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Creating an audience: Experiences from the Surinamese slave registers crowdsourcing project

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ABSTRACT

Crowdsourcing for research promises great rewards, but it is often hard to get the public involved in such a way that they are willing to spend their time and money on such a project. The Surinamese Slave Registers crowdsourcing project is an attempt to tackle this problem by combining a crowdfunding campaign with the recruitment of volunteers. To get the public interested, we focused on inclusion, the sense that we worked together to make this history visible, both in our communication and towards volunteers in the transcription phase. This proved to be a successful combination. Within a month we raised the necessary funds and enlisted hundreds of volunteers, who transcribed a dataset including some 70,000 enslaved persons in little more than three months.

KEYWORDS

Crowdsourcing; crowdfunding; citizen science; slave registers; slavery

On June 26 2018, a database of the slave registers of Suriname was published online as the result of the project “Make the Surinamese slave registers public” (in Dutch: “Maak de Surinaamse slavenregisters openbaar”), a combined crowdfunding and citizen science project, organized by the Historical Database of Suriname Foundation. With the help of almost 400 donors and more than 600 volunteers, the whole project took 18 months to complete, from the start of the crowdfunding until the publication online. The aim of the project was twofold: first, to digitize, transcribe and publish the slave registers, and second, to gain experience with working with a nonacademic audience as part of a crowdsourcing project. This second aim will be the focus of this article. We will discuss the lessons we learned from the “slavenregisters” project, thereby addressing the question of how one can reach the public and keep it involved in a crowdsourcing project.

The article starts with a short description of the slave registers of Suriname and their relevance for the study of slavery. In the second part, a definition of crowdsourcing will be given and some of the related benefits and problems, as mentioned in the literature, will be discussed. In the third part, we will discuss the crowdfunding campaign; and in the fourth part, the citizen science project. In part five we analyze the motivations and the behavior of volunteers and donors. We end with a conclusion and some recommendations.

The slave registers of Suriname

The slave registers of Suriname are a collection of 43 books in the National Archives of Suriname (NAS), which contains 163,000 records. These records contain information on some 70,000 individual enslaved persons, around 300 plantations and more than 3,500 private slave owners in Suriname between 1830 and 1863. The first part of this dataset, the records of enslaved persons living between 1851 and 1863, are available online on the websites of the Dutch and Surinamese National Archives (Van Galen and A.B. 2018: http://www.nationaalarchief.nl/collectie/index/nt00451/). The records of the period 1830–1851 will be added in 2019. The Historical Database of Suriname Foundation is currently working on an enriched dataset, in which the information of individual persons is enriched with data from other sources, for example civil and church records, to reconstruct the life courses of individuals during and after slavery.

Suriname was a plantation colony, with around 50,000 people living in slavery in 1830 (Van Stipriaan 1993). Although the trans-Atlantic slave trade had
been prohibited since 1808, slavery itself was not abolished until 1863, when the remaining 35,000 enslaved persons were freed. After 1808, thousands of enslaved persons were smuggled illegally into the country (Siwpersad 1979). In 1826 the Dutch government decided to introduce a slave register in the colony with the specific aim of curbing the illegal international slave trade. The registrations were based on declarations made by planters and private slave owners, and enslaved persons were registered under the name of their owner or plantation.

Unlike the slave registers in the British colonies in the West Indies, which were lists compiled roughly every 3 years, the slave registers in Suriname were kept up to date continuously. Slave owners had to keep the government informed of all changes affecting ownership, such as births and deaths, but also sale, inheritance and manumission. Clerks in Paramaribo registered the information in the books. The slave registers were in uninterrupted use for 37 years, until the abolition of slavery in Suriname in 1863 (Van Galen and Hassankhan 2018, p. 10). Slave owners were obliged to enter the names, sex and age of all enslaved persons within their ownership. In the series from 1848 onward additional information was added, such as the year of birth, the actual date of birth and the date of death, and the name of the mother of an enslaved person. Information on profession or race is not given. Figure 1 gives an impression of the slave registers from the early series 1830–1838, Figure 2 is an example of the final version of the slave registers.

Although the amount of information on each individual is limited, the research relevance of the slave registers is in its aspiration to completeness. The slave registers make it possible to keep track of the lives of enslaved individuals in Suriname for almost 35 years. Only a few researchers have used this data in the past (e.g., Everaert 1999; Everaert 2011).

In the past two decades, a number of datasets related to the history of slavery have been made available online, such as the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, African Origins, Liberated Africans, Slave Biographies and Legacies of British Slave Ownership (Eltis, Halbert, and Misevich 2008; Eltis, Halbert and Misevich 2009; Lovejoy, 2015; Midlo Hall, Hawthorne and Mitchell, 2019; Hall and Draper, 2019). Like the Slave Biographies and the Liberated Africans databases, the Surinamese Slave Register Database also offers basic individual level information on enslaved persons. The Surinamese Slave Register Database adds to the available databases, because it is based on a source that strived for completeness and was in use for more than 30 years: it offers an almost complete overview of all enslaved persons and slave owners in the colony of Suriname in the last decades of slavery. Meaningful comparisons can be made with the Slave Biographies database and the Legacies of British Slavery website. In the last case sometimes directly, because a number of British plantation owners reinvested the compensation money they received from the British government in plantations in Suriname after 1834. Connections can also be made with existing datasets on manumitted and emancipated slaves in Suriname (Ten Hove and Dragtenstein 1997, Lamur 2004, Ten Hove and Helstone, 2003).

