**Community Curation and Social Engagement in Archives and Special Collections**

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Abstract

Collections of local stories and artifacts are more authentic and interesting when they intimately involve the people who live in the area of interest. Along this train of thought, community curation in archives and special collections within museums and libraries grows increasingly popular. The basic idea of community curation is professional collections encouraging individuals to submit or donate images, stories, and artifacts to be added to the collection and shared. The purpose is to further supplement the collection to enrich and diversify the educational content. Presently in 2022, community curation has been mostly used for local collections that specify in one town or locale’s history to which citizens could easily contribute. However, some research exists on whether community curation can be utilized in a larger or grander scale, however limited, in part due to the interest in increased social engagement and digital access. In analysis of this research, it is evident that there is a lack of balance between programs with a reasonable entry level for participation and those with adequate moderation, considering the credibility of resources.

Community Curation and Social Engagement in Archives and Special Collections

Collections of local stories and artifacts are more authentic and interesting when they intimately involve the people who live in the area of interest. Along this train of thought, community curation, otherwise known as citizen curation, in archives and special collections within museums and libraries grows increasingly popular (Daga, 2022). The basic idea of community curation is professional collections encouraging individuals to submit or donate images, stories, and artifacts to be added to the collection and shared. The purpose is to further supplement the collection to enrich and diversify the educational content. Presently in 2022, community curation has been mostly used for local collections that specify in one town or locale’s history to which citizens could easily contribute. However, some research exists on whether community curation can be utilized in a larger or grander scale, however limited, in part due to the interest in increased social engagement and digital access.

**Social Engagement**

One significant theory for why community curation is continuously explored is the influence of social media. In the digital age, it is common to see companies and organizations putting more time and energy into their social media presence to increase engagement with what they offer. Museums and archives are no exception to this. By prioritizing social media presence, collections of all sizes draw visibility and discovery of items, particularly images, and are able to increase their following dramatically (Garner, 2016). The Southwest Collection/Special Collections Library (SWC) at Texas Tech University (TTU) performed a study on how social media could increase their following by sharing a “…handful of images accompanied by brief expository text on a WordPress blog, Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr. Viewership increased rapidly. Tumblr rose to 4,460 followers by 2014, and, by 2016, had risen to over 9,000.” (Weaver, 2022). Something that SWC did not foresee, though, was a blossoming interest in their audience in offering their own formal contributions to the collection, which they may or may not have been aware of before seeing the presence on social media (Weaver, 2022). Just like in this instance, visibility leads to interest, and thus is how social engagement can lead to a desire to get involved and participate in community curation.

**Benefits and Drawbacks of Community Curation**

Community curation can benefit archives and special collections in numerous ways. For instance, many would argue that items contributed personally shed light on the “real” stories in local communities. As previously mentioned, community curation also increases the amount of information or items in a specific section of a collection. Additionally, a key focus in recent times is attempting to correct interpretations of previously misrepresented or underrepresented cultures or communities. This alone has proven to be a significant motivator for citizen participation, particularly regarding native or indigenous cultures in recent years, a famously mis/underrepresented part of global societies. The National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) has continued to put the accuracy of representation at the forefront of its priorities, including through its community curation initiatives over the past decade, and “determining through assessment and critical opinion how to superimpose upon its model of native representational authority a credible one of historical context.” (Turner, 2011).

Though community curation can offer a lot of incredibly positive attributes to their collections and society, when considering specifically larger-scale potential, there are currently a few pressing issues. One problem lies with the donation/submission process itself. With the increased use of digital means to get images or documents from one place to another, we run into the issue of digital privilege. This is not a problem with physical donation processes, but some programs solely use digital means. Online only programs become problematic when considering many people still do not have access to the internet in order to participate or to even learn about the collections in the first place with such a push to centralize presence on social media.

