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Participation, Collaboration, and Community Building in Digital Repositories

Participation, collaboration et développement communautaire dans les dépôts numériques

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Abstract: This article explores the world of digital repositories and how the advent of Web 2.0 has encouraged the rise of participation, collaboration, and community building. The three types of digital repositories that are described include digital history projects, community archives, and digital collections. The author defines each term, provides examples, and explains how the difference of provenance between each repository ultimately leads to more collaboration in the digital world. Various examples demonstrate just how prevalent participation, collaboration, and community building has become in the archives field. The overall shift toward communal experiences in digital repositories can be seen not just inside the archives and library fields but also outside of these fields. This opens the door to further research into these trends.

Keywords: Archives 2.0, digital collections, community archives, digital history

Résumé : Cet article explore le monde des dépôts numériques et comment l'avènement du web 2.0 a encouragé la hausse de la participation, de la collaboration et du développement communautaire. Les trois types de dépôts numériques décrits ici sont des projets numériques d'histoire, des archives communautaires, et des collections numériques. L'auteur définit chaque terme, fournit des exemples, et explique comment la différence de provenance entre chaque dépôt conduit finalement à une plus grande collaboration dans le monde numérique. Divers exemples montrent à quel point la participation, la collaboration et le développement communautaire sont désormais répandus dans le domaine des archives. Le changement global vers des expériences collectives dans les dépôts numériques peut être perçu non seulement à l'intérieur du champ des archives et des bibliothèques, mais aussi à l'extérieur. Cela ouvre la voie à de nouvelles recherches pour explorer plus avant ces tendances.

Mots-clés : archives 2.0, collections numériques, archives communautaires, histoire numérique

Introduction

Since the advent of the Internet, many professionals in the archives field have embraced the opportunities and possibilities that technology promises. Waves

of innovation have slowly, but progressively, transformed the field from a place where archivists sat in solitary ivory towers and lorded over their special collections and repositories to a place where archivists are expanding into the digital sphere and shifting their focus to interactions with their patrons. Kate Theimer (2011), author of the blog *ArchivesNext*, classifies this latter approach as “Archives 2.0.” Theimer defines Archives 2.0 as “an approach to archival practice that promotes openness and flexibility” which “argues that archivists must be user centered and embrace opportunities to use technology to share collections, interact with users, and improve internal efficiency” (60). This paradigm shift toward an increase in collaborative and community elements not only challenges the traditional notion of an archive but also speaks to the evolution of the archive as an institution.¹ One has the chance to view this evolution in action by looking at the different types of digital repositories and how interdisciplinary collaboration creates a sense of community in an otherwise isolating field.

This article examines the processes and modalities through which various bodies—be they professional heritage organizations such as archives or museums or simply associations and foundations—preserve cultural heritage artefacts, especially archives in the digital age. It has been found that the digital phenomenon is an enabler of collaboration and participatory practices, and various studies have shown that it boosts collaboration not only between information professionals (archivists and librarians) but also between professionals and the general public and helps to create communities around the preservation and sharing of specific historical collections.

Identifying Types of Digital Repositories

The first step in exploring these collaborative efforts as a way of community building in digital repositories comes from defining three examples: digital history projects, community archives, and digital collections. The past decade in the humanities realm has seen a rise in discourse and debate about the concept of digital history. In a May 2009 article from *Perspectives from History*, Douglas Seefeldt and William G. Thomas (2009, 2) write of digital history on two levels: the first level involves digitizing historical materials using new technologies and the second level encompasses an “open arena of scholarly production and communication” through the “development and new course materials and scholarly data collection efforts.” To put it simply, “to do digital history, then, is to digitize the past certainly, but it is much more than that. It is to create a framework through the technology for people to experience, read, and follow an argument about a historical problem” (2). Digital history projects, then, serve the purpose of combining scholarship and technology to address a particular historiographical question (2).

Digital History Projects

Academic and cultural heritage institutions, often partnering with one or more organizations, initiate projects based on specific historical questions. For instance, the Virginia Center for Digital History and the University of Virginia Library

cooperated to create the “the Valley of the Shadow” project. This project documents two communities, one in Virginia and one in Pennsylvania, before, during, and after the American Civil War (Ayers 1993–2007). The digital archive allows researchers to sift through letters, diaries, census, church records, and other media to discover the history of two communities during the Civil War. In the words of the website, “the Valley Project tells forgotten stories of life during the era of the Civil War” (*ibid.*). Another project, “Preserving the Iraqi Jewish Archive,” represents an effort from the (US National Archives and Records Administration 2003–15) and its partners to digitize and preserve records from the Iraqi Jewish Archive whose records were waterlogged, damaged, and moldy. The website contains an exhibit entitled “Discovery and Recovery: Preserving Iraqi Jewish Heritage,” which details the discovery and recovery of this treasure trove of archival materials. This type of project serves many different types of researchers, including those studying Iraqi Jews and those studying conservation efforts between countries. However, these academic and cultural institutions do not just employ existing collections for digital history projects, but they also bring in user submissions to enhance their collections.

