Increasing discovery of archives

A project to provide better pathways to archival records in cultural heritage collections

A report for NAFAN documenting the community engagement workshop hosted by Shift Collective on Dec. 14 and 15, 2021

Shift Collective
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Contents

This report summarizes input from participants in the "Increasing Discovery of Archives" workshop hosted by Shift Collective on December 14 and 15, 2021. It is intended to help inform the research and development phase of the National Finding Aid Network (NAFAN) project led by the California Digital Library (CDL). Note: Some comments are lightly edited for clarity and brevity.

Project description

Project:

"Building a National Finding Aid Network" (NAFAN)

Project summary:

The California Digital Library (CDL) is coordinating a national effort aimed at expanding and securing researcher access to descriptions of archival materials within finding aid aggregations, spurred in part by the imperative to update the aging infrastructure for finding aid aggregations in the US. In its initial stages, the initiative pursued a broad planning agenda comprising early-stage technical assessment, product development, community engagement, and sustainability issues. In its current phase, a two-year research and development initiative launched in 2020, the project aims to identify and address the barriers faced by researchers of all types to locating archival materials across the vast field of cultural heritage organizations. NAFAN "is rooted in the goal of providing inclusive, comprehensive, and persistent access to finding aids by laying the foundation for a national finding aid network available to all contributors and researchers."[1]

Shift Collective's role:

Shift Collective is providing consulting services to design, implement, and support community engagement, communications and outreach, and project management activities.

[1] "Building a National Finding Aid Network: About the Project," by Adrian Turner. Accessed Feb. 17, 2022; last modified on Oct. 1, 2021. https://confluence.ucop.edu/display/NAFAN/About+the+Project

PART 2.
The workshop

"Increasing National Discovery of Archives"

Shift Collective staged a two-day workshop, "Increasing National Discovery of Archives," inviting the input of people whose work is centered on community-based cultural memory projects, to inform NAFAN'S development and implementation of a national network of archival descriptors. The workshop also aimed to identify ways that NAFAN might offer services, support, and advocacy to community-based archives, or might help meet the needs of researchers to better discover and access those collections.

The two-day workshop was held using the Zoom conferencing platform:

• Tuesday, December 14, 2021, 1 pm – 4 pm EST

• Wednesday, December 15, 2021, 10 am – 1 pm EST

Attendees: 14 participants representing 12 community-based memory organizations or projects.

Workshop activities included full group sessions in which participants discussed discoverability, representation, resources, and other issues related to their collections; and small breakout group activities in which participants mapped needs, barriers, and opportunities for the creation of meaningful, inclusive, accessible collections descriptions.

The main objectives for the workshop:

- Identify opportunities for creating a more comprehensive, inclusive, and sustainable infrastructure for describing and discovering materials in cultural memory collections.

- Gather input from both archivists and end users, giving them an opportunity to identify and express their needs, and to offer suggestions and solutions.

- Build community among participants through sharing experiences.

Participant designations included archivist, graduate intern, archive director/president/CEO, tribal librarian, book co-author/National Gallery of Art and National Archives retiree, researcher, university collection co-creator, educator and community outreach coordinator, and community library caretaker.

PART 3.

Organizations represented by participants

Appalshop, Inc.
A documentary media, educational, and arts organization in Eastern Kentucky serving the people of Appalachia since 1969.

Birmingham Civil Rights Institute (BCRI)
A museum, archive, and research center dedicated to preserving the history of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and '60s.

Black Archives of Mid-America in Kansas City
An archive reflecting the social, economic, political and cultural histories of African Americans in the central US, especially the Kansas City, Missouri region.

Densho
A Seattle, Washington-based grassroots organization that documents the experiences of Japanese Americans during World War II.

Guardians Institute
A museum, archive, and educational center dedicated to preserving New Orleans's indigenous cultural arts and traditions of the African diaspora.

Images of America: Filipinos in Washington, DC. (book)
A book documenting the historical events of the early twentieth century Filipino settlement in the Washington, D.C. area. One of the book's co-authors, who helped create the Filipino American community archives at the University of Maryland, participated in the workshop.

Interference Archive
A volunteer-run, collectively-organized gallery, archive, and library of social movement history located in Brooklyn, New York.

La Historia Historical Society Museum
An archival collection comprised mainly of visual media capturing the cultural heritage and identity of Mexican Americans in El Monte and South El Monte, California.

Los Angeles Poverty Department — The Skid Row History Museum and Archive
Founded in 1985 as an arts program, "the other LAPD" (according to one of its archivists) collects materials documenting the lived experiences of people in L.A.'s Skid Row neighborhood.

Mescalero Community Library
A tribal library in south-central New Mexico that strives to meet the reading, research, and lifelong learning needs of all its community members.

New Roots/Nuevas Raíces Oral History Initiative, UNC Chapel Hill
A bilingual digital archive featuring oral histories that document the experiences of North Carolinians with Latin American heritage.

Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research
A community library and archive in South Los Angeles that documents and makes accessible histories of struggles that challenge racism and other systems of oppression.

