

# Independent Community Archives and Community-Generated Content

‘Writing, Saving and Sharing our Histories’<sup>1</sup>

Andrew Flinn

*University College, London, UK*

**Abstract** / This article examines recent developments in community archives and histories, and in particular the impact of technologies that encourage individuals to create and/or share their own historical content. Concomitantly, more archives and heritage institutions are experimenting with allowing their ‘communities of users’ to submit commentary and content to collection descriptions and catalogues. Some have seen such community histories and user content as challenging notions of professionalism and the authority of the ‘expert’ voice, and this article will seek to explore the ways in which this might be the case. However, the article will also argue that, technology aside, these challenges are not fundamentally new but that they reside firmly in the traditions of history from below, oral history, History Workshop and many other attempts to give recognition to less privileged voices. Ultimately, such material is surely an opportunity for archivists and historians to broaden the range of the sources that their work draws upon; whether they make use of these opportunities depends largely on their interests and the focus of their studies or collections.

**Key Words** / archives / cataloguing / independent community archives / public history / user-generated content

## Introduction

In recent years, public histories and heritage, and the authority of those responsible for producing them, have come under a series of challenges, not least with regard to their failure to adequately represent a diversity of voices within local and national heritages. One of these challenges has taken the form of independent, community heritage and history projects. These initiatives have been given fresh impetus by developments in social computing and other participatory technologies. This article will examine these developments in independent community archives and history-making and the technologies which enable and perhaps transform these historical practices. It will offer a brief overview of community history projects and some of the questions that inspire and sustain them.

Next, it will examine the impact of technology on these efforts, in particular experiments by mainstream heritage organizations or memory institutions with engaging their users, audiences and communities more fully with their collections. Finally, the article will conclude by raising some questions as to how the impact of these efforts might be evaluated and how community heritage interaction and history production might be best encouraged.

To understand something of the significance and potential cultural and historical impact of independent community heritage endeavours, particularly for those individuals and communities whose histories have often been marginalized and misrepresented, consider the words of the founder and inspiration behind Black Cultural Archives, Len Garrison (1994: 238):

*For years some young Black people have faced the forces of racism and its contradictions and have been ashamed to identify their Blackness as a positive attribute. Victims of the assimilation process, their lack of recognized history has rendered them invisible, thereby disinheriting and undermining their sense of a Black British heritage. The Black Cultural Archives Museum would hope to play a part in improving the image and self-image of people of African and African-Caribbean descent by seeking to establish continuity and a positive reference point. Advancing this scheme within an educational context, outside a university setting, is a development that would bring primary sources of archaeological, historical and contemporary materials within reach of both Black and White communities. It would also provide a basis for recording the social and cultural history of Africa and Afro-Caribbean people in Britain.*

The significance and importance of independent community archives and the historical content that comes directly from within those communities is not something to be underestimated or dismissed. Community archives and grass-roots histories seek to preserve and make accessible material that is usually not available elsewhere and either implicitly or, more occasionally, explicitly as in the case of the Black Cultural Archives, they also often attempt to actively transform and intervene in otherwise partial and unbalanced histories.

It is undoubtedly true that independent and community histories and archive activity have a long heritage of their own; the Black Cultural Archives was established in 1981 for instance. However, such initiatives have been more recently enabled, extended and perhaps even transformed in their development by new technologies that support the creation and sharing of historical materials and knowledge by and within communities, often independent of and at arm's length from academic historians and the mainstream heritage sector. For their part, formal heritage or memory institutions have also been investigating the potential of new participatory technologies for opening up aspects of their professional practice to a greater diversity of voices. Such processes might be seen as contributing to a democratization of heritage and history making. It is in the context of these recent developments, and drawing upon on-going research<sup>2</sup> at University College London, that this article will examine community archives and community-generated content.

