Memorializing Religion:
Crowdsourcing, Minorities, and the Quest for Identity in Online Archives
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Abstract

Religion, a defining factor in the process of identity formation of a minority community, has been historically used as a driving force behind the introduction, development and completion of projects that require collective effort. In fact, in many cases, religion has been an extreme denominator that has created new communities of practice, or solidified existing ones. A unifying force, religion and its liturgical, ceremonial, educational, communal or personal expressions is an overarching element that unites members of such communities beyond technical, geographic or temporal limitations. Today, new technologies have altered the way minority communities seek, tell and “exhibit” their identity online. For archives with such collections, crowdsourcing their descriptions and collections with user-generated material can add valuable context to their holdings, shed light on hidden collections, and link them to material in other institutions or countries. In the context of this paper, the notion of crowdsourcing archives through religion will be understood as a sense-making process for a community’s collective memory and identity.

Keywords: Minorities, crowdsourcing, archives, memory, identity

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Introduction

For people who have no homeland, either because they are immigrants or exiles or because they are minorities in states that, they feel, do not represent them, religion can be a defining part of their identity, permeating all aspects of the life of a community. In an immigrant or minority setting, religion fills the void of other cornerstones, such as the “nation” or one’s homeland that do not exist as delimitating factors. It regulates the communal life, both the repetitive, seasonal events, as well as lifecycle milestones (birth, marriage, death etc.), and defines a community’s character in its everyday expressions such as food or clothing, and intellectual or artistic output.

The ritualistic nature of religion appeals to the depths of the human psyche, enabling the coalescence of communities around the familiar, the “known.” Deeply internalizing and fervently externalizing ideas, actions, activities, and feelings as repetitive, comforting patterns (rituals) in private or group settings, religion constitutes an all-encompassing experience, by appealing to and stimulating all senses. As a shared, overarching element, religion defines boundaries, enriches the communal experience, solidifies a common past, and invigorates a common outlook towards the future.

Religion has historically been a driving force behind the inception, development and completion of mass collaborative projects. The ill-fated Tower of Babel itself, the ziggurats in ancient Mesopotamia, the pyramids of Egypt, its temples and those of the ancient Greek world,

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the great cathedrals of the Middle Ages are all examples of undertakings that required the ability to “think big,” to delegate work processes, to inspire continuous and committed involvement, and to mobilize a large number of people around a common vision and for a common goal, all the while using iconographic and architectural elements as means to instruct people.

In fact, in many cases, religion has been an extreme denominator that gave birth to new communities of practice, or solidified existing ones. In order to do that, it used all available technologies of the time, and took advantage of new, cutting-edge ones. The example of the invention of the printing press is telling. A new technology in the hands of an effervescent community, it proved instrumental for one of the greatest revolutions in the history of mankind: that of new means of knowledge production and its transmission to the masses, as well as for the spread of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. In the hands of religious authorities, as well as of those that contested them, the printed text became a new, powerful, and eventually indispensable, tool for the dissemination of the word of God—or for the production of texts that challenged it.

Digitization and the introduction of the Web have revolutionized our way of generating, disseminating, storing and finding information, and of subsequently attaining knowledge. The introduction of new technologies, especially Web 2.0 and social media, has extreme implications for minority populations: they affect the way people understand, visualize, interpret and interact with the past and provide them with new ways of building their identity in a “hybridized” way where elements from the homeland and the new land are interwoven (Srinivasan, 2007). They also provide a fertile environment for the introduction of varying, contradicting, and most often

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conflicting voices in themes that can inspire and mobilize people, among them religion, ethnicity, human rights, democracy, freedom etc.

Up to recent decades, lack of technological advancement in communications and transportations or the concentration of such technologies in the hands of the State or of elites therein meant that lay people who did not control such resources remained isolated, and unable to collaborate in meaningful ways. This meant that others told their story or preserved their memory for them. In “memory institutions” (libraries, museums, archives), memory was being produced and reproduced, with one “official” narrative presented as The Memory, while individual voices were excluded from the process. Digitization and the availability of online resources have signaled a new era of collective understanding of a community’s historical continuum.

Different people remember different things, thus we cannot speak of one memory, but of many individual memories. Ketelaar (2005) speaks of a “memory continuum” in which “memories of the individual, the family, the organization, the community, and society function, not in isolation, but in a flow of continuous interaction (p. 2). Different people recreate different aspects of reality by assigning their own perceptions of the events that shape their lives.

