

Working in the digital contact zone

The digital sharing portal for Roald Amundsen's Gjoa Haven collection

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Abstract: *In this article a story of digital sharing is told. The focus is on a collection of traditional Inuit material culture brought together on King William Island over 22 months in 1903–1905 by Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen. Today, shared interest in and concern for this collection centres the collaboration between the Nattilik Heritage Centre in Gjoa Haven, Arctic Canada, and the Museum of Cultural History in Oslo, Norway. A digital sharing portal launched in 2017 sets out to realise the space and framework for crucial collaborative practices concerning knowledge sharing and access to the material. The article discusses this process, using Clifford's perspectives on the contact zone (1997) as an intake to discuss the construction and practice of this digital sharing site.*

Keywords: Digital, collaboration, contact zone, museum collections, Inuit, Nunavut.

This article presents a story of digital sharing. It focuses on a collection of traditional Inuit material culture brought together on King William Island over 22 months in 1903–1905 by Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen. Today, shared interest in and concern for this collection centres the collaboration between the Nattilik Heritage Centre in Gjoa Haven, Arctic Canada, and the Museum of Cultural History in Oslo, Norway. A digital sharing portal launched in 2017 sets out to realise the space and framework for crucial collaborative practices concerning knowledge sharing and access to the material. The construction and

practice of this digital sharing site will be discussed here.

The text that follows explores the process through which dialogues between the museum and source community have been established and maintained. It highlights the network of communication that must be in place with the community before a sharing portal can be built and the many negotiations between source community concerns and information and communication technology (ICT) requirements, economic considerations, and time involved. Digital portals, I suggest, are akin to “contact zones”. James Clifford first

used Mary Louise Pratt's concept of the contact zone to open discussion on the potentialities of museums and museum work as a borderland between power dynamics, historical inequality, suppression, and intense identity politics. In this setting, Clifford envisioned the "contact zone" as "the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict" (Clifford 1997:192). He emphasised the relationality and situatedness of contact zone encounters. Situatedness here is considered both spatial and temporal. The museum, then, becomes "an ongoing historical, political, moral *relationship* – a power-charged set of exchanges, of push and pull" (1997:192).

Clifford's focus on the context and frictions of such exhibition spaces is useful in exploring the dynamics underlying and surrounding the process of developing the digital sharing portal for the Gjoa Haven collection. The portal is as much at the mercy of the situated encounters and specific relationships and conditions that premised its production as any other cultural phenomena, whether its materiality consists of bandwidth, computers, bone, wood, binaries, or zeroes and ones in varying combinations (Hogsden & Poulter 2012, Miller & Horst 2012). This article will describe a process mired in negotiation over meanings where the acknowledgement of differing perspectives is of paramount importance. Potentially, these exchanges and the friction they involve could both perform and maintain a colonial order and further the dialogue between museums and source communities into the postcolonial era (e.g. Peers & Brown 2003, Thomas 2010, Fienup-Riordan 1998)

In the following, I will present the collection

and the work that went into forming this collaborative museum space. I will describe the digital sharing portal and the crucial tenets of collaboration and access that underpin this project. Two aspects of work on and with the portal will then receive special attention: the use of Facebook and the discussions on how to group the objects in the digital universe. The last part of this paper will scrutinise the potential of sociality and relationality in this digital contact zone, and what it could take to activate it.

THE AMUNDSEN GJOA HAVEN COLLECTION

The institutional collaboration under discussion in this paper centres around shared interest in a museum collection. Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen arrived at a small bay he considered to be an excellent winter harbour along the southeast coast of King William Island in September 1903. With his small ship the Gjoa and a crew of six expedition members, he was on the way to realising his first big polar achievement: sailing through the Northwest Passage. Wintering in this area was part of his careful planning. He described his anchoring spot as the nicest little harbour in the world and was extremely pleased with the game he and his crew found nearby. He named the spot harbour of the Gjoa or Gjoa Haven.

As fall progressed into October, the crew encountered their neighbours: the Nattilik Inuit camping near Koka Lake a bit further south came to investigate what the *kablunaaq*, the white people, were up to. The first meeting was reported as tense by both groups but turned into friendly greetings, mutual visiting, and, in time, an absolutely extraordinary learning experience for the Norwegians. Over the next two years, as the Gjoa remained in Gjoa



Fig. 1. In Gjoa Haven 1904. Photo by Amundsen's expedition. Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo, Norway.

Haven, they travelled together, ate together, visited each other, and traded extensively.