Crowdsourcing

Working with crowds can have different meaning to different people. A number of large projects related to slavery worked with crowds, but often in different ways, shifting from a crowd of specialists to the general public. For example, in the case of the Slave Voyages Project and Slave Biographies, the crowd is a group of researchers who combined their datasets, while in the case of Legacies of British Slave-Ownership, the database was constructed by a team from UCL, which invited the public to add information to it once the database came online. In other cases, an online audience with a specialized knowledge is invited to become involved. This is the case in the African Origins project, where researchers asked for help from people with knowledge of African languages to try to determine the African origin of former enslaved persons. In the “Slavenregisters” project, we worked with a more general audience to transcribe the sources.

In this article, the term “crowdsourcing” is used to describe the interaction with the public within this project, instead of the often used term “citizen science.” This is done to emphasize the fact that the public was not only involved in the task of transcribing the slave registers, but also in raising the money. By including fundraising in crowdsourcing, the definition of crowdsourcing is followed as given by Estellés-Arolas and González-Ladrón-de-Guevara (2012):

Crowdsourcing is a type of participative online activity in which an individual, an institution, a non-profit organization, or company proposes to a group...
of individuals of varying knowledge, heterogeneity, and number, via a flexible open call, the voluntary undertaking of a task. The undertaking of the task, of variable complexity and modularity, and in which the crowd should participate bringing their work, money, knowledge and/or experience, always entails mutual

Figure 1. Folio of the slave registers of the series 1830–1838. National Archive of Suriname InvNr. 42, folio 4801 Johan Quasie van Engel.
benefit. The user will receive the satisfaction of a given type of need, be it economic, social recognition, self-esteem, or the development of individual skills, while the crowdsourcer will obtain and utilize to their advantage what the user has brought to the venture, whose form will depend on the type of activity undertaken.

Estellés-Arolas and González-Ladrón-de-Guevara emphasize in their definition the terms “participative activity” and “mutual benefit.” Participation in crowdsourcing is a two-way street. Participants are not “data drones” who are willingly doing whatever the researcher asks them (Ellis and Waterton 2004). They are active participants who bring their knowledge and experience to the projects, but also their own needs, goals and preoccupations (Clary and Snyder 1999; Shye 2010; Nov, Arazy, and Anderson 2011). They interact with the crowdsourcing project and will only stay involved as long as the project helps them to fulfill their own needs. In this sense, the participants not only participate in the project, but the project also participates in the lives of the participants.

When we realize that a crowdsourcing project and its volunteers participate in each other’s activities, then it becomes clear that the notion of “mutual benefit” is essential for an effective crowdsourcing project. To be successful, it is necessary to create an alignment between the project and the participants, in which they both benefit from the project. The benefits for the researcher are clear, but the researcher has to give thought to how this project can help the participant to “receive the satisfaction of a given type of need.”

This can be done in general terms by emphasizing the social relevance of the project or by offering rewards to the participants. However, it also means that researchers have to be sensitive to the needs of individual participants during the project. A great deal of psychology is involved in the managing of a crowdsourcing project to make it successful. For crowdsourcing projects, reaching an audience is difficult, but it is even more difficult to convince people to invest their money and time in the project.

Already in the 1990s it was recognized that the internet had a huge potential for involving the public in academic research and for creating large datasets with the help of an online crowd. Crowdsourcing was presented as a great way to get the public involved in the scientific process and as a means to make possible projects with a large workload at relatively low costs (Irwin 1995; Cooper et al. 2007; Cohn 2008; Bonney et al. 2009; Franzoni and Sauermann 2014). The fulfillment of this potential has proven difficult, however. This is probably a reason why opinions on

Figure 2. Folio of the slave registers of the final series 1851–1863. National Archive of Suriname InvNr. 27, folio 1279 Carolina Spillenburg.
crowdsourcing in the literature seem to have shifted over time. In recent years, research has been drawing attention to problems related to working with volunteers. Many projects find it difficult to attract attention and volunteers (Sauermann and Franzoni 2015). Moreover, the interest of the public in a project tends to dwindle after a certain time (Crall et al. 2017). Even when volunteers are found, there is the question of whether volunteers have the right qualifications for the job (Bone et al 2012). Within the ‘slavenregisters’ crowdsourcing project, we tried to develop solutions to the problems mentioned.

The campaign: crowdfunding

Since 2016, historians of the Anton de Kom University of Suriname and the Radboud University in The Netherlands have worked together to digitize Surinamese population records. We started with the slave registers, because we expected that the publication of the slave registers would draw the attention of the press and the public, due to their relevance for academic research, but also that of the hundreds of thousands of Dutch and Surinamese people who have enslaved persons and slave owners among their ancestors. It is also relevant because the legacy of slavery is a much debated topic in both Dutch and Surinamese societies (Horton and Kardux 2004; Balkenhol 2016; Wekker 2016).