Overview of the state of community-based archives

Three common themes shared by participants

During the workshop, it became clear that while participants had much in common regarding their organizations and experiences maintaining community-based collections, in many cases, their needs differed. One participant suggested that as a starting point, some measure of intersectionality be applied to proceedings, so that commonalities could be acknowledged as a precursor to discussing collections descriptions. Three themes quickly surfaced:

- **Community knowledge is key to the success of community memory projects, but is undervalued in grant writing and project planning.**

- **Community-based archives (CBAs) enrich their communities, but are underfunded, lack basic resources, and are consumed with the day to day work of sustaining their organizations, often at a bare-bones level.**

- **Community memory project funding needs to target CBAs directly.**

Participants' comments about these themes are highlighted on the following three pages.

As discussions began, the need became evident to understand the macro environment of community-based archives. Participants stressed that without basic stability in their organizations regarding funding, resources, and technology, paying attention to collections descriptions — while important — is often difficult.

Key findings

Common themes shared by participants as a precursor to discussing archival collections descriptions

▶ Community knowledge is key to the success of memory projects, but is undervalued in grant writing and project planning.

"I've done this so many times, sat in on things, participated. But I think that in this whole process of doing this kind of work, community organizations are devalued, community knowledge is devalued, especially knowledge that does not matriculate through a college campus. That's not right. That's not fair. And when they're writing the grants, it really is disrespectful to come and ask us to participate on the back end. But let's be real, the stipend that you all have given us is probably very small compared to the grant that was received to extract knowledge from our community. They, in my opinion, have to value community knowledge, just like they value their own knowledge. It is worthy of being compensated at the same level."

— workshop participant

"The powers that be should recognize the value of the collections and commit to providing the financial and human resources to document, label, and put them in places that will be searchable. Because that's really what needs to happen... I don't have the human or financial resources to do that."

— workshop participant

Key findings

Common themes shared by participants as a precursor to discussing archival collections descriptions

▶ **Community-based archives enrich their communities, but are underfunded, lack basic resources, and are consumed with the day to day work of sustaining their organizations, often at a bare-bones level.**

"I've been thinking a lot about power, especially while we've been talking about money, because I think that money is power in the capitalist world that we live in, and I think we need to be really real about the relationships of power that are implicit in these kinds of projects that sometimes we don't want to talk about because it feels dirty to talk about money and power. But I think we need to do that and it's really hard. I'm coming from a space that as an archive is pretty squarely anti-capitalist and it's hard for us to even have conversations about how we enter relationships with institutions that are so wrapped up in power through money. So that doesn't propose solutions, but I hope that by naming the imbalance of power, we can start thinking about what that means and how we can interact with larger institutions and projects like NAFAN."
— workshop participant

"White folks have conversations about money up front, and often people of African descent wait for other people to decide what we deserve, and what's enough. Those are colonial paradigms that have to be broken. They really do. Because it's immoral."
— workshop participant

"We don't have the money to even do basic archiving like cataloging — just to process collections."
— workshop participant

Key findings

Common themes shared by participants as a precursor to discussing archival collections descriptions

▶ **Community memory project funding needs to target community-based archives directly. The field needs to change how these projects are structured.**

"I think the way that this funding, particularly in this moment, is happening so that all this money is going to these large institutions to have these conversations, as opposed to going to us who do the work is part of the structural challenge…"
— workshop participant

"Part of the historical problem is that I think for a lot of us, our communities have been doing memory work in a lot of ways, but we don't have the sustainability. And then millions of dollars are going to universities to figure out how to include us in the university work instead of us actually getting money. So, there's hundreds of thousands of dollars for annual projects to place interns who don't know how to do archival work — which is fine, they're learning — into small archives instead of giving the money to small archives to hire memory workers from the communities who understand the issues. So, we'll get someone who doesn't understand [the] neighborhood that we're in, but they're getting money to do archival work to help us and we're subsidizing their education. It's the way that these things are modeled that kind of prevents changing these histories, but the money is particularly going to professionals and to institutions."
— workshop participant

Recommendations to help sustain community-based archives

Shift Collective's observations and suggestions

Before discussing the particulars of how their organizations describe collections, several participants made clear their position that they think structural change is needed for large cultural heritage and community memory projects such as NAFAN. On the following pages, Shift Collective outlines some ways to change the landscape for large cultural memory projects that by ethical and practical necessity require the participation of community-based archives.

Recommendations

1. Mitigate historical harm. Acknowledge (and respect) the value of community-based archives.

Recognize that for most CBAs, their top priority is serving their communities — the people whose cultural heritage and interests are reflected in their collections. Be mindful that many CBAs repeatedly have endured the extraction of their knowledge and information by large institutions, leaving them frustrated and skeptical about participation in large projects that they do not control.

"I think the main thing they can do is just disband their project and give the money to someone that has the track record and relationships to do this work. I'm not really joking because I think a big part of what accessibility is, it's not a finding aid, but it's having trust and relationships with the communities that you want to serve... I think if they could just say we're not doing this, we're not going to take this money, we're going to give it because what's clear in this conversation, which is like most conversations I've been in, is that we all have such basic needs that we're trying to figure out, like what do we want to do about usage fees and reproduction rights and all these basics. But all the support goes to these national projects that are very colonial because it requires the participation of us as smaller groups. But all the money goes to the larger institution that gets the value from all of us not having resources that we need."