The stories about Amusi and his party, their attempts at practising what their Inuit friends taught them, and the relationships built during their stay are still told in Gjoa Haven and the neighbouring communities today. Amundsen, on his side, wrote with great respect and admiration about the expertise and ability of the people he befriended regarding living well in Arctic conditions.

The longer stay was part of Amundsen's plan

for his expedition. Relocating the magnetic North Pole, and thus proving its gradual movement, was the main scientific goal of the expedition. As the relationship between the local Inuit and the expedition members developed, he learned more about the ways they handled the everyday as well as the extreme, and documenting and trading became important to him. From acquiring Inuit-made fur clothing for himself and his crew, he moved on to trading needles, knife blades, and other metal and wood pieces for the different items

his Inuit friends used – everything from tools, clothing, and hunting equipment to utensils, cooking, and travel equipment.

The collection he amassed filled much of the Gjoa and amounted to some 1,200 items. It documents all aspects of Inuit material culture in the region from this period. On Amundsen's completion of the Northwest Passage in 1906, the objects were shipped back to Oslo where they became part of the collections of the University of Oslo. They were first displayed in the brand-new building at Tullinløkka in December 1906, and the line of fascinated visitors waiting to be let in to see them went around the block.

In the following years, Amundsen went on to put the knowledge he acquired on King William Island to good use in new polar expeditions, winning the South Pole in 1911 and documenting the Northeast Passage from 1922 onwards. Most of the Gjoa Haven collection remained in Oslo, becoming one of the great treasures of the ethnographic museum here. As redressing museum practice and indigenous identity politics became a central topic in social anthropology and museum work, the very special tie the museum had to this small town in the Canadian Arctic was on museum professor Tom G. Svensson's mind (Amundsen 1907, Etnografisk museum 1907–08, Taylor 1977, Svensson 1995). His field research visit to Gjoa Haven in the early 1990s focused primarily on his interest in Inuit art, but the Amundsen collection and the well-remembered relationship between Amundsen and the people he came to know was the basis for establishing a new connection.

The awareness of the strong shared interest in this collection and the positive interest in furthering the relationship was present in both Gjoa Haven and Oslo over the following years. In 2010, when a heritage centre was being planned in Gjoa Haven, the museum in Oslo

collaborated with the hamlet council in Gjoa Haven to return objects from the collection to become part of the exhibits in the new centre. When the Nattilik Heritage Centre opened in October 2013, 16 exceptional objects from the Amundsen Gjoa Haven collection were on display. A solid relationship between the two institutions opened the invitation the board extended to me to spend 2014 in Gjoa Haven working at the heritage centre and doing field research on the importance and relevance of the returning objects and for the repeated visits since.

From the very first visit professor Svensson and myself made to Gjoa Haven in 2011 to discuss collaborations on the collection, digital access was an obvious and crucial part of the plans being made. During discussions with the hamlet council, the safety and conditions for the collection in the new heritage centre were a major topic. The centre being planned would not contain storage facilities and would be limited in size. We were discussing transferring ownership of important cultural heritage to the community, as *utukut*, the old stuff or heritage objects, of this type were not something the people had access to locally at this time. The practical and symbolic importance of the return of objects was obvious to all, as was the fact that the bulk of the collection would remain in Oslo. Digital sharing and digital access was part of the plan we discussed at this point as a key to ensuring that the entire collection would become available to the public in Gjoa Haven and elsewhere. With the launch of the digital sharing portal in 2017, this became reality.

THE DIGITAL SHARING PORTAL

Between the baseline of availability and sharing as general goals of collaboration between the

two museums and the realised portal, there is considerable investment by all parties involved. I will return to this investment below. For now, I want to focus on the portal and how it gives access to the collection. On the web pages the portal is presented as follows:

About the collection and the project: This website is a collaborative effort. It brings together objects, photographs and documentation, related to the collection of traditional Inuit material culture made in Gjoa Haven 1903-1905, by Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen. The resources have been prepared in Gjoa Haven and Oslo, by the Natilik Heritage Centre and the Museum of Cultural History.

Collaboration and digital sharing: This digital sharing portal is one result of the collaboration between the Natilik Heritage Centre in Gjoa Haven and the Museum of Cultural History in Oslo. We have been working together, engaging with the Gjoa Haven/ Amundsen collection, since 2010. In 2013 some objects from the collection were returned to Gjoa Haven, to become part of the displays at the Natilik Heritage Centre.