## **Community Archives – Sharing Community History**

What are independent and community archives and what do they represent? A recent definition offered this description of the work and importance of community archiving:

*By collecting, preserving and making accessible documents, photographs, oral histories and many other materials which document the histories of particular groups and localities, community archives and heritage initiatives make an invaluable contribution to the preservation of a more inclusive and diverse local and national heritage (Community Archives and Heritage Group, 2008).*

The scope of what might be defined as a community archive is extremely broad, covering a wide range of different activities and interpretations. Another recent definition seeks to acknowledge and embrace this variety:

*Community archives and heritage initiatives come in many different forms (large or small, semi-professional or entirely voluntary, long-established or very recent, in partnership with heritage professionals or entirely independent) and seek to document the history of all manner of local, occupational, ethnic, faith and other diverse communities (Community Archives and Heritage Group, 2008).*

The definition of communities used here seeks to encompass all manner of community identifications including: locality, ethnicity, faith, sexuality, occupation, shared interest or a combination of one or more of these. It also allows for many different organizational forms, including length of time established, a physical or virtual presence, degrees of independence or connection with mainstream organizations, and varying levels of resources, funding and long-term sustainability.

Many community archives are owned and controlled from within the community but others are inspired and sponsored by mainstream heritage organizations. In the latter case, the source of initial impulse is of less relevance than the creation of community archives or histories and the participation of members of the community concerned in their collection, production and use. The motivations inspiring such activity also vary greatly. Many projects are primarily heritage focused (that is, the creation of a history or heritage collection is the principal aim of the endeavour). But in other cases the collection and creation of such material is a by-product of other activities, for instance reminiscence as part of a broader health or social welfare project. In many instances, the urge to collect archives and to write histories is one felt by activists inspired by a political or cultural concern with documenting otherwise under-voiced or less visible communities and challenging the absences and biases in dominant historical narratives. In other cases, when the motivation is less overtly political and more an expression of a shared enthusiasm for the history of a place, occupation or interest, there is frequently a sense in which these are documents, photographs, historical materials and stories that would go untold and unshared if it were not for the individuals who have taken it upon themselves to preserve these histories.

These informal or independent archives are emphatically not a new development, but over the last 10 to 20 years the numbers have grown substantially in the UK and elsewhere (Flinn, 2007). There are a variety of reasons for this growth, including:

- a growing awareness and concern over absences and biases in mainstream heritage narratives
- the continued impact of significant population, economic and social changes resulting from factors like de-industrialization and migration
- the increased availability of public funding for local community heritage projects, especially via the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) and other schemes.

In addition, however, there is no doubt that the numbers and the form of these initiatives have also been greatly affected by technological developments. In contrast to traditional community archives, where the focus is on a physical space as a centre for the preservation and dissemination of their collections, many contemporary community archives use the web to share their resources amongst their communities and beyond. The development in the late 1990s of software like 'Comma' which supported the uploading, tagging and sharing of digital images (most frequently photographs), helped to popularize the whole notion of digital community archives, particularly amongst local history groups.

There are many community archives and history projects which make use of the internet and digital technologies, as well as physical spaces, to share their work and their materials with wider communities. For instance, *Eastside Community Heritage* (ECH) is a well-established community history group (operating since 1993) from East London (ECH, 2008). Eastside seeks to encourage local people to recover and record histories on a local, geographic basis and to celebrate the diversity of the cultures of the East End. It seeks to promote greater interracial and inter-generational understanding through engagement with these different histories and heritages. Over the years, Eastside has completed a number of different archival and heritage projects focusing on a range of communities in the East London area, and through these projects has collected thousands of digitized photographic images and oral histories. Although these are accessible at ECH's East London People's Archive (based at the University of East London), Eastside also uses its 'Hidden Histories' website (ECH, 2008) and, more recently, its Facebook page to share some of these materials, including films and images, and to disseminate its histories.

The *Waltham Forest Oral History Workshop* (WFOHW) is another long-running independent history group in London, in existence since 1983. By way of motivation, the group's website offers a tempting reward to encourage participation in its activities, the promise or possibility of immortality: 'by recording your story you will have contributed to the history of this corner of London, not just for now but for ever. Your story will be part of tomorrow's history, and your place in it will be assured' (WFOHW, n.d.). Concerns about permanent preservation ('for ever') notwithstanding, this is a powerful incentive to those who feel their story or, more particularly, the story of their community and neighbourhood might otherwise go unrecorded and unnoticed. The Waltham Forest Oral History Workshop website acts both as a notice board for their activities as well as a way of accessing some of their materials.