— workshop participant

Recommendations

2. Where possible, support the urgent non-technical, as well as technical needs of CBAs.

At the start of the workshop, funding needs surfaced as a primary issue for these small community-based archives. Initial conversations revolved around resource inequity and basic sustainability. Many participants stressed that without basic resources, they did not have adequate time or wherewithal to create or improve collection descriptions. The NAFAN project should know that some CBAs may not want to participate in this project unless their needs are seriously considered.

However, participants stressed that one size does not fit all. Workshop attendees embraced their commonalities, but emphasized how different their communities are from one another, so needs tended to be individualized. (The next section, Part 6, summarizes needs expressed during the workshop, from technological and infrastructure support to content use agreement development.)

" ... I think at some point the dynamic has to change... So that community archives can actually have what they need and that we can all do the work that we want to do that is appropriate, rather than have some standard nationalized finding aid model that clearly is not going to work for all of us because of the particularities of our community."
— workshop participant

Recommendations

3. Address the imbalance of power. Restructure large community memory projects by positioning community archives as partners rather than minor contributors.

One participant drew the line: The approach of building projects that rely on CBAs but keeps them in small roles, represents a "diversity-inclusion tolerance model" of inviting people to do the work they are already doing, but within a larger institution's existing project structure, and of assuming a "professionalization of memory work" that the larger institution is not willing to give up.

"Before we can talk about increasing access to collections, reframe the questions, the way these conversations happen. Redefine what diversity and inclusion mean. It's not enough to just invite people in."

— workshop participant

Recommendations

4. Direct or re-direct cultural memory grants to community-based organizations. CBAs should not have to rely on trickle-down funding.

Participants discussed what some of them perceived as the problem of the 'professionalization of the cultural memory field,' which tends to move funding possibilities for small CBAs further out of reach.

"Part of the historical problem is that I think for a lot of us, our communities have been doing memory work in a lot of ways, but we don't have the sustainability. And then millions of dollars are going to universities to figure out how to include us in the university work instead of us actually getting money."
— workshop participant

"I think that part of the disruption that's needed is challenging the assumption that you want to have as many hits as possible on your website, because we do very deep work with just a few classes in our state, but it's very hard to capture that. So, when you look at our Google Analytics data, you don't see crazy numbers. But we have to address that on grant applications that we do very deep work... so a class of 10 students spends an entire week understanding and learning from this archive. [But] that's 10 people. It's not 100,000 people. So I think [we need] a way to disrupt the paradigm of wanting as many people accessing it as possible — quality of access is important."
— workshop participant

Informing NAFAN's goal to improve finding aid aggregation

Summary of workshop discussions by topic

The following pages summarize participants' discussions of their organizations' needs and concerns around archival collection stewardship, as well as opportunities for NAFAN to move the project further towards achieving its goals by facilitating fuller participation of community-based archives.

Finding aids for who or what?

This topic — Identifying and discussing the project's intended audience and purpose — generated the most comments and lengthiest conversation. Workshop participants asked repeatedly: Who is the finding aid for? Whose interests and needs are being served? Archivists? Academic researchers? Local communities? The general public? A core concern: What assumptions have been made about collections and audiences?

"[There are] assumptions about amplification, that people just don't know about collections… There are researchers in Germany, New York, wherever, who have more access to our collections than in the public high school less than a block away from where we are. And so, having this national finding aid is not necessarily going to address that. It'll create more access for people who already have access, in a way. This is not about finding aids. It's much deeper. These are systemic issues that are still related to social justice issues."

— workshop participant

Discussion topics

'Finding aids for who or what?'

Issue / Concern:

A.

Lack of trust, which leads to limited cooperation on national projects. Due to unfamiliarity with and lack of trust in mainstream and traditional institutions leading large grant-funded projects, some community-based archives may tend to avoid sharing their most significant, cherished data. Thus, national projects end up not adequately reflecting local communities because small archives are wary of fully participating in projects they feel are not intended, structured, or implemented to help them. (Among other things, this endangers the NAFAN project's goal of creating a more comprehensive and inclusive finding aids infrastructure.)

Project opportunity:

Build trust. National projects need to find ways to build trust and credibility with people who maintain community-based archives. Some ideas: employ trusted organizations as project intermediaries; offer CBAs more than a small role and token compensation for their participation in major projects; and help organize a consortium among CBAs that can be built around mutual aid and support.

Participant insights:

"A lot of times when we participate in these projects, we are very selective about what we actually share. [Because these projects are] not for us. And so, we're not able to take full advantage of these projects because we're not going to give them collections we care about... We're not going to give them things that are important to our communities. So, then it kind of negates the whole purpose. It's a reality they may not think of on a national scale. A lot of us know that this is not for us, we don't share with them. And so, they get things that we don't care about. Someone that we trust needs [to get] the [funding] if we're going to really participate, because otherwise, I don't think most of us would do so."

Discussion topics

'Finding aids for who or what?'

Issue / Concern:

B. **The need to increase project accountability and transparency.** From the perspective of those who maintain small community-based archives, they want to better understand the motivations and goals of the academic, institutional, and/or professional field they are engaging with on large projects.

