Welcoming the World: An Exploration of Participatory Archives

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Abstract
This paper reports some of the findings of PhD research investigating the flourishing of online 'Participatory Archives', and 'crowdsourcing' projects promoting user engagement with archival heritage. Starting from the radical concept of the Archival Commons (Anderson & R.B. Allen 2009), the paper draws upon interview evidence with archivists and users to explore the longer-term implications of such initiatives for archival professionalism. The paper proposes a new conceptual matrix for user participation in archives, in which a transformation of professional identity is not always the objective nor the outcome. The question of where authority lies between archivist and participant is seen as fundamental to the tailoring of any successful, sustainable participation initiative, but there are alternative participation models besides the Commons that are mutually acceptable and valuable to both archivists and users.

Introduction
Recent essays in the archival literature about the 'opening up' of the archive profession 'for the people' have emphasised the transformative aspects of Web 2.0 technologies for archival practice and professionalism (Yakel 2011; Evans 2007). Such sentiments are by no means peculiar to the sphere of archives, but are reflective of a supposed broader trend towards a more collaborative and networked society, as popularised by digital culture pundits such as Clay Shirky, Charles Leadbeater, and David Weinberger (Shirky 2010; Leadbeater 2008; Weinberger 2012).

On the one hand then, online user participation is heralded as an opportunity to democratise professional archival practice; promising liberation from the straitjacket of traditional cataloguing practice and promoting the active participation of archives users in co-creating historical meaning. On the other hand, participatory culture carries the potential, at least, to subvert not only the hierarchy of the catalogue, but also the power relationships between records, researchers and archivists. User participation initiatives in archives are haunted by a fear that a contributor might be wrong, or that descriptive data might be pulled out of archival context, and that researchers using collaboratively authored resources might somehow swallow all of this without question or substantiation.

Practicing archivists similarly express a range of responses to this perceived 'participatory turn' in archives, from excitement, through technologically determined inevitability, to weary resignation. Yet for all the anticipation of a professional metamorphosis, what is perhaps most striking from interviews with

professionals involved in participatory projects is how rarely evidence is proffered of actual, present changes to archival practice or thinking. User participation may be *expected* to bring change to such universal functions as description, appraisal and access, or to put claims to certain distinctive professional attributes (such as archival authority) under considerable strain, but the reality of any shift seems rather more constrained, even disappointing.

Mapping the Participatory Landscape
One key stimulus behind this PhD study was the need to map the participatory landscape in the archives sector: to evaluate the effectiveness of user participation initiatives towards helping archives address key organizational and professional objectives, such as widening access, and to assess the longer-term implications of participatory practice upon archival professionalism. To date, this research has primarily taken an interpretative, qualitative (largely interview-based) approach, concentrating on online developments in the formal archives sector, although setting these within the context of wider community archives initiatives and traditional volunteering models. Observation of the evolution and realization of participatory designs at The National Archives in the U.K. has formed a central strand in this research. But as more and more archives across the world, of varying sizes, cultural contexts, target audiences and access to resources, follow suit with their own participatory projects, there is an increasingly pressing need to move beyond the experimentation stage and above the level of the individual short-term project or the single institution: to search for commonalities and patterns, to demonstrate best practices in online user participation that will help to sustain future initiatives, and potentially to embed user involvement as core to the future of the archives profession as a whole. Developments at The National Archives therefore became a backbone framework through which comparative projects could then be identified, grouped roughly into the categories of metadata annotation (tagging, bookmarking etc.) and content enrichment (commenting, wikis). User transcription activities (perhaps the most popular style of user participation project in archives at present) additionally may qualify for either category according to the degree of structure in both the source archive documents and in the transcribed content (Agosti & Ferro 2007).