Today minorities use new media in order to make sense of the world, to reconnect with geographically distant members of their group, to define communal memory in new terms, and to retell and “exhibit” their identity online to larger segments of the population. By emancipating the record from the spatial, temporal, and human elements of traditional institutions (libraries, archives, and museums), such opportunities can provide marginalized or minority groups with transplanted “homelands” that they can inhabit, ensuring a visible presence for themselves and

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projecting an image of their world as they know it or as they want to present it. In this sense, as Dervin (1999) suggests, information for these communities is not a final product, but a tool designed by human beings seeking to give sense to gaps in their world, over time and space.

Although not yet widely incorporated in the flow of archival practices, new technologies provide archives with the opportunity to crowdsource their descriptions and collections through user participation. Crowdsourcing archives with user-generated materials can add valuable context to their holdings, shed light on hidden collections, and link them to material in other institutions or countries. Because of the defining and all encompassing nature of religion, every person of a group has in their possession a story, a document or an artifact that they can contribute in order to tell the larger story of their group.

New media offer a fertile ground upon which common memory and common identity can be constructed. The “deterritorialization” that new technologies offer has altered the way different aspects of identity are “memorialized” online. Here the word “memorialization” implies both the process of relegating to memory, as well as of creating memorials (or “monuments”) out of it. Religion, one of the most crucial identity aspects, is often the one that becomes “memorialized”: Often it becomes a point of reference whereupon the collective memory of a group can be constructed.

Archives and user participation

Archives yield power over the shape and direction of historical scholarship, collective memory, and identity. Contrary to popular belief, they are not passive storehouses of old stuff,

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but active sites where certain stories are privileged and others marginalized (Schwarz & Cook, 2002). What is not there, does not “exist” and what is there does not represent the whole prism of society. Traditionally archives have been collecting and preserving what has been deemed important, authentic, reliable, and of high evidential value. But “reliable” documents, such as judicial, financial, diplomatic, or political documents, rarely reflect the everyday life of the less fortunate of the society, such as working class people, women, or various minorities (ethnic, racial, religious, LGBT or others).

Social history and postmodernism have challenged such assumptions and practices. Archival literature is copious on the paradigm change in archival practice after the advent of post-modernism (Cook, 2000 and 2001; Ketelaar, 2002; Nesmith, 2002; Greene, 2009). Today archivists feel that it is their “moral professional responsibility” to give equal voice to groups that often have been marginalized or silenced, and to become agents of change for social justice and diversity (Jimerson, 2007).

The proliferation of ethnic, immigrant, or other minority archives, historical societies, or museums in the U.S. shows how these groups have transitioned from “being collected” to being the agents of their own stories, and their own facilities. But this trend is not adequate when we try to capture a representative record of a community, to enable greater participation in the memory construction process, and to give researchers the opportunity to navigate through a multitude of discourses and viewpoints. In minority archives, the process is usually still a top-down one, with community elites most often leading such initiatives. If individual, diverse, and representative memories are to be sought, then individual contributions are needed, and it is crucial that people are given the opportunity to contribute their stories.

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The last decade has seen a growing body of archival literature on the opportunities and challenges for user interaction with the records facilitated by the Internet and new technologies that many see as the solution for crowdsourcing the archival holdings through user-generated content and contextual information. Articles dealing with the issue of user participation and crowdsourcing in archives do so from different aspects: Some focus on Web 2.0 technologies and social media, while others assess the challenges and benefits of creating platforms for this purpose. Other articles concentrate on users' involvement in the item or metadata level (Light & Hyry, 2002; Riley & Shepherd, 2009), while others assess user participation in the collection or repository level (Krause & Yakei, 2007; Huvila, 2008; Samouelian, 2009), and some examine how to involve users through archival commons or Semantic Web technologies (Evans, 2007; Kalfatovic et al., 2008, Anderson & Allen, 2009; Sherratt, 2009).

Archivists have come to realize that this participatory model that affords everyone¹ with the opportunity to comment, annotate, describe, link, or mash-up records, among other possibilities, has increased user expectations from their profession, previously seen as proprietary, opaque or monastic, at best. As much as user participation in the archival process is a natural outcome of the postmodernist discourse, rising user expectations can also be seen as a side-effect of the blurring of boundaries among disciplines. As humanities espouse the “information- and data-intensive, distributed, collaborative, and multi-disciplinary” approach of the sciences (Borgman, 2009), scholars and users expect that more data and archival records be digitized and online and that new technical and policy infrastructures be in place that facilitate

¹ The idea of universal accessibility to technology is of course debatable. The digital divide is a situation that cannot easily or presently be solved. It is multi-faceted and consists of difficulties that various users face due to the transition from an analog to a digital world; of financial and social constructs that influence the way individuals and societies relate to technology; and of cognitive affordances of different users towards a medium that has been largely and almost exclusively visual and two-dimensional.