Digital history projects do not limit themselves to using archival records to form their collections; some also crowd source their record creation. With funding from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Rockefeller Foundation, City Lore, a cultural non-profit organization in New York City, designed an interactive map to collect stories from New York residents. Called “City of Memory,” this project allows users to upload their own stories to the website, which are then placed on a map (CityLore 2003–8). Users can then take interactive tours of different places in New York. The participatory element used to create collections for this digital repository distinguishes it from any form of traditional archive or any other online repository.

Community Archives

Online community archives represent the second type of digital repository covered in this article. The definition for this repository is borrowed from a few authors, Emily Monks-Leeson (2011) and Andrew Flinn, Mary Stevens, and Elizabeth Shepherd (2009). In her article about the relationship between provenance and digital repositories, Monks-Leeson (2011, 38) describes an online archive as “websites created by individuals, organizations, or institutions who presumably have little or no grounding in archival theory yet desire to make historical material accessible in digital form.” Writing in the United Kingdom, Flinn, Stevens, and Shepherd (2009, 73) define community archives as “collections of material gathered primarily by members of a given community and over whose use community members exercise some level of control.” Here, we take “community” to mean a group of people who share the same ethnicity, religion, gender, occupation, or other identifying factor instead of a collection of materials on a historical topic or a place. Online community archives blend elements of both. Although similar to digital history projects, online community archives tend to represent a marginalized or under-represented group of people in the digital

sphere (Flinn, Stevens, and Shepherd 2009, 74; Monks-Leeson 2011, 38). These people often form historical associations or other interest groups, and according to Elizabeth Kaplan, the purpose of the associations is to bring attention to, and raise awareness of, their groups (Kaplan 2000, 131). Online community archives serve this purpose and have the added advantage of disseminating information more quickly and reaching a wider audience than traditional communication outlets.

Community archives centre around a wide range of topics including ethnicity or racial background, occupation, religion, military affiliation, or other identifying factors. For example, the Black Archives document the experiences of African Americans in the Miami-Dade County region of southern Florida (Black Archives History and Research Foundation of Southern Florida 2010b). Their collections contain materials based on segregated communities, different types of prejudicial separation, the civil rights movement, and other demographical records. This type of digital community archive aims to document an under-represented segment of society in a predominantly white region of America during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Overall, this example of a digital community archive aims to raise awareness of, and inform, the public on South Florida African American heritages as well as to provide a place for members to engage with their past and establish a form of collective identity.

Institutional Digital Collections

Institutional digital collections refer to institutions with online collections. These collections often comprise an institution's existing digital collections. As with both digital history projects and online community archives, digital collections may focus on a specific topic, but they usually reflect the institution from which they originate. What distinguishes a digital collection from the other two repositories discussed in this article is that they almost always derive from an academic, governmental, or cultural heritage institution, whereas digital history projects and online community archives may not always come from such backgrounds. These latter two entities can be the product of efforts from people with little archival or historical background, but they may simply be interested in a specific historical question or a group of people. On the whole, digital collections cover a wide range of topics, but specific subsets usually exist within each umbrella collection.

The Wisconsin Historical Society, for example, maintains a robust overarching digital collection of over 300,000 scanned pages of materials, including 80,000 images and 3,000 maps. Its website contains several online collections, including the Henry and Elizabeth Baird Collection, the 1964 Freedom Summer Project, the McCormick-International Harvester Collection, and their museum collections (Wisconsin Historical Society 2015). All of these collections represent just part of the over 100,000 linear square feet of materials that the Wisconsin Historical Society possesses. With each of these types of repositories defined, this article will now look at how the concept of provenance, though different between these repositories, ultimately reflects Theimer's (2011) version of Archives 2.0.