In contrast to long-running initiatives such as Waltham Forest and Eastside, other community archives have a shorter lifespan, tied to particular projects and funding but using digital environments to continue to disseminate their material. The *Cypriot Diaspora Project* sought to record and preserve the memories of Cypriots who had moved to the UK before 1960 (CDP, n.d.). This project culminated in 2006 with an exhibition, a play, a book and a DVD, but the website continues to make some of the collected materials available, including videos of some other interviews, embedded content from YouTube and transcripts of some of the personal stories. Other time-limited initiatives include larger partnership projects, often with regeneration, community cohesion or other public policy objectives at their heart. *Community Archives Wales*, funded by the Welsh Assembly, counts chief amongst its aims: 'empowering individuals and strengthening communities in Wales, through digital community archiving' (CAW, n.d.) and supports a range of local

community archive groups to digitize and share their heritage materials via the project website and via Flickr.

Most of the archive projects discussed thus far have used the internet to disseminate information about themselves and to share their collections in a relatively static fashion, though some are also evolving more participatory engagements. However, some community archive projects and sites already involve much greater collaboration and participation – not only allowing individuals to upload content but also to comment, enhance and correct the content and descriptions shared by others. One of the best and most active examples of this type of local community archive is *My Brighton and Hove (2000)*. Affiliated to the independent community publishers QueenSpark, and entirely volunteer run and controlled, *My Brighton and Hove accepts photographs and digitized materials, as well as allowing memories and commentaries to be uploaded from Brighton and the rest of the world*. Building upon an earlier local museum touchscreen exhibit, the site was launched in 2000 and it now has over 9000 pages. It continues to grow with significant amounts of new content being added regularly. Amongst the kind of information contributed and shared are identifications of people and places in submitted photographs, memories and recollections of life and events in Brighton in earlier times, and amplification or reflections on the memories offered by others. By way of one example, in the section on crime in Brighton there are reflections on the ‘trunk murder’ on Kemp Street in the 1930s which are extended by further comments from people who lived on the street, or were related to individuals within the story, speaking from their memories of that time.

A different but not as clearly successful example of an interactive history site is *Greenlevel.org* (n.d.) – a South African wiki. This is a collaborative effort, using familiar wiki technology to record and share memories of the student struggle against apartheid at the University of Cape Town in the 1980s. Individuals, student activists from the time, upload photographs and text relating to the period and others then offer further identification of individuals in images and their own memories. Like other examples, the site appears to have had only limited success in attracting content and comment from outside the small group of originators. Although many activists involved in the period are registered with the website, only a few regularly contribute content. Encouraging active participation (and hence ownership of the site) rather than a more passive viewing is a key criterion for the success of this type of project. It appears that sites such as these need to connect and engage with a community willing to participate, and must reach some sort of critical mass for the collaborative element to properly take effect.

## User Generated Content – Harnessing and Sharing Community Knowledge

Following on from such examples of community-created collaborative digital heritage such as *Greenlevel* and *My Brighton and Hove*, this article will now examine connected but different developments in which formal heritage organizations including archives and museums seek to encourage user (and non-user) communities to submit content and knowledge, including material relating to the description and understanding of their collections via social and participatory software. What is crucial here is a sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit, acknowledgement that those who submit such content may

be more knowledgeable or have important different understandings about what is being commented upon from those of professional or academic heritage workers. This article will offer a few examples of initiatives and pilot projects before considering what may be the potential implications and impacts for historical and professional heritage practice of such developments.

One of the most significant and high-profile examples of this type of initiative is the *Your Archives* wiki run by the UK National Archives (TNA). Launched in 2007, and utilizing a familiar wiki appearance, *Your Archives* allows TNA's 'community of record users' (including staff and researchers) to contribute content relating to TNA's holdings (TNA, 2007). This content can range from detailed guidance on research topics, amplifications and corrections of existing catalogue entries, to full transcripts of documents. Much of the original content for the site was provided by TNA staff making use of existing official materials (notably the research guides) but this material was then available for alteration and enhancement by the user group. Although TNA staff remain among the more active users, recent evidence suggests that there is growing external use and developing communities of use, particularly amongst family and military historians. TNA is very clear that this is a 'user' site, so whilst *Your Archives* and the official catalogues are cross-linked, user generated content is as yet not embedded in the pages of the catalogue itself and each page of *Your Archives* carries the health warning 'The National Archives does not vouch for the accuracy of information appearing in *Your Archives*'. Whilst it is not presently possible for users to upload their own images to the site, TNA has also established a visitor group on Flickr, where users are encouraged to share their digital images of documents they have consulted in the Archive and then to link the images to any relevant content in *Your Archives* and vice versa.