We planned the project as a crowdsourcing project, as we knew that it would be very difficult to finance this project in the traditional way. Since the political relationship between the governments of Suriname and the Netherlands is somewhat strained, we did not ask the governments of either country for financial support, to avoid the project becoming part of the political tensions. We envisaged the crowdsourcing as a two-stage rocket: a combined crowdfunding and volunteer recruitment campaign was the first stage, which would launch our project and make the public and the press aware of its existence. This would help to kick-start the second stage of the project, the actual transcriptions. In this way, we hoped to avoid the risk of the project dragging on for a long time due to a lack of interest and volunteers.

From the start, we knew we had to devise a strategy to avoid the rather negative and confrontational tone of parts of the discussion on the legacy of slavery in the Netherlands. We choose to present the ‘slavenregisters’ as an inclusive project. We emphasized that slavery is a shared history and that, by working on this project together, participants could make a constructive contribution to understanding slavery and its effects. We also made this project inclusive in the sense that we promised to make the data available not only to researchers but to the public as well, in a special database for genealogists and education (Van Galen and A.B. 2018). Finally, we took the precaution of beginning our public campaign in January, to avoid becoming entangled in the often virulent Black Pete debate in the Netherlands, which reaches its peak in early December every year (Hilhorst and Hermes 2016, Rodenberg and Wagenaar 2016, Coenders and Chauvin 2017).

Our bold decision to start a very public campaign made this an interesting project for partners. Even before the start of the crowdfunding campaign the Dutch National Archive had committed itself to building an interface for the public database, while the National Archives of Suriname and the Netherlands both offered to present the public database on their websites. It also made it easier to obtain support and funds. Public organizations related to Surinamese history and the history of slavery supported our project, such as the National Institute for the Study of Dutch Slavery and its Legacy (NiNsee) and the Foundation for Surinamese Genealogy (SSG). Radboud University sponsored the campaign by making available the crowdfunding platform of the university for free.

In cooperation with the SSG, we obtained a 40,000 euro grant from the Prins Bernhard Cultuurfonds, a large Dutch philanthropic organization. This grant covered half of the estimated costs of the “slavenregisters” project. Combined with some smaller grants we had already collected 55,000 euros before the crowdfunding campaign even started. Although it may sound odd, for a crowdfunding project it is necessary to have funds available before the start of the campaign, not only to cover the costs of the campaign itself, but also to give the public the assurance that this project will become successful.

In January 2017, we started the online crowdfunding and recruitment campaign. We anticipated there would be some difficulties in reaching an audience for our crowdfunding in Suriname and the Netherlands. We assumed that the number of participants in Suriname itself would be small. Suriname has a population of only 600,000 inhabitants and due to a recent economic downfall financial resources are scarce.

In the Netherlands, where we expected to raise the most support, we faced a different problem. The Dutch Afro-Surinamese community is mainly concentrated in the big cities in the west of the country. The Radboud University is located near the eastern border
of the Netherlands, in a region where hardly any people with Surinamese decent reside. Furthermore, the project was led by members of the social and demographic history group of the university, who had no tradition in research on Suriname or slavery and had no personal connections to Suriname. This meant that we did not have an existing network within the Dutch-Surinamese community which we could activate, and we did not know how opinion leaders within this community would react to our initiative. This made our partners, such the SSG and NiNsee, especially valuable to our campaign. We were also lucky to obtain the support of a well-known community figure and former Dutch news anchor of Surinamese descent, who became the spokesperson of the project, together with the project manager.

As mentioned before, we focused on inclusivity. We started with the message that slavery is a shared history and that together we could make a constructive contribution to understanding our past by making the slave registers public. We repeated this one message over and over again, combined with a project logo and always using the same spokespersons. This strategy of repetition and positive framing was designed to improve the chances of activating people (Heath 2001; Schwarz 2004). A project logo is important, because it makes all messages from the project easily recognizable. We used a logo which evoked the colors and style used in the Radboud University logo to emphasize the academic background of the project (see Figure 3).

In our communications strategy in the Netherlands, we initially focused on two groups: connecting with the Dutch-Surinamese community and trying to get the (mostly white) public involved in the region where Radboud University is situated. Using as many different mass media and social media as possible, we tried to bring the message to these groups that we could do it together.

The campaign started with two simultaneous kick-off meetings with stakeholders in Paramaribo and in Amsterdam, the area of the Netherlands where most Dutch-Surinamese people of African descent live. Through NiNsee we invited a number of Dutch-Surinamese opinion leaders for the Dutch kick-off meeting. The two spokespersons of the project gave a series of interviews for Dutch-Surinamese news media in the first two weeks of the campaign. This worked very well: the reception of the project among Dutch-Surinamese opinion leaders at the kickoff meeting in Amsterdam had been rather critical, but after a week or so, the mood among the Dutch-Surinamese public started to change. People began to believe in the feasibility of the project.

The project manager also gave a series of interviews to regional broadcasting stations and newspapers, to mobilize people outside the bigger cities in the west of the Netherlands and make this into a truly inclusive project. We gave at least twenty interviews for the press in the Netherlands and Suriname in the first two weeks of the campaign. Furthermore, we gave four lectures for different audiences and promoted the campaign through Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Within a few days we had hundreds of followers on social media who liked and shared our messages. After 2 weeks, the campaign received a certain buzz and national broadcasting stations and newspapers became interested. In the third week of the project, we gave two interviews on Dutch national radio which really helped the project forwards.