This digital sharing portal gives access to the entire collection of artefacts and photographs, the materials currently held in Gjoa Haven as well as those in Oslo. Making this material available online has been a premise and goal of our collaboration from day one. A lot of effort has gone into translating and adapting the materials for digital sharing. Please come in, explore, engage, and feel welcome to share knowledge and help us make what is here even richer!

The presentation underlines collaboration as the crucial framework for what the portal presents, and the kinds of materials available here: the photos and documentation of objects in the collection, and other materials relevant to this, brought together and available online for all interested parties. The invitation to engage and share is explicit, as of course is absolutely crucial in this kind of setting.¹

The goal of making a collaborative space for discussing, documenting, and learning from each other and from the materials is crucial here. While the different materials found in the portal – the photos, descriptions, books documenting the objects, and expedition – were publicly available already, they had not been in any way easy to access. The photos, for example, had been available through the Museum of Cultural History in Oslo's database and its web-based interface.² To handle this interface requires knowledge of the nooks and crannies of the university museum collection web interface in Norway and familiarity with web museum collection search interfaces in general (e.g. Srinivasan *et al.* 2017, Were 2008).

Added to this was, of course, the language barrier. The working language of the university museums in Oslo is Norwegian. The original catalogue documenting and describing this collection, written in 1907 and 1908, was in Norwegian (*Etnografisk Samling*, KHM 1908). Though thorough and extensive, it could in no way be considered particularly accessible, even though it was available on the webpages of the Museum of Cultural History.

The expedition narrative, written by Amundsen and published in 1907 and 1908, was available in libraries as was other documentation on the collection. Added to the work inherent in seeking these sources for any researcher comes the extra challenges as seen from a small community in the Canadian Arctic. Accessibility of the materials was, when all was said and done, not impressive.

Considering the actual objects in the part of the collection held in Oslo, the situation is even more challenging. Part of the materials are on display in the Arctic exhibit in the museum building at Tullinløkka in Oslo. The information provided in the exhibit does not

make it easy for the general museum visitor to identify which objects belong to this particular collection. Most of the objects in the care of the Museum of Cultural History are not on display but in storage. The museum storage facility can only be accessed by special appointment, is located in another part of Oslo, and is geared towards safety and preservation of the materials held there, not visitor convenience. Researchers and others engaged in exhibition work at the Museum of Cultural History have access to what is in storage mainly through catalogues and photographs. For visitors, this is even more limited.

The digital sharing portal brings the photos, the main catalogue description, and other information about the collection together in one place for the first time for the benefit of all users. The interface gives priority to the photographs. This was very intentional and based on the work the community engaged in and that I got to be a part of during my presence at the Nattilik Heritage Centre in 2014.

When planning for object return, we worked with the hamlet council and with the elders, using photographs. Where visits to the storage and extensive discussions over object selection would have been ideal, the practical limits in terms of funding and time constraints did not allow for this at the time. Thus, the photographs became the baseline and frame of reference for engaging with the collection. People and, in particular, the elders involved in this work were extremely interested in the images and what they showed. Other documentation, such as descriptions and names of objects, were not considered relevant. Objects were engaged with and interpreted on the basis of traditional knowledge and memory work done in the different settings where people met.

When starting work on shaping the digital sharing site, the premise from the very start

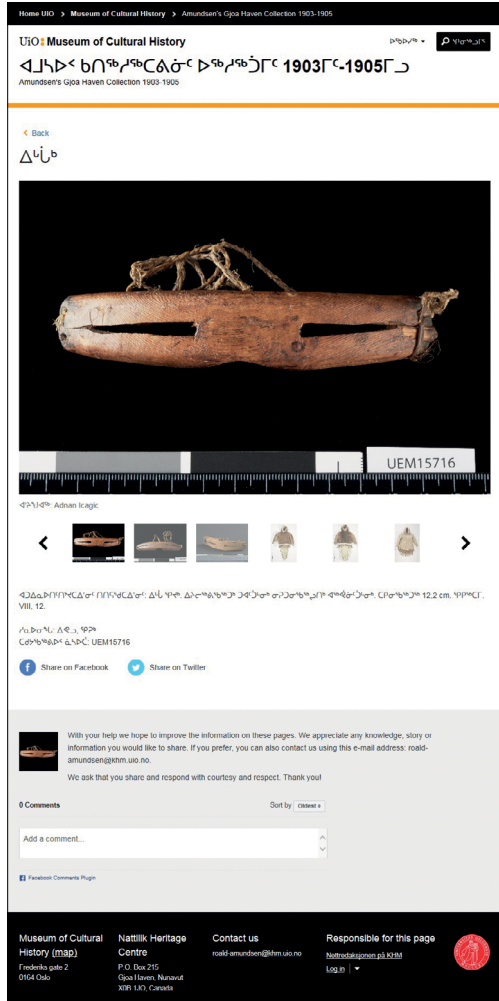


Fig. 2. Screenshot from www.khm.uio.no/gjoahaven/, showing the snow goggles now on display at the Nattilik Heritage Centre in Gjoa Haven, in Nattilingmiut.

