New American Heritage: Designing Digital Collections for User Collaboration

C. Nicholson
Pratt Institute
115 Riverview Avenue
Tarrytown, NY
lottienicholson@aol.com

K. Pradt
Pratt Institute
370 Park Place
Brooklyn, NY
kpradt@aya.yale.edu

A. Reporter
Pratt Institute
172 Rivington St., Apt. 11
New York, NY
aimai.reporter@gmail.com

ADDITIONAL AUTHORS AT END OF PAPER

ABSTRACT
Our project aims to develop guidelines for curating interactive, community-based digital collections for groups and institutions with limited resources. Many small, local cultural heritage organizations would like to develop an internet presence and display their collections online. These collections may include various kinds of media and much of the material may be user-contributed or user-edited, making the needs of these institutions complex. Though limited resources tend to be the norm, the potential and necessity for collaboration across scholarly and professional disciplines makes this area ripe for exploration, and development of such guidelines can help to offset these resource shortages. We will use a specific institution, the folk life program of the Council on the Arts and Humanities for Staten Island (COAHSI), as a case study to explore the decisions, issues, and challenges that such collections should address when implementing a web-based collection.

KEYWORDS
Cultural heritage, folk art, folk life, digital curation, digital literacy, digital archives, user contribution, metadata, collection management, community building.

INTRODUCTION
As a project for the course Cultural Heritage: Description and Access at the Pratt Institute School of Information and Library Science, Spring 2012, fourteen MSILS students researched and made recommendations for the planned website of a community archive of folk life run under the auspices of the Council for the Arts and Humanities of Staten Island (COAHSI). Our client was Christopher Mulé, Deputy Director of COAHSI, Regional and County Folklorist for Staten Island, and our goal was to research existing best practices and current issues for the creation, curation, preservation, and presentation of cultural heritage. After our class completed its initial report in May 2012, five of us continued to consult with Mulé to expand and refine the original paper.

Mulé works with several ethnic communities on Staten Island, helping to document traditional art forms such as storytelling, dance, and cloth weaving in video and audio recordings as well as in photographs.

Mulé envisioned a digital archive that would encourage community participation, such as uploading videos, photos, and audio. He also needed the archive to serve the more traditional functions of collection management, metadata creation, and long-term preservation. He hoped that the archive could be both a scholarly tool and a community cultural resource. Finally, he wanted to have the possibility of integrating the COAHSI archive with other folk life collections, including the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage.

PROJECT DESIGN
Discussions with Mulé showed us that COAHSI's site would need to be easily accessible to and navigable by multilingual users who may not have advanced computer skills.

User uploads would require a mechanism for membership with varying levels of access for community contributors and staff administrators. Privacy protections would be particularly important for a user community that could potentially have immigration issues. Low levels of computer literacy and ownership and the need for

ASIST 2012, October 26-31, 2012, Baltimore, MD, USA.

multilingual functionality called for innovative user interface (UI) design as well as adaptability to mobile platforms, as cell phones are the primary means of accessing the Internet for much of the population.

We examined existing cultural heritage sites to find best practices, outstanding features, and potential pitfalls. Some of the sites evaluated were The Citizen Potawatomi Nation Cultural Heritage Center, Hurricane Digital Archive, PhilaPlace, and Florida Memory.

Findings

Our analysis of the websites demonstrated that there is no real "gold standard." We did find characteristics and features to emulate or avoid.

• *Visual appeal*. B.J. Fogg and his researchers at the Persuasive Technology Lab at Stanford found that the single most important factor in website credibility was the design look (Fogg et al., "How Do Users Evaluate the Credibility of Web Sites?" (2003)). The best and most functional sites we evaluated had these characteristics: a cohesive aesthetic, ease of navigation, and well-designed search and browse functionalities.

• *Engagement and interactivity*. PhilaPlace and the Hurricane Digital Archive are examples of how a cultural heritage website can facilitate additions to the archive. Both sites use well- designed forms to guide users through the content submission process. Allowing users to comment on and tag items is another way to encourage community involvement.

PLATFORMS

Many of the sites we studied were built on open-source content management systems (CMS) such as WordPress and Omeka. Open-source software is free and can be customized. But such a site can be expensive to build and requires greater technical knowledge in-house to maintain it. While proprietary software would be customized and maintained by the vendor, it can be prohibitively expensive for smaller institutions.