*Your Archives* is probably the most important, far-reaching experiment of this type being carried out by a major national/international memory institution. Simply with regard to the breadth of TNA's collections and the research done there, allied with the wide range of expert and specialist knowledge (most broadly defined) amongst its 'community of record users' means that if TNA is able to successfully inspire widespread interest and crucially participation, then the project could well become hugely important and potentially transformatory in terms of user experience, the creation and sharing of knowledge, and professional practice.

Another important initiative exploring the possibilities of enhancing institutional content with user or community generated content was the *Moving Here* project (2003–2007). Led by TNA and pre-dating *Your Archives*, *Moving Here* was a major collaboration between a number of national and local heritage bodies as well as community groups. It resulted not only in digitized resources examining the history of migration to the UK over the last 200 years (over 200,000 items), but also encouraged individuals to submit and share their own personal stories of migration. **One of the original aims of the project was to use the site and the digitized material it contained to organize digital storytelling sessions with a range of different local community groups of African, Asian and other heritages across the country seeking 'to overcome barriers to the direct involvement of minority ethnic groups in recording and documenting their own history of migration'** (O'Riain and Pontin, 2007: 5). Over 500 digital stories are now captured and available on the site; there is a great deal of variety in terms of length and material (including images, poetry, links, audio and video), but all together it represents a moving as well

as informative resource of first-person narratives of movement and arrival. According to Alain and Foggett (2007), about half of these stories were created as a result of the targeted outreach sessions described earlier, the other half being contributed voluntarily by users of the site. The latter suggests significant potential for more explicitly participatory approaches utilizing social networking in the future.

*The Polar Bear Expedition Digital Collections* website (n.d.) developed by Professor Elizabeth Yakel and others at the University of Michigan was one of the first attempts to explore how social computing might transform traditional catalogues and finding aids into something more complex and flexible, capable of reflecting multiple connections, interest and relations within collections, some of which is generated and captured as user-generated content. The collection, which relates to an American military intervention in the Russian Civil War, already had an extensive audience and this project sought to encourage this user community to share its knowledge of the collection and the documents within it as well as recommending and linking files together, on the basis of thematic similarity, research interest, or other connections – information and links which were then captured and made available to all other subsequent users. The intention was that the archive collection and its catalogues would be enhanced by the users who have previously explored and discovered them.

In the event, the project leaders identified four main categories of contribution/comment by participants (information sharing, error correction, further questions arising from the digitized materials, and suggestions about further donations). All these contributions were potentially extremely valuable but the project found that the numbers actually participating were quite small (Krause and Yakel, 2007: 312). Again, it is important to consider the extent to which significant numbers participating and sharing are required before the full benefits of these sorts of collaborations and participatory activity can be realized.

There are many other examples internationally of archives and museums exploring what might be possible by utilizing these new participatory technologies to enhance their content and make connections with communities providing their own knowledge and content. For instance, the Victoria and Albert Museum, TNA and Picture Australia all make use of Flickr to generate content and comment from visitors; *The Commons* is a partnership between Flickr and a range of international heritage and memory institutions led by the US Library of Congress to share and invite comments on publicly held images without copyright restrictions from around the world, and there are various social tagging initiatives such as the Steve Museum.<sup>3</sup> Other developments have seen individuals and communities being encouraged to submit and share their own digital content on the vast genealogical social networking site, *Footnote* (2009), or the personal digital museum, *Your Treasures* (2009). Examining and seeking to understand these new developments and experiments raises a number of questions. To what extent are they successful, or what criteria can be used to judge 'success'? Is the content they create and share useful? Can such content be 'safely' used by other researchers, or is it unreliable and inherently untrustworthy? What are the implications of community generated history and heritage content for the authority and authorial voices of academic historians and heritage professionals? Might this content offer what Parry (2007: 102) describes as both an opportunity and a challenge, in that it 'interferes with the authorship and authority of the curator, and yet allows new narratives to be told and new voices to be heard'.<sup>4</sup>