was that the photographs needed exposure, and the captions and descriptions were to be considered secondary. A direct result of this is the absence of labels/names on the main presentation page of the portal. These only

appear as one access the presentations of individual items or objects. The objects are presented and left, at least initially and for those encountering them with prior knowledge, to “speak for themselves” (Vermeulen & Pilcher 2009, Dudley 2012).

This approach to captioning also helped solve another challenge of the main presentation page: that of the heading. The top part of all pages in the portal provide the user with consistent information on where they are – in the digital sharing portal for Amundsen’s Gjoa Haven Collection – and what language they have chosen to use to access the materials here. The menu giving access to language choice is always available. The consistent use of Inuktitut in Nattilingmiut dialect using syllabics gives a crucial signal to all who use the portal of where this material originates and the relevant cultural and language context in which it should be regarded.

While language and translation were key to this project, there is a very obvious hierarchy in what information has been given priority when it comes to translation. All catalogue information on the objects is available in four languages: Nattilingmiut, English, French, and Norwegian. The use of Inuktitut is, as already underlined, crucial in contextualising this material for all users regardless of background.

The general description of the project and supporting materials is for now available in English only. Amundsen’s two-volume expedition narrative published in 1907 would be one example of this type of material (Amundsen 1907). The consideration was thus that having some things available even only in English still added value to the portal.

What the portal also provides is a framework for further development. It is not made to be or expected to be a static resource. The educational programmes would be one example of this.

They are available in the portal in only English at present. They invite teachers and students at Quqshuun Ilihakvik and Qiqirtaq Ilihakvik in Gjoa Haven as well as schools in the neighbouring communities of Taloyoak and Kugaaruk and those interested elsewhere to engage with the materials in the portal and with their own communities on the issue of traditional knowledge and material culture. As they are being used, they are also being adapted and developed further.

Educational programming in Nattilingmiut/Inuktitut will be a wonderful additional resource for the portal. For now, local teachers with language competence adapt materials as they see fit. In Gjoa Haven, language is an everyday challenge. The older generation speaks mainly Inuktitut, the younger generation mainly English, with the middle generation taking on the role of interpreters within their own families and communities. The local political will to strengthen and underline Nattilingmiut and Inuktitut proficiency for children and students in school is very strong. The fact that English at present is the language of teaching in schools once students enter the upper grades and is the shared language of communication between students and teachers in these settings is part of the practicalities confronting the community on a daily basis.

All this underlines that language, as seen from the perspective of the power dynamics of the contact zone, is a challenging issue. The practicalities of everyday life do not always align easily with the importance accorded to identity and ethnicity as expressed through language use locally.

COLLABORATION AND ACCESS

The development of the resources for the digital sharing portal was, as already mentioned, an

integral part of the collaboration between the hamlet of Gjoa Haven, the Nattilik Heritage Centre, and the Museum of Cultural History. The first challenge we faced when wanting to share this collection was that of language. As mentioned, the catalogue for collections at the Museum of Cultural History in Oslo is in fact written and maintained in Norwegian. While this makes sense from the local museum perspective, it is a considerable challenge for people outside of Scandinavia in accessing our materials and for the museum itself in matters of sharing and collaborating. The very first issue that had to be tackled was making the basic collection information available in English.

While the initial funding of the translation of the collection catalogue to English was secured through the University of Oslo, what followed was very much a collaborative matter. Without the effort and investment of the Nattilik Heritage Centre and Canadian funding agencies supporting the collaboration around the collection, the digital portal as it stands today would never have been possible. Canadian Heritage, through its Museum Assistance Programme, generously funded local research in Gjoa Haven on the collection, interpretation, and travel. The Government of Nunavut and Department of Culture and Heritage further supported translation into Nattilingmiut. While English and French translations were tackled elsewhere, the translation of the catalogue into Nattilingmiut was handled in Gjoa Haven by local expert translator Simon Okpakok.