The research has concentrated on the use of collaborative technologies for description or metadata creation (as opposed to user involvement in selection or appraisal, for instance), but has nevertheless incorporated a spectrum of initiatives which seek to benefit from the skills and knowledge of diverse user groups: from mass participation 'crowdsourcing' initiatives which rely on automated techniques for data verification of double-keyed transcription, to the nurturing of user communities to create multiple narrative access points to archives as an enrichment of traditional catalogues. It has also investigated both highly publicised, trend-setting projects with an international following, alongside others which have been allowed quietly to wind down having failed to achieve the desired degree of user engagement. The field from which projects have been drawn is focused primarily on English-speaking initiatives from Europe, North America and Australasia. Overall, the intention has been to explore the reality behind the

claims made regarding experts and crowds, and to investigate how a shift towards involving users in descriptive metadata creation might be impacting upon professional archival theory and practice.

The study has aimed to explore the following research questions:

- What motivates participation in archives initiatives online?
- What implications does participatory descriptive practice hold for research users of archives?
- Does user participation constitute a revolution or an evolution in archival practice and professionalism?

This paper reports findings upon the last of these overarching research questions. Are these participatory developments substantially new phenomena, or are they similar to previous attempts to engage with wider communities and to encourage volunteering? What role does the professional archivist have to play in the moderation or editing of user contributions? How and when should user contributions be integrated into the professional catalogue? What implications does user-generated content have for archival authority and control? What changes might be occurring in professional descriptive practice, or in the archivist's position as a guardian of access to archives?

The Archival Commons
The Archival Commons metaphor characterises user participation with a strong ideological bent. An understanding shaped significantly by a popular rhetoric which promises a relentlessly positive social transformation on a dispersed, global scale through user engagement with Web 2.0 technologies, it is sometimes dismissed as a utopian and romantic vision (Schafer 2011). Nevertheless, it is a vision that continues to be influential in shaping the user participation field in archives, and within the cultural heritage sector more generally (for example Smith-Yoshimura & Shein 2011; Zarro & R. Allen 2010; Fleurbaay 2009).

The Archival Commons idea has been put forward in the greatest detail in a 2009 article in the *American Archivist* (Anderson & R.B. Allen 2009). In essence, the concept could be summarised as an all-encompassing, postmodern, archival ecology. The authors envisage 'a decentralized market-based approach to archival representation' (elsewhere referred to as a 'democratic culture'), representing a 'sea change in how users engage' with archives online. They anticipate a shift away from 'singular arrangement' towards a more flexible, constantly evolving, descriptive practice to reflect the 'constantly changing views and meanings' of archives. This is a vision of archives for a global, interactive, networked society.

The sense of scale is reflected in the promotional texts used for participation initiatives: an ambition to reach as many people as possible, particularly the elusive 'new users'; an awareness of individual archives' position within a wider cultural heritage information network; an inclusive vocabulary: explore,

share, collaborate, contribute. Recent developments with Linked Data are also beginning to put in place a plausible technological underpinning to the Commons concept (Stevenson 2011; UKOLN 2011; Weinberger 2012) - even if the consequences in terms of the skills demanded of professionals and users alike seem a step up from the simplicity and low technical barriers that Anderson and Allen envisage.

But for the most part, whilst the Archival Commons remains a source of inspiration, it seems current practice is more constrained by organisational reality. Trevor Owens contends that most successful participation projects in libraries, archives and museums "are not about crowds" but merely continue the volunteering tradition by "inviting participation from interested and engaged members of the public" (Owens 2012). Even Anderson and Allen are curiously unquestioning about how the Commons might alter the established relationship between archivists and users; and their conceptualisation relies substantially upon volunteers and expert users being willing and able 'to contribute what they have discovered or know' (Anderson & R.B. Allen 2009).

But users may not contribute what archives want to hear or express themselves in ways in which archivists want to hear it. Archivists become caught between the conflicting trajectories of an imagined radical professional transformation and the defence of their employer's reputation. This is not merely a matter of inappropriate language or the pedalling of historical myths and falsehoods, as much as a misalignment between a professional understanding of description and users' more often emotive and personal response to archives. For the Archival Commons has rarely been considered from the perspective of the potential participants, and if one clear lesson has been learnt from the experience of participatory archives over the past five years, it must surely be that 'if we build it' we cannot assume that 'they' will come (Palmer 2009).

