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

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Abstract

Religion is a defining factor in the identity formation process of a minority community. Historically, religion has often been 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 expressions in liturgical or everyday forms is an overarching element that unites members of these communities beyond the geographic or temporal limitations. Today, new technologies are paramount in online and digital archives of minority communities, especially in ways that these communities use these technologies to retell and “exhibit” their identity online. Crowdsourcing archives with user-generated material can add valuable context to archival holdings, shed light on hidden collections, and tie them with material in other institutions or countries. In the context of this paper, the notion of crowdsourcing in archives will be examined through the lens of religion and a classification of such initiatives will be proposed.

*Keywords*: Minorities, crowdsourcing, archives, memory, identity
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Introduction

For people who have no state 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 factor in the process of identity formation. As an identity cornerstone, religion permeates all aspects of the life of a community. It does so even more in an immigrant or minority setting, when other cornerstones, such as the “nation” or one’s homeland, do not exist as delimitating factors. It regulates the communal life cycle, both the repetitive, seasonal events, as well as the milestones of human life, and defines both its liturgical as well as its everyday expressions in food, clothing, ceremonial objects, art.

The ritualistic nature of religion appeals to the depths of the human psyche, enabling the coalescence of communities around a familiar, common identity. Deeply internalizing and fervently externalizing ideas, actions, activities, and feelings as repetitive, comforting patterns (rituals) in private or group setting, religion appeals to and stimulating every sense, thus creating an all-encompassing experience. The sharing of this common overarching element by members of a community defines boundaries, enriches the communal experience, solidifies a common past, and invigorates a common outlook towards the future.

Historically, religion has often 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, the great cathedrals of the Middle Ages are all examples of undertakings that required the ability to “think big,” to delegate work processes, and to mobilize a large number of people around a common vision and for a common goal. They are also imposing structures where iconographic and architectural elements are used as a means to instruct people.

In fact, in many cases, religion has been an extreme denominator that created new communities of practice, or solidified existing ones. The example of the invention of the printing press is telling. A new technology in the hands of an effervescent community, it was instrumental for the spread of the Reformation, as well as for one of the greatest revolutions in the history of mankind: that of new means of knowledge production and its transmission to the masses. In the realm of religion, the printed text soon became a new, indispensable and powerful tool for the dissemination of the word of God. Up to then other literacy skills, such as oral tradition, iconography and architecture or painstakingly hand copied texts were the norm.

The introduction of the Web and digitization has revolutionized our way of understanding the world and of attaining knowledge. For the first time, people can easily generate material and distribute it worldwide. The implications new technologies have for minority communities are truly of extreme interest, since they introduce varying, contradicting, and most often conflicting voices in themes that can inspire and mobilize people, among them religion, ethnicity, human rights, democracy, freedom etc. New technologies, especially Web 2.0 and social media, affect the ways 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).
Up to very recently, lack of necessary technological advancement in communications and transportation or the concentration of such technologies in the hands of the State or of the elites therein meant that people who did not control these resources remained literally isolated, and unable to come together or collaborate in meaningful ways. In fact, before the advent of the Web, memory was being produced and reproduced in “memory institutions” (libraries, museums, archives) with an “official” memory presented as valid, and individual members excluded from the process. Digitization and the availability of sources online has signaled a new, collective understanding of the past, and the various aspects of the life and history of a community.

Today minorities can 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, thus reaching 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 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.

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.

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.

Although not yet widely incorporated in the flow of archival practices, new technologies provide archives with the opportunity to crowdsource their collections through user participation. Crowdsourcing archives with user-generated materials can add valuable context to archival holdings, shed light on hidden collections, and tie them with 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.

User participation and archives

Archives yield power over the shape and direction of historical scholarship, collective memory, and identity, because, contrary to popular belief, they are not passive storehouses of old stuff, but active sites where certain stories are privileged and others marginalized (Schwarz &
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Cook, 2002). What is not there, does not “exist.” Actually, what is there does not represent the whole prism of society. Traditionally archives have been collecting and preserving what has been deemed important, and of high evidential value, but 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 questioned and reversed this tendency. Archival literature is copious on the paradigm change in archival practice after the advent of postmodernism (Cook, 2000 and 2001; Ketelaar, 2002; Nesmith, 2002; Greene, 2009). Today archivists feel 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. 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).

Recently, archivists have been discussing how to bring together disparate holdings in varied formats. Archival literature features an increasingly growing body of articles discussing the use of technologies that would permit greater interaction of the users with the records, and the contribution of user-generated materials. Giving users the possibility, however, 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.
Many feel that opening archives to user contributions can seriously affect the trustworthiness, reliability and quality of the institution (Oomen & Aroyo, 2011). But these notions that are regarded as cornerstones of the archival theory and profession are open to interpretation when it comes to minorities. Researchers and historians 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 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 mission to “flatten” out any voice or hue that threatens the homogeneity of the nation.

The last decade has seen a growing body of archival literature on the challenges and opportunities 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. Archivists have come to realize that this participatory model that affords everyone\(^1\) 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.

Archivists are called today to reinvent themselves by adapting to the requirements of a world defined by vertiginous technological advances, by the challenges of information economy,

\(^1\) 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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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).

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 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).

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 & Yakel, 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).
Crowdsourcing and minorities

Crowdsourcing is defined as “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.”\(^2\) Such groups are considered as being more effective than before because they work outside the strictures of traditional institutions (Shirky, 2008). The 21st century replaced previously hierarchically structured modes of socioeconomic organization with flexible and highly collaborative networks that introduced new dynamics among individuals, the state, the marketplace, or other institutions (Castells, 2000; Benkler, 2006; Kranich & Schement, 2008).