## I or We – Authorial Voices and Collaborative Production

Outside the heritage domains, one of the leading advocates of the changes that the internet and, in particular, social networking or sharing technologies might bring, Charles Leadbetter (2008), recently advanced the notion of 'We Think' instead of 'I Think', and suggests that sharing and collaborative working is the possible defining mode of creative working in the new century:

*In the 20th century we grew accustomed to the notion that ideas came from specially gifted people, working in special places, the writer in the garret, the artist in the studio, the boffin in the lab. Yet with . . . Wikipedia, ideas are emerging from a mass of creative interaction among a wide range of people who combine different but potentially complementary insights. Our capacity for collaborative creativity will become ever more powerful because the opportunities to engage with others in creative interaction are expanding. (Leadbetter, 2008: 20)*

In arguing this and for the positive role of the internet in this new creativity, Leadbetter does not deny that much of web and Web 2.0 sites in particular often result in inanity, dispute and outrage or even a deadening sense of orthodoxy and conformity, rather than creativity and collaboration. There is nothing automatically successful or creative about these processes. Nor is the web inherently a democratizing force. Some studies show how élites, especially media and professional élites, are dominating the web (in terms of those sites most popularly visited) to the same extent as they have dominated in the physical world (Brabazon, 2008: 226–7). Nevertheless, Leadbetter argues that when it does work, such as in the case of Wikipedia, when participation is encouraged and such participation is organized and co-ordinated to be collaborative, (that is when user content goes beyond merely being published and shared but forms the basis of a collaborative work process), then very significant achievements are possible.

How much of a challenge does this collaborative approach represent to professional authority and academic scholarship? Are we really moving into an era where 'We think' might replace 'I think'? This is probably framing the debate too divisively – individual and collaborative scholarship and knowledge production will co-exist and even interact, supporting one another. Whilst this is an area of continued research and dispute, some studies of the Wikipedia model of collaborative knowledge creation suggest that it is not widely inaccurate compared with traditional sources (the self-correcting and mediating role of the crowd) or that it excludes experts. Although the concept of the unassailable voice, trusted (or demanding trust) on the basis of professional or academic status might be in the future undermined by social networking and user content, the important, but frequently overlooked, point is that it seems that most content is originally created by experts in their particular field and then maintained (from subsequent error, mistake or corruption) and supplemented by a larger number of less specialist 'gardeners' and readers (Kittur et al., 2007; Olleros, 2008; Shirky, 2008). Perhaps the real democratization potential of these developments lies not so much with the idea of the 'crowd' but that the experts are drawn from a much broader, less élitist notion of where expert knowledge might be located (outside the academy and the professions).

Whilst some in the archives, museums and academic worlds have been reluctant to embrace these possibilities, others, including Jennifer Trant, have studied the application of social computing to archives and museums and have looked at how the heritage sector might utilize and embrace user-generated content to the benefit of all their users,

including academic historians. In a 2008 article, entitled 'Curating Collections Knowledge', Trant argues that heritage professionals should stop worrying about the effects on their authority and instead recognize the potentialities of engaging with and encouraging users' knowledge and understandings within collection descriptions:

*Rather than passively recording information about a work of art, artefact or specimen, museums are challenged to acknowledge information sources beyond the museum, and change their practices to incorporate new perspectives into both interpretation and documentation . . . As communities respond to collections, so must museums respond to communities, ensuring that a diversity of voices provide context in the future as well as the present. (Trant, 2008: 275)*

Her point is that each object, each document, each collection has a multiplicity of meanings and understandings attached to it, not only by its creators and custodians but also by its users and the communities to which the collections refer and relate. The role of the archivist or curator is not to assert that his or her professionalism endows him or her with the authority to fully and absolutely describe a collection but to open up 'to the possibility that expertise exists elsewhere' (Trant, 2008: 285).

Professional catalogues may include many important things in terms of information contained, arrangement and provenance reflected, but it can never truly be said to reflect all the meanings and content that the document or collection acquires in its interaction with users. It is not possible to capture all these interactions, reactions and understandings but, according to Trant (2008), it should be the role of the professional to seek to capture as many of these understandings as possible and then to engage with and utilize that knowledge for the benefit of the widest possible audience. So how should we go about ensuring these multiple voices are captured? Trant is primarily concerned with voluntary use of social computing technologies in capturing understandings, but there are other ways which offer more formal, more structured ways to encourage the physical participation of different groups and communities in engaging with historical materials and history-making.

