

Book Reviews

Participatory Archives: Theory and Practice

Edited by Edward Benoit, III and Alexandra Eveleigh
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Imagine this: your institution starts a crowd-sourced project for an impossibly huge backlog. With little to no effort on your part, it goes viral! People around the world pour their efforts into your work, producing high-quality metadata, which is then ingested with no difficulty back into your database. Unknown people and places are given authority terms and context, geographic locations are indexed to the nearest millimetre, and the crowds strain at your doors for the chance to contribute more.

This rose-tinted view of participatory archives exists for a reason: we don't like to talk about our failures. Particularly with funded projects, reviews tend to highlight the positive outcomes while avoiding a lack of public interest, or spreadsheets of contradictory metadata. That's where *Participatory Archives* comes in, bringing archivists from around the world together to explore, explain, and pick apart public participation in their archives - the good, the bad, *and* the ugly.

The book is divided into four sections: *Social Tagging and Commenting*, *Transcription*, *Crowdfunding and Outreach*, and *Alternative and Activist Communities*. Each of these sections begins with two chapters covering literature review and theory, respectively. After gaining a bird's-eye view of the area in question, you are then invited to deep-dive into specific case studies. Separating the principles and examples in this way is really useful, and it means the case studies are clear, concise, and focused on the individual projects.

This book surprised me with its frankness about the limitations of crowd participation, whether in hashtagging, or fundraising, or even simple transcription. As Benoit and Eveleigh conclude, "*applying a participatory veneer to archival challenges is not a panacea*" (p216). In other words, crowd-sourcing doesn't fix understaffing, shaky IT infrastructure, or unending backlogs. It instead provides you with the means to complete a specific,

well-defined project while engaging target communities - with the right planning and preparation, of course.

The case studies were the highlight of this book. From work with indigenous Nunavut communities on *Project Naming*, to a Halloween-themed drive for obsolete media (*#UndeadTech*), each of these stories inspired, cautioned, and celebrated the creativity and scope of archival work. The ideas from these chapters continue to float around in my head, and I recently found myself enthusiastically recommending *Zooniverse* to a LIS student who wanted to try out different aspects of cataloguing.

In reading books on broadening archival practice, I am always wary of archival jargon, which can be a real punch-in-the-face to non-practitioner readers. A few red flags went up when one of the first chapters called tagging "*more rhizomatic than Aristotelian*" - but after that, it was a surprisingly accessible and smooth read. I would feel comfortable recommending this book to anyone in the GLAM sector who wants a balanced view of the pros, and cons, of participatory metadata creation. Given its cost I would suggest heading to your local library for an interloan - but this inspiring and quirky book is definitely worth a read.

Reviewed by Nina Whittaker