Seen from the sidelines, translation of the catalogue text might seem a primarily instrumental process; however, it has been a core activity on which all other aspects of this project have been premised. Without sharing access to the information that has formed

the basis for our knowledge of this collection in Oslo over the last 110 years, developing it further is not feasible. Considering the portal to be a very concrete contact zone, language is obviously all-important to the dialogue taking place. The languages included in the portal and how the languages are approached (as simple translations from English or taken seriously) need to be considered in terms of the nature of the knowledge they represent. If exchange, sharing of knowledge, and further development and care for the collection are to be the core of collaborative practice, we must premise it on just that: sharing of knowledge, discussion of content, and redistribution of authority on what it is we are in fact concerning ourselves with (for similar discussions on the postcolonial era, see De La Cadena 2015, Verran 2012, Hennessy 2009, and Ridington & Hennessy 2008). The two main concerns of the digital sharing portal project: the creation of *access* through *collaborative processes*, could not be more succinctly underlined.

One further point concerning the issue of access must be underlined here: that of digital devices and bandwidth. People in Gjoa Haven are digitally competent, and most use computers and handheld devices connected to the internet daily. Equipment needed to use the digital portal is thus available in most households in the community. What is an issue, however, is stable internet access and bandwidth. Internet access is available, and Facebook is broadly used, but the bandwidth needed to engage with different Internet resources in the form of streaming or downloading is limited. While high-resolution resources (photographs etc.) are available through the digital sharing portal, access is presently limited in Gjoa Haven and neighbouring communities. People wait for improved bandwidth to become available.

22 INTO THE DIGITAL CONTACT ZONE – NEGOTIATING

As this discussion moves further into the digital contact zone, I want to move the focus from Gjoa Haven and the crucial groundwork discussions and considerations of the materials to be included in the portal to also include some of the discussions as they took shape in Oslo. In the following, I want to consider the location of the portal within the webpages of the University of Oslo, the discussions on the use of Facebook as an engagement tool for the portal, and the challenges we encountered regarding the need to group the materials in the portal in ways that are suitable for the user interface.

Taking issues of ownership and control of this information as the starting point, there is no doubt that a website located outside of the institutional framework of the University of Oslo would have made immense sense for a digital sharing portal of this kind. The collection information, as entered in the museum database, is accessible as open-source data to be harvested. The museum and the university are public institutions with policies and strategy documents inviting sharing and engagement with source communities and the public. In Gjoa Haven, different web solutions for the pages of the heritage centre were on the table. At the museum in Oslo, the importance and advantages of constructing the portal pages independently and within an Internet domain that is completely separate from the museum were clear to all. When, despite this, the digital sharing portal did indeed end up located on the University of Oslo/Museum of Cultural History server, the reasons were instrumental and practical.

At the Natililik Heritage Centre, at this time in 2016, work was being done on locating and

creating new webpages. The developments were exciting and locally anchored, and much effort was put into building a web presence from which promoting the centre and heritage-related issues would be possible. Building and maintaining a webpage is a challenging proposition for a small institution under any circumstances. As the focus at the time was on local capacity building in Gjoa Haven, it was important to support and link the work being done there to other web resources. The platform chosen by the heritage centre was, while very suitable to local needs, not ideal for a digital sharing portal displaying a museum collection.

Physical location was also a main issue determining how the development work on the portal took shape. In 2016, funding came through from the Museum of Cultural History in Oslo to support the work needed to make the collection available through a web interface. Taking available time and funding into consideration, the overall aim was no longer development but to bring the prepared materials together in a revised interface and get this up and running. Travelling between Oslo and Gjoa Haven is a costly undertaking, and in this situation, we were much in the same squeeze we had been during the initial phase of collaboration in 2011 and 2012. We had crucially important work to accomplish, but there were no available travel funds.

Consequently, we chose to solve as much as we could in house at the University of Oslo. Using established resources there, we could draw on already developed systems, people who knew the museum database, and relationships already established with user interface experts and web developers. While the existing database and web interface were not, as mentioned, in any way deemed suitable for the kind of access, collaboration

and sharing we wanted for the portal, they did provide a very sound point of departure. What was already in place made developing the digital sharing portal possible.³

This last phase of developing the interface for the digital sharing portal thus became centred on the Department of Ethnography, Numismatics, and Classical Archaeology, and the Section for Digital Documentation, IT and Archiving in the Collections Department, in collaboration with two groups at the University Centre for Information Technology: the Data Capture and Collections Management group and the User Experience group. We received excellent and enthusiastic support from all involved.

As part of the preparatory work for the portal, the Data Capture and Collections Management group at the university had already invested considerable effort into developing a prototype interface for the Amundsen collection. The solutions created here for focusing on one particular collection and solving challenges presented by managing several languages were instrumental in the work that followed.

