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“We've no problem inheriting that knowledge on to other people”: Exploring the characteristics of motivation for attending a participatory archives event



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ABSTRACT

While cultural heritage institutions increasingly use participatory events to draw in new audiences, little is known about what motivates participants to attend these events. Twenty semi-structured interviews with 29 individuals who attended one of three Inspiring Ireland 1916 public collection days were conducted in order to explore participants' motivations for attending the event and perceived benefits. A participatory archives event, the collection days invited members of the public to bring relevant possessions to be digitally captured and have their story of the item recorded. The stories and items were then made available on the Inspiring Ireland website commemorating the centenary of the 1916 Easter Rising in Dublin, Ireland. While participatory initiatives have enjoyed increasing attention in the archives literature of late, much of this work attempts to define terms or model behaviours from the perspective of the archivists. Little existing work attempts to explore the motivations of individuals to participate in these events using empirical methods. Findings suggest motivations for attending a collection day can be characterised across four characteristics that can be categorised as aligning with individual or communal perception of benefits: A) to share their story and provide evidence in order to influence the contemporary narrative of the Rising (individual benefit), B) to relieve the burdens of preservation and remembering (individual benefit), C) to find out more about the object or context of the object (individual benefit), and D) to share their object via the open access features of the Inspiring Ireland website as a way to fulfil a civic duty and support a public good (communal benefit). These findings contradict existing literature about the purpose for engaging in participatory initiatives (to pluralise collections) and assumptions about why individuals are motivated to engage (altruistic, intrinsic motivation). Further exploration of the concept of communal versus individual perceived benefit could influence the ways in which cultural heritage institutions justify their role in society. The concept of an archival *user* is evolving. Understanding how participation can be considered use will help institutions develop a more holistic understanding of use in contemporary settings.

1. Introduction

The phrase participatory archives has been used to describe a shift in the focus of archival work from a focus on preservation to a focus on use (Huvila, 2008). Participatory initiatives in archives take many forms with different labels, including participant centered, web and community archiving (Theimer, 2011). Several early examples of participatory projects exist. Krause and Yakel (2007) developed an online finding aid to which users could contribute. Other work in this area has focused on model development (Huvila, 2008; Shilton & Srinivasan, 2007), case studies of participatory techniques such as crowdsourcing (Eveleigh, 2017; Theimer, 2011), and the influence of such techniques on the archives profession (Eveleigh, 2015).

1.1. Problem statement

While participatory models have been proposed and the influence of participatory initiatives on practice has been explored, little existing research focuses exclusively on the participant's perspective of engaging in these initiatives and how such information can assist in meeting the goals of such initiatives. Further, as use of archives evolves and the definition of user expands, it is necessary to explore the motivations of the participant, not just a user in an on site reading room or a user of a static website. This study explored participation in a participatory archives project from the viewpoint of the nonprofessional participant, asking what motivated them to participate. The findings can be useful in understanding how archives might begin to thoughtfully encourage participation and develop a more holistic understanding of contemporary use of collections. As institutions compete for limited funding, understanding how better to meet user needs may lead to

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improved impact measures and in turn, funding.

2. Literature review

2.1. Participatory archives and archives 2.0

While the concept of participation has broadly been discussed in media and communication studies, there are fewer examples of the term *participatory* as it is applied to archival studies. Early work in this area has described specific cases or projects, with less empirical research attempting to explore how participatory initiatives could meet stated needs and goals of a project, or benefit the participant, from the participant's viewpoint.

In 2007, Shilton and Srinivasan proposed that participatory appraisal, arrangement, and description be applied to archival tasks as a way to more meaningfully represent traditionally marginalised communities in institutional archives. In their proposed model, the authors suggested that participants be asked to “share cultural, economic, educational, and other information” (p. 99) by uploading personal documents perceived to represent their heritage and identity. Focus groups would then be used to gather information to develop metadata and context for the records. There was no indication as to why individuals would be motivated to participate in this model or share personal documents with an institution.

In an effort to “address issues of communication and user participation in archival contexts” (p. 15), Huvila (2008) conducted action research by constructing two digital archives in order to develop a new approach for a participatory archive, defined by “decentralised curation, radical user orientation and contextualisation of both records and the entire archival process” (p. 15). In this model, curation responsibilities were shared between professional archivists and participants, usability was considered equal to preservation activities, and it was intended that individuals be prioritised above organisational contexts of records. Engaging users was considered the priority, instead of traditional archival tasks such as preservation, appraisal, arrangement, and description. Further, Huvila believed that the term *users* should be more broadly conceived to include use of records but also participation in development of records and context. While this work better defined *participatory* it was not clear in what specific situations such a model would be best adopted or why individuals would be motivated to participate in shared governance.

