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Community-Centered Digital Collections & Digital Exhibitions:

Organization and Curator Interview Report

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The Orange County & Southeast Asian Archive Center
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Introduction

This report provides the findings of a study conducted as part of the project, [Community-Centered Archives Practice: Transforming Education, Archives, and Community History](#), led by the University of California, Irvine Libraries in collaboration with the California Digital Library. It is intended to answer two main questions:

1. How can regional and national digital collection aggregators (e.g., DPLA, the DPLA Hubs Network, and other regional aggregators) work towards a more representative and inclusive aggregation; and
2. What is a responsible and inclusive digital exhibition framework that may amplify historically marginalized narratives?

To answer these questions, we conducted 11 interviews with representatives from community-based archives and community-based organizations doing archival projects (henceforth referred to as “community organizations” for efficiency), and 4 interviews with curators who had collaborated with community organizations to create online exhibitions. We define community-based archives and organizations as those documenting the experiences of marginalized people. We also did an [environmental scan](#) and administered two surveys, one for representatives of the DPLA Hubs, and one for representatives of community organizations. The results of the surveys are provided in a separate report.

The environmental scan was a review of the DPLA Hubs’ published participation policies and a review of literature about creating online exhibitions for community organizations. The DPLA Hubs survey requested information about the Hubs’ participation policies and services offered, with a focus on efforts to engage with and on board community organizations. The community organization survey requested information about the ways in which an organization shared materials or content online, and if and how they created online exhibitions.

The interviews with representatives from community organizations focused on how they are currently sharing their stories and collections online, with an emphasis on their participation (or lack thereof) in aggregators and online exhibitions. We also asked them about their experiences collaborating with other organizations, as efforts to share content online are often collaborative.

The interviews with curators focused on their processes and experiences curating online exhibitions in collaboration with community organizations or community members.

The questions we asked both groups are included in the Appendix.

A note on sources and quotations

In order to receive the most honest and forthcoming answers, we assured our interviewees of anonymity, but we also wanted to preserve and present their voices in this report. To that end, quotations from interviewees are not attributed, but where relevant, we have identified the type of organization or the communities with which they are affiliated to provide context for their statements. As the world of community archives is relatively small, we decided against identifying individual interviewees by code names or numbers, as this might make it easier to deduce or piece together which individuals or organizations said particular things. We also refer to all interviewees with “they/them” pronouns as an additional measure of anonymity.

The community organizations

The 11 community organizations are diverse in terms of type of organization, location, the communities they represent or serve, the activities and issues they engage with, and the type of materials they collect.

They represent different types of organizations. In identifying these organizational “types” we use the language the organization uses to describe itself, except in cases where it would make that organization identifiable:

- Archives
- Arts institutes
- Arts cooperatives
- Community service organizations
- Digital repositories
- Historical societies
- Libraries
- Membership organizations
- Museums

Geographically, they are located in 7 states representing most regions of the United States. 4 (36%) are located in California, with 1 (9%) each located in 6 other states:

- Alabama
- Ohio
- Michigan
- Rhode Island
- Texas
- Washington

The overrepresentation of California organizations is a result of the C-CAP team’s networks in the state. As collaboration between community organizations is often dependent on pre-existing relationships, it makes sense that California institutions familiar with the University of California, Irvine and the California Digital Library would be more receptive to participating in this research.

Here are the communities the organizations serve or represent:

- Activists and organizers
- Asian Americans
- BIPOC
- Black people

- Children and youth
- General public
- Immigrants
- Indigenous people
- Latinx people
- LGBTQ+ people
- Local or regional people
- Low-income people
- Other community archives
- People experiencing incarceration or formerly incarcerated
- People impacted by state violence
- People of short stature
- People underrepresented in the arts
- Religious communities
- Scholars
- Spanish-speaking people
- Students
- Teachers
- Undocumented people
- Women

Here are some of the activities, issues, and movements they engage in:

- Advocacy and activism
- Anti-gentrification
- Anti-racism
- Breaking or contesting stereotypes
- Civil rights
- Community archives
- Community building
- Community engagement
- Countering historical or cultural erasure
- Dance
- Documenting local sites and spaces
- Education
- Employment
- Indigenous history, culture, and traditional knowledge
- Media creation
- Mediation and conflict resolution
- Music
- Oral histories and storytelling
- Performance
- Publications, books, etc.

- Tours
- Training
- Visual art
- Writing

Here are the types of materials they create, collect, and preserve:

- 3D scans
- Audiovisual materials
- Artifacts
- Born-digital materials
- Clothing/costume
- Online exhibitions
- Documents
- Institutional records
- Oral histories
- Photographs
- Publications
- Websites

This section of the report is organized into two main sections:

- Sharing
How organizations are currently sharing their content online and the challenges or barriers they encounter
- Partnerships
How organizations are collaborating with other organizations and the challenges encountered therein

Recommendations and best practices proceeding from these interviews are combined with those from the curator interviews in the “Recommendations” section of this report.

Sharing

We asked interviewees 8 questions about their experiences sharing their materials.

1. Is sharing your collections online a priority for your organization?
2. What stories does your organization seek to tell?
3. How do you currently share these stories and your collections? This might include in-person visits, public exhibitions or events, websites, social media, etc.
4. Are you interested in sharing your collections more broadly online?
 - If so, what online venues are you interested in? What would most help you to share your collections online?

- If not, why not?
5. Does your organization currently contribute to an aggregator?
 - If so, which one? And what has that experience been like? Did you experience any challenges in contributing your collections?
 - If not, why not?
 6. Has your organization created online exhibitions to share your collections and stories? Why or why not?
 - If you have created online exhibitions before:
 - How many have you created?
 - How did the exhibition(s) come about? Did you collaborate with another party?
 - What tools or platforms did you use?
 - Were you happy with the outcome? How did you measure the impact of the exhibition?
 - What would you do differently next time?
 - Are the exhibitions still online? Have you been able to maintain them?
 - If you haven't, what would most help you to create an online exhibition?
 7. Would your organization be interested in creating an online exhibition with items already available in an aggregator like Digital Public Library of America? This might mean creating a narrative around digital images from other organizations' collections that are related to your own, or combining them with items from your own collections.
 8. Are there examples of online exhibitions you admire or would like to emulate?

Although this study is focused on aggregation and online exhibitions, we purposely kept some of the questions quite broad in order to record other ways in which interviewees share content online. At the outset of the study we weren't sure to what degree community organizations were aware of aggregation, and we weren't sure if they would recognize their online activities as "online exhibitions." There were no statistics on how many community organizations are currently participating in aggregation, and in the environmental scan, we found that most literature about "online exhibitions" or "digital exhibitions" was associated with museum discourse.

Unlike in the surveys, interviewees did not always respond to every question, and sometimes the flow of the conversation resulted in some of the questions being skipped. Findings in this section of the report are organized under the following topics:

- In-person sharing
- Websites
- Social media
- Aggregation
- Online exhibitions
- General barriers to sharing

The methods of sharing that most interviewees are engaged in are in-person sharing—either individually or through events—websites, and social media. Although they also engage in other methods—blogs, videos, etc.—these were not as widespread. As this study is focused on aggregation and online exhibitions, these methods are highlighted here, although neither was a primary mode of sharing for the interviewees.

In-person sharing

A majority of the interviewees mentioned in-person methods as prominent and impactful ways in which they share their stories and collections. This sharing takes a wide variety of forms, although it only rarely resembles the individual, in-person visits that are common in institutional archives. Interviewees mentioned sharing via presentations, talks, workshops, and panels, as well as through trainings, tours, and events, either hosted by them or by other organizations. Some offered meeting spaces where outside groups could gather, or hosted film screenings, book talks, and other happenings.

One interviewee who works at an Indigenous-led organization, emphasized the primacy and uniqueness of one-on-one interaction. “We really, really thrive and focus entirely on the one-on-one experience,” they said, “Each educator has their own education kit...all their cultural items they use to tell the story...so it's very tactile in that way. And I don't know how that would effectively translate into the digital.”

Another, who works at an organization that documents social justice struggles, talked about how an in-person event sparked a neighborhood documentation project:

We have collections on [a civil rights organization], and they charged the United States with genocide against Black people, like in the early 50s, I think. And actually, the daughter of one of the authors of that document...presented to people from the neighborhood, and then based on that collection, [they] wanted to begin documenting incidents of anti-Black genocide in their local neighborhood.

An interviewee who works at a community service organization, said of online methods of sharing and learning, “I know we still don't utilize it as much as we could. And then you know, we have a bias in that our work is about relationships and small groups of humans coming together to explore.” In some cases, the impersonal nature of online sharing may actually work against an organization's goals.

Although this report is primarily focused on online methods of sharing, it is important to note that organizations serving marginalized communities find in-person methods to be powerful and effective ways of sharing their materials and stories. Although there is a strong push in today's society to move more access and interactions online, these organizations still emphasize the importance and irreplaceability of face-to-face

encounters. It may be that online methods of sharing are not the best fit or the highest priority for many community organizations.

Websites

Organizational websites are by far the most often mentioned means of sharing materials and stories online, and interviewees often made little distinction between web pages, blogs, and online exhibitions. At the time of the interviews, only three organizations had anything resembling a searchable online catalog, and they were organizations that identified explicitly as archives or digital repositories. More commonly the website is a promotional tool or a record of past events. Several interviewees were in the midst of developing new, more robust sites.

“Our bread and butter really is the in-person, is that one on one. And the website becomes a portal for people to find out about us and see what we offer and what they can do,” said an interviewee at a museum. They were one of very few who expressed satisfaction with their website. Most others had sites that were in some state of flux.

An interviewee from a membership organization remarked that their efforts to share the organization’s history more prominently on the website were still in progress, funded by a grant:

Currently, I have started a little website for some of our material, mainly focused on our past presidents and some other general information, but it's very, very basic. And of course that is going to be modified as we go through the grant...that's about the only way that our past information is being shared.

An interviewee from an archives said their website was evolving to provide more access to their collections:

Our website is going to be completely overhauled. And so a lot of our stuff is going to become online. So at a bare minimum, we're going to put our database online so that you can find these collections. They're going to have key terms that you can go in and kind of search them...If we've got sample photos, that will also eventually be attached to them.

At times, website upgrades have resulted in less access. An interviewee from a community service organization said that some things had gotten lost in the transition to a new site:

The old website, we kind of had basically a de facto archive of every time we'd made a statement on an issue, which again, kind of moved away when we went to the new website. The new website, I would say, is not 100% complete, right? It was just kind of getting the priority areas out, so we need to do some backfill.

Several interviewees shared their visions and plans for their sites as being responsive to the audiences that are important to them.

An interviewee from an arts institute who is interested in collecting documentation from the local arts community said they were working with students at a nearby university to evaluate the usability of their site and ensure that it is user-friendly for artists and other community members who might want to contribute to their archives. In a similar vein, another interviewee who works at a library said:

Everyone wants to make a very nice archival site for researchers that can quickly find what they're looking for. And our whole thing has been that we're trying to make things accessible for someone that doesn't know what they're looking for. Because most people have never heard of the things in our collections.

They are looking at website designs that are more similar to the content in lifestyle magazines than the typical websites associated with libraries and archives. The site will be designed, they said, so “you can kind of go in the archive and look at a collection if you want. But in the front layer, it's storytelling. It's connecting the things that happen in the regular world to the collections.”

Finally, an interviewee from an archives emphasized the importance of getting people to spend time visiting their website, saying, “They're also more likely to donate if they spend more time on your page.”

Social media

All of the interviewees we spoke with are using social media to promote and raise awareness of their stories and collections. Most are active on Instagram and Facebook, but are wary about X (formerly Twitter). Only one mentioned using TikTok.

An interviewee who represents a historical society, said social media was a good way to reach a wider audience, and that they were especially active in areas that support teachers: “Everybody shares, ‘Look at this exhibit’ or ‘Look at this Instagram,’” they said, “Everybody's trying to help teachers with resources.” Another interviewee at an archives with an oral history collection said they used social media to draw attention to videos they created using the collections: “We are making thematic video series that we put out on a blog, as well as our newsletter, and we use social media, just right now Facebook and Instagram.” An interviewee from another archives said, “Social media is a huge one. We've got Tiktok, Instagram...our biggest ones. Facebook, and then we still have Twitter, although we're probably about to shut that down because we get a lot of hate on there.”

For some, these efforts are conducted by volunteers or part-time staff and are relatively minimal and not necessarily coordinated. An interviewee from a membership organization said:

We have a volunteer group that has a Facebook page. And they've been sharing mainly photographs that individuals have had from the past. We have a Facebook page for our organization...I don't think we have a Twitter account that I'm aware of at this point.

The interviewee from the community service organization said their social media efforts were similarly casual:

For a long time, the social media was just a former employee of ours who would work on an hourly basis to post. And our social media is a lot more of, 'Here's an upcoming event,' 'This is the National Day of blah, blah, blah'...It's pretty boring.

Although every organization was engaged with social media in some way, only a few of the respondents saw it as a major way to share stories online. Most efforts tended to be more promotional, designed to drive interest in events or other content.

Aggregation

Most interviewees participate in some form of aggregation, although their definition of aggregation tended to be very broad, including everything from DPLA Hubs to the Internet Archive to a coordinated online marketing campaign. None of them said that participating in an aggregation was a priority. Several had contributed records to an aggregator in the past but were no longer doing so, and one had to ask for their records to be removed. One organization also serves as an aggregator for other collections.

An interviewee from a digital archives described how they came to participate in a DPLA Hub:

It was part of a grant that another organization had in [the state], and they were coming around to different organizations here and offering to help get collections up into the DPLA...And we continue to work with them. We just selected a number of collections that seemed like they would work with the DPLA and that we were completely sure of putting up there.

They went on to describe the process as fairly easy because they have a relatively robust technical staff, but added that contributing to aggregators is not a high priority for them:

...the DPLA is low on our level of priorities on all the stuff that [organization] staff have to do. And so if they came to us again, and were like, "Can you give us another

set?" we'd probably give it to them, but we're not actively trying to get anything up there.

Other interviewees found the process more onerous. An interviewee at a membership organization said that while their relationship with the aggregator was good, and they felt supported by local programs and instruction, metadata creation was a heavy lift:

We just got access to the website and we were told what to do, how to do it. It was tied in with the Library of Congress stuff, all the headings, [to] make sure the stuff is consistent...So pretty heavy, pretty intensive, particularly when you get a 70- or 80-page scrapbook, and/or you get a movie of two hours, and it's nothing but people at convention and all that, and you're trying to identify people.

Another interviewee whose archives had participated in web archiving also found the process a bit overwhelming for their staff:

It sounds really great. There are three of us though. And you know, when Archive-It came to us, and was like, "Hey, we've got this thing, it's going to be amazing." I was like, "Oh, this is the coolest thing ever." So we had just started out. It is so tedious and time consuming. And it's a good system, it works well, like DPLA, people use it, it's great...but it's really difficult to coordinate. We don't have the staff to just put specifically on doing digital stuff. So we have to learn the software, and then we have to partner with other people...We want to work with them. It's just yeah, we have to balance it with administrative burden, really. But in theory, yes. In practice, not right now.

An interviewee at a museum hadn't yet participated in aggregation but was looking into working with a nearby university that was trying to develop a Hub.

That's definitely something that piques our interest because as an aggregate like that, where you then have access to all the other people who are in the system, you're able to collaborate and get your eyes on collections you might not have otherwise seen. So yeah...it's been on our radar, it's just, it's been moving so slowly at [the university]. They're trying to figure it out. They'd be the host site, which is fine, because they have all the resources in the world. And so they want to do a [region-wide or state-wide] Hub...we're just waiting for them to get like, "Okay, so this is gonna happen," and what do we need to do?

They added that some of their items are restricted for use by tribal members only, so they would have to be selective about what they shared, but if the university "does the heavy lifting, yeah, we're all in, because they can and we can't."

Some interviewees weren't sure if they were interested in aggregation. "Maybe if it's definitely tied to our site, but I wouldn't want to turn over anything," one said, meaning that they wouldn't want to give materials over to another organization's care. They were concerned about losing control over the items and with ensuring that proper credit was given to their organization. An interviewee from an archive that contains highly sensitive personal information, was also wary of the privacy of the people represented in their collections:

I'd actually be really interested to know what the options are for us. And again, it would have to be consistent with the assurances that we make to our community members about areas of control and autonomy and agency. I assume our archives director hasn't done more of that [sharing with aggregators] because of that issue, and making sure that we are staying consistent with what we're promising the people who contribute to our archives.

Other interviewees weren't sure about the process or weren't familiar with the term "aggregator." One said, "We're aware of who they are and have used them for research and things like that, but I didn't realize or know...that it's, again, something that I could participate in." Another interviewee had a lot of questions:

I don't know if institutions have paid memberships? Or what does it mean to get into these databases?...I did some preliminary research, but...okay, well, what would it mean? And do we need to hire somebody?

A third said, "It's just not on our radar to even know," about aggregation, adding they had only heard the term by participating in a university-led community archiving project.

One interviewee had a very negative experience with an aggregator where they had to ask the aggregator to remove their materials from the site. They had collaborated with a university who had digitized some of their photographs and shared them with a state-wide aggregator but neglected to credit the community organization. This lack of credit allowed another large organization to take the images and put their own watermark on them, effectively erasing the fact that the community organization was the holder of the original photos:

So we told [the university] to take all the photos down. So this large collection that's one of the more popular, important collections, it's not even accessible right now. People are mad at us. And then we had to tell [the state-wide aggregator]. [The aggregator] thought it was [the university's] collection. Because then we contacted [the aggregator] and said, "Please take that down." And they're like, "Oh, my gosh, sorry, I didn't even know that that was yours."

While this experience was just one example, it raises the question of how many organizations might be subject to the same acts of appropriation without even knowing about it. Another interviewee, who had sent their audiovisual material to be digitized and shared via several aggregators, hadn't had the time to check on how the materials were represented.

The only one of those that I've checked out is the Internet Archive and the [state wide aggregator] website. At some point, I'm gonna have to go and look and see how these other organizations are presenting the material, because right now, I don't know.

While attitudes towards and experiences with aggregation among community organizations are generally positive, it is not a high priority for most, and for those with small staffs and a lack of technical expertise, it may not be worth the effort involved.

Online exhibitions

We began this research with a fairly broad definition of online exhibitions, which we laid out in the introduction to our survey:

Online storytelling and exhibitions present and interpret selections of digital items in a way that provides context and meaning for viewers. Examples include: [More than their Labor](#) and [Black Lives in Alaska](#).

Although we purposely made this definition quite broad, we found that some interviewees included even more forms of sharing under the category of "online exhibitions" than we had anticipated, including blog posts, social media posts, digital documents, etc. Some projects like online timelines and maps are what is more commonly known by scholars as "digital humanities," while other forms, such as annotated 3D captures of physical spaces are more typically associated with the virtual environments favored by some museums. This report considers all of these activities to be "online exhibitions," although we acknowledge that differing definitions of online exhibitions led to some inconsistencies in how interviewees described their activities.

In general, interviewees welcomed the opportunity to control the presentation of their collection items beyond their appearance in a catalog or aggregator, and to provide important context around them. An interviewee at an archives said:

We love online exhibits. I think we've also created some in the past that were specifically geared toward mental health clinicians, for example, who were interested in working with these populations. So they're an excellent tool. And I think if we had the capacity, we would do many, many more...In terms of curating how the public engages with these archives, we would love to do more of that.

However, as noted above, interviewees were not always clear about what constituted an “online exhibition” or how to create one. They often found it easier to create in-person exhibitions and encountered difficulties converting this content to an online context. They also had concerns about the impact of online exhibitions, their maintenance and sustainability, the ethics around online exhibitions, and whether online exhibition interfaces were compelling enough to be worth their while. We asked specifically if they would be interested in creating an online exhibition using items found in an aggregator, either alone or in combination with their own items, and while most interviewees found this appealing, none of them had done it before.

Different definitions of “online exhibition”

Perhaps because of the breadth of our definition, there was some confusion about what an “online exhibition” is. When asked if their organization had created online exhibitions, one interviewee said, “I’m wholly unaware of that world. So I would say, ‘No.’” Another at a museum said they knew what such an exhibition might look like, but hadn’t really thought about making one:

...online exhibits sound great. I mean, it's basic: you show a belonging, and then you write text with it...I mean, we could get creative but we haven't really thought about that, I suppose. It's not something I've thought about.