One crucial question when considering the university as a host for the portal was the design flexibility. The possibility of developing a visual identity for the portal using syllabics and images was a deciding factor for us. Using the images as the main tool to identify and engage with the material was one explicit goal for our digital portal project. The use of the Nattilingmiut dialect presented in syllabics prominently in the design was a self-evident concern from a Canadian Arctic perspective. Both issues were discussed extensively with the development team in Oslo. This was absolutely crucial to establish the common understanding needed on what was important and why, what was possible within the boundaries we were

working within, and thus how the different issues could be resolved satisfactorily.

Another significant concern when developing any digital resource is maintenance of the website over time. This concern becomes particularly acute when seen from the perspective of heritage work and museum collection work. For institutions like ours, where the focus is consistently preservation, care, and minding our position as a keeper of future generations' resources, the impermanence and ephemeral quality of many web-related projects are acutely disturbing. Ways of creating some stability beyond individual people's investment in this project represented a crucial concern when discussing different solutions for developing and locating the digital sharing portal. When the project defaulted to the University of Oslo's resources for developing the portal, one advantage was that the portal then became part of the institutional maintenance effort, funded through the university as a whole. Nothing, and definitely not web resources, thrives or survives without engagement by interested users. In this situation, a lot of uncertainty and day-to-day maintenance is secured by the portal's presence in a wider context that ensures basic predictability and security.

During this process, it was clear from an early stage that there were logical advantages to making use of Facebook⁴ for our social interaction interface. In the Canadian Arctic, when it comes to communicating and keeping up with friends and family both within and between communities, Facebook and its related social media applications are the preferred medium. People in Gjoa Haven say good morning to their families on Facebook. This is also where people look to see what house their children might be hanging out at or where they ask about caribou meat for supper. If the sharing aspect of the digital sharing portal was

to have any meaning at all, it depended on using an established and known solution that people were comfortable with, and Facebook seemed to be exactly that.

Using Facebook as an integrated part of the webpages in this way would be a first at the University of Oslo. To do this, we had to obtain special approval from the web editors in charge of the UiO domain. The support and understanding from the staff we collaborated with at the University Centre for Information Technology were instrumental in resolving this matter and in subsequently implementing the Facebook plugin successfully in the portal. Once set up, we were faced with the limited experience the university had with this particular method of building an interface. There were various discussions on how to integrate the plugin with other features of the portal and with other web interfaces that we were only partly able to resolve. An additional challenge to this process was distance. To move forward on this matter, further discussions with our partners in Gjoa Haven will be crucial.

While the possibility of integrating Facebook as part of the portal interface was an anticipated hurdle in portal development, we ran into surprising challenges on other fronts. One such challenge was the question of how to group materials on the web portal. In our first meeting, the people from the User Experience group stressed the matter of grouping as important to the organising of the portal interface. They asked that we provide a list of seven to eight categories that the collection could be divided into. This would form the basis for the main menu and the way for portal users to engage with and navigate the portal.

The ways in which people saw connections and relevance of specific objects in the collection to other objects and linked groups of

objects as belonging together was an essential part of the discussions with the people in Gjoa Haven. In workshops at the Nattilik Heritage Centre, the objects of material culture returned from the Museum of Cultural History collections had become the point of departure for discussions of traditional knowledge.

The naming of the objects and of parts of them was accorded much attention, and the situating of different objects within traditional knowledge spheres had been ongoing and a very productive area of exploration. What was missing was as crucial as what was present, as was the case when discussing the soapstone lamp in the displays. While five elder ladies from Gjoa Haven were discussing the returned objects during a workshop at the Nattilik Heritage Centre in the fall of 2014, the soapstone lamp, the kudlik, became the starting point for recounting personal experiences of igloo life including instances in which different kinds of fuel had been accessible or lacking. The presence of the lamp and the absence of the wick trimmer necessary to put the lamp to its intended use was a point the discussions returned to repeatedly. Using the lamp – a traditional object – as a starting point to explore traditional knowledge in this setting highlighted the importance of context of use and the crucial importance put on what belonged together. The lamp did not make sense without the *tadkut*, the wick trimmer, and what was most important about it was the context of its use.

The challenge translating these concerns and discussions into the precise categories in a drop-down web menu, covering everything and repeating nothing, was immediately apparent when the web development team brought up the need for this as part of the portal design. Compounding the issue was the need to rely on email and Facebook to determine methods

of containing and translating concerns over groupings and divisions with people in Gjoa Haven. Challenges of distance and the limits of this kind of communication added to the basic task of trying to make this grouping exercise make sense.