Unlike Huvila (2008) who categorised use of the term *participatory* from literature and blog posts, Rolan (2016) explored dimensions of the term in relation to the records continuum model. According to Rolan, participatory initiatives in archives could take several forms: participatory projects, generalised systems, and archives 2.0. These three typologies could be mapped to the records continuum model, depending on the ways in which individuals interacted with the records. For example, individuals that *experienced* the records, such as care leavers experiencing a record of their own time in care, differed from individuals who *identified* with records that did not contain information specifically related to themselves but did relate to their personal life activities, such as records documenting a community. In addition, there were those who *related* to records who may have felt connected to records that were not directly related to their lived experiences. Finally, there were those who conducted research using records based on personal/professional interest, but whom did not personally connect with the records. Whereas participatory projects were more often aligned with individuals who experienced records, generalised systems (such as a community archive) were aligned with those who identified with records, and those who related to records were most often aligned with archives 2.0 activities. According to Rolan, these dimensions of “participatory distanciation represented the attitude of participants in relation to the activities represented by the records” (p. 14).

The participants' dimension of participation was directly related to their activity associated with the records: those who experienced

records about themselves may have wished to have more say in management of the records, whereas those who related to the records and engaged in archives 2.0 may simply have wished to engage and connect with others about the records and context. Rolan's work moved the discussion of *participatory* in archives forward in that it designated typologies of participation, but it still assumed that the participation in archives was beneficial, without offering empirical evidence for the justification of such initiatives. Such justification could come from the voices of participants. The above models are of use when attempting to understand how participatory practices can fit into existing archival practices, but do not specifically address why individuals would be motivated to participate in projects.

While the user was central in both participatory and community archives, Eveleigh (2017) suggested that those who participated in participatory archives initiatives were more motivated to share with the public, rather than with a tight knit group. The work of these authors suggested that individuals engaged because they wanted to participate, but its not clear why they wanted to participate or the benefits they believed that they would gain from the participation.

In order to explore different ways that initiatives were used across institutions in New Zealand, Liew (2014) explored four cases of cultural heritage institutions that used participatory initiatives. The author identified the aims of participatory initiatives in libraries, archives and museums as being motivated by three categories: a) as a business strategy to please users; b) that the participatory initiatives met the needs of core goals of the sector, including creating wider educational opportunities and leveraging the knowledge base via users; and c) moving past the perception that cultural heritage institutions could be perceived as elitist. No clear definition of participatory initiatives was provided, but examples included the facilitation of user-generated content, user input in the display of collections, avenues for providing user feedback, and general use of social media tools and platforms. Liew provided one of the first empirical studies to address the purpose of adopting participatory initiatives, but did so without exploring the opinion of the participants.

2.2. Use and studying users

Previous literature has explored archival use from the user's perspective, most specifically related to information seeking in the reading room, but few examples exist that explore participatory initiatives from the viewpoint of the participant (Duff & Johnson, 2002; Duff & Johnson, 2003; Yakel, 2002; Yakel & Torres, 2003). Further, if one is to conceive of use via Huvila's (2008) definition that use includes participation, it is necessary to explore use beyond traditional definitions. While Flinn (2007) explored participatory initiatives from the perspective of the archives professional, little work has investigated the participant experience. Like Flinn (2007), Eveleigh (2015) focused on the perspectives of the archives professional, but also attempted to interview archives users about participation. In one phase of her study, most of the users were existing volunteers or employees of the archives who had engaged with the archives online. In another phase, the author interviewed users who had completed a reading room questionnaire after visiting onsite. Quantitative data suggested that many of the reading room visitors had previously engaged in participatory projects online. A further questionnaire was developed for online users of the UK National Archives. Findings included the suggestion that the concept of use could be reimagined to include online participation beyond information seeking and that there was a potential for online participation to contribute to a sense of personalising the archives experience.

Caswell (2014) queried users of the South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA) about collection priorities for the digital archive. Caswell rooted the empirical study in the tradition of community archives, a collecting tradition thought to lead “to a more straightforward relationship between archival collections and community needs” (p. 1). The author conducted a content analysis of 70 responses asking users

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