Project opportunity:

Be transparent. Disclose information about the project, particularly the budget, to build trust, and so that CBAs can leverage the information to make a case for their own funding.

Participant insights:

"[We need] some kind of survey that can be done about where the money has gone for [large] digital projects like this over the last seven plus years. We've been wanting to map that just because it almost seems like every university has gotten a million dollars for community archives [projects] and we can't show the disparities of where money is going on a map. Also, some kind of salary survey (for transparency) because when we partner with these national projects and digital platforms, one staff member might be making $300,000 at this digital platform and they want our stuff [for free]. And we don't have capacity even to do descriptions, so even just understanding the field that we're engaging with as community archives in terms of equity issues, just getting some information on that, [so that it's part of] the conversation, will be good."

TOPIC #1.
'Finding aids for who or what?'

Issue / Concern:

C.

Boosting usability for non-academic audiences and providing greater access to young people. The format of traditional finding aids is not necessarily useful for anyone but academics, according to some participants. If a goal of the NAFAN project is to standardize finding aids, it should be acknowledged that traditional finding aids can be difficult for non-academic researchers to understand and use.

Also, it can be difficult for young people to access university collections and (collections descriptions). University collections often contain materials that are about or of interest to local community members, including young people. Young people are an important constituency community-based archives want to serve; CBAs would like to be able to point them to university collections that may be helpful or of interest to them.

Project opportunity:

Ensure that finding aids are accessible and comprehensible to non-academics.

"I think part of the project would have to be thinking beyond academic researchers who are used to looking at traditional finding aids. If NAFAN takes our data and puts it into a standardized format, I would want them to explain to people [non-academics] how to use the finding aids, so that they are approachable by everyone."

— workshop participant

Participant insights:

"I remember being a history student and the idea of archives and figuring out what to do and how to find what I wanted was very, very intimidating. I'd want to make that as easy as possible for non-academic researchers. And that gets back to who the target audiences are, who are the intended audiences... They (NAFAN) really need to think about reaching beyond just academic researchers, especially if they would like community archives to be a part of [the project] because academic researchers are great, but they are just a small piece of who we want to reach, just a small piece."

Discussion topics

'Finding aids for who or what?'

Issue / Concern:

D.

Fundamental assumption that community-based archives want to share information widely. Although workshop participants generally are interested in making their collections more discoverable, some curators of community-based archives want their collections descriptions targeted primarily to local community members, with academic researchers and a national audience as a lower priority or secondary audience. Two key reasons: some community collections are developed specifically to enrich the daily lives of their local community members; and CBAs generally are concerned about cultural appropriation and/or the need to maintain the safety, security, and dignity of the people their collections represent. But overall, some CBAs were concerned that the project might be operating on a built-in assumption that people who maintain community-based collections would want to share information about their collections, without project organizers really understanding why these small organizations share or who their audiences are. *"Archives have different purposes,"* one participant reiterated.

Project opportunity:

Strive to understand the different types of audience(s) CBAs serve. This will help indicate the different types of audiences this project is likely to serve. Some small archives are focused internally, meaning they are concerned primarily with providing archival information and access to their local communities (for example, tribal libraries and some African-American cultural heritage collections), while other small archives primarily are focused on making materials widely available, but in a manner that is safe for their communities. The project should ask: What is the priority? Who is the primary audience? CBAs need the project to tailor the finding aids to fit their communities' needs.

Participant insights:

"The thing that I find most offensive is when people try to access the information, this notion that they're entitled to it, and it needs to be in a format that they can use it, and the urgency of their need. Really? Any data that I collect is not collected for researchers per se, and maybe that's not correct, but any data that's collected is for the community."

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"If we're going to change finding aids, I would push to meet a question like 'what is the finding aid for?' I think traditionally these finding aids are for academics, people making films, writing books, and if we want them to be for our local communities, to incorporate collections into their daily life and change the conditions of the world that they live in, then the finding aid has to be designed for that... So that if I'm saying, 'I need better childcare for my baby,' then how can I use archives of people who have struggled for that [purpose]... How does the finding aid help me use those materials to fight for my family, rather than just write a book about it?"

Resources and sustainability for NAFAN project participants

Resources was a big topic, where participants expressed a variety of needs, from offline tools and mentoring to physical space and digital storage. Overall, small organizations need help to sustain their collections and to make them accessible.

"In terms of there being just such a need for fundamental resources, it makes it hard to even think about transferring our information to such a large aggregator."
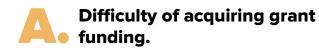
— workshop participant

TOPIC #2.
Resources and sustainability

Issue / Concern:

A. **Difficulty of acquiring grant funding.**

"Typically, to qualify, an organization needs to have a basic budget, say $50,000 or more, to show that you are responsible with money. But as a community archive, you barely get $8,000, if you're lucky, in a good year of fundraising. We are responsible, we are creative in making a lot happen with very little or no money using volunteer power, or the generosity and kindness of people that support the community archives."

— workshop participant

Project opportunity:

"Help us get grants."

"We we've heard loud and clear that these kinds of big national grants happen. But smaller organizations are looking for ways that they can get the grants directly. There's an imbalance of these kind of national projects and smaller efforts. So CBAs are thinking about how much further even smaller amounts of money could go in community efforts."