Similar to the structured approach taken by the *Moving Here* project to encourage and capture different community responses to their digitized materials, both the 'participatory appraisal' process – developed in the USA by Katie Shilton, Ramesh Srinivasan and others (Shilton and Srinivasan, 2007) – and the Revisiting Archive Collections methodology in the UK (Collections Link, 2009), seek to 'actively incorporate participation' from different groups, including, on some occasions, representatives of traditionally marginalized communities, but on other occasions, specific groups of experts, in the processes of selection and description. Both methods employ managed focus group discussions to unlock and record knowledge and hidden understandings of what might be important and particularly relevant when engaging with heritage materials; knowledge often not available to the archival professional or outside academic expert.

There are a number of problems with this participatory methodology (the time and resources needed, the choice and authority of those who participate in focus groups, how to identify and appropriately acknowledge individual and community contributions) and these are acknowledged by their proponents. Nevertheless, the arguments for considering these methods seriously as means of systematically capturing diverse and divergent views, particularly in relation to specific collections and, perhaps with regard to potential application in an online environment, should not be dismissed.

In this I am sympathetic to Trant's views on the question of authority and the opportunities posed to the heritage profession by loosening their grip on the authoritative voice:

*professionals can only ensure that cultural institutions are relevant by changing their stance about the nature of their role; it is possible to contribute authenticity without demanding authority . . . demanding authority is an act, often of arrogance, that denies the contribution of others to the development of knowledge . . . within the rapidly developing environment of social computing, communities of practice are forming that could contribute significantly to the development of the museum. (Trant, 2008: 290)*

If heritage professions are going to survive and prosper in the future, enabling and curating wider knowledge about our collections will be essential. Replacing the sole scholar and the single professional voice with more collaborative working practices offers the potential to transform not only professional practice, but scholarship and knowledge production as well.

Historically speaking, none of this is really very new – new technologies are often disruptive but they rarely present something that is absolutely original. Clearly, collaborative working is nothing new, even if it is better enabled by technological developments. In the case of independent community archives and content that derives from outside the expert or professional world, there is a long tradition of this material emerging and being used by historians and others. Histories 'from below' have long made a virtue of speaking with other (rarely heard) voices and it is no surprise that oral history, which was at the heart of so many of the history from below and History Workshop initiatives of the past, remains one of the most common and central components of community archives and community histories. Oral history is of course in part a form of 'user-generated content', where the user speaks explicitly in his or her own voice.

In this sense, professional working and historical practice may be newly challenged by community-generated content but in essence, these challenges remain the same as the ones posed by the emergence of oral history and communities telling their own stories in response to the absences in the sources and orthodox historical narratives. Ultimately such material is surely an opportunity for all historians and heritage workers to broaden the range of the sources that their work draws upon. For social historians in particular the materials and insights produced through community archives and community-generated content are likely to be exceptional – affording the possibility of 'thick description' histories which include the lives, memories and experiences of various communities which would otherwise be very difficult to obtain (Samuel, 1994: 161; Flinn, 2007: 160–1). For other historians, much of this type of material may remain largely irrelevant but, where their interests do match the content of 'thicker' or 'deeper' descriptions of files produced as a result of TNA's *Your Archives* wiki, then they too will benefit.

Another interesting question is: Who will wish to contribute and share content as communities of interest? Academic historians, like other communities of interest, frequently co-operate through formal and informal networks but they may not always be the most willing sharers of information. As Elizabeth Yakel and Deborah Torres (2007) have demonstrated, family, community or local historians freely share and celebrate their successes and also publish collective solutions to common problems. For academic

historians however a private, perhaps even competitive, approach to research and dissemination (at least in advance of scholarly and peer-reviewed publication) still dominates, hampering the kind of community collaboration and sharing that these developments require. Certainly, many historians still operate within the lone scholar model, still comparatively rarely working on collaborative projects, and not generally participating in 'sharing' networks. Some groups of historians may have better traditions of co-operating and collaborating, military historians perhaps and perhaps also those who face particular difficulties getting access to sources, such as security service historians. Might these historians feel more part of a collaborative, problem-sharing community?