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their access to and interaction with the records. There is a widespread urge “to develop transparent, networked, multimedia, multi-repository resources” (Gilliland-Swetland, 2000). The notion of information commons promotes the advancement of learning and information resource sharing through civil society and democratic participation and promises “to share without owning; to own without enclosing; to take by sharing” (Kranich & Schement, 2008).

Archivists are called today to reinvent themselves by adapting to the requirements of a world defined by interdisciplinarity, by vertiginous technological advances, by the challenges of information economy, and by new socioeconomic conditions. At the same time, archivists voice their concern over what they see as potentially increasing the work load for them, and about issues of authenticity and reliability of contributed material (Yakel, 2006; Samouelian, 2009).

New archival paradigms, such as the notion of “community of records” (Bastian, 2003), assess that the whole community participates in the making of the records and that “the entire community becomes the larger provenance of the records” (p. 83). Many feel that opening archives to user contributions can seriously affect the trustworthiness, reliability and quality of the institution (Oomen & Aroyo, 2011).

Indeed, giving users the possibility to interact with the records contradicts the most basic premises of archival theory, since it is traditionally the institutional setting that warrants the authenticity, reliability and evidentiality of the records. But these notions that are regarded as cornerstones of the archival theory and profession are open to interpretation when it comes to the records of minorities. Researchers and historians of such communities know that in the case of the histories of such populations there is not such a thing as “unbroken chain of custody,” that provenance is irrelevant, that things are not (cannot) be authentic or reliable. When it was not wars, fires, or natural disasters that ensured the “natural selection” of records, then it was

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communities themselves that made sure to hide, destroy or alter records that could be deemed “incriminating” or not patriotic enough. And in the tradition of great Western archives, the official State apparatus has always been very earnest in its nationalizing mission, i.e. in its effort to flatten out voices or hues that threatened the homogeneity of the nation.

Crowdsourcing and minorities

The 21st century has seen the rise of highly collaborative networks that introduced new dynamics among individuals, the state, the marketplace, or other institutions. This new model of socioeconomic organization and productivity has freed the creativity and effectiveness of groups of people by enabling them to work outside the strictures of traditional, hierarchically structured institutions. Thus “the act of outsourcing tasks, traditionally performed by an employee or contractor to an undefined, large group of people or community (a “crowd”), through an open call”² is defined as crowdsourcing (Castells, 2000; Benkler, 2006; Shirky, 2008; Kranich & Schement, 2008).

Novel in its speed and ability to reach and motivate large segments of the population, crowdsourcing does not alter the traditional way of how things have always moved. Traditionally, large-scale projects would start at the center and branch out to many individuals or groups. Before it was kings, priests, or national states that would initiate such large-scale projects; now it is large corporations, countries or institutions in the developed world, in short whoever has digital power that enables the aggregation of data and provides the necessary platforms for people to contribute material and interact.

² <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crowdsourcing>.

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In the heritage sector, various researchers classify crowdsourcing projects according to a variety of criteria: Dawson (2010) organizes them according to category; Bonney et al. (2009) recognize contribution, collaboration, and co-creation as the three main patterns of participation according to the level of interaction of the crowdsourcing crowd with the institution; Simon (2010) adds a fourth category (i.e., hosted) to the model proposed by Bonney et al. In their 2011 study aiming to identify the challenges of operationalizing user participation in LAMs (Libraries, Archives, Museums), Oomen and Aroyo study crowdsourcing initiatives according to their tangible outcomes and orientation (i.e., correction and transcription tasks, contextualization, complementing collection, classification, co-curation, crowdfunding).

In the realm of archives, museums and libraries, many of the activities that today fall under the category of crowdsourcing can be seen as a refashioning since such institutions have always depended on volunteers for many of these functions. The main difference now is that of scale, connectedness among “e-volunteers” and ease of use (Oomen & Aroyo, 2011). In fact, based on Benkler’s commons-based peer production model, Evans (2007) argues that the role of archival institutions should be to manage the aggregation and delivery of the data collected, while volunteers would extend and enrich the metadata.

Crowdsourcing that starts from the center and radiates to the outskirts presupposes the existence of a well-defined center that in a networked world is possible through extensive cooperation and the existence of funds and infrastructure (Sherratt, 2009). This *modus operandi* however is not relevant to the historical record of minority populations, where funds and infrastructure are often non-existent and *a* center (i.e., the story) has to be recreated by bringing together disparate pieces of information.