— workshop participant

"The dominant institutions have to stop trying to include us, and start to try to shift the work to us. At some point, these dominant institutions and actors have to refuse this money."

— workshop participant

Participant insights:

"I think that organizations who can write grants have a responsibility to help smaller organizations who are not as connected, become connected. Because what's your mission? Is your mission just to do your thing for your people? Do you really want to reach out to communities? Or is that just something you put in a report that, 'We need to reach out to a community.' Because sometimes I think that's just what it is. People put that in the report, but where's the follow-up, where's the solution? What are you going to do? What are you suggesting we do? Because if [you don't follow through], then you are an appropriator too."

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"Practically all our collections are under-resourced, and dominant institutions tend to dominate in terms of funding. And we are left at the mercy of a trickle-down kind of situation that often doesn't really happen."

Issue / Concern:

B.

Capacity issues and power imbalances in the field hamper fund seeking from non-grant sources. Many CBAs do not have the capacity and clout to seek out and procure funding opportunities that exist outside of the grant realm.

Project opportunity:

Work with small, community-based archives to locate and procure funding from non-traditional sources. Help create and facilitate funding alliances. An example:

> *"The Wikimedia Foundation is really, really interested in funding more projects that are interested in improving representation on the platform. And there's a huge opportunity, because there are affiliate groups, and chapters in the Wikimedia movement, some of which are geographically based and some of which are more thematically based. But there's huge opportunities for community archives to get together as a cohort and get funding, and there's actually one group called Whose Knowledge that is planning to work more specifically with community archives in getting more representative material online."*
>
> — workshop participant

Participant insights:

"There are requirements that sometimes are way out of our reach as small institutions. And so that is where we're hampered, even though we might be able to pinpoint what agencies are out there, what organizations and [funding] sources are out there for us to reach out to. Once we get into the guidelines and find out what they require, we just don't qualify. We can't meet the requirements. And so even when there are resources, there are hurdles. And those can be insurmountable."

Resources and sustainability

Issue / Concern:

c.

Misdirected resources. According to participants, it is unlikely that a large national project like this one will help small community-based archives meet the unique collections-based needs of the communities they serve.

Project opportunity:

Create a smaller, more targeted project.

"Use some of the resources [going to projects like this] to create a category for community archives to have a smaller project on a national scale for finding aids, for descriptions, for all these things that we're bringing up. Because our issues are very unique relative to dominant institutions."

— workshop participant

Participant insights:

"Our needs are not going to be met by this national project, they're just not. It might be useful if they just create a separate category for us that an outside organization can run."

Issue / Concern:

D.

A shortage of digital storage and physical space to store collections. Many CBAs have inadequate long-term digital storage, a need that is just as urgent – if not more so – as improving finding aids. Also, many CBAs lack resources to store physical artifacts properly. (Even post-custodial operations report that they sometimes get material collections donated to them.) And even though this project specifically is about a national digital initiative, some participants stressed the importance of having physical community spaces. Some CBAs make no distinction between their archival collections and museum spaces they maintain.

Project opportunity:

Commit financial resources (from grant funds, etc.) to help CBAs preserve and provide access to material artifacts and online collections.

Participant insights:

"I don't know how NAFAN can help us with this but it's a big issue that if we want to hold physical objects and keep them safe for our community, we need to have access to the resources to do that."

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"A lot of our spaces are sort of ad hoc or multipurpose, and they're not built to store artifacts. There's no air conditioning, there is no climate control. Our buildings are not set up to be long-term storage facilities. Just getting the acid free boxes is expensive. A big pain point with us, something that keeps my manager up at night, is that something might happen to our building with all those irreplaceable things in it, even things we're just holding on loan. We don't have any of the things that safeguard the collections like big institutions do, and it's really hard to get the resources to do that. We applied for a grant to try to retrofit the room and we didn't get it."

Misrepresentation, security, and control of collections descriptors

As part of participating in a proposed national finding aids system, some small community-based archives feel they may lose control of the way their communities' history and culture is represented. They expressed concerns about appropriate sharing, access versus safety, and protecting their communities' cultural identity. They raised this question: "Regarding collection descriptions, who are the gatekeepers, and who has access?"

"The more we participate in national things, the less we have control."

— workshop participant

Discussion topics

Misrepresentation, security, and control

A.

Issue / Concern:

Potential harm caused by misrepresentation of collections.

'Nationalizing' content descriptors might end up misrepresenting or mischaracterizing collections content in order to make the finding aid more understandable to a wide audience or fit a particular format. Hence, the quest to produce a good (standardized) finding aid may result in a poor description or representation of some collections. Participants asked: How do you describe what might seem vague to people outside the culture? How do you keep items in a collection from being misrepresented due to shortcomings of language or a desire to serve a wide audience?

When cataloging stories, particularly oral histories, some terms that are opaque to the public (they would wonder what they are) are pain points for the community and should not be used out of context. Conversely, one participant said some terms that the public would readily understand, and perhaps search for, are "absolutely harmful to the community, so we're not going to use them."