What was the result of all this? We soon discovered that media attention and followers on social media did not automatically mean that the money and volunteers poured in. As Figure 4 shows, after a good start in the first days, the number of new volunteers and donations started to dwindle. In the second week of the campaign, the inflow of donations almost came to a standstill. Only at the end of the second week did the number of donors and donations start to rise again. This helped to gain renewed momentum and two weeks later, on Monday February 20, we reached our 25,000 euros goal. It did not end there: in mid-April, by the end of the campaign, we had collected more than 41,000 euros and more than 500 people had enlisted as volunteers, a number that would rise to 700 in early June.

When we look at the number of donors and donations in more detail (Figures 5 and 6), it is clear that the number of new donors started to dwindle after day two of the campaign and to rise again in week 2. At first, this rise is barely noticeable in the amount of the donations, because they were largely made up of very small gifts. This rise is probably related to the change in mood within the Dutch-Surinamese community, as a substantial part of the gifts are from people with clearly Surinamese surnames. At the start of the third week we received a number of large gifts,
Figure 4. Results for the campaign “Help! Make the Surinamese slave registers public” between January 23 and March 1, 2017. The vertical axis on the left gives the amount of money crowdfunded in euros. The vertical axis on the right gives the number of people who enlisted as volunteers (sources: https://www.ru.nl/slavenregisters/inschrijven/ and http://crowdfunding.ru.nl).

Figure 5. Number of donations made to the crowdfunding campaign per day, between January 23 and March 1, 2017 (source: http://crowdfunding.ru.nl).

Figure 6: Amount of money donated to the crowdfunding campaign in euros per day, between January 23 and March 1, 2017 (source: http://crowdfunding.ru.nl).
from donors who had waited until they were convinced that the campaign would succeed. The largest donation came from a totally unexpected source: 4,500 euros was collected with the help of Triskontakten, an association of elderly Dutchmen who had served in the Dutch colonial army in Suriname before Surinamese independence in 1975.

The other two spikes in the number of donors and donations are directly related to the aforementioned interviews on NPO Radio 1, the main Dutch radio news station. The first one, on Monday February 13 was in the news program broadcast during rush hour. This brought in a significant number of volunteers and small donations, as is shown in Figures 4 and 5. The second and larger spike is the direct effect of an interview given in a Sunday morning history show named OVT. We had lobbied to have the project manager appear on this radio show, because we knew that the public of OVT was exactly the right one for our crowdfunding campaign: very interested in history, relatively wealthy and politically left-leaning. It turned out we were right: in this 5-minute interview we focused on crowdfunding and we received more than 5,000 euros in donations from more than 60 donors within 24 hours of the broadcast.

A clear media strategy and the repetition of an inclusive and constructive message had convinced almost four hundred people to donate to the project. When we break down the total amount of money donated, it is clear that most donors donated relatively small amounts (Table 1). More than 60% donated between 5 and 25 euros. The median donation was 25 euros, while the average donation was almost 60 euros, due to some large gifts. This meant that the results did not depend on one or two big donors, but that there was a large group of people who trusted the project enough to spend some money on it. In a sense, they had become co-owners of the ‘slavenregisters’ project and we assumed that they would share some of their interest in the project with family, friends, and acquaintances.

### Table 1. Number of donations and the distribution of donations during the crowdfunding campaign “Help! Make the Surinamese slave registers public” (source: http://crowdfund-ing.ru.nl).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Amount donated</th>
<th>Number of donations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>€ 10 or less</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>€ 10 to € 25</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>€ 26 to € 50</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>€ 51 to € 100</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>€ 101 to € 250</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>€ 251 to € 500</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>€ 501 to € 1,000</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>more than € 1,000</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of donations</td>
<td>398</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The campaign: citizen science

Although the crowdfunding campaign ended in April 2017, we wanted to transfer the public attention to the citizen science phase of our project. We kept in contact with the volunteers through email newsletters and a number of newspapers and websites published background stories on the successful crowdfunding, the upcoming transcriptions and the legacy of slavery. Meanwhile, the National Archive of Suriname had begun to scan the slave registers. We decided to start the transcriptions on June 20, 10 days before Keti Koti, the commemoration of the abolition of slavery. We assumed that the media were looking for interesting new stories about the legacy of slavery in the weeks before Keti Koti. Since the press was already familiar with the project, it was not hard to obtain wide media coverage. The start of the transcriptions even became a news item in the eight o’clock news on Dutch public television, the most important news program in the country. We also gave lectures at the different Keti Koti festivals in the Netherlands, as a way of showing our commitment to the project and to promote it among the Dutch-Surinamese community.

For the transcriptions of the slave registers, we used www.velehanden.nl, an online platform which is somewhat comparable to the British Zooniverse platform (Velehanden 2017). Since 2011, 41 projects have been carried out on the Velehanden platform, mostly to make indexes of Civil Registers for public archives. This meant that we could use a well-tried platform. We did not have to develop our own website and we expected that some of the volunteers were familiar with the way the platform worked. An additional advantage was that the Velehanden platform offered a message board where we could communicate with the volunteers and where participants could ask each other questions about difficult texts in the scans and discuss subjects related to the project.

