Let's name it together: VGI, social media and local heritage in traditional toponyms research

Kamil Nieścioruk [a],*

[a] University of Life Sciences in Lublin, Poland, kamil.niescioruk@up.lublin.pl

* Corresponding author

Abstract:

Toponyms research and use are as old as lettering on maps. Informative role of names is obvious, as they explain places, hence their official role is very important – they are included in national databases and gazetteers. The methodology of field collecting of names is well-established and has a long, formal tradition.

However, toponym is more than just a record in a database and a word on a map. It has its own meaning, etymological story and emotional load, especially in case of microtoponyms, which form a part of collective memory and heritage, referring to stories, events and people important to a local society.

While field reconnaissance and field survey are basic, common and effective mechanisms of gathering names, a more citizen-science approach merged with digital tools and online environment is nowadays, especially during COVID-19 pandemic, an interesting alternative and addition to well-known research and collecting methods.

In October 2018 the project "Wąwolnickie nazwy" (Polish "Names of Wąwolnica") has started. Its main goal is to collect local, traditional toponyms in the commune of Wąwolnica (eastern Poland) and publish them in a form of a map and geographic dictionary. The project goes, however, far beyond a simple database creation with field works only. The additional, community-oriented task is to show citizens of villages the value of toponyms, importance of name-related stories in process of building regional identity and to invite people to participate in a cooperative project on local past and present.

Names hide a lot of interesting, personal stories. They seem to be of little importance in a context of global or national history, but are often identity-forming on a local level, hence they are a part of a local heritage that can be used to build values and promote the commune. This can be achieved by doing more than individual toponymic talks in field only.

The activities in the project were developed and performed in "two worlds" – real and virtual.

Fields works and field trips are not neglected – it is a very important way of gathering names, especially when meeting individuals, who often enjoy sharing their stories about places often known from their early ages or of value to them.

There were lectures and workshops for residents, organized with a help of the Society of Friends of Wąwolnica in a community cultural centre. People found out about the importance of names seen as a heritage and later worked with maps and contributed to a database. Workshop resulted in a discussion and sharing personal stories, showing high level of involvement of participants.

Lectures and workshops were also organized in a primary school in Karmanowice (one of villages in the commune), giving children an opportunity to look at local geography and history in a way going beyond basic teaching programme. They also had a "homework": to talk to parents and grandparents about local names and stories. The results were then collaboratively mapped and discussed during the second workshop.

The project is digital from its very beginning. It has started with the Facebook fanpage, which gathers half a thousand followers (https://www.facebook.com/wawolnickienazwy/), with posts reaching approximately 700-1200 users (max: 17 thousands). The numbers are not breath-taking, but the fanpage is niche and local: its subject is an area inhabited by less than 5000 people. It content is related to toponyms, but it also describes villages, places, tells regional stories and educates on names, but also on two other topics. One is space perception and understanding relations of spatial phenomena, adding also geohistorical context. The other one is a map as a medium of communication and source material to trace spatial changes (Figure 1). So far it is successful, having managed to build a small community, with a dozen of active people who share their names, knowledge and stories and discussing about cultural landscape of the

commune. It was possible to meet a few of them in real, before the pandemic, what resulted in a lot of interesting stories and materials, including mental sketches (Figure 2) as people really care about their homeland and often react very positive about projects preserving place-related values. They also share their knowledge in comments to posts as well as in private communication.

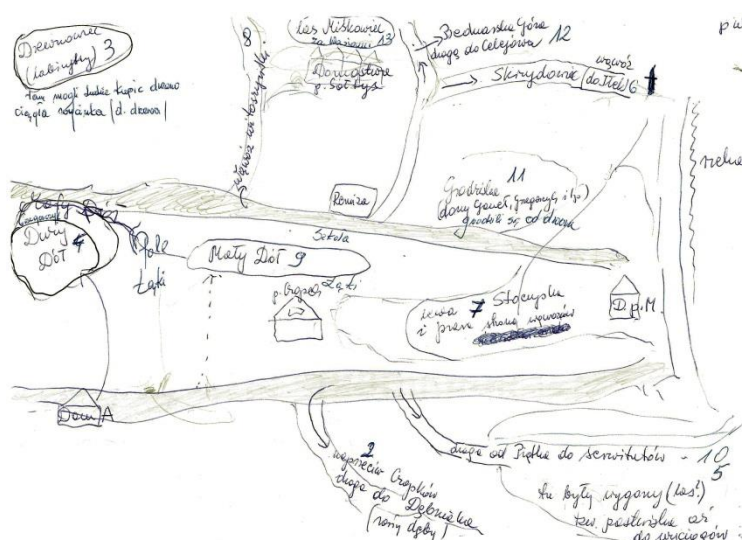Figure 1. Discussion on using early maps and modern database in finding road and settlement past layout.

Figure 2. Mental sketch of Rąblów village (with the permission of its author).

The project also comprises of a simple Internet map-based geoquestionnaire (https://arcg.is/1G1vSW) using ArcGIS online. It gives possibility to survey people with the use of an interactive map. The form part consist of fields for name, description and photo while the map allows adding a point that is saved to a spatial database with attributes filled with a content of above-listed fields. So far over 50 names were gathered this way. Sadly, for many, this form – useful and easy to access – is hard to use due to a low level of cartographic literacy.

An online meeting is planned, with a short, educational introduction and a main part being a discussion and information exchange as a substitution for real workshops and a possibility to increase the project outcome and reach.

The volunteered geographic information is a core way of gathering data in the project, as most of the came from people who wanted to share their knowledge. In the era of COVID-19 pandemic, it is important that even in a case of research that require contact with people and field works they can to some extent be replaced and supported by online activities. These digital tools, especially social media, are a great way not only to promote the idea of toponyms and their role in building local identity, but also to create and strengthen a community willing to contribute to project and receive (even in an unaware way) knowledge increasing their map understanding and spatial awareness of local cultural geography.