

Participatory Archives: Within and Beyond the Archival Institution

Webinar by Dr. Alexandra Eveleigh, 7 December 2021

Q&A Report

What do colonial mining and participatory projects have in common? With a provocative image, Dr Alexandra Eveleigh (Wellcome Collection, UK) made the participants of the first webinar in the series '[To imagine otherwise: future archives](#)' reflect. Of course, the photo of miners and supervisors in the British Cape Colony showing exploitation and segregation is of a completely different order than the online initiatives that emerged more than a decade ago after the advent of Web 2.0 technology. Still, the image stuck: when setting up participation, are we also setting up a one-sided 'extraction' of knowledge or workforce? Are we taking volunteers on board without taking their needs into account? And what about the global dimension: do Western institutions unconsciously 'colonise' the Internet and human resources, without questioning whether this really makes the world a better place?

You can watch Eveleigh's complete presentation at the webinar [here](#). The synthesised report offered below therefore mainly concerns the extensive round of questions that followed the presentation. Maarten Heerlien of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam moderated the questions of more than 100 participants, from all continents. The international webinar series 'To imagine otherwise: future archives' is an initiative of four Belgian organisations that aim to preserve or pass on art heritage: CEMPER, Letterenhuis, M HKA/CKV and VAI, in collaboration with FARO and meemoo.

Why 'participation', again?

Alexandra Eveleigh herself is an enthusiastic advocate for more (online) participation in the professional heritage sector. As the author of a PhD on online participatory archives and co-editor of the volume *Participatory Archives. Theory and Practice* (London: Facet Publishing, 2019), Eveleigh was the perfect speaker to explain the share and importance of this approach in the archive world. And as Collections Information Manager, she was one of the initiators of several participatory processes at the Wellcome Collection in London.

After the initial excitement about the possibilities for online tagging, annotation and transcription, now more than ten years ago, Eveleigh saw interest quickly wane: participation turned out not to be the easy magic bullet that could structurally eliminate the delays in processing archives. Eveleigh calls this first phase of online interaction between archivists and users – to meet the needs of institutions – the 'participatory hub model'. It did not result in a renewal of processes or output: the goals, standards and quality criteria of the archivist remained unchanged. After the initial enthusiasm of the volunteers had cooled off, it turned out to be difficult to obtain the latter's sustainable online engagement.

A more recent approach can be described as the 'more process, less product' model. In this model, the goal is less achieving the institution's goals than improving relations with participants. Here, the archivist cannot passively reap the benefits of other people's work, but will actively encourage participants to enhance their own skills and achieve their own goals. Archivists should also be humble and must dare to 'air out their dirty laundry', and be prepared to learn from participants' critique.

One step further yet is taken when structural 'participatory partnerships' are forged and communities are given the power to help determine goals and methods. For such a model of 'reciprocal curation', Alexandra Eveleigh referred to the Local Contexts initiative (localcontexts.org). From personal experience Eveleigh knows that well established institutions can more easily guarantee *sustainable preservation of content* in the long term compared to many community groups. Still, she believes it should not stop here: anyone who believes in the value of the archive institution must also dare to commit to *sustainable care for communities*.

An open, polyphonic future

An overly simple, yet insightful way to put it is that the initial 'hub' model only promoted knowledge about people's *past*, whereas the 'more process than product' approach took into account the needs of participants in the *present*, whilst the 'partnership' model enables shaping the *future* of communities. In any case, for Eveleigh, participatory practice is 'the future' and (hopefully) 'there to stay'. According to Eveleigh, the COVID 19 pandemic and its freedom-restricting measures meant that people started to appreciate how everyone might benefit from working together online. She also spoke passionately about the opportunity and responsibility of archival institutions to bring about change through participation, as far as societal challenges are concerned – such as social justice, equal access to the digital universe, health and climate change

Still, archival institutions are sometimes suspicious of involving communities in their work because the latter may be perceived as 'biased', 'not neutral', or even uncomfortably radical and 'activist'. However, Eveleigh suggested there is much archivists might learn from activists' determination and their engagement with the future as a place of aspiration and imagination. Eveleigh referred, moreover, to the work of Bernadette Lynch, who argued that museums should not paternalistically 'help' but above all 'empower' participants so that they achieve their goals themselves.