Possibly an even more troubling barrier is moderation or mediation of the donation/submission process. When entering items into a collection for public view, the credibility and sourcing of the information presented is necessary to maintain the integrity of the institution and the accuracy of information. Though this presents little issue to smaller collection with lower donation frequency, a vaster donation process could pose problems in this area, simply in terms of historian or librarian labor or the choice of digital software that has the capability to vet the items submitted. In returning reference to the NMAI, even having museum curators working with select groups of less than a dozen people at a time proved challenging. The consistent issue lies in having “too many cooks in the kitchen,” so to speak, as too many differing opinions on representations within collections caused the community curation program to stray from its original goal to increase said representation (Turner, 2011).

**Research and Studies on Community Curation**

Given the present problems, namely the lack of adequate technological support, digital limitations, and disagreements occurring within institutions, there is a need for analysis. The European initiative, Social Participation, Cohesion, and Inclusion through Cultural Engagement (SPICE) is one such example. The self-given mission statement of SPICE is as follows:

We are developing technologies that help communities select paintings, artefacts and other museum objects and share their interpretations with others. Through this, citizens can learn more about themselves and develop a better understanding of, and empathy for, other communities (SPICE, n.d.).

SPICE has operated under support and funding from the European Union (EU) since 2020, and has, so far, performed case studies in Ireland, Spain, Italy, Finland, and Israel. SPICE case studies focus on working closely with a museum or institution in the countries to foster community engagement. Together, they ask citizens to share their images, stories, and personal engagements with cultural heritages for public sharing, typically focusing on a specific population, such as deaf or hard of hearing people or students (SPICE, n.d.). The SPICE initiatives are an example of turning away from the interest and technology of social media that may have inspired them and operating separately from these social media platforms. This separation allows the institution to have control over the content they receive and how they choose to present it, easing the process for the institution and making for a smooth-sailing initiative.

Unfortunately, one could argue that the total control of the institution somewhat negates the point of community curation. In this instance, there is a significant divide between the operation of citizens and institutions (Daga, 2022). This approach is not entirely unique and was coined by Gabriel and Jenson as the “cathedral model,” which they define as “closed, carefully crafted and inaccessible.” (Gabriel, 2017). However, the more common descriptor for participatory curation programs is at the other end of this spectrum: the “bazaar” model. The bazaar model occurs when there is too heavy a reliance on social media or social-media-adjacent platforms as a meeting place between citizen and institutions with little to no professional moderation. A study conducted in Wellington, New Zealand, in 2020 cited examples of this model through analyzing institutions there, as well as North America, Europe, Southeast Asia, and Australia, that offer participatory curation. A common thread found through the institutions was a very open allowance for physical and digital donations of items to collections, in some cases, with no more than a name or online username as supplemental information about the donor (Li Liew, 2020). These programs tended to become less like a digital collection and more of a glorified social media campaign. The informal nature of these examples might then beg the question: “why not have a social media campaign rather than marketing the program as a community curation for an institution?” As it stands, museums tend to be equally concerned with their reputation as the materials they hold. It is therefore understandable that programs such as SPICE might choose to avoid the open-sharing concept altogether. An analysis of the SPICE initiatives concurs: “…there is a fundamental imbalance in the power relation between content producers and social media service providers, where the latter make all efforts to enable free user expression but reject liability for the messages (interpretations) that are generated through the platforms.” (Daga, 2022).

**Conclusion**

Research on the success or failure of long-term community curation programs is currently limited. However, a repeated concern in the research that does exist is the lack of balance between the “cathedral” and “bazaar” models, or the programs that both achieve the goal of creating a participatory curation process while also allowing proper consideration for the common fallbacks of moderation and tech development. When considering the cultural heritage rationale for community curation, it is especially important to pay as much attention to the credibility and value of the information as the accessibility to donate. Moderation of donated items and information should be prioritized far beyond its current state to present a careful and meaningful result to these community curations. In doing so, they can achieve their original goals of improving the quality of information and increasing accurate representation where it did not exist before.

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