

Online Community Archives and the work of the Community Access to Archives Project (CAAP)

The Community Access to Archives Project (CAAP), described in the May issue of ARC, aims to produce a Best Practice Model for community involvement in the production of content for the UK Archives Network, consolidating the expertise that has been developed in this area, both within the archive community and elsewhere. This article examines the nature of community archives and proposals for their integration into Linking Arms.

What are community archives?

The definition of community archives can be very broad, and CAAP has opted to examine a wide spectrum of online community archive activity. In the simplest terms, community archives might be defined as collections of material that encapsulate a particular community's understanding of its history and identity. This will often be personal photographs, documents, ephemera and oral history - 'unofficial' records that might not normally be preserved, let alone widely available. The community itself might be geographically based, or relate to a cultural or thematic community of interest. CAAP is also considering archives generated by groups in the community in the course of their everyday activities.

For the communities involved, community archive projects offer a means to explore community identity and develop community cohesion and pride, and provide opportunities for capacity building, and learning and skills development. For mainstream archives, community involvement offers a mechanism for broadening audiences and combating social exclusion, developing mutual trust between the archives service and the community, and advising on the proper care of unique material. For everyone, they offer a chance to preserve and celebrate 'grassroots' heritage.

Online community archives have a global audience and offer the opportunity to make connections with people with similar interests, irrespective of geographical location. Their very direct and personal relevance is illustrated by this comment on the Batley Community Archive, a Commanet project:

"I just wanted to say thank you to you and your contributors for the wonderful memories I found on your Batley archive pages. I was born and spent my childhood years in Batley before emigrating to New Zealand 30 years ago. I browsed every page on the Batley archive and it took me three days, three wonderful glorious memory filled days. Thank you all so very much!"

As the scope of community archive activity is very broad, so a wide range of technical solutions have been developed to capture, contextualise and provide access to community archive material. This is exemplified by the contrasting approaches of Commanet and Now Then Dewsbury.

Commanet (www.commanet.org) is a not for profit organisation that promotes, supports and develops community archives, facilitating self-sufficiency and community ownership. It grew out of a regeneration project in Batley in 1994, which invited residents to bring their family photographs to be photocopied to produce an education resource for local schools. It became evident that participants appreciated this chance to share memories, and this inspired the development of the Comma software, a simple database that allows people with relatively little technical ability to store digitized images, documents, and sound and video clips. The archive can be made available on CD-Rom or via the Commanet website. There are currently over 250 Comma groups across the country, and Commanet are also involved in projects in Canada, Germany and Cyprus.

Now Then Dewsbury (www.nowthen.org) is a partnership project led by West Yorkshire Archive Service. The site was initially developed as a curriculum-based resource, using interactive maps to explore the history of Dewsbury through particular buildings in the town. YMLAC funding enabled the project to work with primary and secondary school students to produce their personal history and to build on the existing website by reinterpreting sources held by WYAS. The next HLF funded phase will enable the wider Dewsbury community to contribute via the website, identifying and filling gaps in the archival record with their own records and making the site a focus for heritage recording in the Dewsbury area.

Community Archives in Linking Arms

CAAP was established to inform the inclusion of community material in Linking Arms. To this end, the CAAP Best Practice Model will provide step-by-step guidance on the establishment and maintenance of community relations, and the development, implementation and maintenance of community archive projects.

A range of technical solutions has been proposed for the integration of community archive websites into Linking Arms, taking account of community archives that exist as independent sites, those that are hosted by dedicated organisations such as Commanet, and those that are hosted by other sites with which Linking Arms interacts. A community archive website may opt to become available through Linking Arms at one of three levels of detail, a process which may reflect a developing relationship with a community site. Initially, a link to a static web page may be set up. Then, a metadata record describing the site as a whole and including a link to it might be developed. This would be searched alongside standard catalogue records. Finally, metadata relating to individual digital objects within the site might be harvested, allowing the user to be taken directly to items of interest within the site.

It is also envisaged that Linking Arms will provide a simple mechanism for individuals and small groups to submit their own contributions, in the form of images or other digital objects and contextual information, for inclusion in a public area or special interest zone. This facility will probably be similar to the

model provided by the Moving Here 'stories' (see www.movinghere.org.uk) and the BBC's WW2 People's War initiative (see <http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/ww2/>). It is anticipated that this range of provision will add a rich array of new sources to the archival heritage and aid their sustainability, benefiting a wide range of traditional and new users.

The CAAP Model and Final Report will be available at the end of October 2004. If you have any queries or would like further information about CAAP, please email caap@nationalarchives.gov.uk.

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