However, this same interviewee has an active blog at their organization and later said their blog posts could be considered “mini-exhibits,” suggesting that the different language we use for these different kinds of sharing may be a stumbling block to understanding the online communication practices and needs of community organizations. Another interviewee from a digital repository said they had been trying to get an online exhibit program going for years:

I'm continually every year trying to get an online exhibit program up and running for us. And every year, I say I'm gonna do it, and it's gonna be a priority, and every year, I don't. I really just need to get a grant written that will allow us funds to actually work on it. Again, it's just there's so much that we're doing that it's kind of like, where is it on the level of priorities?

And yet, their organization was already engaged in several digital humanities projects (maps, timelines) that could be considered online exhibitions. In a similar vein, an interviewee at an arts collective described how they created printed and online maps of their downtown neighborhood, connected by QR codes, in order to counter a commercial map that was created by a marketing initiative:

I managed the project with the artist and he created the map. I created it into a virtual map...and then we turned it into a zine, a pocket zine, so folks can pick it up from the bookstore or the gallery. And they think it's the other map, so they're waiting to find bars and restaurants. And we're like, "No, this is where the genocide was attempted in Chinatown...This is where a Mexican American man was lynched."...We want you to learn the history before you come and consume here...They open it up and they get this beautiful, colorful map, but it doesn't make sense until you scan the QR code and it takes you to the history.

This interviewee was able to integrate in-person and digital technologies to engage audiences and surface stories that were otherwise suppressed or ignored. And yet, they also felt that they weren't making "online exhibitions:" "I can't create exhibitions, like on Omeka. And I do have partners that have access to that and they're more than happy to help me, but I just haven't got there yet."

None of the interviewees said they had a robust online exhibition program, although all of them were currently sharing or planning to share their content online in a curated and contextualized way. Our strategy of broadening the definition of "online exhibitions" allowed us to hear about the various ways in which community organizations create context for and share their content online, which is more important than whether their efforts met a strict definition of "online exhibition." This finding also lends texture to our [Environmental Scan](#), which was likely limited by searching for "online" or "digital exhibitions" rather than looking at communication practices as a whole.

By contrast, the curators interviewed for this study were very clear about what they considered an "online exhibition," which aligned with a more conventional presentation of webpages with images and accompanying text. This reflects the academic and museum background of the term "online exhibition." Three of the four curators were affiliated with academic or museum institutions that had access to common exhibition tools and platforms, and the two of the four worked with technology partners who used an existing exhibition platform. (For more information see "The Curators" section.)

Conversion from in-person exhibitions

Some interviewees discussed online exhibitions that were created from in-person exhibitions. In general, in-person exhibitions seem to be easier for community organizations to create. Although in-person exhibitions require a physical space, they do not require digitization and hosting, and are typically restricted to a particular time period. Several interviewees spoke of creating portable panels on poster board that could be moved from venue to venue. If they created one, the online version was seen as a way of providing additional information or disseminating the content of the exhibition to a wider audience. An interviewee at an archives that has done multiple in-person exhibitions said

they are looking forward to converting them into online exhibitions as they redesign their website:

It's not going to be beautiful. It's literally just going to be the panels people can scroll through...there's not enough of us to do it and there's not a huge budget for that. But we think it's important. If it's going to be in person, we want to have it just in person for a while, at least a year. And then we'll put it online so that people can read and follow up.

They also see the online version as a way to maximize their investment in the in-person exhibition, saying, "We're literally just reusing these images that we spent so much time and money on trying to get the most that we can out of them."

Another interviewee at a community service organization described a process by which a civil rights history presentation began as a "tedious one-hour PowerPoint that two people would narrate," and then over the years, as they updated the content, was converted into an exhibit on poster board, which was then converted into a PDF: "So now we have an updated version of that that exists in posterboard and in PDF and in a PowerPoint that we prerecorded a couple years ago." This interviewee recognized the importance of putting more content online, but because their organization is so focused on in-person interactions, hadn't developed a consistent strategy for doing so.

Similarly, an interviewee from an archives focused on oral history said they had created an in-person exhibition that used QR codes to send viewers to online content, but weren't sure how to convert the exhibition to be fully online.

We created a physical, 16-paneled exhibit that had the QR codes that connected to oral history segments...and this is something that has sort of launched us into another new space of...maybe learning about some digital collections, or what the digital exhibits might look like.

(Interviewees in "The Curators" section of this report had more to say about the process of converting an in-person exhibition into an online one.)

Impact of online exhibitions

In general, those interviewees who had created online exhibitions found it difficult to assess what impact they had. Feedback was often anecdotal and website analytics could only reveal so much about whether the organization's message was being received. Still, many interviewees also assessed their projects according to the relationships and feelings they expressed and engendered. An interviewee at an archives that created an online exhibition of letters from incarcerated people hoped to attract journalists, but also measured success in terms of how it made the letter writers feel:

I was happy with the outcome. And the impact...is a little bit hard to measure. I mean, I know that I could probably go back and dig up the articles that were written in various news venues around the collection, and what we were learning. [An academic journal] profiled it, at one point, which I thought was cool. So beyond that...if you read the letters, you can kind of get a sense of the impact on the people who are incarcerated. They are very thankful that people were listening and wanting to preserve this moment in history.

An interviewee from a community service organization said that their main way of assessing their projects is anecdotal:

It's all anecdotal like, "Hey, there's a big demand for this"...We get great feedback when we do it...But I don't think we've aggregated any of it anywhere to say, "Here's the impact, or here's the evaluation of it." We're not great at evaluation in general.

An interviewee from a historical society found satisfaction just in having put up an exhibition that they shared as part of a larger online education campaign:

I am happy because the fact that it's out, we put it up, we did it. That's enough. Right?...I look at how many people clicked on it or things like that. It was minimal, nothing to write home about, but...it got some clicks, where we wouldn't have any if we didn't do it.

Another from an archives noted how just getting clicks is not enough. Although their usage statistics spike at the beginning of each semester, indicating that their content is being used in courses, these visitors aren't sticking around as long as they would like:

If you're looking at our Google Analytics, we're used a lot in courses, both history and archiving courses, and even some [regional] studies and other gender studies are starting to use us. So in the beginning of the semester, there's like these huge, huge jumps. And so we were like, "Okay, people are coming here, they're wanting to learn, they're wanting to study," but we looked at the time that they're spending, and it's not as robust...they're clicking around and they're leaving.

Rather than be discouraged, the interviewee found this information valuable, leading them to put more resources into their online presence to make their content more appealing.

Maintenance and sustainability

Interviewees are concerned about the sustainability of online exhibitions in two areas: keeping content up-to-date, and ensuring that the exhibitions continue to be accessible technologically. Most interviewees were committed to keeping their online exhibitions up

and functioning in perpetuity, but they were also wary of the work involved in keeping them updated given the speed with which web technologies become obsolete. One digital repository has even begun to contemplate preserving online exhibitions that are in danger of becoming obsolete as part of their collections.

An interviewee from a community service organization said they welcome feedback from the communities they serve on updates to the content of their online exhibition, but are only able to do so because they have a board member who can make the updates:

We're very lucky that we have a board member who is a graphic designer...the changes we've made are sort of in the realm of crowdsourcing, right? It's people coming to us and saying "Would you consider some of these stories?" So it's not a super proactive body of work right now, but again, seeing that it might be cited places...we want to keep it available for sure.

This interviewee also talked about how they understood the ethical imperative to keep online materials updated when an online exhibition about civil rights history ended up being used in a city's ethnic studies curriculum:

...if this is going to go out into the world, and young people are going to reference it for their knowledge, I'm confident that what we have is accurate, but the difference between what you have being accurate and what you have left out, also speaks to your accuracy. That program was modified by people saying, "You know, our community doesn't say it that way anymore, right?" ...We had people come to us and say, "I think there's a couple more stories you could add here that would round this out better." And of course, we could add an infinite amount of stories, but being thoughtful about that online presence, that really brought that forward to me: that we're telling the stories accurately and that we're telling as many as we can to just fully represent the communities in our county.

On the technological side, interviewees recognized that online exhibitions they or others create are only viable for four or five years, given the rapid pace of technological change. An interviewee at a digital repository described how they are looking into ways to preserve online exhibitions related to or using the content they already steward. These exhibitions, they said:

...they're older, they're like five-ish years old, which I have seen a lot of grants that stipulate, "We will maintain this for five years" ...Sometimes, their software updates, and they have to move on to a different platform, and they just...being a university, can't sustain this older thing, and they're not going to spend the money to update it...So yeah, just taking that onus onto [our archives], which has the capability...especially since a lot of these use [our archives'] content sometimes in their exhibits.

This interviewee also identified that part of the problem has to do with the use of proprietary software: “You can't expect it to be available forever. It's unreasonable to expect that business to maintain that software forever.” While some organizations have partnerships or the capability to use open source software like Omeka, many are using proprietary systems like Wix or Squarespace to create and host their online exhibitions and websites. It is difficult to tell how long these services will be available and whether they will continue to support older webpages, making the preservation of online exhibitions on such platforms precarious in the long-term.

An interviewee at an archives expressed frustration at how quickly these technologies change, which also affects whether people want to engage with exhibitions created with older software and user interfaces. They talked about how changes in the way people interact with the Internet have made the interface of their exhibition less attractive:

I was so proud of it at first, and now I'm like, "Oh, so ugly." I would have made it completely different. I would have made it for the phone, not for the desktop, because the thing is, people don't even use desktops...and I'm here on this giant frickin' screen building it. Shouldn't have done that...I wish that it was a little less static and old feeling. It didn't feel dated when it came out. It's like four years old now, but it felt dated so fast. And that's the one thing I've noticed about doing online things is it just gets so quickly dated, it's almost impossible for us to keep up.

They went on to discuss how their intended audiences include people who aren't very tech-savvy and/or may not have high-speed Internet access, so they are now trying to design content that is “lighter” and “more of a scrolly, Wikipedia-style kind of thing, because you have to do what people want,” they said.

Issues with online exhibition formats

In a similar vein, several interviewees said they had not created online exhibitions because they found the design options for creating them uninspiring. They questioned whether it was worth the effort to create one at all. An interviewee at a membership organization said:

I've looked at some of the exhibition software in the past, and I just didn't feel that they did a good enough job to invest the time and energy to start to do that. Because there is a commitment once you get into that.

An interviewee at a library agreed, saying they also hadn't seen anything they felt was engaging and relevant to the people they serve:

...a lot of the online exhibits, we kind of feel like, “Oh, is that all we have to do?” Because we're almost looking for examples that are dynamic, and it's like a scanned

document with some metadata. And then maybe you can scroll left to right...and then it gives you another scanned document with some metadata, which is...really not that helpful...People are not necessarily going to discover, browse and engage with it. So part of our question's like, "Oh, what [does] an effective, dynamic, engaging online exhibit look like?" Because what we've seen from a lot of universities and other places...it's just kind of a bunch of slides of scanned things with some metadata that's not as relevant to people.

This interviewee added that exhibitions created by/for academics or students (where a lot of online exhibitions come from) presume an audience that is already interested in the content, whereas their organization works with people who may come into the library not knowing what they are looking for. Instead of following the formats and presentations they've seen in academic contexts, they are looking at online magazine formats as a model for sharing their content online in a way that is more familiar and compelling for the audiences they serve.

Online exhibitions with an aggregator

We asked interviewees specifically if they would be interested in creating an online exhibition using items they found in an aggregator with or without items from their own collections. Overwhelmingly, interviewees found this idea intriguing although most of them weren't sure what such an exhibition would look like or how they would find the time and capacity to do it. Some had reservations about copyright issues and ethical concerns about how the other items had been collected.

An archivist at a digital repository thought such a project could bring to light obscure collections with similar material:

...one of the issues is always that there's so much out there, and sometimes in very strange places that you wouldn't know about, especially with universities, you're like, "Why would X university have a [ethnic group] collection?"...It enriches the exhibition, right? To be able to aggregate all of the different repositories' materials. Especially because...we have a lot of content related to x, y, or z. Where else do they have content that could increase the contextual information about it?

Another interviewee from a membership organization thought it would be a great opportunity to recontextualize items found in others' collections and collaborate with them:

...the information or what they have is probably focused in one way, and we would probably want to focus it differently, but we would want to take advantage of either the photos, or the documentation they have, and that sort of thing, to even make our exhibit better, or help them to flesh out what they're trying to do.

An interviewee from an archives said they had never thought about working with material from aggregator before, and was concerned about copyright:

There's nothing we want to do more than collaborate. I think that I never really thought about the possibility of using content from other collections or what that means, because...copyright is still copyright.

Another interviewee from an archives said they would need to make sure there was ethical alignment between their organization and the sources of other items before they would include them in an exhibition:

...a little bit more broadly than that is assessing those collections about their ethical approaches and the building of those collections and making sure that there was alignment there. If that was an easier process, or if we just sort of knew that this group who built this collection did it in such and such a way that I think that'd be easier for us to agree to do that.

This response suggests that a core feature of aggregation—direct access to individual items out of context of their collections and repositories—might not be in alignment with the goals and methods of all community organizations. Although aggregation provides easy access to materials that community organizations might not otherwise find, its impersonal nature doesn't always facilitate the mutual trust and understanding that community organizations look for and value in their collaborations. Even the interviewees who gave unqualified positive responses to this question also mentioned the importance of context, whether that context was one they provided or worked with another organization to develop.

Visions of the future

When we had time, we asked interviewees about what they saw as the future of their online exhibition programs and what their visions were for their ideal exhibitions if money, time, and capacity were not barriers.

One interviewee at a digital repository had a whole online exhibition program in mind:

In my ideal world, we'd have this exhibition space, where we'd have a permanent exhibit based off of the history of the [major historical event], etc. We already have educational pieces on our website that go over the history of the [event], but it would be cool to use our content and create our own actual exhibit, which is more visual based and...more our thing. And then from that, be able to do half yearly or quarterly exhibits highlighting the content that we have in the digital repository, be it oral histories, or historical materials. And just be able to have like a rotating set of

exhibits, but also be able to maintain those old exhibits as existing pages that you can still go back and look at. So that's my ideal world.

Other interviewees envisioned online spaces that would facilitate collaboration. An interviewee at a community service organization envisioned an interactive space where people could make suggestions about the content of their exhibit, which:

...right now, where it exists electronically is just a PDF. So every time we want to update it, you basically have to change the entire document, and it's a number of pages long. I'd love to have an interactive online space where you can add to it, you can take suggestions from folks, you can link people back to the book that [an author] and her colleagues did. There's great opportunity there.

Another interviewee at an arts organization had a similar idea, inspired by Wikipedia Edit-a-thons:

One of the things that I am still contemplating is having like, you know how people do the wiki write-ins? Like having a community write-in so that other people can contribute to it, so they realize we all have a hand in preservation and archiving. You don't need a college degree, you don't need to speak English. And you definitely don't need to pay for it. And so doing more stuff like that is what I want to get into in the future.

Others are interested in moving away from text-based formats to things that are more customized and multimedia. An interviewee at a digital repository said they preferred custom-designed exhibitions to those that were templated, although they realized they are cost-prohibitive:

Sometimes exhibits can be very text heavy. And you can tell that they're all made from the same program. So it's nice when people can kind of have their own web developers who can kind of develop out an exhibit to make it look special, fully knowing that that is very expensive, and not many people actually have that capability.

An interviewee at an archives said they are planning to use Matterport, a 3D capture software to document at-risk sites:

We're going to be digitally preserving through...Matterport, the insides of at-risk queer spaces in the [region]. Over five to ten years, we're hoping to do that. We're gonna have a whole website for it. Hoping to kick that off in the summer.

An interviewee at a library is looking to the corporate world for inspiration on how to redesign their website:

Corporations spend a lot of time and money thinking about how to connect, how to get us to do what they want, much more than I feel like social justice people...And so I think we looked at those kind of designs and lifestyle magazines...And so what can we learn from them?...how are they sharing their content?...We want to meet people where they are. They're on YouTube, they're on Instagram...the people that we care about want to see this stuff. And so for us, it's more of how do we do that effectively?

Another interviewee from an arts institute interested in activating and documenting neighborhood spaces envisioned a multimedia approach:

We're doing a project where it's documenting neighborhood change. So interviews with the residents, photos of the architecture of the neighborhood, testimony of how they want to see their neighborhood in the future, but also really, going back into dance space, like, how do people utilize space when the cameras aren't on versus when the cameras are on? Like, how do people really move through, like if it's vacant land? Or do people walk along the sidewalk? Or they're cutting through? What are some of the ways that we can look and be able to have proper documentation? And then how do we build around the way people are already using the space? So I wish I could have a camera up to just like, a day in the life of a corner of a neighborhood, and you could just see how people interact with one another, and then you'll be able to know properly, this is what we could do here, because people are doing it. How do we, you know, make it stronger?

These organizations have powerful visions of how—with the right support and technology—they could develop inventive, engaging, and beautiful ways to preserve and activate cultural heritage materials and spaces. Rather than funding the next technological innovation, we should be looking for ways to get existing technologies into the hands of people who are invested in documenting marginalized and at-risk communities so they can preserve and share them in the most ethical, respectful, and caring ways.

General barriers to sharing

In addition to talking about the ways in which they currently share their stories and materials, interviewees also identified several barriers that were keeping them from sharing more widely.

These were:

- Funding, time, and staffing
- Loss of potential income
- Restrictions or conditions on sharing
- Censorship and discrimination

- Acknowledging different forms of knowledge creation
- Not finding the right features in available technology
- Collections not inventoried or digitized

Funding, time, and staffing

When asked what would most help them to share more widely online, many interviewees said funding, and the related resources of time and staff. “It’s always gonna be a matter of funding, time, or volunteers for research,” said an interviewee from a historical society. “I have a lot of projects that are just sitting there.”

Some organizations are run largely by part-time staff. “A lot of people here are part time. About half the staff are part time. That includes the marketing and media people. So they aren’t here; they’re doing other things,” said an interviewee from a museum. As a result, engaging with new technologies or media is often not an option for overstretched teams. An interviewee from an archives said:

My team right now, again, we’re struggling to stay caught up on all the new advances even in the GLAM [galleries, libraries, archives, and museums] world, because we’re processing materials, we’re doing talks, we’re going to conferences, we’re creating resources...as a small community-based org with not a lot of funding, we just do not have the luxury of that, to engage at that level, sadly. But I would love for that to change.

An interviewee from the library said, “Practically for us, it’s more so money, one. But then it’s having good designers, like graphic design, visual design.” They talked about how they had wanted to create a digital “packet” of materials about the library for a recent gathering of funders, but didn’t have the technical and design know-how to pull it off.

An interviewee from an LGBTQ+ archives talked about how their previous sources of funding are drying up.

Queer money is going towards the desperate, hands-on needs of keeping people housed and out of prison and like...A funder, LGBT funder told us that training activists on their histories, how to use that as activists and then how to preserve their histories wasn’t direct enough.

They also said that 2023 was the “lowest individual donor year that we’ve ever had, because people just, particularly marginalized folks, do not have the money to support their own community work.”

They also went on to discuss how humanities grants often either require the project to be innovative and “ridiculously high tech” or provide only a small amount of money to do a

single project, like a podcast. They lamented the lack of a middle ground of funding for organizations to build their digital infrastructure:

We need more opportunities for grants that are not as complicated as like an NEH [National Endowment for the Humanities], that you don't have to report on every two seconds and you don't have to have like, tech advisors...We need practical, accessible, manageable funding lines for increasing technological infrastructures.

Loss of potential income

Another barrier organizations find to sharing content more widely online is a potential loss of income. Sharing things freely online may result in lost revenue for them in the form of access and reproduction fees. "We're also pretty shy about giving the store away for free," said a museum interviewee, "We have research fees and we have reproduction fees. So we want people in the door. We want researchers to research, but we also need to be compensated for our time and our intellectual property." They shared a story about how a local alternative weekly had taken a watermarked image from their website and reproduced it without asking permission. "So we're very guarded about our intellectual property and what goes out, because people will take advantage," they said.

Another interviewee at an arts institute wants to set up a payment system on their new website to provide support for artists who share their content online via the archives:

Sometimes you have proprietary information. It could be a choreography of someone's or a music direction...that's one of the reasons why we wanted to create this site, because once things are on the Internet, in terms of Instagram and things like that, they no longer belong to the artist. And so how do you keep ownership of particular things?...So, that's one component that we were even thinking about as well: people being able to get a monetary payment for their submissions...and then they have the ability to take it down when they want to or just being able to think about that because...anyone could use it at that point once it's up there.

A couple of organizations found that the larger institutions they were collaborating with were raising funds around the organizations' collections but were not sharing the wealth.