When the transcriptions started, we discovered that the Velehanden platform also had a serious drawback: it was not possible to enter the list of volunteers directly into the platform. Each volunteer had to sign in for him- or herself on the Velehanden platform. This meant that we had to ask the volunteers to sign up for a second time for the project, which was an extra obstacle to participation.

Each volunteer was given a scan and had to transcribe the text in different fields for names, age, mother’s name, and so on (see Figure 7). The volunteer had to complete the data entry for the entire scan before it could be registered as an entry in the Velehanden platform. Each scan had three entries,
because each scan was transcribed twice by two different volunteers. A third person then combined and corrected the two transcriptions and entered the third entry. This was done to minimize the number of errors in the final version of the transcribed texts.

Unlike most other projects on the platform, we wanted a complete transcription of all texts on the scans. To train the presumably inexperienced volunteers in transcribing nineteenth-century handwriting, we created an instruction manual and organized four training sessions in the Netherlands and Suriname in July 2017, in which more than one hundred volunteers participated. A junior staff member of the Radboud University provided a helpdesk service for the volunteers and acted as moderator on the message board. We also hired experienced students from the Anton de Kom University of Suriname to correct the transcribed scans.

Once the transcriptions started, we realized that our assumptions about the quality of the volunteers had been wrong. They were not the relatively inexperienced volunteers we had expected: quite a number of them were seasoned genealogists or had work-related experience with nineteenth-century archival sources. Some of them even knew more about the sources than our professional staff members. Although the training meetings and the support of the moderator were certainly helpful for many volunteers, within a week a system of mutual support developed on the message board whereby volunteers helped each other with suggestions for difficult words and sentences on the scans. We changed our role accordingly. We no longer focused on teaching how to transcribe the scans, but on supporting the participants by solving technical issues related to the platform, providing historical context to the remarkable things they found in the scans, and intervening whenever small conflicts arose about the correct interpretation of texts.

The Velehanden platform offered some incentives to encourage participants to make more transcriptions. Velehanden published a ranking of the participants who made the most transcriptions, and participants earned points when they completed a scan. The idea was that they would be incentivized to do more work to collect points and swap them for gifts, such as a book or an invitation to a lecture. It turned out that participants were not interested in earning points: hardly anyone wanted to swap their points for gifts. The ranking of participants was even counterproductive for some participants. It encouraged a few people at the top of the ranking list, but it put off other people who felt that they could never keep up with the “top volunteers.” To counter this effect, we emphasized in our communication on the message board that, although we appreciated the hard work of the “top volunteers,” we valued the
contributions of all participants, great and small. Again, we took the deliberate stance that the project was an inclusive one.

The participants in the project worked extremely hard, much harder than we had expected. We had estimated that it would be possible to make two hundred entries a day, in which case the transcription would be completed in about six months. We thought this was a rather optimistic estimation, but it turned out that the volunteers exceeded our expectations: as Figure 8 shows, they did much more than that. The volunteers transcribed on average 317 scans a day, which meant that the transcriptions were finished in early October, more than 2 months ahead of schedule.

The dedication and hard work of the volunteers was overwhelming, but it also created an acute problem. The students who were paid to correct the transcriptions could not keep up with the task. It took time for them to be trained and become familiar with the source, but they also treated the work too much as though it were a university assignment. In other words, they did not put the same amount of work into the project as the volunteers. Within the first month, the backlog of corrections grew rapidly.

We decided to ask some volunteers to start correcting the transcriptions as well. Because we could check the quality of their transcriptions, we could select for this work those volunteers who had the “golden” combination of speed and accuracy. This solved the problem. The number of corrections per day could keep up with the transcriptions, and the daily number of transcriptions actually went down once some of the “top volunteers” started to work on corrections. From late July until the end of October, on average 158 corrections were made per day, as is shown in Figure 9. This was enough, because every correction was based on two transcriptions. In the beginning of November 2017, the corrections were completed and the work for the volunteers was still finished two months ahead of schedule.

Behavior and motivation of participants
As mentioned above, we started this project with some assumptions about the behavior of the participants, both donors and volunteers. We assumed that we could create interest in this project by starting a crowdfunding and volunteer recruitment campaign and that this interest could be transferred to the citizen science part of the project, which started some 5 months later. We also assumed that our volunteer group would be relatively inexperienced and would be members of the Surinamese community in Suriname and the Netherlands, supplemented by people interested in Dutch colonial history. In the following section, we will discuss the behavior and motivation of both donors and volunteers.

Motivations of participants
According to the academic literature, donors are motivated to give money by a number of factors, including sympathy for the project, guilt, happiness and identity (Cialdini, Baumann, and Kenrick 1981; Rick, Cryder,
and Loewenstein 2008; Liu and Aaker 2008; Aaker and Akutsu 2009). We were curious as to which of these factors played a role in our crowdfunding campaign. Although we did not ask specifically about their motivations, we offered donors and volunteers the option of leaving a message. Donors could do so when they submitted their donation and 130 of them did so, some of them leaving more than one. In total we collected 156 motivations. Contrary to our expectations, guilt only played a limited role in these motivations. It was mentioned 24 times, often framed as a moral responsibility of the Dutch towards the victims of slavery and their descendants.