The categorisation of the collection felt less and less relevant as the issue at hand was reduced to a different kind of challenge of providing what the web development team needed to do their part of the job, rather than providing something of relevance to the source community users of the portal. This transformation of focus included adhering to the strictures of the maximum number of categories. Instead of asking what object groupings would be the most important to the community users in the Canadian Arctic, the number became a determinant. Based upon well-established and sound standards for webpage development practice, the maximum number of items in a menu was to be eight. Coding the collection made it challenging to have objects appear in several categories, and everything needed to belong somewhere to be visible in the web interface. If the project had access to more funding and more development time, these concerns could have been tackled differently. As it was, it was necessary to adjust the collection to a universalistic idea of what was an acceptable webpage format.

In the end, the chosen solution was to borrow already established collection categories, in this case following those used by J. Garth Taylor in his excellent discussion of the Amundsen collection (Taylor 1977).

While this categorisation is a classical and straightforward solution from a collections and museum practice point of view, it does not contribute to improving access for source community users. Categories do, as Thomas (2010) pointed out, live in the museum. As they



Fig. 3. Elders Rosie Kigeak and Mary Aqirgiaq discussing the soapstone lamp from the Amundsen/Gjoa Haven at Nattilik Heritage Centre workshop, Gjoa Haven, fall 2014. Photo Tone Wang.

were brought into the digital sharing portal, they now present users with the same kind of challenges the museum database did, in that they expect and require a certain familiarity with collections classification and the material to make sense (e.g. Srinivasan *et al.* 2017, Miller and Horst 2012). This quandary was, interestingly enough, also brought up by the User Experience group at UCIT in Oslo, the very people who had requested and argued for this format of categorisation of the portal content in the first place. Their concern was the accessibility and meaning of the category labels, questioning the use of terms like “housekeeping” and “dwellings”.

As an extension of this resolution to the question of categorisation, we ran into a further issue related to translation and language. While translating and finding good and meaningful labels for objects and groups of objects in the different languages that we were working with, these categories came late in the process, and it became quite challenging to establish meaningful translations for them in Nattilingmiut. The Inuktitut terms used to

label these categories in the portal at present will be part of the future conversation with people in Gjoa Haven on how to improve the portal.

Establishing better labels will not resolve the underlying issue here. It is not the category label of “clothing” that is of interest but what it contains and how the different objects within it relate to each other and to different situations of use. Elders contributing to another of our 2014 Gjoa Haven workshops discussed the harpoon, the central piece of the seal hunt, extensively. In the portal, the varieties of caribou footwear used for seal hunting by the breathing holes on the ice belong to the “clothing” category, while the harpoon itself is included in the category “hunting and fishing”. From the perspective of the elders in the workshop, the footwear and the harpoon are very obviously related and crucial to each other, as part of the same situation or context: that of seal hunting by the breathing holes. Combinations of items that go together depending on seasons and the work at hand matter. The exercise of sectioning off traditional material culture into mutually exclusive categories with labels like “clothing” and “housekeeping” does not.

The challenges inherent in grouping according to different perspectives and needs in the digital portal project begs the question of what sharing could mean in this context. The tension between the presumed universalistic web development guidelines, the expressed interests and concerns regarding what was interesting about this material in a specific source community setting, and the museum as the structuring mechanism influencing the potentialities and constraints in this collaborative endeavour make for a contact zone situation of friction where differing positions, power structures, and potentialities grind against each other. In the resulting

solution for the portal, as it appears at present, the categorisation of objects can be read as either the colonial remains of classical typology, a somewhat unsatisfactory but practical solution to a quandary composed of constraints in time and funding, or as being altogether irrelevant to the offerings of the portal. Further discussions with user groups in Gjoa Haven and elsewhere will be extremely interesting to assess this further.

THE SOCIAL LIFE OF DIGITAL THINGS

The digital sharing portal for Amundsen’s Gjoa Haven collection is a purely social object. It is created through the collaboration between various expert communities in Gjoa Haven and in Oslo, all bringing very different but strongly founded perspectives on what matters and what is relevant to the table. The discussion addresses the materiality of the digital form directly. It is premised on the object of study being the process of creating something that is meant to live its life in digital form on the Internet. Its materiality is inescapable and crucial regardless. The opportunities and limitations offered by the systems, shape the premises we were working with throughout the process. The contact zone that its production creates was exciting and challenging to all concerned.