We had gotten word that they were fundraising off of our collection, because it was the sort of post-George Floyd, BLM uprising moment and our collection had quite a lot around police violence against BIPOC people and communities. And somebody on staff, sort of a lower level archives staff person said, "I just want you all to know that the higher ups are pursuing grant funding pointing to your collection." And we've never seen a penny from that university and so we had to have a pretty frank conversation with them about that, and threatened to abolish the partnership, as a result of that.

Another interviewee said that the problem is not just with universities but with funders, who pay for “community-based” projects at academic institutions to make archives freely accessible, but don’t understand that they’re shortchanging the community organizations they’re trying to help.

So you have funders that have no idea what's going on, because in their mind, they're trying to force [large universities] to be good to the community...But we're applying for that same pot of money, and then we're required to give things away for free. Now, we're not trying to charge on our own site, but what they mean by that is we're supposed to give our stuff to [a state-wide aggregator], or whatever these places are. But it's not the same, because [a large university] is able to leverage value out of our collection more than we're able to do. Because we're still not seen as legitimate.

Because community organizations often struggle to meet funders’ staffing or infrastructure requirements, they aren’t as competitive against larger institutions that already have ample resources. As a result, funding intended to support access to the stories and collections of community organizations keeps going to large institutions, who aren’t always in turn sharing it with those organizations whose collections they digitize and ingest. They then use the presence of these “community” collections in their repositories to raise even more funding. As pointed out by this interviewee, participating in aggregations that make content freely available can end up perpetuating the cycle of extraction, and the community organizations continue to lose out on funding opportunities.

As if this cycle weren’t bad enough, sometimes a community’s collection items that are freely available online become subject to cooptation and enclosure by other interests who make money off it as if it were their own. An interviewee from a library said that works from their collection, which they had shared with a university, were claimed and further monetized by a large institution.

The [large institution] put their stamp on one of our photos. And the digital librarians at [the large university]...we told them this is a photo that was on [the university's] website and they're like, 'Oh, they do that.'...They will put their name on stuff because are you going to pay to challenge it? And so they just do it out of hand. And so one of our most popular photos, I found it online with a [institution] stamp on it...So they're monetizing that by putting their watermark on it and selling it to corporations.

This interviewee also recounted how participating in the university project almost resulted in a loss of direct funding for participation in an online project organized by a national aggregator.

I was talking to [the national aggregator], going, “Okay, we have all this stuff, what do you want?...We also have photos.” And the person I was talking to said, “Oh, yeah, we already have that because [the university] offered that to us.”...let's say we didn't have the other collections but those photos, we would have missed out on \$26,000, which for us at the time was huge.

Sharing items with the university, who made them available for free, ended up working against the community organization's interests because they couldn't benefit financially from providing access to the materials in their own collections.

Stories like these demonstrate the need for funders to create different categories and criteria for funding. “There's not different stipulations for different size and different kinds of organizations,” this interviewee said, “What we feel is really important for the funders to hear is that you need to write some different guidelines for us, because...at least right now, we're not competitive.”

Restrictions or conditions on use

Organizations and communities are also inhibited from sharing their materials and stories online because there may be cultural, legal, or ethical considerations involved. Most interviewees acknowledged that once something is online, it is very difficult to control who has access to it, requiring them to be very circumspect about what they choose to share in the first place.

An interviewee from a digital archives noted that their archives is not appropriate for everyone who might want to contribute.

We provide everything for free online, for anyone to access, and we don't do watermarking on anything. We put up very large files, because our desire is that people are reusing them...And we have had partners in the past who didn't want that. They wanted much more control over the content, and even perhaps, to be able to have fees attached to it and things like that.

An interviewee from an Indigenous-led organization talked about cultural restrictions that are particular to their collections: “We just have to be careful about what we share, because we do have restricted things that are only restricted to tribal members.”

Copyright concerns are also a factor. An interviewee from a historical society said:

You try to cover legal and copyright. It's still nothing like having been able to have the money for that lawyer to clear things. And I think that those are the types of barriers that a smaller organization faces. I rely on public domain and fair use, but it still makes me nervous sometimes.

Another interviewee from an Indigenous archives described how concerns about criminal prosecutions have kept them from sharing certain items:

Those are some of the things we've sat on for a long time, because we have unsolved murder cases from the 70s, involving COINTELPRO and the FBI...We don't want to redact things, but it seems like fundamentally it's going to be safer to probably do that.

The interviewee from an archives that documents state violence, discussed the process they go through to determine whether something can be made available at all.

We have a pretty serious risk assessment protocol that is time consuming, and sometimes tedious. And I don't think we would ever feel comfortable trusting another group to sort of oversee that process as a means of adding it to an aggregator or to their wider collection.

They went on to describe how materials in their collection may include information about violations of the law that weren't charged, a legal appeal that's currently in process, gang affiliation, or information that might lead to retaliation from corrections officers or police. "We have to keep a lot of that work internal because it's the protocols that we develop, and it's the people that we trust to work with the materials and work with the communities," they said, "Now, after that process is done, and there's been a sign off, and everybody feels good, that's a different story."

Censorship and discrimination

An interviewee from an LGBTQ+ archives noted that censorship and the current political climate were barriers to sharing their stories as they previously had, through in-person talks and presentations.

I also did a talk in June at the [state archives], where it was just looking at primary sources to talk about [the state's] LGBT history. And some of our lovely state politicians were revved up by this alt-right news organization that really controls our government, and they came after us. They came after some of our funders, and now they're threatening to defund the [state archives], and they're not going to be allowed to have any LGBT talks there anymore.

Because the organizations we selected for interviews all represent or serve marginalized communities, the content and stories they share are at least doubly vulnerable: they are subject to the general forces of decay and forgetting that all historical records face, but also to the purveyors of hatred and discrimination that seek to suppress and deny the legitimacy and existence of histories that differ from those they seek to promote.

Acknowledging different forms of knowledge creation

One interviewee experienced barriers around how to account for collectively authored content in a way that recognizes processes of Indigenous knowledge creation that differ from dominant, Eurocentric ones. Their archives is rooted in a book that began as an individual, academic project and ended up being collectively authored and more open-ended:

Because of the changing goals and methods and the way I wanted to write and create something collaboratively and collectively, we're doing that now, calling it a digital, interactive book project...there are multiple authors but at the same time it's been about the need to stick our own flag in the methods and the theories that we've been producing...we don't want to share and put out all of the interviews until we...are able to put out some mediated content that we've created based on these relationships.

In this case, the barrier points to the ways in which bodies of knowledge are created that may escape or defy the rigid boundaries that form the basis of bibliographic, archival, and digital forms of description where every item requires certain data points: title, author, repository, etc. Other forms of knowledge creation may have different requirements that don't fit neatly into this structure. While this study did not turn up much detail about these requirements and whether they are helped or hindered by digital forms, this is certainly an area for future study.

Not finding the right features in available technology

In addition to the issues interviewees had with online exhibition software described in the "Online Exhibitions" section, some of them also found other forms of technology to be barriers to online sharing. An interviewee at an archives also struggled with the available technology for transcribing and syncing transcripts and closed captions for oral histories that contain Indigenous languages. They described how a human transcriber would create an accurate transcript of an oral history, but then it was difficult to get that transcript imported and synced with the video in a system where the built-in, AI transcription was wildly inaccurate.

It's so frustrating of how bad, just how colonizing, the transcription software is: just like "foreign song chanting ooga booga." It's always still that bad. And you're just like, how is this possible?

They also found current systems lacking in support for the kinds of collaborative, participatory knowledge-creation they wanted to do. "I know how Mukurtu was developed, and was very interested in ways that we wanted to work with it that had more to do with

creating communities within it, that could be interactive,” they said, “It’s one thing to make something available. It’s another thing to make it truly accessible and interactive.”

Collections not inventoried or digitized

Another barrier to sharing things online is incomplete processing and digitization of physical collections. “Up until early October, we did not have a complete inventory of the collections for 40 years,” said a museum interviewee, “So now we have photos of everything; we know where everything is, where before we didn’t. So that’s been very helpful, and when people want to use something, we can actually find it and know what it looks like.” But they admitted that these photographs were mostly quick reference snapshots and were not of a quality to be shared publicly.

An interviewee from a membership organization participated in a grant-funded digitization and aggregation project, but didn’t realize how much time and effort it would require to prepare the metadata. “I’m really struggling to get that completed...it’s taken much more time than I expected,” they said, “If I had known this beforehand, I would have been working harder on this in the past, but unfortunately, I did not address it. One of those things you learn by doing, sadly.” In this case, the interviewee felt there was a knowledge gap between themselves and the digitization and aggregation team about what was required to make their materials—complex items like scrapbooks—available and comprehensible in an aggregation. They expressed frustration that requirements were not always clearly spelled out: “What do you want from us in terms of format? Content? What are you looking for? Because right now, we don’t know.”

Another interviewee from a library agreed to participate in a digitization and aggregation project at a university, thinking they would get a collection processed as a result, only to find out that the university would only take collections that were already processed and were of a certain size. They eventually stopped participating in the aggregation.

Impact of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic was a motivating force for community organizations to share more online. They moved events online using Zoom, started blogs, and embarked on larger digital projects. “We’re realizing,” said an interviewee from an archives, “it is super important to be more digital than we thought.” Another said they became more focused on their website: “The website would be the space of libraries, especially post COVID.”

An interviewee from a museum said they started a blog as a work-from-home project:

During the pandemic, I had to do something from home because I wasn’t allowed to come in here and work...So I had to figure something out, virtually, I could do that would give me my 20 hours a week. And so I came up with the “From the Archives” series on the blog, which I still continue to this day.

One of the curators interviewed said they noticed an uptick in interest in online exhibitions.

It's changed a lot, obviously, with COVID, because people became much more interested in online exhibitions and things. And before that, it was kind of like an afterthought, or maybe some people are doing that. And now we're like, "Oh, yeah, we should do this."

Although we did not specifically ask about it, for most of the interviewees, the COVID-19 pandemic underscored the importance of sharing their stories and collections online.

Visions of the Future

Several interviewees shared visions for how they would like to share their materials more widely and effectively.

An interviewee from an archive spoke about trying to make their materials more accessible to activists and organizers:

Something that we talked about internally a lot is, how do we get these materials into the hands of activists and organizers who can use them quickly? And so we talk about trying to curate materials that are ready to go for direct action or a campaign. And I think we're still thinking through how to do that.

Another from a library, shared their vision for content that would appeal to and be useful to everyday people:

We're wanting to find the practices that allow people to engage our collections in their everyday life. So whether they're at the laundromat or waiting in line at Trader Joe's or whatever, they're scrolling on their phone. They can scroll on our site.

Interviewees also said that the users they want to reach have needs that differ from those of traditional scholars and researchers, and thus require a different type of presentation.

We don't really have to do much at all for the traditional, or the existing kind of dominant audience for archives. We don't have to promote...scholars will find us and they'll come in. They know what box and folder they want to look at. But for a lot of our communities that are still living these histories, we have to figure out different strategies.

Another interviewee from an LGBTQ+ archives identified 3D digital scanning as a possible avenue for sharing and preserving at-risk three-dimensional objects.

For a while we were going to work with a local university on doing some 3D scanning of some of these elaborate drag dresses and these crystal crowns and really cool stuff that [is] too fragile to be moving around a ton. And there was a person there who was super game. He was super gay. He was like "Yes, let's do it." It's a local medical university and ...they 3D scan hearts and stuff. Well, he left. And the new person I guess, doesn't think that's worth their time.

For most, simply getting their collections digitized and online would enable them to connect with more audiences and save them labor and time. "If we do get the website up, and we get oral interviews up, then...people won't have to come to us," said an interviewee from a membership organization. A library interviewee said, "Figuring out a digital presence has become even more important, as a way for us to leverage increasing access and connecting to more audiences, without necessarily having a much bigger staff or greater capacity to be an organizing entity." It was also clear that interviewees are trying to reach different audiences outside of traditional academic researchers, and that this goal requires more creative forms of communication and outreach.

Sharing Summary

Although community organizations recognize the need to share their content online, they often find in-person methods more effective and easier to execute. Of the various methods of online sharing, they most employ organizational websites and social media, although most organizations were not content with their current web presence and several are in the midst of revamping it to be more appealing and to provide more access to content. Their efforts on social media are sometimes piecemeal and volunteer-run, and are more promotional, rather than content-based in nature.

Most interviewees are or have participated in some form of aggregation, although their definition of an "aggregator" is quite broad and diffuse. While their experiences have been mostly positive, some of them were surprised by the amount of labor required to get items into an aggregator, and it was not a high priority for the organization to do so. Those who had not participated were wary about their materials being co-opted or misused in an aggregator. Others were not familiar with the concept at all and weren't sure where to begin. One interviewee had a very negative experience with an aggregator and asked for their materials to be removed.

Interviewees were also sometimes unclear about the definition of "online exhibitions," but were interested in sharing their content online in a curated and contextualized way. Some of them already do so—employing formats and strategies from "digital humanities"—but don't necessarily call these efforts "exhibitions." Several had engaged in converting in-person exhibitions to online formats as a way to extend the life of the exhibition, reach more people, and to maximize their investments of time and effort in creating the exhibition in the first place. They measure the impact of these efforts in qualitative rather

than quantitative ways, being more interested in feelings and relationships created by the exhibitions than in clicks or traffic statistics. They are, however, concerned about the sustainability of their efforts as they recognize the quickly changing nature of online technologies and the work required to keep content up-to-date. For those who hadn't created online exhibitions, many found the available tools and templates uninspiring and looked to other modes of content presentation. They were generally receptive to the idea of creating an exhibition using items found in an aggregator, but none of them had done this and they had reservations about copyright and whether other organizations' collections were mission-aligned with theirs. Many of them shared visions they had for future exhibitions that would better reflect their collections and appeal to the audiences they want to reach.

In addition to those mentioned above, interviewees experienced a number of challenges or barriers to sharing online. Chief among them are funding, time, and staffing, with many organizations relying on volunteers and part-time staff. They also noted that private donor funding has been drying up, and that the requirements imposed by traditional grants are often too onerous or beyond their reach. Sharing things via an aggregator, for free, might also result in loss of income in the form of access and reproduction fees, as well as make it difficult for them to compete for funding with larger institutions. They are also concerned that their resources may be co-opted by larger organizations that claim them as their own and monetize them.

Interviewees were also concerned about cultural, legal, and ethical restrictions they may have on sharing their collections. The impersonal nature of aggregators—which often surface content out of context of collections and organizations—can work against these organizations' needs to restrict content to certain audiences, or to respect the privacy of and protect subjects who are already marginalized by society. They are also concerned about censorship and discrimination, as the right-ward swing of U.S. society makes it more difficult to discuss and promote histories that differ from patriarchal, white supremacist accounts. Their emphasis on different forms and methods of knowledge creation also sometimes makes it difficult to properly present and contextualize materials in an online setting.

There are also logistical barriers to sharing, such as insufficient transcription technology for Indigenous languages, and the inability of some organizations to fully inventory or digitize their collections.

Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic underscored for many organizations the need to move their content more online, and they shared ambitious and creative visions of their future plans and dreams for doing so and appealing to audiences beyond traditional researchers and scholars.

Partnerships

We asked interviewees to share their experiences partnering with other organizations or individuals. We wanted to learn what the main benefits and challenges are for community organizations to participate in such partnerships, and what they see as best practices and things to avoid. We asked the following three main questions:

1. In the past 5 years, has your organization collaborated or partnered with other organizations or individuals to share your collections? If so, please describe the collaboration(s).
2. What difficulties, if any, did you encounter in these collaborations? What went smoothly?
3. What characteristics, values, resources or criteria do you look for in collaborators or partners? How do you determine whether to collaborate or partner with an organization or person?

Again, interviewees did not always answer all questions, and some of the responses overlap or intertwine with responses in the other sections of this report. As should be obvious by now, the experiences of community organizations with online sharing are myriad and complex, touching on issues of funding, resources, community relationships, ownership, copyright, and respect.

Interviewees talked about many different challenges they experienced in collaborating with larger institutional partners to share their collections online. One interviewee at an arts collective pointed out that there are no guidelines (something this report hopes to help address) that govern these relationships, particularly for more well-resourced institutions who don't know how to work with communities outside their immediate spheres of operation:

...there's no parameters on how to do it, other than ask for the money, and do what you proposed. And I think that's what's missing with a lot of these partnerships is the parameters of 1) how to approach community; 2) how to pay community; 3) how to give community credit, and 4) how to create a system where this organization continues to receive support, so that it's not a parachute scholar experience, right?

This quote may as well be an outline for this section as it outlines the major challenges that community organizations face in collaborating with larger organizations. The section is organized into the following sections, but they are all intertwined:

- Gaps in communication
- Grants
- Bureaucracy

- Lack of reciprocity
- Lack of support from within the partner organization
- Extractive behavior
- Cooptation
- Lack of control
- Critiques of this study and the field of “community archives”

As with the “Sharing” section, recommendations and best practices for partnerships are combined with those of the curators in the “Recommendations” section of this report.

Gaps in communication

Several interviewees identified gaps in communication and understanding between themselves and members of the dominant archives and library worlds. They shared that they sometimes weren’t familiar with the terminology and concepts that archivists and others at larger institutions use, and felt that these professionals often lack understanding of the challenges that community organizations face. This situation has led to breakdowns in communication and, in some cases, the weakening or dissolution of trust and relationships. Archivists from larger, more resourced institutions often take for granted that a community organization will be able to provide certain resources, staffing, or time, and they may impose requirements or standards on the collaboration that are difficult or impossible for the community organization to meet. In other words, the archival profession hasn’t always been good at listening and responding to the experiences and needs of community organizations, which has led to many lopsided collaborations that have privileged the needs and priorities of larger institutions.

Sometimes the misunderstanding is a matter of language and domain expertise. One interviewee at a community service organization compared interactions with archivists to talking with an accountant: “I have the same experience every time I talk to my board member who’s a CPA [certified public accountant], and I’m like, ‘We need a translator. I think we’re talking about the same thing. [But] I don’t know.’”

In other cases, it’s a lack of clear communication channels that leads to difficulties. An interviewee at an archives expressed frustration over a university partner who failed to clearly explain the requirements of a grant-funded project:

...often there's the go-between: there's the project lead at the university, and then the grants person and then us. And sometimes always having to go through the project lead, at certain points, we had to actually just directly talk to the grants person because they were not communicating appropriately or helpfully...and they're asking for things that are just not possible or very onerous...which, if we knew upfront we had to do it, and we were just kind of dealing with it as the grant progressed, it would be much easier than finding out like a week before time, and

then having our limited staff have to scramble and spend hours and hours trying to recreate this information that we could have just gotten done at the beginning.

(Interviewees recounted similar stories in the “Grants” and “Bureaucracy” sections of this report.)

Sometimes the problem is a lack of clear specifications. An interviewee at a membership organization expressed frustration that universities they might like to partner with did not provide clear guidance on their requirements for submitting content to their digital repositories:

We really don't know what their real interests are...It'd be useful, I think, for all of us to know what those are, so that we can have some kind of ideas about what we need to be doing. Technologically, I think there are some things that need to be laid out for us from their side, what their expectations are.

They were also disappointed that an aggregator they were already working with didn't seem interested in helping with their needs:

Let me share with you a little bit of my frustration. The [state-wide digitization and aggregation] project had specific goals and objectives. And when I got the grant, and I identified preservation as an area of interest, I really thought I would get more help in that area. And I was surprised. They didn't connect with where I was, and what I needed. And also, I didn't feel like they wanted to get into that pool or recognize it.

This same interviewee identified similar issues with the professional associations to which they belong:

I belong to [national professional association]. I belong to the [state] archive group. And it's the same thing...the focus is at the university level, and the large private institutions. And they haven't really, to me, addressed [these] lower-level heritage organizations' needs.

Another interviewee from a library had similar experiences. While they wanted to work with best practices and standards, they found there was no support for or openness to adapting those to the particular needs of their organization.

I believe very much in you always start with looking at best practices, or what people have known before. You don't discard that, and then you make it appropriate for you. But it's always been so difficult, that last step in those spaces, for people to be open to “Hey, this is what we do.”

This interviewee noted that even programs designed at larger institutions specifically for community organizations often miss the mark:

I think some of the kind of community archival notions and norms don't really fit a lot of the work that we're doing in the communities that we work with, or just notions about community. In terms of how we decide what to collect, I think it's related to our mission: is this going to be useful to people in understanding what has happened and what the issues are and how to change them?

Overall, interviewees identified several areas where communication gaps occur and affect their enthusiasm or ability to collaborate with larger organizations: the use of specialized language and jargon, a lack of clear channels of communication, an inability to clearly communicate requirements, and, perhaps most egregiously, a lack of interest in or understanding of the actual needs and goals of community archives.