In any event, the extent of voluntary participation appears to be one of the key determinants if we are to see the benefits of collaborative working that Leadbetter and others envision. If the benefits of collaborative creation, of content being 'tended' by the crowd (but often originally created and shared by 'experts' however broadly defined), then, as we saw earlier with some of the projects discussed, significant rates of participation are essential. If participation rates remain low, then many of the benefits of collaborative creativity will struggle to emerge.

Finally therefore, how that participation happens or can be made to happen is a crucial question. A recent article on a collaborative cultural heritage project in Hong Kong reflected on the low participation rates in virtual community sites created by formal memory or learning institutions, with which users were used to having a traditionally passive relationship. This was in contrast with the high participation rates common to those virtual communities that 'are usually formed organically by individuals who group together as a result of similar interests and depend on active participation' (Affleck and Kvan, 2008: 275). It would seem that the answer to whether individuals want to share their knowledge with a chosen community and beyond, and therefore ultimately the success and failure of collaborative models of knowledge production, may revolve around the nature of the community, which is envisioned to contribute to that knowledge production. The extent to which that community has legitimacy, has developed organically and its members feel ownership and belonging or, conversely, whether it has been constructed by an external agency, may be ultimately more significant than the technologies that seek to enable that community to come together.

## Notes

- 1 An early version of this article, 'Independent Community Archives and Community-Generated Content: A Challenge or an Opportunity for Archivists and Historians?' was given at the Royal Historical Society and The National Archives sponsored Gerald Aylmer seminar, 'The Wisdom of the Experts and the Wisdom of the Crowds', 20 November 2008.
- 2 UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded project, 'Community archives and identities: documenting and sustaining community heritage', 2008–2009. The research team comprises Andrew Flinn, Elizabeth Shepherd and Mary Stevens. This research would not have been possible without the help and partnership provided by all our case studies (Future Histories, the rukus! Black LGBT Archive project, Moroccan Memories, and Eastside Community Heritage) and all the other participants and interviewees. For further details see <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/infostudies/research/icarus/community-archives/> (consulted 5 October 2009).
- 3 All these examples can be seen on the following Flickr pages: [http://www.flickr.com/groups/va\\_museum/](http://www.flickr.com/groups/va_museum/); <http://www.flickr.com/groups/nationalarchives/>; [http://www.flickr.com/groups/picture\\_australia\\_ppe/](http://www.flickr.com/groups/picture_australia_ppe/); <http://www.flickr.com/commons/>; <http://www.steve.museum/> (all consulted 5 October 2009).

- 4 These questions will be at the centre of a recently awarded AHRC Collaborative Doctoral Award (2010–2013), held jointly by the UCL Department of Information Studies and TNA.