Now that the portal is up and running, its present and potential use concerns us all. “Success” for digital environments like this is generally measured in clicks. The digital sharing portal is thus, at least among those whose work is ICT oriented, questioned and measured on the basis of user statistics. Our portal has “clicks”, but does so far not impress on the basis of these numbers. This might of course be due to shortcomings in design and groundwork, both known and yet to be discovered. My claim here will, however, be

that this kind of digital resource requires us to look further than clicks in an attempt to evaluate its relevance and importance. It is what lies behind the clicks – or the lack of such – that is of real interest.

The first element of relevance to this discussion is the often-presumed antithesis to digital potentiality: direct social engagement between physically present people. As discussed above, the final phase of the work to materialise this digital resource happened in Oslo. The process and the portal that came out of it need to be physically brought to Gjoa Haven. Its Internet existence is not to be confused with its existence considered from a situated social and cultural perspective. Likewise, counting clicks does not tell us much about who is clicking or what contexts those clicks happen in. The opportunity to discuss these matters with people, in Gjoa Haven and elsewhere who are users would provide important insight here (Were 2008).

At present, the portal is relevant as an existing resource, but the extent to which it is engaged with in everyday heritage practices is an unanswered question. The portal needs to be physically established in Gjoa Haven through conversations and visiting.

Museum repositories and museum organisations have provided a particular kind of potential memory storage and engagement resource for the public and for researchers for the last couple of centuries. These have been concentrated in certain parts of the world and certain parts of the power dynamic. This has been widely pointed out and discussed (e.g. Thomas 1991, Bennett 1995, Were 2008). One aspect of the digital sharing portal that is not at all visible through the prism of click counting is the simple fact of shared access. Postcolonial reality, with its crucial insistence on access and information control, posits the importance of

this material being accessible in this format in the first place. It matters that it is used, yes, but just as importantly, and maybe even more so, it matters hugely that it has been addressed, developed as a collaborative effort, and now exists as a platform of access to the material heritage of humanity's past.

From the perspective of community engagement and archaeological research, Ian Hodder formulated his vision for the potential use of Internet resources in 1999 as the "... potential for democratisation, participation and erosion of the boundaries between specialist and popular archaeology" (Hodder 1999). Since then, the realisation that not even this technological invention might save us from ourselves has sunk in. The dangers of reproducing traditional, hierarchical elite knowledge – in Ian Hodder's terms – on the Internet is just as real as in any other social context. There is no reason to regard the digital form as inherently more or less democratic than any other means of communication and exchange we attempt to use (Were 2008). Turning this argument on its head leads us to the crux of the contact zone and the inherent challenges and potentialities it offered this process. Using the digital form offers a sharing potential that is extraordinary, but it requires the same hard work on relationships, understanding, and negotiations that any other social process does.

The memory and ramifications of Amundsen's visit have lived on in stories in Gjoa Haven and in museum repositories in Oslo since the early 1900s. To engage and use the resources this encounter produced are and will likely remain of great importance to community and experts in Gjoa Haven, in Oslo, and among those with an interest in traditional Inuit material culture everywhere. The digital sharing portal for Amundsen's Gjoa Haven collection with all its limitations

and potentialities does in fact open the doors to broad engagement. While access is not equal, or without limits or distortions, it is greatly improved, compared to the previous situation. Traditional materiality is no longer solely contained in repositories in Europe, it also lives on the internet to be shared, studied, and enjoyed by a much broader community of interest and engagement.

This is the story of the creation of a purely social object: the digital sharing portal for Amundsen's Gjøa Haven collection. It addresses a material and digital reality and questions the tendency to regard the two as separate in favour of discussing how they, through the contact zone of their creation, constantly blend into each other and depend on each other for meaning and engagement. The presented argument underlines the material production of a digital portal as having considerable effect on the postcolonial potential, or in Appadurai's terms, the social life one can expect of real things (Appadurai 1986, Miller and Horst 2012).

Our digital sharing portal has only just begun its life as a relevant resource and engagement site. We look forward to further discussions, development, and innovation to build on what we have and to determine how to engage with it in meaningful ways and from different perspectives. For that to happen, we need to sit down and talk, to travel, to explore the portal resources together, and to find the resources to do this.

NOTES

1. at www.khm.uio.no/gjoahaven
2. www.unimus.no
3. See Jordal *et al.* (2012) for more on the database for the ethnographic collection at the Museum of Cultural History in Oslo.

4. The Facebook comments plugin was used. An example can be seen here: <http://www.khm.uio.no/english/research/collections/gjoahaven/#id=UEM15546>

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