What do we mean by 'public'?

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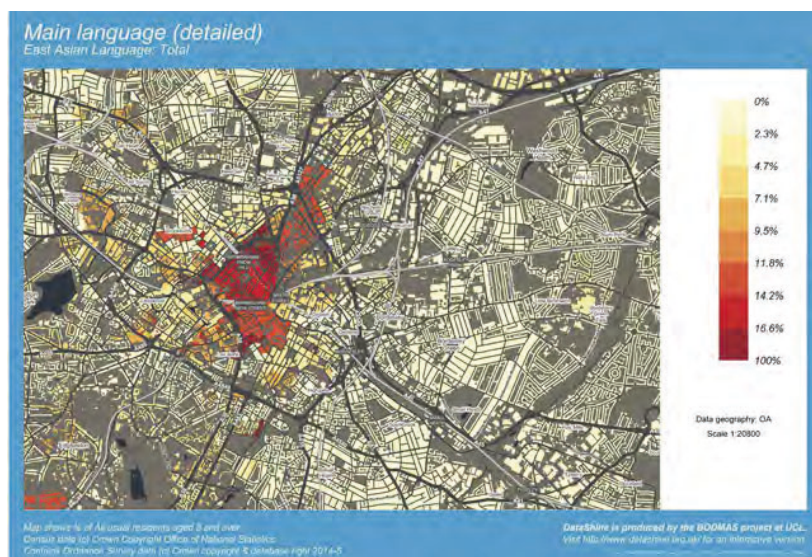

Archaeologists on the Tideway site at Chamber's Wharf. Credit: MOLA

The definition of public benefit can be as wide-ranging and multi-faceted as those of us who seek to promote it, but key to understanding the concept is the need to define what we mean by 'the public'. Similarly, the persistent belief that archaeology happens so that archives can be created for 'future generations' leaves us grappling with vague notions of a homogenous mass of humanity, with little idea of who they might be or how they could potentially benefit from our archaeological work. Currently, we know that the people who engage with archaeology or heritage tend to be in the more comfortably off economic groups, and while their own participation can of course offer them benefits, it is likely that this in fact serves to increase the gap between them and those who do not currently benefit from archaeology. We tend to know much more about people who do participate than those who don't, and it is

Mapping from Datashine showing East Asian languages spoken in areas east of Birmingham town centre (Curzon Street is NW of Moor Street). Credit: Oliver O'Brien and James Cheshire, 2016, Interactive mapping for large, open demographic data sets using familiar geographical features, Journal of Maps*, 12:4, 676–683 DOI: 10.1080/17445647.2015.1060183*

of course easier to provide materials and experiences for people we think we know, or have motivations we can recognise.

We are beginning to understand the inequalities inherent in archaeology and there are practitioners who are committed to enabling more equitable experiences. This has been explored further within the field of science museum communication and Emily Dawson's book (2019) is well worth reading for pragmatic and innovative proposals for upsetting these structural problems. Key is the careful use of our expert status, with the understanding that everyone is expert in something. All these things will contribute towards an enjoyable and positive experience, whether they be knowledge-based, personal experience, interpersonal skills or cultural backgrounds, to choose a few examples from the myriad possibilities. The challenge for archaeologists working in the development-led sector is how we can establish what we could be defining as public benefit on a local and site-specific level so that we can steer our projects to positive conclusions for communities and individuals. It is hardly surprising that we struggle with identifying who we need to be providing benefit for, as we don't generally assess local populations and impacted communities when talking about (or reporting on) development-led archaeological work.

One practical thing we can do as archaeologists is to investigate who our potential public might be. Audience mapping is not a new tool and is well used in the museum sector to assess current visitors and to establish where potential new audiences might be. However, these mapping exercises are often done by static establishments (museums), whereas development-led archaeology can be far more mobile,

with teams moving to where the projects are located for the duration of the fieldwork and then moving away. It is not often likely that we will have any great understanding of who the local community is, and it is also often the case that we won't come into much meaningful contact with them beyond using local businesses such as shops, hotels and (most likely!) pubs.

There are several tools that could be used to define who lives close to an archaeological project, and some of this data could be collected at desk-based assessment stage to provide a more rounded impression of the area. Of particular value when looking at local demographics is DataShine (datashine.org.uk), which maps all the Census data onto spatial maps for England, Scotland and Wales. (Northern Ireland is not included in this dataset but can be researched using Nomis (https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/lmp/gor/contents.aspx)). It is possible to interrogate these maps for all categories of data collected, and thereby establish details such as which languages are commonly spoken in proximity to your site. For example, the image at the bottom of page page 10 shows the prevalence of East Asian languages (defined as Cantonese, Mandarin, Korean, Japanese, Thai) spoken in the proximity of Curzon Street, Birmingham, where extensive excavations took place for HS2. All the detailed data could be used to refine the public benefit provision of your project, from providing materials in different languages to outlining the specific need to provide wellbeing outcomes for specific cultural groups as part of the project's public benefit.

These tools for looking closely at communities that will be impacted by development are crucial to understand the wider context of our work. As archaeologists we are often complicit in the disruption and damage that construction can wreak on people but fall back on the accepted narrative of providing knowledge for them, rather than with them. For public benefit to be truly equitable we need to establish the parameters and design projects with outwardly facing benefits in mind.

Community excavations underway at Altab Ali Park, as part of a development project. Local heritage values were incorporated into a temporary museum exhibition, and local people brought personal objects which formed part of the display alongside the finds. Credit: MOLA

Bloomberg London Mithraeum Oral History project participants are interviewed, having just seen the restored temple for the first time in 2018. Credit: MOLA

Reference

Dawson, E, 2019 *Equity, Exclusion and Everyday Science Learning: The Experiences of Minoritised Groups*, Routledge Research in Education

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Sadie Watson (MCIfA) is undertaking a four-year Fellowship focusing on ensuring that development-led archaeological projects lead to meaningful and relevant research and genuine community participation. Sadie spent more than 20 years in the field supervising complex urban sites for MOLA in London and has in-depth knowledge of the profession and its pressures.