Grants

The importance of philanthropy and government grants in support of community archives initiatives cannot be overstated. Most interviewees spoke about some experience with grant funding, either directly at their own organization or indirectly through a partnership with a funded institution. "At this point, most things are, they have to be grant funded," said an interviewee at a digital repository, "Everybody needs the funding in order to produce the work and the volume at this point is so large that we usually have to find some sort of external funding."

Although grants are a major source of funding for community-based archival projects, they are sometimes a highly problematic one. Smaller programs like mini-grants have been successful and useful for those who are just getting started, or for very specific projects, but when larger amounts are involved, it can put pressure on organizations to conform to the wishes and priorities of the funder, rather than the funder aligning with the organizations' needs. An interviewee from a library described how funders' ideas don't always address the needs of the community they're funding:

Foundations started doing more place-based funding and also kind of having their own campaigns that they funded groups to be a part of....So now, here's all these people that want to get in on that, but it wasn't a community project...they're making decisions, you have to raise money, and where their money is coming from is supporting very specific kinds of work. And that's where it can be challenging.

They went on to say that this kind of top-down approach to funding has consolidated decision-making power in the hands of a few people who advise on these larger projects and shape the discourse about what is possible. We need, they said, to "broaden the scope of funders...because there's IMLS, Mellon, whoever else, and it's a problem."

The limited term of grant-funded projects is also challenging for community organizations partnering with larger institutions. A grant-funded collaboration with a community organization may be just one of many at a university, but for the community organization, it is likely much more critical to their mission. An interviewee from an archives described their partnership with a large university that was digitizing and preserving their collections, and how it became strained when the funding ended.

They were doing us a pretty important service. But that changed over the years as their grant funding to support that initiative...dried up. This is what happens all the time with these grant-funded initiatives at universities. It dried up, they let the staff go, because they were time-bound positions...but our work continued. We weren't beholden to a specific grant...And so over the years, there became a bigger and bigger backlog of our materials that were not being processed there, but our community still wanted and needed access to them. And so, in 2019, we got a grant to build our own digital repository, because we were frustrated that the university couldn't keep up.

Another problem community organizations have experienced with grant funding is a lack of transparency and guidance about the application process and the planning involved. One interviewee from a membership organization said they were approached by a funder to submit a proposal but weren't given adequate guidelines:

I'll be quite frank with you, they came to us. We didn't go to them. And you think about a typical grant process, the organization sits down, does a tremendous amount of work to get the grant to fit the requirements. There were no requirements, except in broad, general cases. And so we pulled together a grant, we wrote it in probably eight weeks, and...we're finding that there's things that we're having to do that'll be within the grant, but they weren't anticipated in the planning process...And now we're scrambling, trying to pull those together.

An interviewee at a digital repository had a similar experience working on a grant administered by a university:

We have had some issues where we went into a grant thinking we had the reporting that we needed...and then the grant ends, and then we're rushing and scrambling to try and provide this documentation that we did not record because we weren't asked to do it. And then there's also an unrealistic expectation from perhaps the grants departments on what small community based archives can actually do in terms of reporting. Our time trackers are just Google sheets that we manually fill out...We don't want to get too granular because they're not billable hours so much as just kind of reporting...It has become an issue over the past few years, as we've worked with more really large universities, especially.

Another issue with grant funding is overly rigid requirements that don't take different circumstances and ways of working together into account. It isn't always easy to shoehorn activities that address specific community needs into the contours of a grant application or report. An interviewee from an archives said, "We're constantly trying to figure out ways in which we're working together and giving titles to it that make sense to funders, because they need certain things."

Interviewees also said funders could be inflexible in the face of quickly changing circumstances. An interviewee from an archives that centers Indigenous knowledge described how funders did not understand the urgency created by the disproportionate effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on Indigenous communities, and how this reflected a lack of understanding of Indigenous worldviews in which the "past" and "present" are not separate but continuous:

It's been one of our greatest challenges in explaining to foundations and funders that we can have our plan as much as we want, but COVID hit Indian Country. And also one of the things...that is hard to explain that's really important is that history is so living and so alive. It is the absolute opposite of our nation-state conception of history as something distant that we are separate from. And that's why [the] archive—even though the word "archive" has that same reflection of something dead and gone—it's the roots and the bones and the thing that we need for the community to build on to move forward. So it's a very strange position to be in...it's a historical emergency, like every other day.

Bureaucracy

Several interviewees cited bureaucratic hurdles at larger, partner institutions as a factor that discourages or damages efforts to collaborate. Chief among these is the difficulty of distributing honoraria or stipends to community members who participate in archival projects. Large institutions like universities often require that individuals be paid directly, and require paperwork and documentation that are sometimes onerous to people who are unfamiliar with their protocols, or may be experiencing other challenging circumstances. An interviewee at a library with strong community programs described a situation where a community member was unable to receive a check for her participation in a university-funded project because her husband was stealing her mail. When the library staff asked if the university could instead give them the check so they could give it directly to her, the university said no, it had to be sent directly to her house. This lack of flexibility in how payments are processed and released creates additional hardships for people who may already be struggling and damages the relationship between the larger partner and the community organization and the communities it serves.¹

¹ Honoraria for this portion of the C-CAP research were funded by UC Irvine but disbursed directly to participants by the researcher. Interviewees did not have to submit paperwork and funds (\$250 each)

A curator who has worked on community-centered exhibitions facilitated by a large university also remarked on how the institution's payment process affected participants:

University processes can sometimes work against community-engaged practices. So, for example, when it comes to distributing honoraria, or community stipends, it always comes up that [community members] don't understand why there's so much paperwork, "Why is there so much bureaucracy?" all of those things. I think that can get in the way of doing really amazing community-engaged archiving, and exhibition-making.

Universities need to recognize the importance of community-based practices and come up with different processes to accommodate them. For their project, they eventually were able to "go about some of the paperwork by distributing money in a different way," but this strategy was a work around. Ultimately, they said, of the university, "They need to create a code in the money-processing system that distributes it differently."

Others had difficulty establishing an organizational structure and status that ensured they could receive payments but also reflected the multifaceted nature of their work.

The greatest bane to my existence is what actual structure and legal structure we need to be. When you come from filmmaking, public policy, community organizing, nonprofit work, and academia, what is it that we need to be as a structure that lets us raise money and function? ...that part is sort of undoing me. That's why anytime there's an institution that can lend its operational support and other things, that's really valuable.

Beyond issues with payment, interviewees also struggled with complicated approval processes. An interviewee at an archives expressed frustration working with government-funded partners:

There's also the bureaucratic chain. We have been trying to get an MOU [memorandum of understanding] signed with some universities in one of the states we're in, and it is just egregious, because the minutiae has to go all the way up through the state, which doesn't make any sense. So getting the first MOU signed has taken two and a half, three years.

Lack of reciprocity

Whether the funding comes from grants or other sources, there are usually resource disparities between relatively well-funded institutions and the community organizations

were paid either through electronic payment (PayPal, Venmo, direct donation on their website) or via check.

they partner with. These disparities are not always sensitively handled or even acknowledged by the well-funded partner, which can damage the relationship or keep it from developing further. In many cases, the well-funded partner asks for things without providing anything in return. An interviewee from an archives said:

There's this desire to have representation of the community without investment in the community, without investment, fiscal investment in the organizations...you're a well-endowed state university, and you're going to ask us to do something for free or for \$500? It's insulting. And we're not doing that.

Larger organizations are also often not transparent about the amount of funding they receive to work with community organizations, and may display paternal attitudes toward them, refusing to give the community organization control over how the money is spent. An interviewee from a library talked about how universities get grant monies to work with community organizations but then don't share any of the funds:

We just give away our things for free and they got all this money. And so that's part of the challenge of what can we do with that? And how are resources shared differently? Because even these grants that are public—you have to look it up—but they'll never tell you, "Hey, we got a grant for \$250,000...unfortunately, we don't have a line item for you."

They went on to describe how in one case, the university provided graduate students to process a collection, but not funding that the community organization could control: "It's really helpful to have that work done for us. But then what else? Because that's not the same as having \$250,000."

Another interviewee at an arts organization also related how a university partner who was providing space for an educational program only wanted to provide support on their terms:

We only had a partnership with the university for two years. And once, they wanted their grad students to come and run [the program] without any commitment...And I said, "No, we can't do that. There's a process to this pedagogy as well as there's a process to how we cultivate a relationship with the community." And that's when they let us go from the space.

In other cases, the larger institution expects the community partner to do all the work and doesn't include them as equal partners in planning and designing the project:

[What] I've seen more times than not, is that one entity is doing most of the work, and they're not being highlighted or compensated fairly enough to have to put in the amount of work that they've put in...And not to say that libraries or universities are bad, but I mean, it is an unlevel playing field, and how can it be a bit more level?

Then I think it's really looking to say, smaller community based archives, to not just do the work of a community based archives, but actually partnering in the thought leadership and the curation and how things are being seen and accessed.

Sometimes, larger organizations assume that a community organization will be happy to participate just to receive any kind of exposure. One interviewee from a historical society participated in a television commercial for a large, genealogical database service that they use in their own research. They saw it as a good opportunity to share their story, although the company did not mention the historical society in the commercial nor pay an appropriate fee for their appearance.

I know what it's about. I've been paying them much money, much, much more than I got reimbursed...They were giving me the opportunity and the platform to shine a bigger light...I would have loved to have been able to be compensated like an actor would have, but I wasn't.

Other times, the price of participation is simply too high, and more well-resourced institutions don't seem to understand the limitations community organizations face. An interviewee from a membership organization said:

One of the other frustrations I have is that at the university level, there's all kinds of collaboration among universities, around sharing storage for one thing, and doing other stuff...I identified one of these groups, contacted them, and we had some discussion, but to even get your foot in the door, it was so blasted expensive. And I thought, "Well, this isn't gonna work,"...There seems to be no focus on how to get a large number of smaller organizations who would share costs. That's what I was looking for. But it was..."We have one level, one level of participation, and here's the entry." And that just doesn't work for us at this particular point.

Experiences like this are a disincentive for community organizations to partner with larger institutions, in particular academic institutions. An interviewee from an arts collective summed it up:

I think that's why so many community institutions don't partner...Because the heavier loss is felt in the community and not the faculty, not the scholar, not the researcher, not the institution itself.

Lack of support from within the partner institution

Once a collaboration has begun, there are often limits or shortfalls in the support provided by the more well-resourced partner. An interviewee at an archives said there is often a misunderstanding between community organizations and larger institutions about how much support is available:

On the community-based archives side, they see these universities and they think they have endless amounts of money and support. And I think it's important for them to understand that sometimes, if you're working with an archives or a library, they are just as hamstrung, sometimes, as a community-based archives, just in different ways.

(For more on some of these limitations, see the “Bureaucracy” section of this report.) Several interviewees identified the fact that staff members at the larger institution who are invested in the partnership don't always have the full support of higher ups. An interviewee from an archives said:

The fundamental challenge, I would say, is always that the folks so far who have been interested in this work are the incredibly poorly funded stepchildren of the institution. So in other words, I mean, I used to work at [large university library] in the oral history office as an academic specialist, and I got to see a lot of the bureaucracy in libraries and so it didn't give me very high hopes...the people who are interested are colleagues, and some are friends, but simply there's no bandwidth, and there's not enough funding or time.

Another interviewee at a different archives said much the same thing:

The archivists and librarians are incredible...they're really great. Our problem is with the higher ups who are constraining some of the workers around the stuff that they want to do and allocating resources down to that level of processing collections and building community collaborations.

An interviewee at an archives described how partners didn't live up to their commitment to staff and run their own physical spaces when they hosted collaborative exhibitions:

We work with a lot of institutions to host exhibits and those have been very, very difficult...We didn't used to do contracts...Now, we are always doing contracts because...they literally wouldn't unlock their space, or they wouldn't have staffing when they said they would, or they wouldn't have their hours correct online...or they wouldn't be willing to put any money at all in something that was going to drive people to their space, not ours.

A lack of support can also emerge as a lack of sensitivity to the needs of marginalized communities. The interviewee above continued:

We're actually working with someone who I will not name...very big institution, extremely well funded, and they wanted to push back our exhibit that's on Black, queer and trans folks...a full year because they needed to “get the community

ready." I was just like, "What do you mean? What does that mean?" And they said that in front of our community partners, in front of the people who are going to be represented in it, and I was like, "You're slapping them in the face."...I know it wasn't intended that way, but it was super disrespectful...And now we don't know if we should tell people to go there...Is this a safe place for us to bring all these people in if there are staff who I thought were better than that?

In some cases, the larger institution backtracks on the partnership by caving to political pressures. An interviewee at an LGBTQ+ archives had an experience where the partner participated in creating an exhibition, but then didn't want their name associated with it, caving to an increasingly hostile political climate.

They said, "Listen, we'll help you. You can have all our stuff. Do not credit us. Don't put our name on it. We can't be involved. We'll send one person to the opening, but nobody can ever know. Don't talk to the press about us."...So now we can't give you materials, because you have told me that you're afraid of your state legislature. You can't even put your name on an exhibit. So we're just in the weirdest place ever.

Extractive behavior

In some cases, larger, more well-resourced partners have taken advantage of their privileged position to extract labor or materials from community organizations or have withheld information, effectively preventing the organization from making informed decisions about the partnership. One interviewee summed this situation up as "not being mutually beneficial collaborations, either wanting to take over and run everything or have us do literally everything with no input."

As noted in the "Grants" section above, details of fundraising efforts and the total amounts of funding received are often not shared with community partners. An interviewee at an archives related how a university who was hosting some of their digital collections did not include them in fundraising efforts around those collections.

We heard that they were fundraising off of our work but not sharing any of those grant funds with us. And then I had made some asks to some people at the university for some financial support—very little. I was talking like 10, 20, 30k a year to support our archival efforts on our end, since they were using our collections for development and for teaching, which is great. That's the point, you know, we want our materials to be used. And I got a pretty cold reception for that.

Another at an arts organization said that a university who had written their organization into a grant tried to spend the funds that had been allocated to them elsewhere.

They wrote us in to buy 70 books from us. And then they said, "Oh, well, we had other expenses, so we're gonna cut our order in half with you." And I was like, "No, you can't. That's not how you wrote it in the grant." And luckily, by then, I already had asked for a copy. So I had it. I'm like, "It says, right here, this is what you were going to do. So I need you to do it." She's like, [the representative from the university] "But we don't need the 70 books." That's not my fault.

At the same time that interviewees are frustrated and indignant over the extractive behavior of their academic partners, they are also aware that this pattern of behavior seems to be built into even the most progressive academic systems; one even expressed sympathy for their academic colleagues:

I also feel like there's a process that PhD tenured professors go through that I'm not aware of that causes a lot of oppression and the same trauma, so sometimes they're just so immersed, they don't even realize they become what they used to criticize.

Cooptation

Another behavior that threatens relationships between community organizations and more well-resourced institutions is cooptation and the failure to give appropriate credit to the community organization or community members. An interviewee at an arts institute described how the upsurge in support for "community archives" isn't necessarily helping small, community-based organizations like theirs:

We are front-facing in the community, and it's our organization that our community trusts. And you see a lot of bigger entities co-opting smaller projects all the time. And again, it's also grants, or funding opportunities that we wouldn't be able to apply for because we're small. And so it's just really kind of like gobbling up the small resources that are even out there for community based archives.

An interviewee at an arts collective described how their organization was included in a university grant application for a project that duplicated a service the collective already offered. They were asked to provide a dollar amount for the use of their space for an event, and went through several rounds of negotiations to arrive at an agreement, and then when the grant funds were received, their university partners went silent and hosted the event at another space. They said, "I think that's the part of institutions, they are first to go to the community, but first to take out the community too, because again, the community only enhances their application and there's no accountability." They also talked about how scholars see themselves as "activists" but don't give credit to communities who have already been doing that work.

What's happening a lot is now with the social justice movement, so many scholars are all of a sudden institutional activists, right? And they take what the community has been doing, and reformat it into the institution, and then all of a sudden, they have these great ideas, like making zines with teenagers, or doing walking tours, or writing about radical moments in history. And all that's fine...but the original thought did not start with the scholar or the institution, right? And I think those are the harder things to create parameters [for] in institutions, because as scholars, historically they've had the privilege of their title to enter spaces and take information. But some information shouldn't be taken without giving credit to the community.

An interviewee at a library found that a university that hosted and shared some of their digital collections wasn't crediting them when those items were used by others.

What we discovered was that [a large university] was leveraging all these relationships on our collection, because they had the [Black newspaper] photo collection on their website...So when we would try to Google something for ourselves...we would get hits from sites around the country that they would have aspects of our collection, but it was attributed to [the large university].

Most interviewees were angered or discouraged by partners' co-optation and failure to credit them, but one expressed some ambivalence, a feeling which may reflect how community organizations feel caught in a bind when it comes to collaborations with larger organizations. They said:

Taking credit is something that we go back and forth with because ultimately we just want it to be saved. We want this material to be saved; we don't care how it happens as people, but then as an organization you do have to protect your brand. And you do have to hold these institutions accountable. And so yeah, I don't quite know how I feel about that. I'm very conflicted about like, "Yeah, get it out there. I don't care," versus like, "Ooh, you're kind of taking advantage of this community-based, lower funded work."

Lack of control

It is a fact of contemporary life that once something is put online, it might be online in some form forever. Digitizing and sharing items that are significant to a marginalized community might be a great way to preserve and disseminate knowledge about that community's culture and history, but it also means that such items could be used for purposes that are beyond the knowledge and control of the community. For all these reasons, the decision to share things online is often a difficult one for community organizations. An interviewee from a digital repository said that it was important to understand:

...the importance of the materials to that community, and the fact that a lot of them just don't want the university to take over that stuff, even if it financially and technically makes sense for it to be housed somewhere else. ...That's a tough decision for many communities to make.

An interviewee at a historical society described how they offer digitization as an option for individuals who may not be ready to donate their physical materials, but that they also collaborate with the donor to ensure the materials are used in a manner they agree with: "So we're like, 'Right now, let's just get a copy. Let's get it digital; give us the access to it, the copyright,' and we'll use it accordingly with them, in collaboration with them." The interviewee also described curating an online exhibition where the photographer whose work they were featuring wouldn't let the original photographs out of her hands.

She wouldn't ship her photographs. She did it. She had to do [the digitization] herself. We talked about that, and I'm like, "Yeah, nope, don't want to be responsible for that either."...I was going to scan it, but it was like, "Yep, she's not going to let go of it." So I was like, "Yeah...totally agree."

These community organizations understand that sharing personal or cultural items may also place people at risk, particularly in communities who have not always had positive interactions with institutions. An interviewee at an archives focused on people impacted by state violence said they were interested in sharing their materials more broadly online as long as they could maintain controls that were consistent with the responsibilities they owe their communities:

...there is interest, but as long as we can maintain control and agency about how the materials are organized and described and how they're used. But of course, we want to get these stories and materials out as widely as possible in classrooms. We want them to be used by activists and organizers in direct actions. Yeah, absolutely. It's just doing that in a way that's consistent with how we work.

Privacy, for example, is a big concern for this population. The interviewee continued:

We're hitting a roadblock on exploring decentralized digital storage options because one issue is, you can't often take down materials once they're in a blockchain or something. So there's the question of, well, there are materials that we don't want to take down like government records of human rights abuses, but there are still regular, ordinary people referenced in those records who ought to have some say in how the records that they're represented in are being used, and whether they're up permanently for the public to access. So these are difficult ethical questions that we're trying to think through.

Another interviewee problematized the notion of “control” itself, saying that it’s more complicated than the current dominant discourse around community archives acknowledges:

When the [large philanthropic foundation] started funding, one of our critiques in terms of their initial community archives proposal questions was a lot of it centered around wanting to make sure that communities had agency and control over the collections in terms of description and those kinds of things. And for us, we felt like it was kind of this liberal question and imagination about authenticity...because so many of our communities are dead, and they did not expect to be dead, and so they can't describe their collections...Or we have people that are incarcerated and can't communicate safely about the history that they have, and history has been used against them in court, literally by people in our neighborhood.

They also noted that it’s not always easy to determine who should be in control within any given community. They said that efforts by community archives initiatives to give control back to the community often don’t take into account the complexity and diversity of the communities they seek to aid.

I don't know what community isn't complicated, right? I don't know what community people live in where they're like, “I will give you full control over my life,” right? No, we don't always agree. All these Black people fighting against gay marriage down the block from us, we're not seeing eye to eye with them.