Findings

Cost, flexibility, cataloging and design capabilities, ease of use, and concerns of a specific institution such as security all need to be considered in choosing a platform. For the COAHSI project, cost was a concern, which led to our recommendation of open-source software rather than a proprietary system.

Our recommendation for COAHSI was Drupal, one of the most widely used open-source software platforms. Drupal sites are highly customizable and have interactive modules that allow participants to add content, tag items, select favorites, and so on. Drupal is also a leader in developing mobile capabilities.

Other collections might be better served with a different CMS. Institutions must balance their resources against their requirements to choose the best platform.

METADATA

Because the COAHSI collection aims to be useful to scholars as well as the general public, and because Mulé would like to be able to integrate its materials with other collections, assigning and managing metadata is critical. However, little has been published on the topic of metadata standards applied to folklife collections, and the ethnographic nature of folklife collections requires a completely different focus than metadata schemas used for museums and archives. Because materials in ethnographic collections are collected with a certain focus, on a certain occasion, or from a certain group, or accrue within a specific structure, it is essential to describe materials in a way that not only leaves this structure intact but is capable of highlighting the significance it lends to the collection.

Lourdi, Papatheodorou, and Nikolaidou (2007) note, "The main difficulty in managing such [digital folklore] collections is material heterogeneity (handwritten texts, photographs, 3D objects, sound recordings etc.) that imposes different digitization, description and maintenance practices" (Lourdi et al., 2007, p. 197). To address the issue of associating materials with their larger collections, the authors propose a "metadata policy [that] considers a collection as a hierarchy of entities and combines different metadata schemas for the management of each entity" (Lourdi et al., 2007, p. 197).

In 2011, the American Folklore Society (AFS) was awarded a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities in part to address the varying standards used to describe folklife collections. AFS has created the National Folklore Archives Initiative (NFAI) Metadata Schema. Preliminary information on the project is available at the American Folklore Society at http://www.afsnet.org/?page=NFAI. Unfortunately, because the schema is still under development, little is available on the specifics—the fields and their guidelines and the exact scope of the project.

Findings

Through interviews with project directors Andy Kolovos and Steve Green, we have been able to get a slightly more focused picture of the project including a better understanding of the project's timeline and scope, and a layout of the schema's fields. The schema will be made public around 2013, at the completion of the first phase of the project.

CONCLUSION

We began this project with the intention of producing a list of recommendations for presenting COASHI's folklife collections online and using this presence to engage the community in new ways. We intended ultimately to present an outline of best practices for digital folklife collections based on standards within the field. But we found few protocols and fewer guidelines. While this lack of standardization in the field can seem intimidating, we believe that it presents an opportunity for an individual institution to discover the best balance between the components of the digital projects surveyed in this report.

Our research and recommendations can be used by small cultural institutions to design or enhance their digital presence. Even more important, it provides models for two-way communication between cultural institutions and the communities they serve. We expect that it will be a contribution to the evolving field of interactive digital collections for cultural institutions.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The paper on which this project is based was written for a class taught by Dr. Cristina Pattuelli at Pratt Institute's School of Information and Library Science, New York City. We would like to thank Christopher Mulé for giving us the opportunity to explore the world of folklife collections. We are also indebted to Andy Kolovos, Steve Green, Karin Carlson, and Joanna Norman for helping to broaden our understanding of the workings of the field. Lastly, we would like to thank our class members for the time and energy they dedicated to this paper and for allowing us to continue to pursue this project further.

REFERENCES

Lourdi, I., Papatheodorou, C., & Nikolaidou, M. (2007). A multi-layer metadata schema for digital folklore collections. Journal of Information Science, 33(2), 197-213. DOI: 10.1177/0165551506070711

Fogg, B.J., Danielson, D., Marable, L., Soohoo, C., Stanford, J., Tauber, E. (2003). How do users evaluate the credibility of web sites? A study with over 2,500 participants. Proceedings of DUX2003, Designing for User Experiences Conference. DOI: 10.1145/997078.997097

ADDITIONAL AUTHORS

Bruce Shenitz
Pratt Institute
165 W. 66 St.,16J
New York, NY
bruce.shenitz@gmail.com

Charlie Macquarie
700 Wagner Drive
Carson City, NV
Pratt Institute
charliemacquarie@gmail.com