User Participation as Outreach and Engagement
As an alternative then to building bespoke platforms, some archivists have turned to external social media services, such as *flickr* and *HistoryPin,* to provide a space for user participation*.* Elizabeth Yakel notes how engaging with these third-party services shows 'the initiation [of archives] into and understanding of social norms in these peer production systems' (Yakel 2011). Professionals interviewed for this study rationalised their involvement with social media as an exercise in taking archive material out to a place where an interested audience already exists. Such ventures have much in common with traditional audience engagement and marketing initiatives, extended in reach and ambition by means of the Internet. Indeed, in-person outreach events may sometimes be incorporated into online projects as a means of building community around the archival content. For all their avowed intent of dipping into spaces inhabited by users, these types of projects were also found to have taken a strong strategic steer from the archives organisation, bounded in terms of timescales, carefully selected archive content, and target user community.

Since these third-party participation sites are usually poorly integrated with finding aids and other archives web resources, however, this severely restricts the impact that the interaction with users might otherwise have had upon professional descriptive practice. User participation in this vein also seems to require a bedrock structure of professional description onto which users are invited to add embellishments. User contributions are treated as supplemental rather than fundamental, and the boundaries between 'us and them' remain substantially intact, particularly where access to the contributed content is also only provided through third-party spaces.

Nevertheless, success in this style of user participation is still contingent upon sensitivity to the user environment. User 'energy' is sought to promote the sustainability of the archival enterprise, by widening the pool of advocates as a response to external turbulence and complexity. A professional renewal, if not a professional re-birth, this outreach form of user participation was recognised by research participants as a legitimate (if possibly transient) response to external policy and economic pressures, challenging archivists to show strong leadership in shaping the future of the profession.

The role of the archivist here seems to be that of intermediary between organisation and target community (Duff, Craig & Cherry 2004; Hedstrom 2002), or a boundary gatekeeper maintaining the archivist's position of authority. Editorial control is usually reserved to a staff moderator, and contributions may even be rejected according to professional judgements about suitability and pertinence. Yakel argues that the authority claimed here is a kind of cognitive influence - the archivist and archives institution acting in concert as a proxy for personal knowledge of the accuracy of archival finding aids and the authenticity of the records described therein (Yakel 2011; Wilson 1983). Some users may be willing to accept this authority, since it implies no 'right to command', and lessens the filtering and verification burden on research user. But it was also found in this study to be vulnerable to allegations of censorship, as well as to false or offensive user representations, even where the archives operated a relaxed moderation policy. The tension over authority in outreach projects appeared to be difficult to resolve, however, since the instinct to control stemmed as much from defence of the organisation as from professional inflexibility.

Participating in Learning Communities
More rarely, interviewees embraced this challenge to the archival *status quo*, and sought a more thoroughgoing remodelling of archival practice which aimed to break down, or at least redraw, the boundaries between archivists and users. The literature is critical of the high visibility of archivists, rather than users, on some public participation sites (Yakel 2011; Palmer 2009). But an alternative reading might see this as an important staging post in the transformation of archival practice, in learning to share archival knowledge more openly, and in new and more adaptable ways. In this way, archivists can begin to identify areas where current professional processes and services fail to meet user needs. The next step is to entrust specific user communities to help resolve these issues, by reorienting participation opportunities around the intrinsic interests of the divers communities of practice which already surround

the archival record (for instance, family historians, geographers, economic historians might use the same source, but in different ways) (Wenger 1998). When user communities are invited to input into the *processes* of participation in this way, as well as to contribute content, the results are no longer restricted by the established structures of acceptable professional archival practice. The professional role is reoriented away from a mechanistic focus on strong archival leadership and hierarchically determined goals towards a new emphasis upon facilitation, dispersed community coordination and emergent design.