Project opportunity:

Ensure that collections descriptions meet community standards.

To CBAs, improving the quality of finding aids means removing harmful language and using self-descriptions from communities. To them, the most successful collection is shaped by the community, from the nomination process to describing content. CBAS emphasized the importance of tapping elders in their communities to help describe the materials in collections.

Participant insights:

"We're concerned about how metadata that we create might be represented, how it might be mapped into other systems, because [just as] there are assumptions about what quality is, there are assumptions about what a good finding aid is."

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"A lot of the assumptions that I feel are being made about audience and access really don't resonate with us. I think all our collections have been created because it's really important for our communities to have control over our history. And it really feels like entering into this kind of partnership is taking away a lot of that control."

Discussion topics

TOPIC #3.
Misrepresentation, security, and control

B.

Issue / Concern:

Respecting and securing cultural heritage and cultural identity protocols.

A conundrum for some CBAs is that participating in projects like this (that is, making collections more accessible) opens the door to cultural appropriation and misuse (including vulnerability to trolls and culture war antagonists). Some participants expressed concerns for how their collections might be used, and how misuse might undermine the intentions of the archive itself. Many CBAs have a culture of sharing, but ask for respect for their sacred languages, spaces, traditions, and practices.

"We were talking about access and discoverability and stories — the concern about stories being taken and manipulated. And the idea that once that discoverability is there, you'd want some kind of control over what happens to the piece once it leaves the repository."

— workshop participant

Project opportunity:

Help CBAs develop or refine use agreements for content.

Access to collections is important, but participants also were concerned with how to insure proper use. If a national finding aid tool is going to be useful for community-based archives, there needs to be ways for small organizations and the communities that their collections represent to affix some rules around how their materials are accessed and used, and that whatever protections they put in will be able to be interpreted by the system that NAFAN sets up. CBAs want to implement as much control as possible throughout this developing system and they think this is a valid thing to say to the people who are building the systems that the project hopes will be comprehensive and useful to a large group of users.

"So, you want researchers to have access, but you still want to have kind of control over it because all of a sudden it's ending up on YouTube and it's not continuing to tell the story that the people who created the archive want to tell."

— workshop participant

Participant insights:

"I don't think we fear cultural appropriation as much as we are concerned about the use of the materials that we do have. The whole rationale, the intent of having collections centralized in some way is to allow accessibility to the public. And so, I'm not sure that misuse of materials can be avoided entirely. You kind of have to have a degree of trust that the people who you're going to work with, either researchers or producers of media or other materials, will do exactly what they say they're going to do. I'm not naive enough to think that in every instance that you will not see somebody misusing the legitimate materials that you allow them to have access to. But I think that there are ways to guard against it. But at the same time, you're going to have to allow for a certain degree of belief and trust that people who come to you for use of materials will do exactly what they say they're going to do, and not abuse the access that you give them to the material."

TOPIC #3.

Misrepresentation, security, and control

c.

Issue / Concern:

Loss of control over data (and data security).

CBAs are concerned that they will lose the ability to make quick changes to collections descriptions for security's sake or to correct inaccuracies or update finding aids content as the need arises.

> *"I think all of our archives exist because we want our communities to have control over our histories. Even putting access through our own online catalog gives up some of that control. And then feeding descriptions into a platform that OCLC is involved in gives us even less control over what happens with metadata that we craft really carefully. We may not have control over how that is displayed and whether it is all displayed. We will definitely not have control over the servers that that data is stored on. And we feel really, really strongly about the servers that any data related to our materials is stored on. So I really wrestle with this premise of community control.*

— workshop participant

Project opportunity:

Create a system in which contributors DO have control and continued access to their metadata.

Some participants stressed the need to be able to implement updates and input continually to protect their communities.

> *"We have fairly recent immigrant communities… with respect to people who have moved here from Mexico and Latin American in the past 50 years… We run into some issues with people who have migration stories and as you know [that is] a very challenging topic in the United States right now. And so we are limited in what we can document because of immigration status issues… We don't have the legal capacity to be able to protect individuals who share or disclose their immigration status. So there's that tension between wanting to provide access versus privacy."*

— workshop participant

Participant insights:

"Some of the donor metadata that is in our descriptive system, we know is locked up securely. If any parts of that system are interacting with an external [system], there's risks to what we thought was secure. There's descriptions that we host on our own servers… If someone comes to us and says, 'can you remove my name from that publication that I made because I'm now facing risks because of that work and I would prefer if that wasn't available online.' We have control over that right now. And if metadata has been pulled into another system where we have lost some control over changing data — and I would assume that this could be a system where we would not have as much control moment to moment on updating our metadata — then that becomes a real issue. I can tell [a donor] 'I can update our catalog.' But now this data also has been pulled into this national catalog. I can't update it, but I can maybe request a change that happens in three months, but I can't fix it for you right away."

Discoverability and promotion of archival content

Participants generally expressed that an objective for their collections is that they want to help fill gaps in histories and information about under-represented people. To that end, their organizations do want to get the word out about their collections, they do want people — for some, mainly the people in their local community — to know who they are and what they have, while hoping that security risks can be minimized.

"Yes, [safety is important], but you don't want to be excluded from something that could be very important to represent different sides of America, or people and cultures."