Another interviewee from a community service organization talked about how part of their work is tolerating dissent and making space for folks with different perspectives:

We created a conference room in our office. We cleared out a bunch of cubicles, and we're offering it to folks to use for free. And we have some people in there that we haven't agreed on everything. I mean, there was a group that used it last week, that five years ago, they led a protest against us. So that's okay...I don't want to be in a place where we can only work with people that we agree on everything. We've got to have some space for dissent.

From the perspective of larger academic and government organizations, “the community” is sometimes talked about in generalized terms and becomes an abstraction that is imagined to speak with a unified voice. These interviewees remind us that all communities are complicated and that no one person or organization can ever fully represent them. (For more on how online exhibition curators have handled this polyvocality, see the “The Curators” section.) Confronting this reality is a challenge that needs to be brought up and discussed rather than assuming that any one person or organization speaks “for the community.”

Critiques of this study and the field of “community archives”

Another challenge is the ways in which community archives are studied and the discourse around them, which can exacerbate the inequalities and challenges mentioned above. One interviewee thought the term “community-based archives” was unnecessarily divisive, calling it “an othering term.” They said, “I don't understand why...we can't just be archives? We don't call [large university] a dominant archive.” This frustration no doubt reflects the fact that the boundaries of the field are set up by “dominant” archives and the archivists who work in them, who perhaps reflexively center themselves. This interviewee was also particularly critical of the ways in which this study and others like it are set up:

...they'll do a focus group, a survey, they'll get community voices, and you get like a Subway sandwich gift card or a \$25 gift card. There's no prep, and then we use those as expert voices to legitimate the project that was already going to happen, as opposed to okay...give me \$20,000 and a year to study and then you and I are gonna sit down and have this conversation after I reflected on this for a year. That's a different situation and then I've been resourced to do that [rather] than just show up and talk off the top of my head and I get a \$25 gift certificate...And so my biggest concern and point that I just want to make is that these are very extractive things that are not helpful. They're not helpful to our users, they're not helpful to us...the guidelines should be rewritten because the relationships...are not helpful.

These criticisms reflect not only unequal resources, but important questions about how knowledge is generated and who generates it. They raise questions about what we consider “legitimate” modes of study and information-gathering, and expose the extractive nature of research that adheres to traditional academic models. Despite these strong criticisms, the interviewee said they would keep participating in the ongoing discourse around community archives in hopes that things would change.

We'll keep participating...it's in our interest and the people we care about's interests that these things can change and be better. And so whatever ways that we can continue to be a resource, we will be, like this, where as long as we can share our opinion, and we don't mean any harm.

In the interest of full disclosure, the structuring of this study, which involves two surveys, a data analysis, and fifteen interviews of about an hour in length each, is based on traditional modes of academic research, although the principal researcher is not an academic. It is also part of a grant-funded project and as such is subject to the standardized and legitimating methodologies and products that are expected in a grant-funded study. What would it look like to co-create and co-author research about community archives with the archivists, historians, technologists, and organizational leaders who are already doing such

work in their own communities? This is fertile ground for a future study or practice to explore.

Partnerships Summary

Interviewees expressed frustration with a lack of guidance governing partnerships between their organizations and larger, more well-funded institutions. They identified significant gaps in communication and domain expertise that interfered with their ability to collaborate: the use of specialized language and jargon, a lack of clear channels of communication, an inability to clearly communicate requirements, and, perhaps most egregiously, a lack of interest in or understanding of the actual needs and goals of community archives.

Partnerships involving grant funding and reporting were also often difficult. Interviewees found that funders sometimes weren't interested in addressing their actual needs, and that grants required the community organization to conform to the wishes of the funders. The limited-term of grant funded projects was also frustrating, as promising projects would grind to a halt once the grant period ended. They also experienced a lack of transparency around application guidelines and planning, as well as reporting requirements. And they found that funders were often inflexible in the face of emergency situations where funds may need to be redirected to more pressing needs.

Hand-in-hand with grants were interviewees' concerns about the bureaucracy at larger institutions. Most prominent were difficulties around disbursing honoraria or stipends to community members, where there was either a lot of paperwork or a lack of flexibility in how funds could be distributed. Some had difficulty figuring out what their own organizational status needed to be in order to receive funding or enter into partnerships. And those who worked with government-funded institutions noted the extremely long chains of approval that needed to be navigated and often took multiple years to resolve.

A lack of reciprocity in partner relationships was also a major concern. Larger institutions were not always sensitive to disparities in funding and staffing and would ask for work to be done for free or at a very low cost. They were also sometimes not transparent about how much money they had for a given project and did not share funds that the community organization could control. They might only provide support if certain demands are met, or not include community partners in the planning and design of projects.

Similarly, community organizations have experienced shortfalls from larger institutions when support is not uniform throughout the institution. While lower level staff at the institution might be on board with the collaboration, sometimes support from higher ups is absent. This lack of support results in greater bureaucratic hurdles and is sometimes driven by political pressures.

Another concern is extractive behavior on the part of larger institutions. This behavior involves extraction of labor, materials, or information from community organizations and can take the form of not sharing information or funds or changing the terms of an agreement without consultation. Cooptation of collection materials or work products and failure to give credit to community organizations or members is another issue. Scholars may claim community-driven initiatives as their own, or create parallel programs that receive attention at the expense of community ones. Larger institutions may digitize and share community collections but fail to give proper credit to those organizations. While interviewees were rightfully indignant at such behavior, they were sometimes torn between wanting to hold institutions accountable and wanting their materials to be widely shared.

While interviewees recognized that sharing things online means they can't always control where and how they are used, they also asserted the importance of having some measure of control over how their materials are disseminated. They described how important it is to assure community members, who may be vulnerable to persecution and discrimination, that the stories and items they share will be used responsibly and respectfully. That said, they also problematized the notion of "control" itself, saying that it's often hard to determine who should have the right to decide what is and is not available.

Finally, one interviewee expressed criticisms of the methods employed in this study, faulting it for studying community organizations from the outside, and through an academic, extractive lens, rather than providing the means and time for community organizations to come up with their own analyses of what they need. These criticisms reflect not only unequal resources, but important questions about how knowledge is generated and who generates it. They raise questions about what we consider "legitimate" modes of study and information-gathering, and expose the extractive nature of research that adheres to traditional academic models.

The curators

We interviewed 4 curators who have all worked in various capacities to curate online exhibitions in collaboration with community organizations or community members. We decided to interview curators in addition to representatives of community organizations in order to also reflect the perspective of someone outside of an organization who may be a staff member at a larger institution, or who may be an independent party. We expected the curators would have strategies for working with community organizations and would be able to assess which strategies and approaches were effective from the other side of the relationship. While the voices of the community organizations are primary in this report, the curators also had valuable insights to contribute which may be especially relatable to those working in larger institutions who want to partner with community organizations. Their responses about online exhibitions are also more in depth because we spent most of the interview time talking about a single exhibition they had worked on.

The curators work in the following professional contexts:

- Academic archives
- Independent curator
- Museum
- University (not in an archives)

They are located in the following states:

- Alaska
- California
- Virginia

They worked on exhibitions representing one or more of the following communities:

- African Americans
- Asian Americans
- Indigenous people
- LGBTQ+ people

This section is organized into the following subsections:

- Benefits of online exhibitions
- Aggregation
- Conversion from in-person exhibitions
- Challenges

As with the previous sections “Sharing” and “Partnerships,” the recommendations and best practices that emerged from these interviews are shared in the “Recommendations” section of this report.

Benefits of online exhibitions

Curators identified many benefits for community organizations in organizing online exhibitions. Primary among these was providing exposure for the organization and concrete evidence of its value and importance. They also saw online exhibitions as a way to extend the life of research that went into curating a physical exhibition that was only up for a limited time, or as a way to expand physical exhibitions with additional content and context. They saw online exhibitions as projects that facilitate and open up collaboration to many more partners and participants than exhibitions that are limited in place and time. Finally, they described the ways in which exhibitions can give back to the community represented by making them feel recognized and providing occasions for new relationships.

Curators talked about how online exhibitions provide exposure and allow potential funders or other supporters to better understand the values and mission of a community organization. The independent curator said:

Their biggest benefits are exposure, I think, promotion, exposure. And in my opinion, not just stopping with exposure and promotion, but utilizing that exposure and promotion towards another goal, towards a larger goal. So towards more discoverability, towards more access, towards greater funding, towards building projects, towards capital campaign projects.

The curator who works at a university said the benefits also include highlighting the research value of collections from marginalized populations:

When we were thinking about the digital exhibitions that we have on the page now, we saw them as opportunities for people who are interested in the archive to have further engagement. And what's really exciting, too, is...to continue to show and prove that these objects hold immense research potential.

A curator at a museum drew attention to how online exhibitions extend the reach of an in-person exhibition, which is especially important when the exhibition involves a lot of new research.

We wanted to make sure that that was visible and lived beyond being on the walls, so others could go to it, learn from it, see it. Then also, I really am a strong advocate for just sustainability in our work, and there was so much research that went into this. And when you spend months researching, and then it goes up on the wall, and then it comes down and it disappears, that is not sustainable in a number of ways. So I was really excited when the opportunity came up that I could advocate for this one to go online.

Online exhibitions also allow curators to continue to add materials that didn't fit into the physical space or were created after the opening. A curator at an academic archives said:

In the digital exhibitions you can continue to add material much more easily than obviously in a physical space where it has a limited timeframe, and then it's done...We also were able to conduct an interview with [an important individual] who we'd been barely introduced to at the time of the [in-person] exhibition, and didn't have the bandwidth nor the kind of relationship to do something like that. And that's another component that's going to be added to the online version. We really feel like, not that we're continually adding things, but trying to make that exhibition as expansive as possible.

A curator who works at a university said that the online version gave them the ability to provide additional context for an in-person exhibition that gave it meaning beyond the community it was originally created for:

It was kind of a display of all of the objects without differentiation or categorization...And so the [online] exhibition kind of takes that a step further by adding label writing, getting tombstone information, getting oral history interviews, to inform why those objects were important. Because in the initial display, it was like, just a book. And it's like, "Okay, well, why is that book so important to this community? Or why is that photo important?" So adding those personal stories and making them highly visible, I think is what amplifies it from what the physical exhibition was doing at the public library.

This process also created opportunities for collaboration with community members. The same curator described how they "co-wrote" the object descriptions with community members and then used those to determine the overall shape of the exhibition:

All of the item entries included a description of the object that was sourced from the community, whether that was through conversation, through sitting in their living rooms, and going through the objects physically, getting that documentation. And then after we wrote the description, we sent that to the community to review as well. And then after they approved of that, then it transformed into the exhibition. And so I would kind of read the description that we co-wrote together, think about what were the common themes across the different items that we had collected, and then categorize them in that way.

Similarly, the curator at an academic archives thought online exhibitions are a little more democratic than in-person ones, and actually facilitated collaboration, in their case with a digital archives in another part of the country.

That's one of the affordances of a digital exhibition is that you can collaborate in those kinds of ways, and bring a lot of people in, especially and in this sense, we are mostly all geographically close, although [the digital archives partner is] in [a city in another state]. But it does allow that kind of collaboration to happen...physical exhibitions sometimes can be a little more top down, there's the curator, and they're deciding...but for the community base, you really can represent that community in ways that feel meaningful.

Curators often did not have specific metrics or goals by which to measure the success of their exhibitions, although they all were less concerned with page visits and clicks than they were with qualitative outcomes that were more difficult to measure. For the curator from a university, it was simply validating the experiences of the community they worked with. They described the reaction of a community leader who had curated the in-person exhibition on which the online exhibition was based:

I think he was surprised by the kind of scholarly rigor that could happen from just these objects that he saw as just a community exhibition in a public library...I think that's been the message that we've received from not just this exhibition, but from other aspects of the [community digital archives] research initiative is, "Wow, I didn't realize that my family history was that important, that it could constitute a digital exhibition, or that it could constitute an entire archive."...another thing that I have heard from the community about that specific exhibition was just joy that their family's history was finally being recognized.

The curator at the academic archives shared how documentation of events they shared inspired a younger generation to revive those events.

It's really hard to find these videos and representation, documentation, period. So of course, [my co-curator] and I were like, "This is amazing."...the younger members of [the community organization] have reinvigorated [the event], and then now have new versions of it, which is pretty incredible, which I think in part is because we unearthed this earlier rendition, and people saw it, and then said, "We want to bring this back," which yeah, is pretty much the best praise you can ever get for doing any kind of cultural work or exhibition.

They also said that the exhibition had resulted in a more conventional measure of success: more visits to their archives to see the materials that are held there.

Although they were creating online exhibitions, these curators were not concerned with traditional web metrics but focused more on the relational and community-based outcomes of their work. This orientation reflects a move away from quantifiable outcomes that prioritize exposure and circulation to more interpersonal and relational ones that prioritize connection and community.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the curators of online exhibitions found there were multiple benefits for community organizations in creating them. The clarity of these responses is in marked contrast to some of the uncertainty expressed by some interviewees from community organizations. This contrast suggests that creating online exhibitions as they are traditionally defined by academic institutions and museums—for example, those created in Omeka—may be more feasible for community organizations in partnership with a curator affiliated with a larger institution who is able to navigate and lead the process.

Aggregation

As with the community organization interviewees, we asked the curators if they had created an online exhibition using items they found in an aggregation website. None of the curators had done so, although they had certainly used aggregators to do research. In one case, the curator was involved in building a digital archives from which exhibition items were selected. In another, the curator partnered with an existing digital archives that ingested the exhibition items into their archives. In some ways this was a reversal of the process we were initially curious about: the exhibition served as the catalyst for items to be digitized and shared online in a digital archives rather than the other way around. The curator described the process:

I think it started as a necessity because [the digital archives] didn't know how to make an online exhibition without having the objects as part of their digital archive, because that's how they've done it in the past. And then that was like, "Oh, that's so much the better if they become part of their archive, because they should." So it's a necessity first, and then it made a lot of sense, and then it opened up other possibilities and linkages in the way that the digital realm can work best, which is you can carry all these tags, you can come up with related content, stuff like that.

Conversion from in-person exhibitions

Three of the curators created online exhibitions that were created from in-person ones. Although these curators were relatively well-versed in the conventions and practices of exhibitions—whether in-person or online—they also struggled with many of the same issues that community organizations encountered.

Digitization represented a large part of the work that went into the online version. Like the community organization interviewees, the curators often found it easier to create in-person exhibitions. The curator at the academic archives described the work that went into converting their in-person exhibition to online:

We had a few digital versions of some of the [magazine] covers, but yeah, pretty much it was a lot of digitization, which was partially why it took so long after the

physical exhibition to do this, because you're like, "We can't do the physical exhibition and the online at the same time because there's so much labor and then once the stuff goes on [view], we have to wait until the exhibition closes so we can then digitize the materials."

The museum curator said they try to limit themselves to things that are already digitized because of the labor involved:

If we are doing an online exhibition, we want to do things that are already digitized, just so it's less strain on our archivists. Although, if we did need to do something, they'd be happy to do it, but we just want to try to conserve work time.

The curator at the academic archives also said that the conversion of their exhibition was facilitated by a partnership with a mission-aligned, community-based digital archives that was able to adapt the exhibition to technology already in use:

They're a digital archive, and they used their internal platforms and kind of tweaked and re-coded their exhibition template for what we wanted to do. So in that sense, that made the barrier for us to do an online exhibition easier, although it did take some back and forth of how to make things look good...We went with some of what [the digital archives] already had in house because we didn't have the capacity nor the funds to kind of completely design from the ground up something that would have been maybe slightly more consonant with the [in-person] exhibition. And that was fine.

Another issue curators confronted was the difference between showing something in a physical space, where access is limited to those who can physically visit, and putting something online where it is available to many more people. They included some home videos in the physical exhibition but left them out of the online one at the request of the video's subjects:

Especially in terms of queerness, people may not be out to their whole family...So we had some amazing home videos of [events] that are like drag nights, that some of the [organization] members had done in probably the early 2000s, which are really special. But the people didn't feel comfortable having them be online in perpetuity, which is also understandable...I think it's interesting to bring up where certain content can't exist in perpetuity in certain platforms.

Curators working with community organizations to create online exhibitions based on physical ones emphasized that it is rarely an easy conversion. They discussed the amount of labor, mainly in the form of digitization, that goes into such endeavors, as well as the need to partner with aligned organizations that have already developed online exhibition tools or platforms. Finally, they stressed the care that needs to be taken due to the much

wider and indiscriminate distribution that online exhibitions afford; not all items that appear in an in-person exhibition may be suitable for dissemination online.

Challenges

Comparison to in-person

Echoing the sentiments of some of the community organizations, the independent curator said they have yet to encounter an online exhibition that has moved them in the same way an in-person exhibition can:

...we work with several exhibit partners, but I haven't yet found the partner who gives me anywhere near the same experience digitally as I can get in person. Meaning, I have not yet seen a letter in a digital exhibit on my computer right here in my office, that moved me in the same way as seeing that exhibit in a vitrine in person. But I don't think that's community exhibits. I think that's this world of digital exhibits.

Partnerships

For the most part, curators found the process of partnering with community organizations to be relatively smooth, although there were a few moments of tension or disagreement. The curator at a university described a situation where their goals for a mural project clashed with those of the community organization they were working with:

There was some head butting there, because on the university researcher side, we were wanting to have critical conversations, versus the community member side, they just wanted this mural up to see this community member honored...the research interests of scholars I think, can really differ from what the community envisions...So for us, it's been about just constant conversation about why certain things matter to us, and why certain things matter to them, and trying to find a way to satisfy both. But ultimately, I think for us, as scholars, we also have to recognize that our research interests should take a backburner to the needs of the community. And I think we've just kind of accepted that and said, "That's not the point of this project and this relationship," that we can be okay with sidestepping a little bit so that the community can shine in the ways that they need to.

The independent curator found themselves having to navigate competing needs of their education partners and their community advisors:

[The education partners] needed or had certain expectations from the content, and how the content was shaped, how the wall labels were shaped. And they needed it to be at a certain reading level; they needed it to have certain vocab words. They

needed it to look a certain way so that they could use it. Additionally, you had community members who were like, "You just ripped the whole soul out of that by scrapping five paragraphs," and it's like, well, we can't have five paragraphs in every single wall label.

Curators have also found themselves in positions similar to those of community organizations when they collaborate with larger, more well-resourced partners. The curator at a museum partnered with a larger, corporate entity that promised greater exposure for their exhibition, but wasn't willing or flexible enough to accommodate the curator's needs.

It is a challenging relationship. Just because I feel like a lot of the content that they're looking for isn't easily adapted from these exhibitions that are so rich in information and research. And they really just want these super cool, pop-y images with a little bit of text. And well, that's great, and that works for some institutions and some exhibitions...it's just really hard to convert to fit their standards. And I had to push back on one of these projects this last time. And I don't think they were very happy with me because it's like, "I can't do this. We don't have the ability to do this," and it was coming down to the deadline.

Curators serve an in-between role between larger institutions and community organizations and often find themselves torn between competing needs and agendas. This position, in some cases, makes them uniquely positioned to develop strategies for facilitating collaboration in ways that both larger institutions and community organizations can agree on.

Copyright

For curators, who are often affiliated with the organization presenting the online exhibition, concerns about copyright were more prominent than for the community organizations. The independent curator said it was a big limiting factor in selecting objects for an exhibition:

We might start with a whole spreadsheet full of letters, diary excerpts, photographs, oral histories...And then one of the first swipes that we do is "Well, is it relevant? Does it make sense? Is it part of the holistic storytelling?"...But the second weeding would be things that we searched for. The first round is "Can we get the rights for this?" Yes, No...No, but are we willing to fight for it? Or Yes, but it requires an extreme amount of work, or an extreme amount of money...in our case, the community repository doesn't have oodles and oodles and an ample amount of money, or ample amount of time to go chasing down really extraneous rights, and they don't have \$20,000 to use this one photograph. It's just gonna get cut.

The curator from a museum had a similar experience when converting an in-person exhibition to an online one:

...there were a few images that I mentioned that we had loaned from other institutions, and when those loan agreements were written, it did not have anything in there about doing the online exhibition. And when we reached back out, they were open to it, but it would be more expensive than what we could afford to do. So some of those did get cut.

The curator at an academic archives said rights weren't a big issue for the exhibition they curated with a community organization, but it had come up in others they had worked on: "Sometimes copyright holders think because it's online forever they can charge an exorbitant fee for that kind of thing."

Copyright, and the costs associated with securing the rights to reproduce something, can be a prohibitive expense for community organizations on a tight budget and may steer them away from doing online exhibitions, because they come with the possibility of items being digitally available in perpetuity.