The most often mentioned motivation was the desire to make the history of slavery, and especially the enslaved persons themselves, more visible. This motivation was mentioned 47 times. Two typical reactions of this type were that “this history must not stay hidden and the names of these people must not fall into oblivion” and “this history deserves transparency and a database which is accessible for everyone.” Other motivations which were mentioned were a general expression that people liked the project (37 times), the desire to uncover one’s own family history (25 times) and a feeling of personal connection with Suriname (23 times).

Volunteers could also leave a message when they registered. We received 295 reactions from the 702 people who registered before the start of the project on the Velehanden platform. The same motivations of making history visible (38 times), uncovering one’s own family history (29) and having a personal connection with Suriname (51) were mentioned, while the notion of guilt played an even smaller role among volunteers, being mentioned only 7 times. By far the most common motivation given by volunteers was the desire to participate because they liked the project: 147 times, 49.8% of all motivations. However, other volunteers left a message to ask how the project would work (75 times), or promoted their experience in transcribing texts (45) and other qualifications for the job (28). This suggests that many volunteers saw the registration as a sort of job application which could also explain why so many volunteers emphasized that they liked to participate in the project.

Unfortunately, we do not have motivations from the volunteers who registered on the Velehanden platform directly, because Velehanden does not offer the option of leaving a message. Motivations mentioned by volunteers on the message board mostly emphasized that they were glad to participate in this project together and that they wanted to make enslaved people visible in history again. In other words, the motivations strongly mirrored the way we had framed the project.

**Behavior of participants**

The crowdfunding campaign certainly did reach its double goal of generating funds and attention for the project, but we were interested in how the involvement of donors and volunteers during the campaign was reflected in behavior once the transcriptions started some 5 months later. We did not expect many donors to participate as volunteers, because we expected people to donate either money or time, not both. A comparison of the email addresses of donors and volunteers who actually participated on the Velehanden platform showed that 46 were found in both (11.6% of the donors). Those who did were not a clearly distinguishable group. Their donation ranged from 5 to 500 euros and the average donation within
this group was almost 57 euros, comparable to the donors as a whole.

More remarkable was the behavior of the people who had registered as volunteers during the campaign. Of the 702 volunteers registered by early June, 297 persons became active on the Velehanden platform from June 20 onwards, 42.3% of the total. We had predicted that a certain percentage of the registered volunteers would not become active once the transcriptions started, but this percentage was far lower than we had expected. It is not clear why more than half did not become active. The need to register again on the Velehanden platform was probably an obstacle to some. Another likely factor was the 5 months which had elapsed since the start of the campaign. We received a number of emails of volunteers who apologized for their nonparticipation and explained that their life situation had changed since they had registered.

From June 20 until October 1, 2017, 618 persons registered for the project on the Velehanden platform. Almost half of them had registered themselves during the campaign, while the other half either registered directly on the Velehanden platform or were already active on this platform. Out of all the volunteers for the project, 53% were new to the platform and registered specifically to participate in the “slavenregisters” project. As Figure 10 shows, more than 500 persons registered within the first month of the project.

According to Crall et al. (2017), the attention of volunteers tends to dwindle after a certain time, which can seriously hamper the progress of a project. Within the “slavenregisters” project, 36 volunteers unsubscribed during the project and by October 1, 572 volunteers were still registered in the project. This did not affect the project’s progress. As Figure 11 shows, the number of entries made for both transcriptions and corrections taken together remained fairly stable through the summer and until the end of September when the transcriptions were more or less completed. This may be due to the relatively short period in which the project was finished.

Who were the volunteers who became active in the “slavenregisters” project? The volunteers could fill in some questions when they registered on the Velehanden platform. Of the 555 volunteers who mentioned their place of residence, 505 lived in the Netherlands, half of them (253 persons) in the western provinces of North and South Holland, where most members of the Dutch-Surinamese community live. Of the remaining 50 volunteers, 30 lived in Suriname, while the other 20 lived all over the world.

Slightly more than half of the volunteers were 50 years or older, as is shown in Table 2, with the largest age group being between 61 and 70 years old (26.3%). The volunteer group of the “slavenregisters” project was younger than average, compared to other Velehanden projects: on average two-thirds of the volunteers on the platform are 50 years or older. Also, more women were involved. While on average 47.3% of the Velehanden volunteers are female, in the “slavenregisters” project this percentage was 58.8%. Our volunteers had a slight preference for working between 11 and 12 a.m., between 2 and 5 p.m., and between 8 and 10 p.m., which suggests that some of the volunteers did not have a regular day job, for example because they were pensioners or students.

According to Bone et al. (2012) it can be argued that volunteers do not have the right qualifications for this type of work, because in principle anyone can
participate in a project of this kind. This is contested by De Moor and Rijpma (forthcoming) who based their paper on their experience with their “Ja, ik wil” transcription project on the Velehanden platform. De Moor and Rijpma argue that the accuracy of the volunteers’ work was high from the start and improved over time because less skilled volunteers left the project.

Although we have no statistical information on the subject, our experience with the “Slavenregisters” project is in line with De Moor and Rijpma. As mentioned above, many volunteers had previous experience with transcribing old texts or (had) worked in jobs which made them suited for this type of work. In the first week of the project we took some samples and we were impressed by the high quality of the work. Over time, the quality of the transcriptions improved further, as volunteers who could not keep up soon dropped out and the remaining volunteers became more experienced.