— workshop participant

TOPIC #4.
Discoverability and promotion of archival content

Issue / Concern

A. **Addressing topical gaps, biases, and incomplete histories in archives.**

"In my community the big thing is they want their history to be taught and they want the lessons to be learned. And they want those lessons to be able to be applied to what's going on in the world today. So, that's the big clarion call of the community every time. They always say education, education, education."

— workshop participant

Project opportunity

Integrate our communities' stories into national narratives.
Sara Beckman of Densho provided an example: "Our big push is both preservation and education... Our big goal is to make the experience of the Japanese Americans during World War II a nationally known event. A national aggregator, we would hope, would be able to expand our reach beyond the Japanese American community and the West Coast community... The Japanese American story during World War II is, I think a regional story in the United States. And since my Midwest community didn't see it happen, or really feel it happen within our community, it was not taught in our schools. But it is taught in the West Coast community because it was felt there, people can actually still remember it, there is living memory. And so, a national aggregator I would hope would be able to put our narrative of the Japanese American community next to the narratives of the same time period or bring that narrative to view for people who are researching stories of the World War II experience. A national reach is something we've been trying to accomplish, and I would really hope that would be something a national aggregator could do."

Participant insights

"One thing that has been important for us in terms of representation of the social movements and activists in our collection has been using our collection to edit Wikipedia. There are so many articles that we've created on Wikipedia that no one else would have been able to write because they didn't have the source material. But because we have done that, now if you search for that on Google, the Google knowledge box pulls in information from that Wikipedia article. That actually allows us to be a lot more strategic in how our information from our collection gets out there, and it reaches an audience that we're interested in, which is people who use Google, instead of just academics. It's not going to drive people back to our archive, but we don't really care about that. We're creating representation of our community, which is what matters to us. And in many cases we're working with folks in those communities to build skills to edit Wikipedia themselves about issues that matter to their community so that folks can be more involved in telling that story, describing that story."

Discoverability and promotion of archival content

Issue / Concern

B.

Without a grasp of history, people do not know what to ask for. We need help amplifying stories.

"Discoverability is huge because we don't know our history, we don't know the names, we don't know the movements… The assumption for a lot of the way the archives are structured is that you know what to ask for — you get the finding aid, and then you want Box 10, Photo 7."

— workshop participant

Project opportunity

Amplify and promote small archives on a national level.

"Nationally, doing promotion of archives in whatever ways [is important], assuming controlling for security issues and other kinds of concerns. Because discoverability is an issue and knowing even what our histories are… Promote this on a national level — what we have in some of our collections, what some of the history is — so that people know what to ask for."

— workshop participant

Participant insights

"What tends to happen in a small archive is that people come in and ask for material based on broad categories like civil rights, or policing… I think the issue is how do you help people find things rather than assume that they already know what to ask for, and then make it easier once they know what to ask for."

Discussion topics

Discoverability and promotion of archival content

Issue / Concern

c.

Standardization of finding aids and cataloging systems.

Many or even most small community-based archives don't use a formalized or standardized system, nor are many of them up to date with the latest national cataloging schema. There is a concern about the different kinds of cataloging systems small, local organizations do use, and how that might factor into a national finding aids network. "There is a gap between how we describe collections and the way national databases do it," one participant said.

They also acknowledged the challenge of representing in a finding aid a "holistic story of what's in the collection." They are concerned that standardization as a way improving content quality and discoverability may undermine the ability to fairly describe what is in a collection.

Project opportunity

Integrate local knowledge systems into the aggregated system.

"We need to be able to create our own descriptions and taxonomies. Can we put local knowledge systems at the center of a new way of cataloging? Can we create standards for community-focused sharing?"

— workshop participant

Participant insights

"The question that I would have about what NAFAN is going to do relates to what might be the end product of all our discussions that we are having right now. Looking at the [NAFAN] website, one of the four areas that they want to focus on is evaluating the quality of the existing finding aid data. And I don't know exactly what that means, but it does sound to me like if there's a finding aid that uses a particular format that's not standardized, is NAFAN's intent or concern standardization of finding aids by institutions, small ones like ours that might have a different format of sharing this information with the public? Is there an intent on the part of NAFAN to kind of standardize what we put together as a finding aid?"

Discussion topics

Discoverability and promotion of archival content

Issue / Concern

D.

Discovery beyond the search box.

Participants asked: How would the project classify and present the materials? In a uniform manner? It is difficult to appropriately categorize holdings, several participants said. "We need interesting ways to share, to make content discoverable."

One participant asked about taxonomy and subject headings: How would the project assist people who are having trouble with their searches? "I work with people trying to search our repository all the time. And there's a lot of basic things I help people with because they don't know what to search for to get what they want. And so, I can help them out with that. I know discoverability can sometimes be a big issue with people who aren't used to looking through repositories like this."

Project opportunity

Presenting "different ways of discoverability, such as by location, topic or time frame within the project would be helpful." Participants recommended
creating tools to help people narrow their searches; and implementing training programs to make finding aids more understandable and accessible to non-academic local community members.

