation practices, inviting community members to shape exhibitions and displays. The "Reimagine Remembrance" exhibition in Canada brought together war veterans, artists, and youth to co-curate narratives around military service and memory. This model shifts curatorial authority and fosters greater emotional and cultural relevance for diverse audiences.

## 4.5. Selected Examples of Participatory Humanities Projects

The table below summarizes selected participatory research projects across different contexts:

Table 2: Participatory Research Project Across Different Contexts

| Project Name          | Location/Institution       | Participation Type       | Focus Area                             |
|-----------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| Transcribe Bentham    | University College London  | Contributory             | Historical manuscript transcription    |
| Recording Lives       | Manchester Libraries (UK)  | Collaborative            | Oral history and working-class culture |
| Mapping Indigenous LA | UCLA & Indigenous partners | Co-created               | Digital heritage and storytelling      |
| Reimagine Remembrance | Canadian War Museum        | Collaborative/Co-curated | Memory, identity, and public history   |

## 5. Challenges, Ethics, and Future Directions

While citizen science and participatory research offer significant benefits to the humanities, they also present a range of challenges. These include ethical concerns, issues of data quality, questions of representation, and structural inequalities that may influence participation. Addressing these concerns is essential for building responsible, inclusive, and sustainable models of public engagement. This section explores key challenges and outlines potential future directions for participatory humanities research.

### 5.1. Ethical Considerations and Consent

One of the primary ethical concerns in participatory research involves the informed and ongoing consent of participants. In humanities projects especially those involving personal stories, cultural artefacts, or community identities, researchers must ensure that contributors are fully aware of how their input will be used, stored, and shared. Consent must be an active, continuous process rather than a one-time formality. Furthermore, participants should retain agency over their narratives and be able to withdraw at any point (High, 2009; Brady, 2009).

## 5.2. Data Reliability and Scholarly Standards

Another common concern relates to the accuracy and consistency of data collected through public contributions. While crowdsourcing platforms have made large-scale data generation possible, questions persist about the validity of volunteer-generated content. To address this, many projects incorporate quality control mechanisms such as peer review, automated checks, or expert moderation. However, striking a balance between inclusivity and academic rigour remains a critical challenge.

## 5.3. Representation and Equity in Participation

Participation in humanities research is often uneven due to disparities in access, education, language, and technology. Digital platforms, while powerful, may unintentionally exclude individuals or groups with limited internet access or digital literacy. Moreover, projects must be mindful of whose voices are included and whose are marginalized. True participatory research must go beyond token involvement and seek meaningful inclusion of underrepresented communities throughout the research process.

## 5.4. Power Dynamics and Shared Authority

Participatory projects often reveal tensions in decision-making authority between scholars and the public. While many initiatives aim for shared ownership, institutional structures or funding priorities may limit the extent to which participants influence research design, interpretation, or dissemination. Recognizing and actively managing these dynamics is essential for equitable collaboration (Liu, 2013).

## 5.5. Future Directions and Innovations

The future of participatory research in the humanities lies in deepening collaborative practices, expanding digital inclusivity, and embedding ethics more firmly into project design. Emerging technologies such as AI-driven transcription tools, virtual exhibitions, and immersive storytelling platforms offer new avenues for engagement. At the same time, interdisciplinary collaboration with designers, technologists, educators, and community organizers can support more holistic and context-sensitive research. There is also a growing call for institutional change, including revised research evaluation metrics that value public engagement and community impact.

## 6. Conclusion

Citizen science and participatory research have redefined how knowledge is created, interpreted, and shared in the humanities. By inviting public collaboration into scholarly spaces, these approaches challenge traditional academic hierarchies and offer more inclusive, diverse, and socially grounded forms of inquiry. Through co-production of knowledge, oral histories, digital tools, and community-driven projects, the humanities can expand their relevance and better reflect the complexities of human experience. Participatory research also fosters mutual learning, enhances public trust in scholarship, and strengthens the social impact of academic work. However, realizing the full potential of these methods requires ongoing attention to ethics, representation, and power dynamics. Issues such as consent, data quality, and digital access must be addressed through thoughtful planning, transparent communication, and equitable collaboration. Looking ahead, the integration of emerging technologies, interdisciplinary partnerships, and more inclusive research policies can further strengthen participatory approaches. Ultimately, engaging the public is not only a methodological innovation but also a moral and democratic imperative for a more just and responsive humanities.

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