## References

- Affleck, J. and Kvan, T. (2008) 'A Virtual Community as the Context for Discursive Interpretation: A Role in Cultural Heritage Engagement', *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 1(3): 268–80
- Alain, A. and Foggett, M. (2007) 'Towards Community Contribution: Empowering Community Voices On-line', paper presented at Museums and the Web 2007: International Conference for Culture and Heritage On-line, San Francisco, CA, April, URL (consulted July 2009): <http://www.archimuse.com/mw2007/papers/alain/alain.html>
- Brabazon, T., ed. (2008), *The Revolution Will Not Be Downloaded – Dissent in the Digital Age*. Oxford: Chandos.
- CAW (n.d.) Community Archives Wales, URL (consulted October 2009): [www.ourwales.org.uk](http://www.ourwales.org.uk)
- CDP (n.d.) Cypriot Diaspora Project, URL (consulted October 2009): [www.cypriotdiaspora.com/index.htm](http://www.cypriotdiaspora.com/index.htm)
- Collections Link (2009) Revisiting Archive Collections, URL (consulted October 2009): [www.collectionslink.org.uk/Increase\\_access/revisiting\\_collections](http://www.collectionslink.org.uk/Increase_access/revisiting_collections)
- Community Archives and Heritage Group – CAHG (2008), 'Our Vision', URL (consulted July 2009): [http://www.communityarchives.org.uk/documents/CAHG\\_Vision\\_.doc](http://www.communityarchives.org.uk/documents/CAHG_Vision_.doc)
- ECH (2008) *Hidden Histories*. Eastside Community Heritage, URL (consulted October 2009): [www.hidden-histories.org.uk/about-us](http://www.hidden-histories.org.uk/about-us)
- Flinn, A. (2007) 'Community Histories, Community Archives: Some Opportunities and Challenges', *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 28(2): 151–76.
- Footnote (2009) URL (consulted October 2009): <http://www.footnote.com/>
- Garrison, L. (1994) 'The Black Historical Past in British Education', in P.G. Stone and R. MacKenzie (eds) *The Excluded Past: Archaeology and Education* (2nd edition), pp. 231–44. London: Routledge.
- Greenlevel.org (n.d.) URL (consulted October 2009): [www.greenlevel.org](http://www.greenlevel.org)
- Kittur, A., Chi, E.H., Pendleton, B.A., Suh, B. and Mytkowicz, T. (2007) 'Power of the Few vs. Wisdom of the Crowd: Wikipedia and the Rise of the Bourgeoisie', *Alt.CHI* at 25th Annual ACM Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI2007), San Jose, CA, April–May, URL (consulted July 2009): <http://www.parc.com/publication/1749/power-of-the-few-vs-wisdom-of-the-crowd.html>
- Krause, M.G. and Yakel, E. (2007) 'Interaction in Virtual Archives: The Polar Bear Expedition Digital Collections Next Generation Finding Aid', *American Archivist* 70: 282–314.
- Leadbetter, C. (2008) *We-Think*. London: Profile Books.
- Moving Here (2003–2007) URL (consulted October 2009): [www.movinghere.org.uk](http://www.movinghere.org.uk)
- My Brighton and Hove* (n.d.), URL (consulted October 2009): [www.mybrightonandhove.org.uk](http://www.mybrightonandhove.org.uk)
- Olleros, F.X. (2008) 'Learning to Trust the Crowd: Some Lessons from Wikipedia', in *Proceedings of 2008 International MCETECH Conference on e-Technologies* (held in Montreal, Canada, 23–25 January), pp. 212–18. New York: IEEE Publishing.
- O'Riain, H. and Pontin, K. (2007) 'Learning and Reflections on Routes to the Future, *Moving Here* Community Projects – Phase II, March 2007', Community Partnership Evaluation Report 2007, URL (consulted June 2009): <http://www.movinghere.org.uk/help/default.htm>
- Parry, R. (2007) *Recording the Museum. Digital Heritage and the Technologies of Change*. London: Routledge.
- Polar Bear Expedition Digital Collections* (n.d.) URL (consulted October 2009): <http://polarbears.si.umich.edu/>
- Samuel, R. (1994) *Theatres of Memory. Vol. 1, Past and Present in Contemporary Culture*. London: Verso.
- Shilton, K. and Srinivasan, R. (2007) 'Participatory Appraisal and Arrangement for Multicultural Archival Collections', *Archivaria* 63: 87–101.
- Shirky, C. (2008) *Here Comes Everybody. The Power of Organising Without Organizations*. London: Allen Lane.
- TNA (2007) *Your Archives*, URL (consulted October 2009): <http://yourarchives.nationalarchives.gov.uk>
- Trant, J. (2008) 'Curating Collections Knowledge: Museums on the Cyberinfrastructure' in P. Marty and K. Jones (eds) *Museum Informatics: People, Information and Technology in Museums*, pp. 275–92. London: Routledge.
- WFOHW (n.d.) 'Your story' *Waltham Forest Oral History Workshop*, URL (consulted October 2009): <http://www.wforalhistory.org.uk/>

Yakel, E. and Torres, D. (2007) 'Genealogists as a "Community of Records"', *The American Archivist* 70: 93–113.

*Your Treasures* (2009) State Library of Victoria, URL (consulted October 2009): <http://your.slv.vic.gov.au/treasures/index.php/home>

**Andrew Flinn** is Director of the Archives and Records Management programme in the Department of Information Studies at University College London and leads the AHRC funded 'Community archives and identities' project which examines community archive initiatives of African, Asian and other heritage groups in the UK. Recent publications include *'Other Ways of Thinking, Other Ways of Being. Documenting the Margins and the Transitory: What to Preserve, How to Collect'* in *What are Archives?* edited by L. Craven (Ashgate, 2008), and *Freedom of Information. Open Access, Empty Archives?* edited by A. Flinn and H. Jones (Routledge, 2009).

**Address** Department of Information Studies, University College London, Gower Street London WC1E 6BT, UK. [email: [a.flinn@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:a.flinn@ucl.ac.uk)]