Funding, time, and staff

Like their colleagues who work in community organizations, curators also identified funding, time, and staff as barriers to creating online exhibitions, or to creating the exhibitions they envision. However, unlike their community organization peers, these shortfalls did not keep them from making exhibitions; they only curtailed their ability to make them as fully featured and complete as they might have liked.

The curator at an academic archives pointed out that online exhibitions often take more time and different expertise than in-person ones:

...the digital components often take longer than the physical ones. That's like, you know how to hang a painting, maybe it'll take a little bit of time, but pretty much you know you can get it done. You need to get a video playing on loop on this iPad with the volume correct, and that might take three times as long. Or you need to get the video playing online in a way that you like. I mean, I think there's more capacity in online...but sometimes the analog, you kind of know what you're in for in a way that the digital can be kind of like a wild west.

They also mentioned that hosting high-resolution image files is often difficult for community organizations to deal with and afford. "There's a lot of tiny components for even putting together a quote unquote simple exhibition. It's never so simple," they said. They also talked about how their plans to add more content to the online version of the exhibition fell prey to a lack of time and resources:

In some versions in our head, we were going to expand what was offered online more than in the physical space. And that just became kind of impossible in terms of our own time commitments and constraints...at one time, that felt really exciting, like a possibility. And then it just became like, we're gonna more one-to-one transfer what we did in person to online, and that's going to be enough for this one.

The curator at a university created their exhibition during a training residency that limited the amount of time they had to spend on it and constrained what they could achieve:

I wish I had more time with it, because it was such a finite project. It was really for the purposes of this research training that I was receiving that summer...I really wanted it to be more expansive, more engaging, more exciting.

The curator at the academic archives also noted that there is often a lack of “how-to” resources and inspiring examples for online exhibitions. They agreed with some of the interviewees from community organizations that this lack of resources might make it seem like online exhibitions are not worth the effort:

...not having the resources, like, "Who do I go to to ask for this?...Where do I go to try to get an answer, to get some help in a way that it's functional for me, it doesn't maybe cost anything, and can let me do what I want to do?"...And good examples can be hard to find. I think there's a lot of not great online exhibitions out there for all sorts of reasons. And so maybe you see some of those, and you're like, "Oh, this is not really what I want." Or like, "Why would I want to do this?"

Even curators working for universities and other well-resourced institutions have limitations on the time, staffing, and resources they can devote to online exhibitions, and they also recognize that creating one may be a heavy lift for community organizations due to a lack of easy-to-find, applicable support.

Lack of digital archives for research

Like their community peers, curators are interested in the potential of online aggregations, primarily as a research tool. But while some community organizations are ambivalent about participating in aggregation, the curators lamented the absence of community organizations from these aggregations, or simply the fact that their collections were not online.

The curator from the university was saddened that a mission-aligned organization whose collections they were interested in didn't have the capacity to put more things online:

...they just don't have the capacity to do the digitization that we can do. And so if we could work with them more, if we could have access to all of the materials that they

have digitally, it would make it that much more exciting to build content, if we had access to other archives in that way. But I think that there's so many treasure troves and all these archives across [the state], in the US that are not publicly available, in the ways that ours is. And that makes me sad, because it makes me think, "Well, what are those family histories that can't be studied and researched in the same ways that we've been able to?"

The curator at the academic archives described how, even if it is online, sometimes content related to marginalized communities isn't sufficiently described and is therefore hard to find:

...any kind of minority, etc. It's just like, yeah, it may exist, but not at the top cataloging level. And so then what? How do you go about finding it? And that requires a lot of time, but it's like, "Oh my gosh, there's great content on POC [people of color] within this magazine that wasn't specifically about POC..."

While they have a slightly different relationship to online archives than the community organizations, these curators have experienced first-hand the dearth of online materials related to particular communities, and how it has hampered their research.

Digital divide

Only one curator mentioned the digital divide as a challenge for creating online exhibitions, but their comments reinforce and elaborate on comments made by some of the interviewees from community organizations:

You can often be looking to communicate with communities or individuals who live at or below the digital divide, and/or teachers for whom all of their students in their classroom may not have adequate, high speed Wi Fi at home...I think that there are a lot of families, even post pandemic, who are still working through challenges with technology and laptops and access to Internet, especially...disenfranchised urban Black communities don't always have the best internet access. And two, disenfranchised rural communities don't always have the best internet access. So if you receive a grant to build this gorgeous \$500,000 exhibit that 25% of students that you plan to reach can't reach, you've missed something.

Changing digital technologies

Like their peers in community organizations, curators are also concerned about the rapid pace of change in digital technologies. The independent curator pointed out the many things that can go wrong that under resourced organizations may not have the ability to address:

Another challenge would be the slipperiness of online exhibition platforms...if you are a community based collection, and you've just invested substantial amounts of time, energy, effort, resources and money into a digital exhibit that is obsolete in 18 months, that's a potential problem. And/or do you have the staff or IT support to sustain it? If there's a problem, can you get it fixed? Are you part of a larger institution that can lend you IT staff to fix it if you get a bug or if it gets hacked?...You really have to have a sustainable infrastructure in place to manage it.

The museum curator brought up another scenario, which is when an organization's marketing or outreach department controls their web presence and may not see the value of keeping digital exhibitions online:

While the curatorial department really advocates and hopes that this will live up on the website for a very, very long time, our marketing department doesn't necessarily share the same views...and I think it will be just a larger discussion in the future as to what stays up, and what goes. Just last year, we used to have a list of all the archival exhibitions that we'd done...which was really, I think, a valuable tool...but they took all of those down. So now we don't have any of that.

Resources on Ethics

Although we found a few resources on ethical digital exhibition-making in the [Environmental Scan](#), we also asked the curators about resources they used or referred to, and again, there was no consensus. Some of them relied on the policies set forth by their institutions. A curator at a museum shared that they follow their institution's guidelines for in-person exhibitions and social media posts:

We're really, I think, pulling from our own institutional ethics in terms of how we display things in an exhibition...the rules that our collections department has in terms of sharing content online, and our social media posts...So it's really become a combination...it's not something that we have at the museum, is an ethics of online exhibition guide. And it's not something that we've found a resource that we've used. So it's really just kind of coming from our own practice and converting that to this digital space.

A curator at an academic archives said they've learned about ethics primarily through word of mouth, but also from the permissions policies of the large content suppliers that they work with:

Mostly through word of mouth, talking to other people, other archives. I mean, because we also have a digital repository and are often working with big, like Adam Matthews and...EBSCO, ProQuest, all those places...what we learn from relationships with those kinds of places then informs how we do other online ethics. For us, it's

more similar in terms of permissions and things like that, and so whatever our standard is for the archival practice just bleeds into the exhibition.

A curator at a university mentioned a book (that we did not find in our Environmental Scan) that provided them with a framework for ethical exhibition-making:

[*Decolonizing Museums*](#) [by Amy Lonetree] is, I think, the foremost work on working with community and thinking critically about the role of museums as it pertains to histories of colonialism. And I think she provides really concrete examples of what community engagement should look like in a museum space. I've always turned to her as a guiding light for ethics and practices.

The independent curator said they learned about ethics through attending conferences, but that their understanding of ethical behavior also derived from their own lived experience, both as a museum worker and a woman of color:

...you just trust your gut. As a woman of color in America and you see the world around you and you see things that just aren't right, or how someone approached something or how this politician took something or how this institution used a collection in this way, and you're just like, "Let's not,"...I also just try not to step out of my lane, if that makes sense. I specialize in [a period of history of a racial group]...and I know what makes sense in this space, and just lean to other people who are way smarter in other places.

In some cases, exhibition technologies may be too new to have an established set of ethics around them. A museum curator who is working on a 3D scanning project said that although it is an area with a high risk for unethical behavior, there are really no guides on the use of 3D scans:

There are very few if any—closer to like zero publications or guides—on ethics of 3D. So that just doesn't really exist. There are some people talking about it, but there's not like this guide that you can go [to] to reference.

While it seems like a given that technological innovation may always outpace the development of ethical frameworks for its use, this study calls into question why we accept that situation. If nothing else, the rise of discourse around the need for more ethical approaches to collecting, digitizing, and sharing histories and artifacts online highlights the importance of building ethical frameworks and guardrails into the ways in which we record and retell these stories *from the beginning*, rather than having to retroactively patch and buttress them after the damage has been done. Although it is beyond the scope of this study, a call for the grounding of technological development in an ethical framework—as can be seen in the current discourse around AI—is a necessity we cannot afford to ignore.

Curators Summary

This part of the report is more focused specifically on online exhibition-making by curators in collaboration with community organizations or members. Although most of the curators interviewed are affiliated with larger institutions, they have developed approaches and best practices to working with community organizations that provide a bridge between community organizations and larger institutions. Unlike the interviewees from community organizations, they adhered to the definition of online exhibitions most familiar in academic and museum contexts: web page displays of images with accompanying texts or captions.

Curators identified several benefits of online exhibitions for community organizations, including: exposure for the organization and concrete evidence of its value and importance. They also saw online exhibitions as a way to extend the life of research that went into curating a physical exhibition that was only up for a limited time, or as a way to expand physical exhibitions with additional content and context. They saw online exhibitions as projects that facilitate and open up collaboration to many more partners and participants than exhibitions that are limited in place and time. Finally, they described the ways in which exhibitions can give back to the community represented by making them feel recognized and providing occasions for new relationships.

Similar to community organization interviewees, none of the curators had made an exhibition using items they found in an aggregation website, although one of them had created an exhibition in collaboration with a digital archives that ingested items featured in the exhibition into its permanent collection. Through this experience, they highlighted how partnership with a digital archive could keep infusing life into an online exhibition by continuing to direct traffic to it, or by adding related materials to its collection.

Also like the community interviewees, curators had experience converting in-person exhibitions to online ones and often struggled with many of the same issues. They discussed the amount of labor, mainly in the form of digitization, that goes into such endeavors, as well as the need to partner with aligned organizations that have already developed online exhibition tools or platforms. Finally, they stressed the care that needs to be taken due to the much wider and indiscriminate distribution that online exhibitions afford; not all items that appear in an in-person exhibition may be suitable for dissemination online.

Curators also identified a number of challenges that paralleled many of those experienced by community organizations. They underscored how online exhibitions often can't provide the same emotional pull as in-person ones, and discussed the complexities of working with multiple partners who may not always agree. Although none of these challenges stopped

them from making an exhibition, they also at times felt taken advantage of by larger institutions who wanted to use their labor and work product for their own ends. They noted that copyright restrictions and related costs often limited what could be included in an exhibition, and lamented rights holders charging exorbitant fees because the item in question might be online in perpetuity. They also faced challenges related to funding, time, and staff, pointing out that online exhibitions may take more time than in-person ones. They also noted a dearth of “how-to” resources for online exhibition-making and admitted that there were few really inspiring examples. This is certainly an area for future research and documentation.

Diverging somewhat from the responses of community organizations, the curators also lamented the absence of community organizations from digital aggregations, or simply the fact that their collections were not online, or were under-described, because they saw aggregators as a useful research tool. Yet again, like their community partners, they were also concerned about the digital divide and the ever-shifting terrain of digital technologies that make online exhibitions hard to access for some and in danger of obsolescence for all.

Finally, we asked curators a question we did not pose to community organization interviewees: what resources do they consult on the ethics of online exhibition-making? Some simply followed the policies and values set forth by their institution or by some of their larger partners. One mentioned a foundational book, *Decolonizing Museums*, and another said they learned about ethics from attending conferences and relying on their own lived experience as a woman of color. The rise of discourse around the need for more ethical approaches to collecting, digitizing, and sharing histories and artifacts online highlights the importance of building ethical frameworks and guardrails into the ways in which we record and retell these stories *from the beginning*, rather than having to retroactively patch and buttress them after the damage has been done.

Digital technologies

This section combines observations from the community organizations and the curators on their use of digital technologies for online exhibitions and the sources they use to learn about new technologies.

A note on language in this section

If a speaker is referred to as an “interviewee” they are a representative of a community organization. Curators are always described as such to maintain the distinction between the two roles.

Online exhibitions

If interviewees had created online exhibitions, we asked what tools or platforms they used. Their answers ranged from proprietary online services like Wix, Squarespace, and Matterport, to open source tools like Omeka, StoryMapJS, and TimelineJS, to custom-designed and developed sites using a range of different technologies. As noted in some of the quotations in the “Online exhibitions” section above, some interviewees also considered PDFs, PowerPoint, and online videos to be their equivalent of “online exhibitions.”

This diversity of technologies somewhat contradicts the findings in our [Environmental Scan](#) of digital exhibitions literature, which found that despite the use of over 60 online exhibition tools over the past 10 years, Omeka was by far the most commonly written about. This difference no doubt reflects the academic nature of the literature written about online exhibitions. While academic institutions seem to have coalesced around the use of Omeka and Omeka S as a standard platform for online exhibitions, this is certainly not the case among community organizations.

In fact, the dominance of Omeka may be overstated. Among the curators, only one created an exhibition using Omeka. The others used proprietary software, pre-existing web page templates, or custom-designed webpages. The one who used Omeka did so because their university provided easy access to it, and because they were assured that future student interns working on exhibition projects could continue to use it.

3D Scanning

Two interviewees and one curator are engaged in using 3D technology to scan physical spaces and objects in order to preserve them. One interviewee at an arts collective uses it to preserve visual arts exhibitions in their gallery space, and an interviewee at an archives

is using it to document spaces important to the communities they serve that are at-risk of disintegrating or being destroyed. They both use the same technology, Matterport, which is a proprietary platform. Both enhance the 3D scan with annotations and links to additional material, and both think of these scans as online exhibitions. In the case of the arts collective, the scans extend the life of the exhibitions, which are only up for a limited time; in the case of the archives, they become preservation documentation of what the space once looked like. The curator is involved in a collaborative project with a community organization to scan cultural heritage objects.

The interviewee from the archives said they were excited about the possibilities of the platform, even though it might be difficult for people without good WiFi to access it:

...it will also be kind of like a little mini exhibit. So you'll have primary sources, oral histories, little snippets about them, publications that mention them or maybe their newsletters for download for everyone. So that will be our part. Our part will be the history, their part [Matterport's] will be the digitization. So I don't have to learn too much tech for it. But I do know that pulling down one of those videos on your phone is rough if you're not in Wi Fi central.

The interviewee from the arts collective said that although they were committed to 3D digitization as a means of preservation, the scans were one of the least used parts of their website, and they were starting to think of ways to preserve them as the subscription to Matterport is bound to become more expensive:

One of the things that I'm trying to train myself in now...is our 3D captures, because they are reliant on Matterport, which is an expensive app...This is probably our most interactive and [least] used collection. It's so weird how people still are scared of certain technology. But we offer this for free for all the artists that [we] feature in our gallery, and we have partnered with other folks like [another arts organization] and other artists. We go and scan their stuff...But, you know, eventually they're going to outprice us, so I have to start thinking, "How do I turn these into videos, so that people still have this experience? And then so that we can keep it for the future?"

The curator emphasized the importance of making participants aware of the risks associated with creating 3D scans of cultural heritage objects, which might then circulate on the Internet beyond the control of the community organization that owns the data. They also stressed the importance of making sure that the community from which the objects came is the owner and steward of the resulting data, and that the larger organization that provided the funding and equipment to do the scanning had no say in what was scanned or what was eventually done with the data.

Information sources

We asked interviewees where they go for information about digital technologies. There was no consensus as to any one place or resource, and interviewees often had to do their own research and compile their own resources, or rely on the expertise of board members, volunteers, other staff, or colleagues at other institutions. One earned a certificate in digitization skills from a community college; some rely on webinars; others resort to online searches or social media. “There's a lot of nerds on Tik Tok and it's a great way to find new stuff,” said an interviewee at an archives. Only two interviewees, both at digital archives, worked with a technical team that handled technology research for the organization. One of these said that while it was great to have a dedicated team, they would not expect or recommend that approach for other community archives:

I would never expect another community-based archives to be able to do that sort of thing. And I wouldn't recommend it actually. If you can at all, get something out of the box with tech support. I definitely recommend that. We are very lucky in our CIO, and our software developer...they feel very strongly about the mission and about our organization and so they work at a nonprofit, even though they could be working somewhere else...they're kind of unicorns in that way.

On the other end of the spectrum, an interviewee at a community service organization said not only do they not have the capacity to research new technologies, it is not a priority:

It's a capacity issue for us for sure...we also are planning to move some of our workshops and trainings into e-learning and doing them on demand. And I'm like, “Oh, outside of a Google search, I don't even know where to start.” And it happened that we have a board member that said, “Oh, I know some of the sites you can use, and some of them are free.” We're like, “Well, where have you been? Why didn't you tell us about this?” It's just it never gets to the top of the list.

Yet, community organizations and their constituents understand that keeping up with technology is core to their mission to preserve and disseminate their stories. An interviewee at an archives focused on oral histories described how the “grandmas” they interviewed understood the value of technology:

They're like, “My grandkids aren't going to watch me. They're not going to listen to me now...but they'll watch me on that screen if you put me on that screen.” And also, “Put me on that screen so when my kids go to school, they'll learn about what we did.” So I always keep that in mind.

An interviewee at an archives said, “I was just at a gathering last week in [city], and I talked a lot about emerging tech and community archives and the need for us to start to pay a lot more attention to this intersection, because we don't have a choice.”

Some interviewees mentioned other organizations they look to for guidance on technology issues, including [Shift Collective](#), which advocates for decentralized storage, [Witness](#), an organization dedicated to using technology to protect human rights, and [Digital Preservation Coalition](#). An interviewee at a membership organization said of the DPC:

They have a huge website; they have a lot of resources, most of which I have relied on, in pulling together the preservation strategy that we're going to employ. And there is nothing similar in the U.S. And it just boggles me...I have been looking for two years, and have not found something that really addresses the needs of organizations like ours.

Although curators were better versed in the process and form of online exhibitions, they also were at a loss when it came to resources for learning about new technology. The independent curator said they learn about new technologies at professional conferences that focus on the digital realm like the Digital Library Federation Forum, the Museum Computer Network, and Code for Lib. The curator from a museum acknowledged that the lack of centralized information is something of a paradox:

...there's not necessarily a central hub to be able to learn about everything, which, it's funny, because I think that's something that really gets people excited, like, "Oh, we need to build a central hub to access all this information." And they're like...hundreds of these hubs, but not one has all of the information that you need.

The general consensus is that there is no “one-stop shop” for resources on digital technology, and none designed specifically to help community organizations. Instead, interviewees rely on a sometimes haphazard patchwork of resources, individuals, and organizations to learn about and deploy new technologies.

Digital Technologies Summary

This section combined responses from the community organizations and the curators to form a motley picture of the state of digital technologies for online exhibition-making.

Despite the dominance of Omeka in academic spaces, there is no consensus on the tools to use for online exhibition-making. Interviewees and curators used a variety of off-the-shelf and bespoke solutions to create their exhibitions.

The emergence of 3D scanning of at-risk spaces and objects for preservation and presentation represents a relatively new, but tech-heavy development for community

organizations. While three of our respondents were engaged in 3D projects, they acknowledged that the outputs were often difficult to see for people without high speed Internet access, or were less visited than other parts of their site. They also underscored the importance of data sovereignty in the creation of 3D scans, which could easily be appropriated and used commercially if protections were not in place.

In terms of where interviewees and curators get information on new digital technologies, there was no consensus. Most community organizations and curators use a patchwork of resources to gather information, despite recognizing that keeping up with technology is increasingly at the core of their mission to preserve and disseminate stories. A few mentioned specific resources like Shift Collective, Witness, the Digital Preservation Coalition in the UK, and conferences like DLF Forum, Museum Computer Network, and Code for Lib, but lamented the fact that a centralized hub for such information is currently lacking.

Recommendations

Although the community organizations and the curators all have different relationships to online exhibitions and aggregators, many of their suggestions and recommendations for how best to work together and to share things online are the same. This “Recommendations” section is therefore a combination of suggestions, learnings, and best practices from both groups.

It is organized under the following exhortations:

- Look for alignment of values and mission
- Promote reciprocity & complementarity
- Provide what is asked for
- Build long-term relationships with open communication
- Share credit
- Engage young people & students
- Be flexible
- Offer fair compensation
- Question received definitions of “community”

A note on language in this section

If a speaker is referred to as an “interviewee” they are a representative of a community organization. Curators are always described as such to maintain the distinction between the two roles.