Participant insights

"I think a conversation that we have here in the archive, in the organization itself, is we're always thinking about how useful our descriptions are for the neighborhood, right? And a lot of the subjects in our materials that cross over, from national politics to local politics, to oral histories of artists in the neighborhood. There's a lot of different subjects that you have to think a lot about, and there's an issue with our ability to represent people... Even though our organization's been involved in the community for 35 years, and a lot of people help out with the description, it's hard to succinctly categorize people's actions and lives and experiences in a finding aid."

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"One low-hanging fruit sort of way would be to browse by institution. But that might be an obstacle, as some institution names are opaque."

Managing collections and mutual support

During the workshop, participants shared links to resources, and to materials produced by their own organizations that they thought might be useful to others in the workshop. They discussed the potential value in mutual aid and support to manage their collections, and advocated for a mechanism that would accommodate pooled knowledge and collaboration.

"One benefit of the workshop was all of us being online together sharing information, processes, and approaches."

— workshop participant

Discussion topics

Managing collections

Issue / Concern

A. **Small, community-based archives have different concerns and needs** than large institutions and collections and lack a forum for sharing those concerns.

Project opportunity

Advocate for the creation of a consortium of CBAs for mutual aid, support, and collaboration. Help facilitate a way for CBAs to convene and share information on an ongoing basis. "A space to have these complicated conversations around our collections and finding aids would be helpful, a place to have conversations about concerns." Concerns include funding, data security, misrepresentation and harm, equity, and control. Help CBAs tap resources that could provide advice or guidance.

Participant insights

"Maybe [CBAs need] an organization created by smaller archives, where they make the rules. And to find the funding to support it on a national level. Because there are different things that we talk about sometimes in these smaller organizations and they're not addressed by bigger organizations. And many times resources, even though they're there, are hard to obtain through them. And an organization that we create, that small community archives are a part of, would directly address the needs and the wants of our groups."

Issue / Concern

B.

Small archival institutions cannot afford subscriptions/ membership in archivists societies and other professional associations that offer guidance and education that would help keep them up to date about the field.

Sometimes CBAs need guidance and assistance in organizing collections as precursor work to describing them.

> *"They (researchers) want pictures that literally I don't know how to organize. I'm just being very honest. I probably have over 10,000 pictures and videos. The organization existed for 20 years, so now things are getting fuzzy. People remember some of the [subjects in the photos and videos]. But they're [identifying] younger people. We're losing elders who would remember almost everyone."*
>
> — workshop participant

Project opportunity

Advocate for a 'small institution' membership categories in organizations such as SAA, whereby small archives can become members without the typical cost that's paid every year for those memberships.

Participant insights

"What I've always thought would be beneficial to the field in general and small archives in particular, would be an arrangement with SAA (the Society of American Archivists). The SAA does a lot for the field... and it stands as the archival institutional connection for the field. But a lot of us can't afford to have membership, either as an individual or as an organization. I think it would be great if there's a possibility of working with SAA to help small archival institutions around the country benefit from what SAA provides its membership [by creating] a small institutional membership category."

Discussion topics

Managing collections

Issue / Concern

c.

A need for guidance on licensing and usage fees and assistance in handling commercial requests for collections materials.

"I think it would be interesting to see what other people are charging for use. I know that's something that we're kind of struggling with, because there's not really any guidelines out there for what community organizations are charging for use of materials. We might charge a nominal fee, if that, for people who want to use materials, especially if it's a nonprofit use. I'd be really interested to see how other organizations deal with this because we've been getting more commercial interest in our materials, and we don't license for commercial use. We really have no guidelines or idea of what the standard is among other [small] archives."

— workshop participant

Project opportunity

Offer or point to management help for licensing and reproduction rights pertaining to collections materials in small archives. Participants wondered about the possibility of establishing a national group to handle requests from the media about relevant materials in small collections, especially during periods of great attention and demand.

"What happens to us is that organizations or corporations with a lot of money always ask for the materials for free for their documentary film or for their book. And then it puts us in a position of having to negotiate and commodify our collections, which is what we don't want. So, it would be nice if there was an entity to just handle these kinds of contracts and usage fees with people who are not in our communities. We don't have staff for that. We don't want to be in that [area]."

— workshop participant

Participant insights

"You want to share [materials] but at the same time you want to be able to place a value on the item that they're using. You're having to balance because it could be that someone is publishing a book on a history that's local to your community and you want them to be able to tell the story, but at the same time, you want to be able to not devalue the items that they're asking to use."

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"Some of the big players in the area of licensing and permissions like Getty, are structured and set up to go after those individuals who might violate the use of images. And so, a lot of us are not set up with lawyers and legal departments that can go after someone who will take an image that we might license to them for a nominal fee and then do whatever they choose."

PART 7.
About Shift Collective

Shift Collective (shiftcollective.us) is a New Orleans-based 501(c)(3) non-profit corporation. We support and design community-driven initiatives to increase social, cultural and resource equity. Through our work on projects like Architecting Sustainable Futures, Cultural Heritage and Social Change Summit, Moving Beyond Colonial Models of Digital Memory, Historypin, and the Sustainable Futures Blog, we are committed to an inclusive record of our shared cultural heritage, and collaborative and equitable approaches to deep community-based initiatives.

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