In the case of archives, libraries, museums, although networks can provide incomparable opportunities for user interaction with the records, at the same time they provide false expectations of instant Web access to item level description, which challenges archival principles (Evans, 2007). Furthermore, many of the activities that today seem to be becoming parts of the crowdsourcing efforts of these institutions can be seen as a refashioning since such institutions have always have depended on volunteers for many of these functions, the main difference now being 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 archival institutions should manage the aggregation and delivery of the data collected, while volunteers would extend and enrich the metadata. Such aggregations, however, require substantial cooperation, as Sherratt ascertains. For him linked data can offer a solution.

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But although 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 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.

This model though cannot be easily applicable to minority populations. The main issue is that 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. Crowdsourcing that starts from the center and goes to the outskirts presupposes the existence of a well-defined center that can only be possible through extensive cooperation and the existence of funds and infrastructure. This is not the case for minorities, where the center (i.e. the story) does not exist but has to be made by disparate pieces of information.

If we perceive the web as a mass archive of human knowledge that people populate with content, then what is needed are meaningful ways to bring together this knowledge. We cannot reliably tell the stories of populations for whom we have little or incomplete material. Instead we need to consciously seek out the content that is lacking, and particularly provide people with the means to do this. In fact we can see crowdsourcing as a never-ending process towards this end. Memory is never complete, it is always in flux, always consisting of an array of individual memories.
While increasingly archival users come to expect to find everything online, the archival profession has not changed its traditional processes in ways that would meaningfully overcome the issue of backlogs. According to Greene and Meissner (2005), this is because 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 learning to accept “good enough” instead of insisting on perfection, archivists can thus revolutionize access to archival material.

While this call to the profession to untangle itself from its quasi-obsession of needing to describe everything item-level is indeed a radical but necessary solution for the backlogs, it presents other challenges in an online world where keyword search is the norm. Here is where crowdsourcing can be instrumental: If archives have to minimize their role in manipulating the record before bringing the material to the end user, and if end users require more from the material, archives should provide the users with the opportunity both to contribute content as well as to tailor it to their needs by adding contextual material. Evans (2007) speaks of commons-based peer-production in engineered archival systems that would aggregate and deliver the data collected by enthusiasts.

This should be a valid approach not only for archives, but for libraries and museums too. In fact, users, especially researchers knowledgeable of the material, would be able to point connections among records and artifacts and create links among collections. LAMs (Libraries, Archives, and Museums) should take advantage of the various skills that different people can
bring into the work-flow. Because when it comes to using new technologies the skill sets of people are not homogeneous, LAMs (Libraries, Archives and Museums) should provide people with different levels of opportunity to contribute and co-create. Providing only one or minimal functions in a monolithic “one-type-fits-all” way can only exacerbate the issue of the digital divide. If we lower the threshold for participation, then every user can feel welcome.

Crowdsourcing though does not only denote the act of coalescing in order to contribute data and collaboratively build new knowledge, but also that through new media (in essence new systems of representation) these data can become understood, measured, and observed—in fact known—in many novel ways (Foucault, 1982). In a networked environment, these data are preserved in and disseminated via digital networks (Srinivasan & Pyati, 2007), and one could argue that in our digital era, online minorities populate databases, not really geographies (Zwick & Dholakia, 2004). This assertion paints a bleak picture of a world where our online identities are controlled and inscribed in the digital media by others. Zwick and Dholakia (2004) bring the idea of crowdsourcing even further by proposing that people 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” histories, which proves that how one remembers can be as crucial as how one can selectively forget when necessary. The idea that forgetting, even if fabricated, 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 in the stage of designing. Srinivasan (2006; 2007) has also repeatedly pointed out the importance of a participatory and ethnographic approach to systems design that favors community participation and vision in their design.

While involving local knowledge in the design stage is important, it needs to be combined with the lowering of the threshold that is mentioned before. Many times we see that archivists seek out actively community elites, especially the ones who produce or have written records, such as religious institutions, benevolent societies, the press, or communal leadership (Daniel, 2010), without realizing that these elites are not free from biases or hidden agendas. It is not only outsiders (such as the state or archival facilities) who dictate “official” histories on communities. Community leaders or organizations 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 various skills participate can contribute to more representative records. Today the “participatory multicultural archiving” can promote diversity, flexibility and evolution of collections (Daniel, 2010).

Various researchers classify crowdsourcing projects according to a variety of criteria: Dawson (2010) organize 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, 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).

This article proposes a classification for the understanding of projects that relate to minority populations through the lens of religion. It does not concentrate on the modes of participation or on the outcomes, since this has already been done, as shown in the previous paragraph. Instead it examines crowdsourcing examples through the lens of religion, and uses facets that define the ways communities are formed.

**Discussion**

New technologies allow users greater interaction with the records and contribution of user-generated material. This is of extreme interest for minority communities who now can redefine online their 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” memory of a community. Members of the community can both project their view of the world to greater parts of the society, but also can escape the patronizing control of community elites.

Crowdsourcing can enrich archives, add valuable content and context to its 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, are governed by various legal and political systems, or exist in multiple languages and alphabets the implications
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are 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 permit users partake 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-fit-all” solutions are not applicable to these challenges. Crowdsourcing itself is only part of this process. The Semantic Web offers exciting opportunities for archives and their users. Since archival metadata are everywhere in a “web of extended finding aids” even in YouTube and Flickr, as Sherratt (2009) argues, instead of trying to aggregate material and build 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 though of the notion of 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 people take control of elements that form their memory and identity.
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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 and being searched, browsed, shared, manipulated, mashed-up by anyone means that we will each become Derrida’s archive, since the archive requires an external space (in this case us, the user) that assures the memorization, repetition, and reproduction of the record.
References