The discussion of the quality of the work cannot be more than an impression, but the amount of work done by the volunteers was certainly not inferior to that of trained researchers. This is clearly visible when we compare the students and volunteers who did the corrections of the transcriptions (Table 3). Initially it was our intention to have students do the corrections. After a month, we had to ask volunteers to help with the corrections because of the large backlog of uncorrected transcriptions. The selected people were among the most hard-working and precise volunteers and most volunteers were very flattered that we asked them, because they experienced the change from transcribing to correcting as a “promotion.” They often worked extremely hard to prove that they deserved it. This probably explains the remarkable difference in output between the 16 volunteers and the 14 students. Although the first volunteers started with revisions 1 month after the students, they still corrected 88.5 percent of all transcriptions!

A comparison with participants of other projects

How does the “Make the Surinamese slave registers public” project compare to other crowdsourcing projects? The Velehanden platform offers statistical information, but comparable projects are scarce. The

Table 2. Age distribution of volunteers of the slave registers project, compared to the age distribution of the average volunteers on the Velehanden-platform (source: www.velehanden.nl).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Category</th>
<th>“slave registers” project %</th>
<th>Velehanden platform %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20 years or less</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 to 30 years</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31 to 40 years</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>11.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41 to 50 years</td>
<td>17.7</td>
<td>12.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51 to 60 years</td>
<td>18.6</td>
<td>19.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61 to 70 years</td>
<td>26.3</td>
<td>26.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>71 to 80 years</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>16.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>81 years and older</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 11. Combined total number of completed transcribed scans of the slave registers and corrected transcriptions on the Velehanden-platform per day, between June 20 and November 11, 2017. The number of transcriptions is twice the number of corrections, because each scan was transcribed twice and both transcriptions were used for one round of corrections (source www.velehanden.nl).
platform has been used mainly to make indexes for civil registers for which the transcription of a limited number of variables suffices. Projects like the “slavenregisters” are more difficult, because volunteers have to make a complete transcription of the text. However, in the last few years some projects have begun which had a comparable aim of making data available for research in the humanities and which also asked the volunteers to make a complete transcription of the text.

We selected three projects. These are the “Ja, ik wil”-project, started by Utrecht University in 2014, and two projects which started in 2016: “Volkspetitionnement 1878” by Free University in Amsterdam and “Amsterdamse doodsoorzaken 1854–1940” by Radboud University Nijmegen (Velehanden 2014; 2016a; 2016b). The information on the three projects which is given below is correct for March 1, 2018, while information on the “slavenregisters project” is based on November 6, 2017, the date the project was completed.

Although each of these three projects has some unique features which makes individual comparison difficult, I used the averages of these three projects to put the results of the “slavenregisters”-project into context. On average, the numbers of volunteers and scans of these projects are almost identical. While the “slavenregisters” project had 572 enlisted volunteers and 17,682 scans, the average of the other three projects is 577 enlisted volunteers and 17,406 scans. There is a clear difference, however, when we compare the time needed to complete the projects. Of the three comparable projects, only the “Ja, ik wil” project had been completed as of March 1, 2018. It took 107 weeks to finish this project. The other two projects had been running for 88 and 73 weeks.1 Within the “slavenregisters” project, it took the volunteers 18 weeks to transcribe all scans twice.

There is no single clear explanation for the much greater pace of the “slavenregisters” project. The slave registers, rather well structured sources from the nineteenth century, were probably not the most difficult ones to transcribe. However, it seems unlikely that this factor alone could explain the large discrepancy with the other three projects. Statistics suggests that the involvement of the volunteers in the “slavenregisters” project was a more influential factor.

We compared the involvement of the volunteers based on the publicly available statistical information on the project sites of the four projects (Tables 4 and 5). It is an open secret that a large percentage of the people registered as volunteers to citizen science projects do not do much. For example, of the 6,000 registered volunteers of the large citizen science project “Evolution MegaLab,” 62% did not add any data at all (Worthington et al. 2012).

Volunteers tend to shop around, looking for projects that interest them. They subscribe to a project to see what it looks like. When they like the project they will become active. Otherwise, they will look elsewhere, most often without unsubscribing.

In Table 4, it is shown that the “slavenregisters” project is no different in that respect. More than one third of the enlisted volunteers, 203 persons (35.5%), never completed an entry. Of those who did, another 41 volunteers (7.2%) stopped after one entry. In effect, 328 volunteers, 57.3% of those who are enlisted, have done all the work. This still compares favorably with the three similar projects. In these projects, on average 331 volunteers (57.4%) never completed an entry, while another 79 (13.7%) only completed one entry. This leaves on average 167 active volunteers (28.9%), which is half the number of active volunteers of the “slavenregisters” project.