All this may demand unaccustomed levels of professional humility: recognising that archivists too make errors, and welcoming dispute and debate around the contents of a catalogue in 'perpetual beta' (Yeo 2010). Yet it is by handing over some responsibility for the maintenance of community norms and standards, and for the direction and sustainability of the site of participation, that archivists seek to resolve the tension of cognitive authority encountered in outreach initiatives (Yakel 2011; Wasko & Teigland 2004). Participation can then begin to move beyond a channelled exchange of supplementary descriptive information towards a deeper understanding of historical sources as new knowledge emerges from the network of (redundant) connections, or develops in unexpected directions - for instance, through the creation of new visual finding aids or mash-ups using archival data (Morgan 2006).

Transcription Machines

If outreach-style participation is to defend the professional boundary, learning communities seek to redraw it, and the Archival Commons to dissolve it. A fourth option is to reinforce it. Rules and structure are imposed from above to ensure consistent, standardised input (and output). Quality control becomes a matter of consecutive processing up through a hierarchical chain of command, combined with double (or sometimes triple) entry, statistical sampling and automated error detection. The emphasis is on bureaucratic or administrative control over user input, which is characterised by the reductive nature of both the participative task and of contributors' fleeting commitment to that task and to each other. Participants are, in effect, expected to behave as if they were parts of a metadata-processing assembly line, and the issues of motivating participants to take part in 'transcription machines', and of rewarding performance, come to be understood as a competitive game. The mechanical image of user participation can even be extended, metaphorically and also literally, into the ways in which archival metadata can be released for use through the structured delivery mechanisms of APIs (application programming interfaces).

The impact upon the professional role here is not transformation so much as extension or translation of function. The enforced consistency can be viewed as a continuation and extension of an ongoing trajectory towards standardisation of archival descriptive practice (Bunn 2011), extending control over input standards down to a micro-level. Meanwhile, responsibility for the actual process of data input transfers to the users, the archivist taking on more of a coordinating role: participants in such projects

understood their role to be releasing archivists from the drudgery of the routine, or freeing them up to concentrate on more worthy professional concerns.

But this shift might also harbour a hidden threat to professionalism. The bureaucratic nature of the authority wielded here is not relative to a particular sphere of interest or expertise (Wilson 1983), and hence does not of necessity have to be exercised by professional *archivists,* and the reductive nature of the transcription task is easily dismissed as beneath the professional dignity of an archivist. Archives organisations have outsourced responsibility for many such projects to a range of external delivery partners, ranging from the entirely volunteer-led and managed (such as the U.K. based *Crew Lists Indexing Project*), to subject specialist consortia (the Zooniverse *Old Weather* project is a good example here), to commercial enterprises such as *Ancestry.* So whereas one benefit of the more community-focused forms of user participation is the advocacy role that such projects can play in raising the profile of professionalized archive services, participants in outsourced transcription machines may be disinterested or simply unaware of any link to a formal repository or of any input of expertise made to the project by professional archivists. Furthermore, restricting licensing deals or simply a lack of foresight over data rights can also lead to a loss of *archival* control over the extensive quantities of descriptive metadata generated by such projects.

This is a particular issue in the context of the increasing prominence of open data and the potential for 'big data' computational analysis to transform historical research using archives. As the role of the archivist shifts away from the sole authorship of description then, a new opportunity or imperative opens up in respect of descriptive information retrieval: linking together the multiple representations and contexts of each archival asset, and devising new tools for filtering, searching and understanding the historical world. 'Gatekeeping of information resources shifts from contribution to retrieval. When "anyone" can post to the web, the value is in being retrieved' (Haythornthwaite 2009).

Conclusion

This paper has discussed the diversity of user participation in current practice through four frames. These four frames, or quadrants, come together to form a proposed matrix of user participation (Figure 1). The borders between the frames are fluid, but together the four quadrants provide a conceptual map which aims to make sense of the ambiguities and contradictions, ideological inclinations and variety of configurations observed in contemporary user participation initiatives in archives.