Knowing the differences between these three various digital repositories goes a long way towards understanding that a “digital archive” takes many different forms and cannot be seen in plain black-and-white terms. Adrian Cunningham (2008, 530) takes issue with the mishandling and misuse of concept of a “digital archive.” He argues that the idea of a digital archive is only part of the idea of digital curation, which also includes digital preservation, digital librarianship, and data management. If we consider digital archives as part of digital curation, then we can consider digital history projects, online community archives, and digital collections as being further subsets of digital archives, each subject to the same facets of archiving, including acquisition, appraisal, arrangement, description, record keeping, ethical considerations, provenance, custody, and others. For the purposes of this article, I choose to focus on provenance because it encourages collaboration and participatory practices in archiving due to the unique way digitization influences the practice.

Provenance and Collaboration in Digital Repositories

The Society of American Archivists defines provenance as “information regarding the origins, context, creator, custody, and ownership of an item or collection” (Pearce-Moses 2005, 317). In a traditional archival setting, provenance usually encompasses the individual who created the record and the line of custody as ownership that is passed between individuals, institutions, or both. An unbroken line of provenance for a record goes a long way in determining its authenticity (Hirtle 2000, 12). In an online environment, the question of proving an unbroken line of custody can become tricky, especially in digital history projects. For instance, in the “City of Memory” project mentioned earlier, the main collections come from the community. Arguing for an unbroken provenance becomes a bit of a double-edged sword. On the one hand, a creator who curates his or her own story through the submission of an online form can rest assured that his or her story becomes part of the website. On the other hand, the website manager may edit content, especially for grammar or language. From an archival standpoint, this is direct tampering with the original record, which, in some circumstances, is no great cause for concern. Monk-Leeson (2011, 54) remarks that, “in no small way does the Internet itself form part of the records’ context . . . as the primary benefit to such online archives is their ability to establish active connections between dispersed records and collections.”

However, a crowd-sourced digital history project differs from what she defines as an online archive because the project may not have any existing archival materials placed on the web. The users create the records as soon as they hit a submit button on an online submission form. The ownership of those submissions then passes to City Lore, which posts not only those submissions but also the stories curated by their staff. Therefore, one finds distinct provenance in digital history projects, even crowd-sourced ones. Tampering or editing with user submissions, however, can cast doubt on provenance, leading some to potentially question the authenticity of the records.

Provenance in online community archives demonstrates a unique case in which the creator has the chance to also serve as the custodian. The archival materials originate from the community that the archive represents, and, often, those who donate their records become involved in the organization and oversee the archive. Dorothy Jenkins Fields founded the Black Archives in 1977, and she donated a variety of papers relating to “the funeral of her father ... the Herstory organization of which she was a member, and many digitized images documenting her family and career” (Black Archives History and Research Foundation of South Florida 2010a, 2010b). Fields also serves on the Board of Directors for the Black Archives so in a way not only did she create some of the records housed in the digital repository, but she also maintains custody over them. This type of relationship is more easily found in an online community archive than in digital history projects and digital collections.

The question of provenance often becomes less of a concern for digital collections that are part of an institution such as a university, government agency, or cultural heritage organization. Typically, when institutions place their collections on the Internet, metadata accompany the digital objects. The McCormick-International Harvester Collection at the Wisconsin Historical Society in Madison, Wisconsin, offers insight into how thorough institutions can be when providing information on object provenance. By cross-referencing a finding aid and the item description, an object’s provenance becomes apparent. For instance, take the poster advertising the white Farmall demonstrator tractor. The metadata for this item contains a description that reads: “Fourteen advertising flyers, brochures and posters relating to International Harvester’s ‘Mid-Century’ promotion and white tractors. White demonstrators included the Farmall C, Farmall Super A, and Farmall Club Tractors.”² The finding aid for the collection in which the poster resides provides additional background and arrangement information about the collection (Wisconsin Historical Society 2015). Taken together, a user has the ability to place the poster in both a historical and an archival context through knowing its provenance. In this case, both the finding aid and object description operate similarly as they might in the physical archive, something that cannot always be said for digital history projects or online community archives. In addition, rarely does the same person create and maintain custody over records. Despite the differences regarding the concept of provenance between these three repositories, the issue of provenance as a whole in the digital sphere actually encourages collaboration between different individuals and groups.