The higher number of active volunteers was not the only factor involved, however. Table 5 compares the number of transcription entries produced by the volunteers.2 As is generally the case with transcription projects, a large part of the work has been done by a small group of people. The top volunteer of the “slavenregisters” project single-handedly completed

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**Table 3.** Comparison of the number of corrections done by paid students and volunteers of the project “Maak de Surinaamse slavenregisters openbaar” (source: www.velehanden.nl).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Volunteers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Persons involved</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scans corrected</td>
<td>1,818</td>
<td>13,956</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of scans corrected</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>88.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average per person</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>873</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median per person</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>203.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Table 4.** Effort of volunteers of the project “Maak de Surinaamse slavenregisters openbaar,” compared to the average of three other projects on the velehanden-platform: “Ja, ik wil,” “Amsterdamse Doodsoorzaken 1854–1940” and “Volkspetitionnement 1878” (source: www.velehanden.nl).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Slave registers</th>
<th>Average 3 projects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Volunteers enlisted for the project</td>
<td>572</td>
<td>577</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enlisted volunteers who never completed an entry (% of total enlisted volunteers)</td>
<td>203 (35.5)</td>
<td>331 (57.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enlisted volunteers who completed one entry (% of total enlisted volunteers)</td>
<td>41 (7.2)</td>
<td>79 (13.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enlisted volunteers who completed 2 or more entries (% of total enlisted volunteers)</td>
<td>328 (57.3)</td>
<td>167 (28.9)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2,300 entries. However, when we compare this with the three similar projects, we see that the influence of a small group of top volunteers was less pronounced within the “slavenregisters” project. Table 5 shows that the total number of transcription entries in the “slavenregisters” project was higher, but the number of entries made by the ten most active volunteers was lower than in comparable projects. Within similar projects, on average two-thirds of the entries were made by just ten volunteers, while in the “slavenregisters” project this was one-third.

In the case of the “slavenregisters” project, there was a large group of volunteers outside the top 10 who together did most of the work. This “middle group” was twice the size of that in the similar projects (318 versus 157 volunteers) and each volunteer transcribed on average more entries (63 versus 46). It was probably this group which made the real difference between the “slavenregisters” project and the three comparable projects. Comparable projects depend heavily on a small group of very active volunteers. If we had depended to the same extent on “top volunteers,” the project would have taken at least twice as much time to complete.

**Conclusions**

A well-planned communication strategy and careful management of the volunteer group once the project began made the crowdsourcing project “Maak de Surinaamse slavenregisters openbaar” into a success. We raised the necessary funds and we got volunteers involved in such a way that the work was finished more than 2 months ahead of schedule. We avoided the pitfalls of crowdsourcing projects that are mentioned in the literature: a lack of attention from the public, dwindling participation of the volunteers and a lack of qualified volunteers. Based on our experience with the “slavenregisters” project, we will offer some suggestions as to how one can reach the public and keep them involved in a crowdsourcing project.

Firstly, before you even begin work on a project, think very carefully about what people have to gain from it. As academics, we are used to looking at the content and starting with research questions, but when you want to reach an audience it is better to start by looking at the needs of the intended audiences. If the project helps to fulfill some of their needs, they are more likely to participate in the project.

Secondly, realize that there is no such thing as one amorphous public. For a successful crowdsourcing campaign it is necessary to know who your target audiences are and to develop strategies to reach them. In our campaign we initially focused on two target audiences and only branched out to a broader audience once we had reached the target audiences sufficiently.

Thirdly, use the experience of the advertising industry. Advertising often works because a clear positive message is repeated over and over again. Once people become familiar with the message and acquire a positive association with it, they are more likely to “buy” the product. In our context: use one clear positive message and make it more recognizable by using a logo or always the same spokesperson. Furthermore, it is not enough to give just one press release or do one interview. Try to get the message in as many different public and social media as possible to increase the likelihood that people receive your message more than once and become familiar with it.

Fourthly, timing is important in your communication strategy. Time your communication in such a way that you can optimize the impact, as we did by starting the transcriptions just before the *Keti Koti* commemoration and by getting the project manager into the right radio shows at the right moments in the campaign. Time your communication also to avoid negative associations (such as the Black Pete debate) and if there is a time gap in your project, try to devise communication strategies to bridge the gap and keep the public involved.

Fifthly, the most important function of crowdfunding is not to generate funds, it is to generate a network, public commitment and press attention. A crowdfunding campaign gives a project a sense of urgency and at the same time people who actually donate feel committed to support the project, because...
they have literally invested in it. Combining the funding aspect with volunteer recruitment is something to think about because it offers people alternative ways to participate.

Finally, in our experience, inclusion works better than competition for keeping volunteers involved in the project. Had we focused on the few competitive “top volunteers,” the project would have taken twice the length time to complete and other volunteers would probably have lost interest in it. Focus first and foremost on the creation of a community feeling. Volunteers are less likely to quit when they have the feeling that their contribution matters and that they are a valued member of the group. It also seems to be important to the volunteers that the project manager gives the impression that he or she is only interested in the outcome of the project: be supportive towards the participants and give a quick response to any problems which may arise during the project. Participants are more motivated when they have the feeling that volunteers and staff are “in this together.”

Notes

1. The project ‘Volkspetitionnement 1878’ has since been completed. It took 119 weeks to complete. The project ‘Amsterdamse doodsoorzaken 1854 – 1940’ was still running on February 1 2019.

2. The number of entries is double the number of scans (because every scan had to be entered twice), minus scans which had been labelled ‘uns usable’ by volunteers. ‘Unusable’ scans contain no information, for example covers and empty pages.

References


