Chapter 78
Building Inclusivity Through Connections With Community Archives

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores how to construct bridges between existing cultural institutions and community archives (or community groups wanting to develop archives) and the potential role for third-party organizations in bridging these groups. Further, research is presented that provides recommendations for library and archive practitioners who wish to build connections with groups in their communities. Connecting with participatory heritage is introduced as a means to build capacity in community groups for sustaining efforts to preserve and make accessible diverse histories.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter offers practice-based recommendations on how to construct bridges between existing heritage institutions and community archives or community groups wanting to develop archives. These recommendations are based on a case study of a multi-year project involving one particular community archive that began 160 years ago and remains active today, as well as, a qualitative study focused on individuals who have functioned as a third-party organization to bridge connections between institutions and community groups. The concept of participatory heritage is presented as the social context in which connections and capacity are built.

BACKGROUND

Archives and Underrepresented Histories

Over the past several decades, heritage institutions (libraries, museums, and archives) have increased their commitment to documenting and preserving forgotten records and unspoken voices of underrepresented communities (Cook, 2013). While these efforts have significantly contributed to social justice and human rights, there are limitations to a top-down approach of collecting and preserving marginalized histories. Community archives, which take a bottom-up approach, are a potential path to overcoming these limitations (Flinn & Stevens, 2009). Community archives usually refer collections of archival records that originate in a community-that is, a group of people who live in the same location or share other forms of community of interest-and whose collection, maintenance and use involves active participation of that community (Ander, 2007).

Historically, many underrepresented communities have created archives for use by their members to advocate for their current and historical representation in society. When social justice is desired, community archives generally possess these characteristics: it is used by members beyond their evidentiary purpose; it requires control and participation by community members; it is driven by social context rather than neutrality, it supports activism and advocacy for the community; it contains non-traditional acquisitions generated through community member donations; its collections are dictated and developed by community members (Copeland, 2015). Community archives also face many challenges, such as lack of expertise in and capability of preservation as well as technical and financial sustainability, because it prioritizes the use of records to support current community information needs rather than long-term preservation and it is often founded by one or two passionate individuals and it is maintained by volunteers (Copeland, 2015).

Bringing archival institutions and community archives together is a mutually beneficial approach to overcoming these limitations for both sectors. The desire for formal or mainstream heritage institutions to form relationships with community archives stems from a professional responsibility to build more inclusive and culturally relevant collections. Through forming partnerships, heritage institutions will be exposed to an increasingly broader scope of topics but also be better positioned to help the communities that are not capable of organizing and preserving their own stories. The need for community archives to form relationships with other agencies emerges when financial and physical sustainability issues arise. Over time, relying on volunteers and limited or sporadic financial resources threatens their long-term existence. Further, community groups or community archives that are so marginalized as to not have connections to formal institutions will have access to professional expertise as well as to a preservation infrastructure. Third-party organizations may likely be the bridge between institutions and community groups as third-party entities are in a better position to prioritize social justice than are formal archival institutions, which operate from a premise of neutrality.

There have been considerable practical and theoretical interests in community archives since the early 1990s. Archivists and librarians have recognized the importance and impact of community archives; connecting people with their history and heritage, engaging community in social activities, and contributing democratic heritage from participatory collecting (Duff et al, 2013). Perhaps the most significant role of community archives is their contribution to social justice, by recovering the hidden and marginalized stories and documenting the silence that are not the scope of formal memory institutions. Flinn (2011),

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