Look for alignment of values and mission

One of the main things interviewees said was important in deciding whether to collaborate with any partner was whether the partner institution was aligned with their values, ethics, and mission. For some, the values they looked for were quite broad. An interviewee from a historical society, said inclusivity and a commitment to expanding American history are key:

It's inclusivity...I don't care how small I am or look, but if you include me then I know that I'm part of the bigger picture, that I'm part of the larger narrative. And ultimately, that's my goal, right? Is for these stories to become part of the American narrative.

Similarly, openness and a willingness to learn are often enough to start the conversation about working together. An interviewee at an Indigenous-led museum discussed how they vet organizations that may want to borrow objects from their collections. They described a loan request from a military college that was at first unknown to them, but whose staff expressed a genuine respect and willingness to start a relationship:

...then the two people who came in to visit...they wanted to learn, they genuinely wanted to learn. And you have to commend people for that, because that's half the battle is getting people who admit that they don't know anything and want to learn and want to be respectful, and want to include that [Indigenous] history in there when they talk about their history...So they were kind enough and they had good enough intentions that we were like, "Sure...[you can] not necessarily borrow things right away, but establish a relationship with us and be committed to being honest, including that history, and not glossing it over or sugarcoating it."

An interviewee from a community service organization emphasized how they look for bedrock values that make it possible to work with organizations or individuals they may not completely agree with:

...if folks are willing to fight hate in [the county], come to the table. And in that setting, we've had organizations that may disagree on certain issues, but they'll agree to be at the table...In our organizational values, we say we honor everyone's human dignity, inherent human dignity, and we're eager to work with people who share that value.

Alignment in terms of ethics and values, and how the partner displays those values in their process and approach, are also important. An interviewee from an archives that documents state violence said:

...it's, I would say, making sure that there's alignment in terms of ethics...it basically just means recognizing the expertise of people who have lived experience with violence and its aftermath, really trying hard to be transparent about the harms and risks to these communities for participating in our memory projects, all the way to...fair compensation for labor including emotional labor, and fair compensation for everybody involved in the work.

They went on to say that it was also important whether a potential partner was aligned with their goals for advocacy and social change, but that they did not have to agree on everything as long as both entities were working for change in the same direction. For example, they participated in a technology training with an organization they later found out also works with law enforcement:

...even though that training was really useful, a colleague in the community archives field who also took it pointed out to me later that that same group also works very closely with law enforcement around surveillance...I used that one, but I wouldn't necessarily recommend them to others.

Alignment in terms of mission and values has other benefits. A curator at the academic archives found it was beneficial to partner with a digital archives outside their institution that was not only mission-aligned with the community organization represented in the exhibition, but could provide support for the exhibition in perpetuity.

...otherwise, it can be a challenge if your platform goes out of date or your staffing changes, and it's not in your purview anymore...So in this sense, because they already kind of have that built in, into their mission, it was very helpful.

They added that because the digital archives was adding content all the time, there was an opportunity for more people to find the online exhibition, long after it went up.

No one has the bandwidth to continually update an exhibition itself, but if there's certain tags or links, and things kind of start to bleed back in different ways, that was interesting for us to think about as a way that this kind of keeps feeling relevant and growing.

Because the digital archives and the community organization featured in the online exhibition were already aligned, they were able to leverage the strengths of the digital archives in the collaboration to ensure sustainability for the exhibition. Although the curator didn't mention it, this situation was also an example of them refraining from claiming the exhibition for their own institution and recognizing when a different partnership was a better fit.

Although community organizations look at many factors when deciding to collaborate with another organization, these collaborations are not primarily driven by convenience or a need for additional resources or exposure. They must be anchored in a shared sense of purpose and enacted according to shared values and ethics.

Promote reciprocity & complementarity

Another factor community organizations value in collaborations is whether the relationship is reciprocal and complementary, meaning that the partners feel they are receiving adequate benefits for the time, labor, expertise, or other resources they contribute, and/or that the partnership provides things that complement the work they are doing already. The most successful partnerships the interviewees have experienced were mostly with other small or community-based organizations. An interviewee from an archives said, "It's a lot of bartering happening here. So I feel like we're in medieval times sometimes. I did this for you, you do this for me."

Similarly, a curator from an academic archive described how their collaboration with a digital archives did not involve a financial exchange but was premised on "gifts in kind." "There was no financial reciprocity...other than mutually beneficial in terms of us publicizing to our network at [our archives] about [the digital archives] and its capacity and what exists and vice versa. So obviously, gifts in kind, in that sense." They also described a case where community members not only refused financial compensation but ended up feeding the curatorial team:

This is obviously a unique or rare case that you have individuals who are working for an organization on a volunteer basis and so financial compensation was not what they were interested in for the most part, but really like building relationships. I mean, we went over to people's houses; they wanted to cook for us...But really devoting that much time was really our gift to them of saying, "We really want to get to know you. And yes, we will have a meal, we will watch you cook [food] for us, all sorts of things like that, which I know seems weird and I'm like, "Yeah, we didn't pay them; instead, they fed us." But really, the gift is time, like spending a lot of time so that they felt like we were really stewards of their information and their stories and trusted us to tell those stories.

An interviewee from an archives discussed how they are involved in creating resources and a network of community archives that can help each other:

...as a leader in the community archives field we have really been proactive about creating resources: everything from sort of how to build a community focused organization, both in terms of organizational infrastructure, to how to work with communities that are targeted by the state, so that we can safely archive their

materials, to resources on how to work with state-generated records, but in a community context and sort of keeping control around access and things like that...

Similarly, an interviewee from an arts institute described a complementary partnership with a local archives:

They are an archive that is based in the music legacy of [the city]. So it works well and is serendipitous that we focus on the dance, and they focus on the music...it just felt like it was a right fit that we could collaborate and they are an archiving institution while we do the [dance] work, and they do the archiving. So it's pretty well balanced.

They also stressed the importance of cultivating long-term relationships: "I wouldn't want to do something where it's just, 'Oh, we're just gonna do something for this one event and that's it.' This interviewee also collaborates with a large university within very specific parameters that they determine. They felt this approach—where the university's resources are used for very specific and time-bound projects worked very well:

...this partnership, I mean, it's a large institution, it's [a university]. But I am very much in support of this because...it acts like they're using their resources to help out this smaller community-based archive, and that is a collaboration or partnership that I feel like is very beneficial.

A curator from a university explained how their project has leveraged complementary strengths in the university and the community:

One of the things that we pride ourselves on is recognizing shared expertise across the university, but also with our community partners. Our community members have expertise in [their ethnic group] history in this local area, full stop, right? They're the ones who have knowledge and know-how about that. On the university side, we have knowledge on things like how to build an Omeka page, or how to write grants to raise money to support these things. So I think institutional support for communities is really, really important, because they don't have the time to do that type of work, but university researchers, students, that's kind of the time that we can provide.

Their project was also able to provide financial compensation, in the forms of stipends, for community members who participated in the project: "It takes time for the community to set aside a day for us to go to their house and digitize 50 objects in their collection, right? So we just want to make sure that we're compensating them accurately."

An interviewee from a museum said that it's easier to decide to collaborate with organizations that have shown support for them in various ways in the past:

...it's usually a no-brainer...like [name of organization], we have a pretty good collaborative relationship with over the past year. They had given us interns and things. They didn't have to, but they did. And promoting us out and stuff and coming to our events, supporting us that way.

Provide what is asked for

Successful partnerships between well-resourced institutions and community organizations often involve the provision of support for specific things that the community organization needs without demanding control over the project. An interviewee from an arts organization described how they partnered with a university to run a summer educational program for teens:

I realized they have this really tiny budget for community engagement. And I'm like, "That's all we need."...And they started buying the snacks for us; they started buying the bus passes. We had a free venue, which also was part of our mission to expose minoritized students to a pipeline to universities and higher education, because oftentimes, they're not seen as university students.

An interviewee at a historical society participated in an online project that aggregated online exhibitions and other content around a particular theme. They were impressed by the support they received in marketing and promoting their content:

They gave us talking points. They gave us graphics, they gave us everything...The website was well done. So I really did like what they were doing. I liked the experience, and I wish other bigger organizations would do something like that.

While the two projects mentioned here were relatively small, lightweight collaborations, they still make a point: community organizations appreciate support for things *they actually need*, which may be relatively small things in the eyes of an institutional partner (like snacks and bus passes), and may not be directly related to the content or collections they steward. These things actually help them do their work. It's even better if that assistance is easy to access without too many strings attached.

Build long-term relationships with open communication

Interviewees discussed the importance of long-term, ongoing relationships, both with larger institutions and with partners in their communities that enable them to do their work. Here is where the "community" part of the moniker very much comes into play, as much of community-centered archiving work is based on trust and relationships built over time. These relationships are also built on transparent and ethical communication.

An interviewee at a historical society emphasized how long-term relationships—even familial ones—enable their work. They described how they created an online exhibition featuring the work of a photographer who also happens to be their aunt, and then shared it as part of a larger, online cultural heritage campaign:

I already had developed that relationship. Obviously, she's my aunt. But honestly, she is a very difficult person in the sense of sharing her things. And I had to convince her to share her things and it's very communal, right? Like, we are community and I have to work for people to trust to share their things with me...And so once we had already done her biography and [a] blog on her, this opportunity came and I was able to easily say, "Hey, this is a really good opportunity to tell this story."

A curator from an academic archives also emphasized the importance of going slow and maintaining open channels of communication:

It's all about relationship building, and going slowly, and just having the excitement about working with someone else, and sharing what you know, and so of course, we first had them here at the archive. I gave them a tour, a taste of what we do, past exhibitions, just to give kind of a basic, "This is who we are, this is what we do, this is how we operate, this is why we are excited to talk to you," things that seem obvious, but really go a long way. And then just approaching the whole thing like a collaboration, saying, "We want your input at different parts of the process and oversight." Of course, many times, they're like "You do it, you guys are the curators. We don't know." But just to keep that line of communication open and feel like, it's not like people are coming in from the outside and telling your story and taking your stuff, which hopefully none of us are doing, but I'm sure we've all seen that happen in different ways.

An independent curator said they refrain from interpretation as a way of showing respect:

My goal is to be a steward of history, not a gatekeeper. I really believe in the stewardship of records. I also believe in the cooperation of multiple records to tell a story. I'm not trying to add my thoughts and opinions. I try not to take the role of a historian and interpreting...But rather just simply presenting: here's this document, interpret it how you will...I think there's often a bit of understanding and respect that comes from taking that approach.

An interviewee at a membership organization said that they wished universities would treat community organizations with the respect and consideration they reserve for donors, who are able to stipulate how their donations (fiscal or otherwise) are used and represented:

I wish the universities would look upon the community heritage organizations as donors. If they came at it from the perspective of a donor, I think it would provide a

better basis for everyone to have agreed, "This is what's going to happen." Instead, the university says, "Oh, we've got a donation." And that's different than how you treat a donor.

A museum curator talked about going above and beyond what is required by copyright laws to respect ethical and privacy concerns of the people featured in their exhibitions. They said that they made an effort to let community members know that the things they had donated to the archives were going into the online exhibition:

Most of the archival material was from our own collection; we didn't have to get permission, necessarily. But we did just let them know that it was happening. And yeah, that communication is important, and making sure that people are aware that that's going on.

A curator from a university discussed how they had built the digital archive that their exhibition drew upon with the concept of "rolling consent," or consent that could be revoked at a future date:

...a part of [the project's] philosophy, too, is rolling consent. So we always say too, if, at some point, you don't want your objects [to be] a part of the digital archive anymore, we can pull them. That's fine for us. We also have a policy where at any time, we or other research initiatives, or other projects, or other curators want to use the images in your family collection, the digital archive will contact you about it. And then you can give the consent to that individual or to that organization or research project. So we're trying to kind of position ourselves as a party that can help them make those decisions about consent and rights at every stage, and every project.

Other curators emphasized the importance of communicating clearly with community partners about the ways in which institutions operate. A curator from a university said that they made sure to explain institutional collecting practices to help community members make informed decisions about participating in the exhibition and potentially donating their collections in the future:

...being transparent about different institutional practices I think is super important to us as a project, whether that is an acquiring library or museum or the university at large. Just kind of showing them the inner workings so that they can make the best decisions about their family histories, I think is something that we really pride ourselves on, because we never want to be in a place where we're making decisions for them. But we do want to make this kind of behemoth of an institution legible so that they can make the best decisions.

The museum curator echoed this guidance when talking about another project, in which they are working with communities to create 3D scans of cultural heritage objects:

We want to make sure that these relationships are honest. And we're being upfront about what we know, to make sure that communities know how these things can be shared and displayed. So specifically for 3D stuff, I think a really big component is who owns the data once these digital elements are created, and then...we want to make sure that we're respecting what they want to share and have be shared with other people.

They went on to clarify that the community organization they are working with owns the data and determines where and how things are shared. This is particularly important now that 3D models can be used to print physical replicas of objects, or might be taken and used in inappropriate ways in commercial products like video games. (See more on the ethics of 3D scanning in the “Digital technologies” section of this report.)

An interviewee from an archives who spoke about partnering with universities, said it was important for both sides to understand where the other is coming from:

So on the CBA [community-based archives] side, just to understand the workings of the bureaucracy and the restrictions the university has often worked under. And then on the university side, I think a lot of university archivists and librarians...understand the restrictions that CBAs work under in terms of funding, and actual people doing the work—volunteers—but just to understand that they're obviously not always professional trained archivists, or librarians or just LAM [libraries, archives, and museum] professionals in general. And they're doing the best that they can, and just keeping that understanding there.

An interviewee who used to work in academia before starting an archives that focuses on Indigenous knowledge, described how maintaining strong relationships with universities helps not only their organization, but the broader community.

...the reason why [that university] is appealing is simply because I have a long history. I used to teach there, I used to work there. And that's where I first started doing community-based scholarship in the classroom and therefore all the other things were community-based. And just for Indian Country, it has a good history. It's always good to go and be at a place where people know that they can send their kids because that's how you get people to college from reservations is they're like, "Oh, so and so's a professor. Now they're working there so we can get in touch."

Another interviewee from a library shared how they model relationships of care and reciprocity within their own communities, despite the risks they may incur. They discussed how maintaining strong and trusting relationships in their own community has sustained

the library for decades despite a chronic lack of funding, and described how, even when faced with a devastating theft, they did not call the police for fear of endangering community members.

During COVID, someone broke in and stole all the computers, hard drives, all kinds of stuff. So the community was mad, a lot of people were like, “We know you don’t call the police, but you should call the police.” And they thought it was this young person who we kind of knew but didn’t know him very well...But one of the people was very upset and went to his house, told his mother, say, “This is a library, it’s important. We need that stuff.”...there’s different kinds of accounting. And so the family was trying to get our stuff back.

This kind of trust and community accountability as an alternative to coercion and law enforcement is an example of how cultural heritage work can be based in care, reciprocity, and respect. It should be obvious that the ultimate goal of community based archival work is not to make mainstream archives more diverse or even to preserve valuable materials, but to help and sustain the community. Community organizations serving marginalized communities enact this ethos every day, becoming not just partners, but part of the fabric of so many communities that have been otherwise left out of the historical record. Although many of the stories in this section aren’t about collaborations between community organizations and larger institutions, they demonstrate how community organizations understand and enact their values and provide models for mutually beneficial and respectful relationships in general. Larger, more bureaucratic institutions would do well to follow their lead, not only in interacting with community organizations, but in all of their relationships.

Share credit

Although several interviewees shared examples of projects with multiple, community-sourced contributions, curators really emphasized the importance of engaging community members in knowledge production and sharing credit for the results. This is perhaps because they find themselves in a position of relative power when working with community organizations, and want to make sure to share this power more equitably.

A curator from a university described how they used “community-engaged research” techniques to involve community members in every step of the exhibition-making process:

...these are family objects, they’re personal stories, they’re often difficult conversations. So we as a team decided to use community-engaged research as the primary method for all of the things that we do under [the digital project]. For curation, that means involving community members at every step of the curatorial process. And I think this differs from other curatorial projects that are community-facing, in that we’re not just kind of soliciting feedback from community

at the onset, but they're involved in object selection, label writing, design, right? And so I think that's what differs and because of that, we're having conversations at multiple stages, to ensure that the community is comfortable with the message that we are saying about them.

The museum curator, who is engaged in a project with a community organization outside their duties as a curator, described a similar approach as a “co-production of knowledge framework.” Their research team provided digitization services and education about data ownership, rights, and circulation while the community organization selected the items to be digitized and retained ownership and cultural property rights over the digital data.

The university curator also wanted to ensure that community members retained ownership and stewardship of their materials:

...that was also something that we were really insistent on, is thinking about the historical misuse of objects, and how we wanted to ensure that the community members continue to have ownership and stewardship over these objects, while still recognizing the fact that they themselves were wanting it to be available to a wider public.

Whereas an older model of curation involved a single curator doing research and making selections (and often acquisitions) in order to form an argument or a thesis, these curators take a broader, more inclusive view of that role. They are more like facilitators and educators who are more interested in helping a community organization represent and advocate for itself than in making a singular intellectual argument or proposition. In fact, the proposals they make are not just the exhibitions they create per se, but rather consist of sharing authorship and decision-making power with community organizations and in the process modeling a more ethical, and less extractive mode of research and knowledge creation.

Engage young people & students

Several interviewees mentioned that they found internships or student labor provided by a university or government partner to be very effective ways of making progress toward their goals. An interviewee from an arts organization described how their organization was working with information science students at a large university to assess their new collections website and develop protocols and workflows for community contributions. They said that the students were:

...really helping to build up the site which we can't do. We're not archivists. We could call ourselves field archivists, because we do dance, we do perform, so the information which is being archived is our work. But in terms of being able to figure

out the usability...and now we're creating those workflows and all of the assessments of the site.

As a volunteer-led organization, they found the structure provided by semester-long stretches of work to be helpful in moving their website development forward and giving them a sense of where they need to go next. They did stress however, that it was important to create well-defined parameters for the work and to give students specific tasks and objectives each semester.

A curator at a university said that engaging student labor was the only way they were able to make one online exhibition happen:

The undergrad that developed this digital exhibition was funded for a full year by this research center, [name of center]. So if it wasn't for them, we wouldn't be able to have her do this expansive exhibition on this community member and on this family.

When asked what they look for in a partnership, another interviewee, also at an arts organization said "Youth!" They found that younger contributors were more open and flexible in their attitudes and approaches, which is more in keeping with their own ethos and values.

I honestly have learned that youth can give broader perspectives than full grown adults. And I think if institutions are willing to invest in youth and they're part of the partnership, then there's hope that there's liberty for some experimenting, for some flexibility. And that helps, because so often, there's institutions that want to give money, but they tell you exactly how you're supposed to do it. And I think there is no exact way.

They found that including students and young people also gave them some common ground with educational institutions:

...whether it's the institution or ourselves, our goal is to make that student successful. So if we focus on that, then the outcome will benefit both of us, right? And I think that has been something that I continually look for, is partnerships through student internships or youth as an example. And they have been the most successful.

Community organizations benefit from opportunities to collaborate where youth and students can provide not only skills that the community organization needs, but fresh perspectives and flexibility to work in ways that may be different from dominant or traditional ones. Internships and youth employment programs are joint programs where community organizations can get some of the help they need while providing valuable work

experience and education for students and youth. This emphasis on youthful experimentation also reveals how some community organizations share decision-making and project planning power with their partners—a quality that larger institutions could also adopt toward their community-based partners.

Be flexible

Following on the flexibility provided by youth, curators also found that flexibility in general—in terms of timelines, deliverables, processes—was key in working with community organizations, who are often short on staff, time, and resources. The curator at the academic archives said of their collaboration with a digital archives:

Neither of us had a big team, but we had enough people to do the work. And we were both very understanding of like, it's going to take time, this is not the only priority for either of us, and it's going to happen when it's going to happen. And I think that helped a lot...I think just mutual understanding and communication about what everyone's capacity was...and just being patient. If that's possible, it goes a long way towards collaboration.

In another case, a curator at a university was flexible about the form and scope of a mural project that enabled them to navigate a disagreement that came up with their community partner. The community organization wanted to honor a specific community member who the university partners found problematic. Instead of withdrawing the university's support for the project, they used an online exhibition to provide an alternative perspective on the subject of the mural while letting the community's plans proceed.

...we also asked if we could create a digital exhibition that supplements the image that they used. And so one of our interns...created an exhibition about this community member that offers a more complicated perspective to this individual, rather than the kind of laudatory, kind of larger than life image that the community often asserts on to this family...And that digital exhibition will have a QR code that will be posted with the mural. So I think we're able to kind of do a little bit of both while still, you know, honoring the community's desire to memorialize her in a certain way.