Caroline Haythornthwaite's 'crowds and communities' peer production spectrum creates the left and right hand sides of this framework, representing the motivations and behaviours or contributors to online participation structures (Haythornthwaite 2009). 'Crowd' in this model does not necessarily refer to large numbers of people, but instead relates to the relative strength of the social ties between participants, being strong in a community, but becoming weaker as the continuum line moves towards the crowd. This

conception of a crowd retains the all-embracing sense of scale which underpins the Archival Commons ambition, as well as the potential for comments and encounters of a more serendipitous nature from participants with no previous connection to a particular archives.

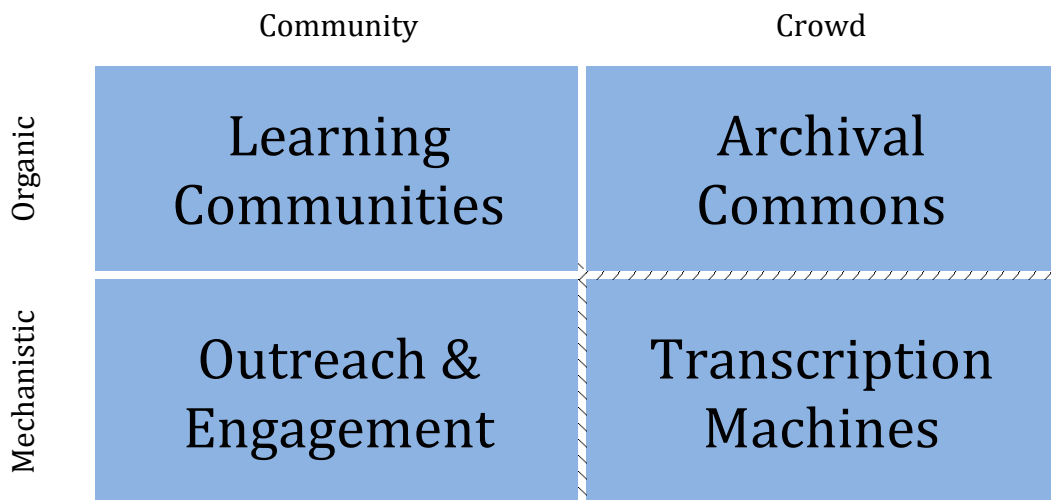|	Community	Crowd
Organic	Learning Communities	Archival Commons
Mechanistic	Outreach & Engagement	Transcription Machines

Figure 1: A User Participation Matrix

The upper and lower halves of the user participation framework represent contrasting approaches to the structure and management of online user participation projects, using Burns and Stalker's classic distinction between 'mechanistic' and 'organic' styles of organisation (Burns & Stalker 1961). Here, this spectrum pertains to the structural coordination of user participation, whether focused upon specific goals and objectives (mechanistic) or taking a more flexible and open-ended approach (organic).

A further variable is the position of the employing archives organisation with respect to each frame, since not all participation projects are solely designed or managed by professional archivists. The impact of Web 2.0 technology upon archival professionalism has mostly been conceived and discussed in the literature as a straight line, a tug of war between greater openness towards users in one direction and the forces of professional traditionalism in the other (Flinn 2010). But archival practice is considerably more complex, involving at least a three-way relationship between profession, employer and user. The impact of user participation upon archival professionalism is determined by the interplay between these three elements within each frame of the matrix, and by tensions within each element. For example, the position of the employing organisation is prominent in the bottom left-hand quadrant (Outreach and Engagement), where as the name 'outreach' suggests, participation emanates outwards from the organisation. Different professional cultures can also influence how user participation is conceived and understood, and similarly the reluctance of one archival user community to accept or engage with another user community may in turn limit the depth and pace of professional change.

The matrix is an attempt to begin to draw out the different ways in which participation may influence archival professionalism in the abstract. It suggests that a revolutionary transformation of professional

practice is not always either the objective, nor the outcome, of user participation initiatives in archives. Where, for instance, the tolerance of an employing organisation for professional autonomy is low, or where the project seeks the participation of large numbers of users who may have only a transitory interest in the archives, a more circumscribed evolution is equally legitimate and practical, and may consequently prove more sustainable in certain contexts.

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