

DE **BIAS**

Detecting and Cur(at)ing Harmful Language in Cultural Heritage Collections



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Community Engagement Recommendations



DE-BIAS and the context of community engagement

- DE-BIAS aimed to create an AI-powered tool capable of identifying, flagging, and providing historical context for biased language in cultural collection metadata
- This was based on research and the development of methodologies to work with local communities in a way that transforms this collaborative effort into a positive experience for both sides
- From the beginning, our idea was that community members should have their time, work, and dedication valued just as much as we, cultural heritage professionals, value our own time, dedication, and effort



DE-BIAS and the context of community engagement

- Therefore, from the outset, the project partners joined forces to ensure that community members participating in co-creation activities would be financially compensated
- However, the work we developed brought us valuable experiences that we would like to share with you, hoping you can apply what we've tested and found to be positive in your own actions and work with local communities

The tips and recommendations that follow are far from the only way to develop collaborative work with local communities, but we at the DE-BIAS project believe that these tips will help you create and improve your own working methodology.



1 - Collaborate with researchers

Learn from the specialists on the topic at hand

In general, cultural heritage institutions are not research-focused and often don't even have a department exclusively dedicated to research. Therefore, the best approach is to establish partnerships with dedicated researchers (or research centers) who are knowledgeable about the topic you wish to develop in collaboration with the local community. Even better is if the researcher has connections to and is part of the community in focus.



2 - Build long-term partnerships

Collaborate with other cultural heritage institutions and academic groups

Starting a new project or activity and building all the relationships from scratch is time-consuming and costly. Therefore, if your institution already has partnerships with other organisations, private sector, companies, universities, or research centers, make the most of that advantage. Invite them to collaborate with you in building up a strong and dedicated community based work.



3 - Make use of existing events

Contact and connect to the focus group

Cultural heritage institutions should take a more structured approach to leveraging existing events to connect with focus groups. By doing so, they enhance their ability to reach a broader audience. Make use of pre-established events and spaces, expand your network, and increase your capacity to engage with diverse communities. Every month there are so many cultural events going on (online and offline), if they are aligned with your goals, why not bring your discussions to them?



4 - Work on specific themes

Split a big group into smaller teams

When collaborating with communities, it's essential to create space for open and meaningful conversations. This is better done when working with small groups where participants feel welcomed and safe to share their ideas, fears, and hopes. Break large groups into smaller ones and focus on specific themes, fostering in-depth discussions that are open to different interpretations and perspectives. Give the floor to the community, listen and welcome their insights and knowledge.



5 - Consider reaching out

Think of ways to involve an expanded community (depending on the topic)

This was the case for the DE-BIAS project partners working with the LGBTQIA+ community. This community is not confined to a specific location and encompasses such diverse groups and perspectives that it couldn't be reduced to a small, contained group. As a result, the best approach was to reach out to an extended LGBTQIA+ community across two different countries. While we acknowledge that many perspectives were still left out, by broadening the conversation, we aimed to listen more widely, share our findings, and engage in discussions about questions and experiences from different cultural backgrounds.



6 - Involve different departments

Work across departments within your own organisation

Cultural heritage institutions often focus outward, aiming to reach out to communities, but they sometimes overlook the importance of engaging with professionals from within. Bringing together different departments helps to enrich the knowledge sharing and collaborative work. The outcomes for the institutions can be worthy!



7 - Enable a critical discussion

Allow for a broader audience with online events

Meeting in person, sharing a coffee, and discussing important topics are valuable ways to enrich conversations about bias and cultural heritage collections. Especially when you intend to have a critical discussion on how language and sources are historical testament to understand current struggles.

However, with today's technology, it's easier than ever to connect online and engage in meaningful discussions with people from different locations. Take advantage of this opportunity to expand your reach and bring fresh ideas to the table.



8 - Involve different perspectives

Compare perspectives from different generations and personal backgrounds

Dealing with a colonial past is no easy task. There are countless perspectives and diverse ways in which individuals connected to this history engage with and discuss its legacy and present-day consequences. Connecting and collaborating with local communities and diaspora groups can help foster dialogue and explore meaningful ways to address this complex past.



9 - Create a safe space

Allow for emotions, personal experiences and open discussions to make the community experience valuable for them and your institution

The starting point and goal of any work by a cultural institution should be people — with their emotions, feelings, conflicts, and opinions. It is crucial to create space for this, allowing individuals to express themselves openly. Respecting each person helps institutions not only build trust but also understand that objects are not an end in themselves. Instead, they serve as tools to reflect on and comprehend the culture and unique characteristics of the human groups to which these objects belong.



Further reading

- da Milano, Cristina; Guida, Maria Francesca; Migone, Pascuala; Pireddu, Roberta; Taes, Sofie. [A Community Engagement Methodology: Resources, Reflections, Recommendations](#). 2024.
- Heine, Matthias. *Verbrannte Wörter: Wo wir noch reden wie die Nazis – und wo nicht*. Duden, 2019.
- Steinke, Ronen. *Antisemitismus in der Sprache: Warum es auf die Wortwahl ankommt*. Duden, 2022.





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