The independent curator also underscored the importance of listening and the need to make space for multiple points of view.

...you just have to listen more than you talk. You have to be open to evolving adaptation, switching, changing, tweaking. My experience has taught me that every word that we pick could be tweaked on our wall labels...every single word could be tweaked by the community. That's how we develop the culturally conscious, racially

conscious archival practices by listening to how the community referred to itself and what they just really didn't like.

Because, as one of the community organization interviewees pointed out, community is complicated, curators who set out to collaborate with community organizations need to be flexible and creative in ways they may not be used to in their home institutions.

Offer fair compensation

Although many community organizations are volunteer-run or survive on very small budgets, they express a deep commitment to providing fair compensation for work done on their behalf. They have also come up with creative ways to fund themselves and keep the lights on. An interviewee from an archives said, “We try to be as equitable and fair, always, in how we work with community members, including compensating everybody fairly for all kinds of labor.”

Another from an arts collective said much the same thing, adding that as a “hybrid non-profit” they were able to take advantage of two streams of funding:

...we pride ourselves on paying people and one of the things that has helped us tremendously to be able to establish a brick and mortar is working with the [city] Youth Employment Program. And so we are signed up as a nonprofit and also as a business...And that helped tremendously during COVID, because guess what? We qualified for both types of grants: business grants, as well as nonprofits.

Where others have struggled with what status or structure they need in order to receive funding, this interviewee said that this hybrid structure allowed them to focus on the work they wanted to do: “The goal is for me, to not be bothered by those administrative steps so I can continue to do the work in the community.” Larger institutions might also consider taking some of the administrative burden from community organizations by creating funding structures and processes that more easily and efficiently channel money to their partners.

Question received definitions of “community”

Some interviewees see their role as not only representing “community voices” but helping to shape and move those voices in a direction that better serves the community as a whole. An interviewee at a community service organization described the balance between “meeting people where they're at” and pushing for a more critical or progressive stance:

There's an inherent tension that we're managing between when do we meet people where they're at? And when do we need to really push on an issue that we feel we have to, maybe not call out the person, but call out the issue? And that's not always

a clear path for us, especially when some people hire us to come in. We do feel comfort in some places with, "Well, let's meet you where you're at, with the intent to move the relationship forward in a way that lets us challenge and push and critique." And other times something is so egregious that you just feel like you need to say, "No, that wasn't okay."

An interviewee at a library also troubled the notion that community voices are always true reflections of the knowledges and experiences therein:

We're working with the young people from the neighborhood, some of whom are in gangs, some are locked up, all these kinds of things...Hey, let's think of a project that y'all can do for the community, with the community, in the community. And their initial responses were all so reactionary, like, "We don't know anything, and we need help." And we're like, "We know you, and you have so much knowledge and wisdom from your experiences."...They see themselves as, "We're just bad criminals, and we're troublemakers," but they have a knowledge in that setting.

The interviewee told this story to make the point that while community archives studies like this one seek to uplift "community voices," the voices they may be surfacing are often the ones that fall in line with dominant ideas about who a particular group of people are and what they are capable of. This interviewee also critiqued studies of community archives where the questions come with built-in assumptions about what the community needs:

There's all this money going out where people write these little papers on how community archives have no money, and we don't get no money out of it. And we know a lot of stuff. Why are we doing a survey to really get to say, "So the community said it's really helpful if they can display their stuff on [a state-wide aggregator]. It helps them with their access"? And no, it's not.

An independent curator emphasized the need to resist generalization:

Dr. Henry Louis Gates has a quote that says..."If there are 40 million Black people in America, then there are 40 million ways to be Black." And I think if you're doing exhibits about the Black diasporic experience that has to be the foreset of your mind when you're curating these pieces. You have to be completely and utterly sensitive that just because this was one person's experience, it may not have been their neighbor's experience.

These interviewees highlighted the need to be specific, and to think in more complex ways about communities—who the members are, what social and political dynamics are at work, where they're coming from, etc. Communities are polyvocal, internally diverse, and may be riven with divisions that may not be visible or comprehensible from the outside. Engaging with a community organization must take these complex factors into account.

Conduct additional research into online exhibition making for community organizations

Although many resources about online exhibition-making exist, these are typically written by and for museum, archives, and library staff. While this study includes many good suggestions from curators as to how to make exhibitions with community organizations, more research is needed to determine whether a guide to online exhibition-making specifically for community organizations is needed.

Recommendations Summary

Interviewees and curators provided several strains of guidance for future partnerships focused on aggregation and/or online exhibition-making.

They stressed the importance of alignment in terms of values and mission between partners, and that it was important that partners were open and receptive to learning from one another. It was also important that partners display these values in their process and approach, not just in their statements. That said, partners did not have to agree on everything to collaborate, nor have all of the same capabilities.

In fact, reciprocity and complementarity were also strongly encouraged, where partners could play to their strengths, and also feel like their contributions were adequately returned or balanced. Many of these collaborations proceed on a “gifts in kind” basis rather than on the exchange of funds, although sometimes a larger institutional partner’s main contribution may be funding. Sometimes reciprocity could be as simple as attending one another’s events or helping to promote them.

In line with complementary relationships is the exhortation to give what is asked for or needed. Making things easier by giving specifically what is needed is much appreciated by community organizations who are often already doing a lot with very few resources.

Respondents also emphasized building long-term relationships with open communication. Much of community-centered archiving work is based on trust and relationships built over time. These relationships are also built on transparent and ethical communication. Partnerships often evolve slowly and involve time for partners to get to know each other before anything is exchanged or any project has begun. It is important to build relationships of mutual respect upon which collaboration can be built. Curators introduced the notion of continuous, “rolling consent” for participation in aggregations and online exhibitions and emphasized the need for clear explanations for community members about the bureaucracy and collecting practices of larger institutions. Mutual understanding where each partner knows the situations and limitations of the other, is key to successful

collaborations. Community organizations often model these relationship values in their interactions with other organizations and with community members, and set an example for how cultural heritage work can be based in care, reciprocity, and respect.

Sharing credit for the work that has been done is another important value. This often involves engaging community members in knowledge production and sharing credit for the results. Curators described this as “community-engaged research” and “co-production of knowledge frameworks,” but it also just means not taking sole credit for work that was produced collectively. Whereas an older model of curation involved a single curator doing research and making selections (and often acquisitions) in order to form an argument or a thesis, these curators share authorship and decision-making power with community organizations and in the process model a more ethical, and less extractive mode of research and knowledge creation.

Engaging young people and students through internships or student labor has been an effective form of collaboration between larger educational institutions and community organizations because both sides can agree on educational outcomes for the students. It is a way to provide labor for cash-strapped and understaffed community organizations while providing real-life learning opportunities for students. Community organizations have also found that young people are more open to new approaches and are more flexible.

Flexibility in and of itself is a recommendation, as both sides of a partnership may contend with fluctuating capacity to contribute. Understanding and being transparent about each others’ limitations, and then being able to adjust to changing circumstances is a key part of making collaborations successful. Listening and making space for multiple perspectives is also an important factor here.

Fair compensation for labor and other contributions is a value held by many community organizations, even as they find themselves struggling to make ends meet. Because they often serve poor and working class communities, they understand the importance of ensuring that work is compensated and valued, and they often come up with creative strategies to increase their funding and funnel more support to community members.

Partners seeking to collaborate with community organizations would do well to question what they think they know about “the community.” Communities are not monolithic entities and contain many different voices and positions that may not always align. Community organization interviewees and curators both described the fine balance between reflecting a community as it is, and nudging it forward, perhaps towards a more critical or progressive stance. While community archives studies like this one seek to uplift “community voices,” the voices they may be surfacing are often the ones that fall in line with dominant ideas about who a particular group of people are and what they are capable of. Communities are polyvocal, internally diverse, and may be riven with divisions that may

not be visible or comprehensible from the outside. Engaging with a community organization must take these complex factors into account.

Finally, while this study provides basic suggestions for more ethical and reciprocal relationships between community organizations and their partners, more research into an ethical framework for online exhibition-making is needed to determine whether there is a need for a guide specifically for community organizations.

Conclusions

The formal categories of aggregation and online exhibitions are both fairly academic or museum pursuits that aren't necessarily appealing or appropriate for community organizations. Although community organizations are generally interested in sharing their stories and collections more broadly online, the ways in which they do so vary quite a bit and often derive from or emulate in-person interactions or events. These organizations, which represent and serve marginalized peoples, tend to emphasize interpersonal relationships and are often not well served by the depersonalized and decontextualized environment of the Internet.

Our project to assess participation in online forms of sharing among community organizations required that we expand our definitions of aggregation and online exhibitions to include online storytelling and sharing in more ad hoc or casual ways. Organizations are interested in sharing on their own terms and with consent and control that is based in their own ethics and values, which are often different from dominant ones. These organizations foreground models of care and respect for marginalized communities that are often not reflected in the colonial and extractive values on which the cultures of academia and museums are based. This difference makes participation in aggregators especially fraught as there are often no safeguards as to where and among whom content might circulate. Unlike public libraries and universities, and to a lesser extent museums, which are dedicated to the free circulation of knowledge, community organizations that serve marginalized groups are more interested in context and care. In other words, the way in which something is shared, and who has access to it, matters just as much as the content being shared.

Dominant modes of presentation online often aren't nuanced or customizable enough to result in meaningful sharing, and community organizations may have little incentive to participate in them. While they definitely seek broader and more diverse audiences for their content, they are not willing to sacrifice important context and their values to secure them. These organizations each have an express agenda; they are not pretending to be neutral purveyors of information. They have objectives to achieve, and they want to ensure that they pursue those objectives in ways that remain true to their values.

In the course of doing this study, we have learned that the questions with which we began are the wrong ones to be asking, or are asked the wrong way around. Instead of asking how aggregators can be more representative of marginalized groups, we should ask what aggregation has to offer them, and whether it can help them achieve their goals. We should question whether a "commons" like the DPLA, whose structure no doubt reflects the encyclopedic aims of colonial museum and library collections—an attempt to gather everything under one roof—is a useful one for communities who have been damaged by or left out of it from the beginning.

We must also interrogate the format of the “exhibition,” rooted as it is in imperial displays of plundered wealth or “exotic” life forms—often including marginalized people, dead or alive— such as the World’s Fairs. Is there a way to make the process of making an online exhibition “responsible and inclusive” when the form itself has always been dehumanizing?

Indeed the Internet itself, with its origins in the U.S. defense industry, is a product of the fallacy that all information is collectible, knowable, findable. The organizations and curators we interviewed for this study unmasked that fallacy again and again, from the immeasurable diversity of relationships and voices to be found among their communities, to the simple lack of a central hub for learning about digital technologies. The experiences they seek to record and preserve and the support required to make them accessible and understandable to the next generation seem to exceed the available structures we have at our disposal. The exhibition, the aggregator, and the Internet were not made for them. They were not made with the values of care, reciprocity, transparency, and relationality that these interviewees bring to the fore.

The question is rather: How can we take these flawed tools—the aggregator, the exhibition, the Internet—and make them more hospitable for more voices? It is our hope that the challenges and recommendations documented in this study add to the growing chorus of voices advocating for stronger guardrails and clearer guidance to make the landscape for sharing online more ethical and less extractive for community organizations and those who support them.

Appendix

CCA Interview Questions

Community-Centered Archives Study Information & Consent Form

Introduction

You are invited to participate in this interview as a representative of a community-centered archives (CCA). We define community-centered archives as collections of documents, images, and other materials about people who are not usually represented in traditional academic and government-run institutions. Caring for these collections may not be your organization's primary mission, but you are invested in preserving and sharing them. We hope this study will reveal what CCAs need to share collections and stories more widely and make our public culture more diverse and representative.

Purpose

This interview seeks to understand your organization's participation in two online activities:

- 1) Contributing digital collections to aggregators, such as the [Digital Public Library of America](#), which publish collections from many different places on a single website.
- 2) Creating online exhibitions, which present select items from your collections and interpret them to create meaningful experiences for visitors.

If you are unsure about the difference between an aggregator and an online exhibition, an aggregator is like a public library, where all kinds of books are available on the shelves. An online exhibition is more like a museum show, where certain items have been curated and written about to reveal stories and connections between them and create meaning for the viewer.

Expected Outcomes

Through your answers to these questions, we hope to better understand the factors you consider in sharing your collections online, and what resources you need to do so. With these learnings, we intend to create a guide to facilitate conversations and collaboration between CCAs, aggregators, and other partnering organizations. We hope this guide will support CCAs interested in sharing their collections and stories more widely. In the process, we hope to make aggregators and online exhibitions more inclusive of underrepresented voices.

About This Study

This study is being conducted by consultant Sharon Mizota in collaboration with colleagues at the University of California Irvine (UCI Exempt Self-Determination IRB protocol #3717) and the California Digital Library. It is funded by a grant from the [Andrew W. Mellon Foundation](#).

Access to your personally identifiable information and responses to the interview questions will be restricted to researchers involved in this study. In the final resource guide, your responses to these questions will be anonymous; neither you nor your organization will be identified in the final report.

To facilitate note taking, we would like your permission to record the session, with the understanding that the recording will only be utilized to help document your contributions. The recording(s) will be destroyed once the research process is completed and the final report is produced.

We estimate this interview will take around an hour to complete. We greatly appreciate your participation.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact Sharon Mizota at sharon@sharonmizota.com.

Thank you for your contribution to this study!
University of California Irvine, California Digital Library, & Sharon Mizota

Consent Form

I agree to participate in this interview.

- Yes
- No

I agree and consent to have this interview recorded for note taking purposes and give permission for my anonymized quotes to be incorporated into the final report.

- Yes
- No

Signature _____ Date _____

Print Name _____

Organization _____

Definitions

Throughout the interview, we will be using some terminology which may be unfamiliar to you. To foster a shared understanding of these terms for our conversations, we have included definitions below. If any term is unclear at any point during the interview feel free to ask for clarification.

Aggregator is a website that publishes digital collections from many different places on a single website.

Collaboration is a project involving two or more parties which has a short duration or known ending date.

Content encompasses documents, photographs, books, reports, videos, audio files, and other media, both analog and digital, created or managed by your organization.

Community-Centered Archives are defined as collections of documents, images, and other materials about people who are not usually represented in traditional academic and government-run institutions.

Online Exhibition (or Digital Exhibition) is an online presentation of select items from your collections with interpretation to create meaningful experiences for visitors.

Digital Repository is the technical infrastructure, services, and resources for the storage and management of digital information that make it available to users.

Metadata is descriptive information about each item or collection of items. Examples of metadata include an item's title, creator, date, etc.

Partnership is defined as a formalized agreement between two organizations to work together to achieve particular objectives or deliverables.



Introduction

1. Tell us about your organization, your mission and the communities you serve.
2. What kinds of items or documents do you collect? How do you decide what to collect?
3. Is sharing your collections online a priority for your organization?
4. What stories does your organization seek to tell?
5. How do you currently share these stories and your collections? This might include in-person visits, public exhibitions or events, websites, social media, etc.
6. In the past 5 years, has your organization collaborated or partnered with other organizations or individuals to share your collections?
 - a. If so, please describe the collaboration(s).
 - b. What difficulties, if any, did you encounter in these collaborations? What went smoothly?
7. What characteristics, values, resources or criteria do you look for in collaborators or partners? How do you determine whether to collaborate or partner with an organization or person?
8. Are you interested in sharing your collections more broadly online?
 - a. If so, what online venues are you interested in? What would most help you to share your collections online?
 - b. If not, why not?
9. Does your organization currently contribute to an aggregator?
 - a. If so, which one? And what has that experience been like? Did you experience any challenges in contributing your collections?
 - b. If not, why not?

Online exhibitions

10. Has your organization created online exhibitions to share your collections and stories? Why or why not?
 - a. If you have created online exhibitions before:
 - i. How many have you created?
 - ii. How did the exhibition(s) come about? Did you collaborate with another party?
 - iii. What tools or platforms did you use?
 - iv. Were you happy with the outcome? How did you measure the impact of the exhibition?
 - v. What would you do differently next time?
 - vi. Are the exhibitions still online? Have you been able to maintain them?
 - b. If you haven't, what would most help you to create an online exhibition?
11. Would your organization be interested in creating an online exhibition with items already available in an aggregator like Digital Public Library of America? This might mean creating a narrative around digital images from other organizations' collections that are related to your own, or combining them with items from your own collections.
12. Are there examples of online exhibitions you admire or would like to emulate?
13. Where do you currently go for information on digital technologies such as digitization, web hosting, etc.?
14. Is there anything else that would help you share your collections online?
15. Do you have any questions about the study?

We thank you for your time today.

Curator Interview Questions

Community-Centered Archives Study Information & Consent Form

Introduction

You are invited to participate in this interview as someone who has curated or created online exhibitions with community-centered archives (CCAs). We define online exhibitions as online presentations of select items with interpretation to create meaningful experiences for visitors. We define community-centered archives as collections of documents, images, and other materials about people who are not usually represented in traditional academic and government-run institutions.

Purpose

This interview seeks to understand the participation of community-centered archives in creating online exhibitions. Through your answers to these questions, we hope to better understand the barriers CCAs face in creating and sharing online exhibitions.

Expected Outcomes

With these learnings, we intend to create a guide to facilitate conversations and collaboration between CCAs and other organizations. We hope this guide will support CCAs interested in sharing their collections and stories more widely. In the process, we hope to make online exhibitions more inclusive of underrepresented voices.

About This Study

This study is being conducted by consultant Sharon Mizota in collaboration with colleagues at the University of California Irvine (UCI Exempt Self-Determination IRB protocol #3717) and the California Digital Library. It is funded by a grant from the [Andrew W. Mellon Foundation](#).

Your responses to these questions will be anonymized; neither you nor your organization will be identified in the final report.

To facilitate note taking, we would like your permission to record the session, with the understanding that the recording will only be utilized to help document your contributions. The recording(s) will be destroyed once the research process is completed and the final report is produced.

We estimate this interview will take around 45 minutes to complete. We greatly appreciate your participation.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact Sharon Mizota at sharon@sharonmizota.com.

Thank you for your contribution to this study!
University of California Irvine, California Digital Library, & Sharon Mizota

Consent Form

I agree to participate in this interview.

Yes

No

I agree and consent to have this interview recorded for note taking purposes and give permission for my anonymized quotes to be incorporated into the final report.

Yes

No

Signature_____Date_____

Print Name_____

Organization_____

Definitions

Throughout the interview, we will be using some terminology which may be unfamiliar to you. To foster a shared understanding of these terms for our conversations, we have included definitions below. If any term is unclear at any point during the interview feel free to ask for clarification.

Aggregator is a website that publishes digital collections from many different places on a single website.

Collaboration is a project involving two or more parties which has a short duration or known ending date.

Content encompasses documents, photographs, books, reports, videos, audio files, and other media, both analog and digital, created or managed by your organization.

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Metadata is descriptive information about each item or collection of items. Examples of metadata include an item's title, creator, date, etc.

Partnership is defined as a formalized agreement between two organizations to work together to achieve particular objectives or deliverables.



Questions

1. Please tell us a bit about your relationship to the CCA. What is their mission and how did you come to collaborate with them?
2. Did you have prior experience creating an online exhibition?
3. What was the nature of the exhibition(s) you created? What subject matter did you focus on? What types of digital items did you include?
4. What ethical or social justice issues did you consider in creating the exhibition? Were there specific ethical considerations when working with or within the CCA?
5. Were the items in the exhibition already digitized and accessible online? Did you have to do digitization, description, or hosting?
6. What platforms or tools did you use to create and host the exhibition(s)?
7. Did you collaborate with any other organizations or individuals to create or host the exhibition(s)? How would you describe that collaboration?
8. Who was the primary audience for the exhibition?
9. Was the exhibition(s) stand alone, or was it related to a physical exhibition(s)?
10. Were you happy with the outcome? How did you measure the impact of the exhibition?
11. What would you do differently in the future?
12. Are the exhibition(s) still online? Is there a plan for maintaining it?
13. Where do you currently go for information on digital exhibition technologies?
14. Where do you go for information about the ethics of digital exhibitions?
15. What do you think are the biggest benefits for CCAs in creating and maintaining online exhibitions? What are the biggest challenges?
16. Would you consider creating an online exhibition with items already available in an aggregator like Digital Public Library of America? This might mean creating a narrative around digital images from other organizations' collections, or combining them with items from the CCA's collections.
17. Are there examples of online exhibitions that you admire or would like to emulate?
18. Are there any additional thoughts you would like to share on digital exhibitions and community-centered archives?
19. Do you have any questions about this study?

We thank you for your time today.