The idea that the issue of provenance encourages collaboration between archivist and user or between members of a community touches all three types of digital repositories. The very nature of crowd-sourced digital history projects such as “City of Memory” actively encourages community participation through digital submissions of stories or pictures. This creates a direct link between the creator of the record and the custodian. In online community archives, the creators of the records often have a very close relationship with the custodians, and so one assumes that they work closely together to ensure that the records remain intact. This holds especially true if the creators hold positions of authority

in the archive. Finally, although a divide often exists between the creator and the custodians in digital collections, the institution will often allow users to give feedback or provide additional information. In addition to provenance, other issues in the digital environment have allowed collaborative efforts to flourish between institutions.

Why Does This Matter?

The overarching question we must ask ourselves in exploring the idea of community building is why should the archival field care at all? To what purpose does community building enhance or better archival institutions, staff, and the field as a whole? A myriad of complex responses provide answers to this question. Besides the obvious answer of providing access to a wider audience for a growing number of digital materials, other answers include a paradigm shift toward the idea of archivist as mediator between collections and users and the creation of identity and cultural memory by individuals, communities, groups with similar backgrounds and interests, and just about everyone in between.

In recent years, the archival mindset has slowly shifted from Hilary Jenkinson's view that archives serve as the caretaker of records, ensuring their continued "archive value," toward Theodore Schellenberg's belief in the archivist as a mediator between records and researchers (Jenkinson 1922; Schellenberg 1956; Tschan 2002, 178–80). Indeed, the US National Archives has adopted Schellenberg's approach (Bastian 2002, 90). In this atmosphere, it stands to reason that, at least in the United States, the field will see a rise in collaboration between archivists and other entities. Collaborative efforts help ensure the sharing of resources, materials, manpower, and ideas, which benefits archivists and can aid them in becoming more efficient, better trained, and can even provide their users with access to materials outside of the institution itself. Communities of practice are becoming more common in both the library and archival fields, and this speaks toward a growing recognition of the benefits of collaboration as a whole.

However, Theimer's (2011) definition of Archives 2.0 does not just mean a sharing of resources among archivists; it also extends to archival users. Archives 2.0 blurs the lines between archivist and user, and this occurs in several ways. As we have seen in crowd-sourced digital history projects, the user becomes the creator and even the archivist in some instances. Michelle Light and Tom Hyry (2002, 226) argue for the use of annotations in online finding aids so readers have the ability to "respond to hypertexts with new commentary, make new connections, and create new pathways, gather and interpret materials, and otherwise promote an accretion of both structure and content." Many digital repositories accept feedback on their collections through contact forms. Archives perform a variety of outreach efforts through references, workshops, exhibits, working with school groups, and other means, which demonstrates increased collaboration not only between archive and institutions but also between archive and user. People participating in archives not only conduct research, but they

also share experiences. This helps many people construct a sense of identity, whether as an individual or as a group.

Others use archives to discover their past. Community archives particularly demonstrate this desire. Flinn, Stevens, and Shepherd (2009, 73) write that “the defining characteristic of community archives is the active participation of a community in documenting and making accessible the history of their particular group and/or locality *on their own terms*.” These groups use their archives to tell their stories, which has also enabled the disenfranchised to have a voice. Lyndon Ormond-Parker and Robin Sloggett (2012, 2) write that the materials collected by community archives are granted protection and are then used for educational, creative developmental, economical, and cultural purposes. In addition, crowd-sourced digital history projects accomplish much similar goals, allowing community members to interact with their own past and see themselves as part of something larger than themselves. They see themselves as part of a community, which, after all, is one of the tenets of Archives 2.0.

Conclusion

In this article, I have sought to explore how archival practices are evolving in the participatory paradigm of Web 2.0 with the emergence of the concept of Archives 2.0. It also seeks to briefly show how the culture of collaboration and participation have spread to other cultural heritage institutions such as libraries and museums. Kate Theimer’s (2011) definition of Archives 2.0 promotes collaboration, user-centredness, and sharing resources, which all work together to break down traditional barriers that have isolated archives in the past. In the future, I will extend this study to the related fields of libraries and museums, which is beyond the scope of this article. Who knows what studying the convergence of museums, archives, and libraries will yield for the future of digital collections, preservation, and curation?

Notes

1. In this article, the term “social elements” encompasses the idea of any social interaction between individuals and/or institutions for the purposes of participation, collaboration, and creating a sense of community.
2. “White Farmall Demonstrator Tractor Advertising: Demonstrate the C, Sell the C,” 1950, McCormick Mss4, 00011950, International Harvester Company Advertising Literature 1832–1984, McCormick-International Harvester Collection, Archives Division, Wisconsin Historical Society, <http://content.wisconsinhistory.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/ihc/id/5218/rec/1> (accessed 15 November 2014).

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