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If we perceive the web as a mass archive of human knowledge made up of arbitrary, often data-intensive and objective, but most often personal and intimate, pieces of information, then what is needed are meaningful ways to bring together this knowledge. We cannot assume that we can reliably tell the stories of populations for whom we have little or incomplete material, since objects and documents of these communities are often geographically or institutionally dispersed, linguistically diverse, governed by various legal or political systems, or simply not included in mainstream archives. Instead we need to consciously seek out the content that is lacking, and particularly provide people with the means to populate Memory with their individual memories. Memory is never complete, it is always in flux, and in this sense, crowdsourcing is a never-ending quest towards memorializing individual memories, i.e., capturing individual memories as pieces of Memory and exhibiting them online.

In essence, the process of pulling in individual memories in order to form a scaffold, whereupon the collective memory of a community can be built, is an act of collaborative sense-making, a notion that encompasses and goes beyond crowdsourcing (i.e., outsourcing tasks to an “unruly” crowd) and implies the idea of people sharing common experiences. Sense-making focuses on the collaboration of people through a shared representation (Qu & Hansen, 2008), working together to find and create knowledge structures in unstructured situations (Russell et al., 1993). Dervin (1998) has defined this process as bridging a knowledge gap that enables people to move forward in a time-space situation.

If we want to empower people to create knowledge structures and bridge gaps in Memory, then we need to understand the sense-making through crowdsourcing in archives, libraries and museums as the unmediated interaction of the users with the records. Digitization,

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networks and new media provide incomparable opportunities for such interaction. Such instant gratification of the users' information-seeking needs, though, provides false expectations of instant Web access to every archival holding and at item level description (Evans, 2007).

While increasingly archival users expect to find everything online, the archival profession has not changed its traditional practices in ways that promote access to archival material and meaningfully overcome the issue of backlogs. Greene and Meissner (2005) assess that as archivists we favor more the collections than our users and have recently proposed the "More Product, Less Process" approach: they suggest that by arranging, preserving and describing materials minimally, but in a way that can promote sufficiently their use, we will be able to triple our productivity with the present resources and end the frustration of researchers and donors by delivering materials that are "good enough" for access and use, instead of "perfect" in the way they are catalogued or described.

While this call to the archival profession to untangle itself from the need to describe everything item-level is indeed a necessary solution for backlogs, it presents other challenges in the online environment where keyword search is the norm. Here is where crowdsourcing can be instrumental: If archives must promote access by minimizing their role in manipulating the record before bringing the material to the end user, and if end users increasingly demand "itemized" online access, archives should provide users the opportunity both to contribute content as well as to tailor it to their needs by adding contextual material. Instead of "arks of memory," archives could become engineered platforms of fermentation and of commons-based peer-production that would aggregate and deliver the data collected by enthusiasts (Evans 2007). Such a peer-based approach would enhance the formation of social memory in a commons-based

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networked environment that, through leveraging existing tools and user involvement, would in parallel reduce associated costs contributing to the sustainability of such projects (Anderson & Allen, 2009).

In such platforms, users, especially researchers that have dealt directly and in all levels with the material, would be able to add content and context, to create links among records, artifacts, and collections, and contribute to the workflow of LAMs through their varying skills and knowledge. Because when it comes to using new technologies the skill sets of people are not homogeneous, LAMs should provide people with different levels of opportunity to contribute. Providing only one level of functions (either simplistic or requiring advanced skills) in a monolithic “one-type-fits-all” way only exacerbates the issue of the digital divide and alienates users. If we lower the threshold for participation, then every user might feel welcome.

Beyond an act of coalescing in order to contribute data and collaboratively build new knowledge, crowdsourcing signals an era of new media (in essence new systems of representation) through which user-contributed data (content and context) can become understood, measured, and observed—in fact *known*—in novel ways (Foucault, 1982). In a networked environment, where data are not preserved or disseminated in the linear medium of printed text, one could argue that online minorities populate databases, not really geographies (Zwick & Dholakia, 2004). In the case of local communities, a number of researchers have questioned the effects of the transition from the local to the globalized, from the ‘real spaces’ to ‘virtual ones,’ while others have supported the empowering potential of servers, networks and databases within information systems (Srinivasan, 2006). This assertion paints a bleak picture of a world where our online identities are controlled and inscribed in the digital media by others. In

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this sense, the idea of crowdsourcing can be further enhanced by allowing people to have immediate access to the database so that they can “act directly on the linguistic composition of (their) identity” (p. 39).