Fortunately, archivists and organisations increasingly accept the fact that, as a principle, their own position is not neutral. Still, in practice the institution is so concerned by its reputation that it still responds defensively when outsiders question its choices. For Eveleigh, this is counterproductive: by not being open and transparent about one's own interventions and bias, one excludes oneself from the richness that interaction with engaged communities offers. According to her, we should not be afraid to enter into dialogue with others about the endless possibilities of giving meaning to archive material. It can help us to better understand the social and global impact an institution can generate.

Need for awareness and dialogue

Alexandra Eveleigh repeatedly pointed out the danger that volunteers in participatory projects get unilaterally instrumentalised, without taking into account what they want to achieve themselves. This raises questions about how this balance can be restored, how the participation can become 'reciprocal', or how enough can be 'given back'. According to Eveleigh, listening, talking and negotiating are the only principles that can offer guidance here. Often, one mistakenly thinks to know what the other person wants... Eveleigh recalled that when she first met a contributor to the Local Contexts project, she had expectations of what she wanted to *get*, without having given much thought to what she herself could *give* to the partners. After a few intense discussions, it turned out that this could be about much more than just archival documents, but also about the exchange of, say, technical knowledge or knowledge relating to the content – such as how to deal with 'born digital' material.

Relying on voluntary crowdsourcing could be seen as a form of exploitation. Wealthy institutions should consider paying the participants for their work. Nevertheless, there is certainly a way to respectfully involve the large group of people who are enthusiastic about voluntary online collaboration. Participatory initiatives must, however, be very aware that they should not push people beyond a limit. For her doctoral research, Eveleigh interviewed someone who had become addicted to chores we might call 'menial', because the platform's interfaces were designed to fuel competition and to continue to fuel the addiction. Shouldn't we guard an ethical boundary? For others still, the competitive approach had the opposite effect: those who could only commit to a limited extent, quickly felt useless.

Online collaboration: from 'nice to have' to foundation?

The COVID 19 pandemic also taught the Wellcome Collection to set aside another widespread prejudice: that the 'real work' was done on location, with the physical archives or collections, while what happened online was only a 'nice to have extra'. In the past, this dichotomy was sometimes reinforced by adjectives such as 'virtual' or 'remote'. Eveleigh's own work as an archivist can no longer be divided into an 'online persona' and a 'real persona'. Moderator Maarten Heerlien saw a similar evolution at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam: before the pandemic, the main purpose of the online operation was to attract visitors to the museum; today, online and offline visits are equally important.

Alexandra Eveleigh would like online and offline activities at her institution to be integrated even more strongly. Both in strategic development and in individual project planning, the starting point should always be that for most people, the Internet is the first access route to an institution and its collection. Some products and services that were previously only offered on location, can even work much better in an online environment. The question of how to deal with the 'digital divide' – the fact that not all target groups have equally easy access to the online offer – remained unanswered during the conversation. Still, on several occasions, Eveleigh emphasised the importance of exchange between newer online forms of participation and the long tradition of *live*, physical voluntary work.

For smaller organisations or institutions, it seems a lot more difficult to organise online participation. Not all institutions are for example able to digitise their collection sufficiently

in order to set up online transcription projects. Eveleigh confirms that, as a bigger, wealthy organisation, Wellcome Collection has a serious advantage here. Still, it is also possible to take photos of documents on a small scale and to share them with volunteers via standard tools such as Dropbox or Sharepoint. Or volunteers can come over and take photos on the spot, then get to work at home. At Wellcome, the groupware Slack is used for collaborative collecting projects. The transcription project, on the other hand, was launched with basic tools such as online Excel spreadsheets, with the initial assumption that the project would subsequently switch to existing platforms for transcription (e.g. fromthepage.com) or collaborative research (e.g. Zooniverse). Such platforms have the advantage of already disposing of a pool of enthusiasts who may be willing to help, at least if the demand matches their interests. Yet for the Wellcome Collection, a creative approach to the regular Office package ultimately offered enough possibilities, so they didn't even have to take that step. As Alexandra Eveleigh indicates, in the longer term, a sustainable database is important for the management and storage of data, but before starting a project, one already goes a long way by adapting existing tools to the needs of those who want to participate.

Staf Vos en Sarah Masson (CEMPER)