The ability to directly intervene in the identity formation source is paramount for minority populations who have long been forced to accept “official” memories as representing them. But how one remembers can be as crucial as how one can selectively forget when necessary. The notion of forgetting, even if fabricated or imposed, as an act that can bring closure to traumas that we carry, can present a point of exit when in time of danger, or can constitute a white page whereupon a new chapter can be written is quite enticing. Galloway (2006) distinguishes between what databases remember and what we as individuals or groups remember, and makes the case that, in the realm of human-computer interaction, local knowledge and ‘values’ should be incorporated at the stage of designing. Srinivasan (2006; 2007) has also repeatedly pointed out the importance of a participatory and ethnographic approach to the development of systems that favor community participation and vision in their design.

Involving local or communal knowledge in the early stages of a project needs to be combined with the lowering of the threshold that was previously mentioned. When developing online projects, archivists usually collaborate with community elites, because of the ease of access to archival material that these elites enable. Archivists might not realize though that such elites, especially the ones who produce or preserve written records, such as religious institutions, benevolent societies, the press, or communal leadership (Daniel, 2010), are not free from biases or hidden agendas. It is not only “outsiders” (such as the hegemonic state or mainstream

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archives) that dictate “official” histories and morph the online presence of communities. Community leaders or organizations all too often intervene and speak on behalf of the community, actively imposing levels of remembering and forgetting. Lowering the threshold of participation and permitting various individuals with a variety of skills to participate can contribute to a more pluralistic and representative online presence of a community. Today the notion of “participatory multicultural archiving” can promote diversity, flexibility and evolution of collections (Daniel, 2010).

Conclusions

New technologies in archival settings allow users to contribute material, and interact in novel ways with the records. This is of extreme interest for minority communities who now can redefine their online identity through direct manipulation of memories. The opportunity that each person has to freely create, store, and disseminate material on the Internet, is crucial, because we cannot speak of one collective memory but of many individual ones that come together to form the “hegemonic” (dominant) memory of a community. Through new media, members of the community can project their own view of their identity and of their world to greater segments of the society, escaping the patronizing control of community elites.

Crowdsourcing can enrich archives, add valuable content and context to their holdings, shed light to hidden collections and create links to materials in other institutions or archives. For communities whose records are geographically or institutionally dispersed, governed by various legal and political systems, or existing in multiple languages and alphabets, the possibilities are

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quite exciting. In this process, as an overarching and all-encompassing element in the life of a community, religion defines boundaries, reinforces ties, and enriches communal experiences.

These tendencies have signaled a new era for archives, library, and museum professionals who are now expected to promote and facilitate user participation in activities that were up to now very specific to the profession. Archivists have only recently started to incorporate user-contributed material to their collections. The transition to a new paradigm of archival theories and practices is bound to be challenging, but will redefine the way we see our past and heritage.

It seems that “one-size-fits-all” solutions are not applicable to this new form of peer-production. Crowdsourcing itself is only part of this process. The Semantic Web offers exciting opportunities for archives and their users. Sherratt (2009) sees archival metadata everywhere in a “web of extended finding aids,” even in YouTube and Flickr, and argues that instead of trying to aggregate material and build applications or platforms for specific audiences, we should try to offer users the metadata in ways that can be meaningfully searchable and manipulated in ways that fit each user’s needs. Linked data and other Semantic Web technologies can be used in ways that will further the idea of crowdsourcing beyond the physical archive itself.

This new understanding of constructing memory through crowdsourcing is not a simple process: Beyond the fact that many institutions are not ready to adopt this approach, because they lack the resources, or the necessary policies, or even the desire, minority communities themselves might be reluctant to reveal and let others take control of elements that form their memory and identity—or let intra-community “minorities” represent the whole community in the public sphere that is today the online world.

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Pushing the record outside the archival walls and into a universe of cultural artifacts and human knowledge that can be globally viewed and manipulated might seem as the pinnacle of the Information Age in the Western tradition, but are we sure that everyone aspires to this? Having records with persistent URLs “float” in a Web of data that can be searched, browsed, shared, manipulated, mashed-up by anyone pushes the individual at the forefront of memory creation. In a way, each user becomes like Derrida’s Archive that requires an external space in order to exist: In this case, it is the user that becomes the external/eternal space and vessel that ensures the memorization, repetition, and reproduction of the record—and of Memory.

Biographical statement

Amalia Skarlatou Levi is a Ph.D. student at the archival track of the University of Maryland's iSchool, where she also completed the interdisciplinary History and Library Science program resulting in a MA in History and a MLS. She also holds a MA in Museum Studies. Amalia has worked in Jewish museums developing exhibits and managing collections. Amalia's research is at the intersection of information studies and memory. She is interested in how museums, archives, and libraries inform our understanding of our identity and in how memory and identity are articulated and reified in online archives, particularly of minority populations.

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