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**“Telling My Stories”: Genealogists’ Engagement with Participatory**

**Heritage Projects**

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# Introduction

The vision of an online participatory culture involving communities contributing information and engaging with digitized collections has been challenged by the reality of low response rates to many digital cultural heritage projects. Genealogists are a community of DCH users who have a variety of research experience and diverse cultural backgrounds. While they use information provided by libraries and archives to verify their family information, they may also be motivated to share their family stories and other historical information (Paterson, 2011, p.4). In the New Zealand context, for Māori family historians, whakapapa (genealogy) and historical information is a sacred gift or tāonga, governed by family and tribal custom (Joyce, 2006 p.3), and is not meant for general distribution. This reflects wider Māori concerns around the control and protection of their cultural and intellectual property, as expressed in the Wai 262 Waitangi Tribunal Report on claims affecting Māori culture and identity (Waitangi Tribunal, 2011).

This research sought to identify factors that encourage or discourage genealogists, a group motivated to share information and to contribute to digital cultural heritage (DCH) projects. The objective is to determine how genealogists prefer to contribute knowledge, and to discover if and how this may differ for genealogists from the Māori (New Zealand indigenous) community. The insights from this research should provide cultural institutions seeking meaningful input from genealogists with findings that would allow them to identify appropriate methods to engage and seek participation from genealogists and to design digitization projects that effectively encourage participation and engagement by this group of potential contributors.

**Research Design**

The study is guided by the following research questions:

* In what ways do members of the New Zealand Society of Genealogists (NZSG) engage with digital cultural heritage projects through social media?
* What factors encourage them to contribute or not?
* In what form they prefer to contribute their knowledge in?
* In what ways do specific cultural factors such as tapu and noa knowledge encourage or constrain genealogists from the Māori community to contribute their knowledge?

The research was undertaken in two stages. A purposive sample of six NZSG members for the phase one interviews was selected with the assistance of the NZSG President to represent the population. They ranged from 48 years to over 70 years. One member had over ten years’ experience, four with more than 30 years’ experience and one with more than 40 years’ research experience. All the participants were New Zealand European and had completed research into their European heritage, with one also completing research in Māori whakapapa for family and as a cultural heritage professional.

Themes identified from the interviews were used to construct the questions for the phase two survey. The survey was open to the entire NZSG membership including individual members of the NZSG and members of the affiliated branches, who may not be individual members of the NZSG. The invitation to take part in the survey was emailed to the branches and individual members of the NZSG by the NZSG office as part of the NZSG eKIT (e-Keeping-in-Touch) newsletter. A total of 78 complete responses was received.

**Research Findings & Discussion**

The research found that members of the NZSG were more likely to use commercial heritage databases for their research, which target the genealogists market, but were more likely to contribute information to cultural heritage databases. That they don’t make more use of cultural heritage databases in part due to a lack of knowledge about the databases and the information they hold. Palmer’s warning (2009, para.3) should be heeded, simply providing cultural heritage databases filled with great content and interactive potential doesn’t guarantee they are known or used. This also supports Liew’s (2014) findings that successful DCH projects require sustained, coordinated effort by cultural institutions to initiate and maintain conversations with their communities and encourage community involvement.

NZSG members currently engaging with digital cultural and commercial heritage projects mostly provide corrections and comments to improve the accuracy of the information. Improving the accuracy of the content was also mentioned by respondents in Duff *et al.* (2013, p.89) as a reason to contribute to archives. While NZSG members would contribute photographs, some stories and identifications of events and locations, like the respondents in Duff *et al.* (2013, p.90), they were reluctant to contribute personal or sensitive information.

For both Māori and non-Māori NZSG members researching whakapapa clarity over the ownership, access and reuse of information was especially important. Just as McCauley (2010, p.48) reported, this research found noa (common) knowledge may be shared, with respondents willing to contribute photographs and identify locations and events. In contrast, tapu (special or sacred) knowledge, such as whakapapa, is communally owned and respondents researching whakapapa felt they could not share it without permission of whanau (extended family), hapu (clans or descent groups) or iwi (tribe).

In the case of the NZSG members, there is a desire for greater transparency from cultural institutions. This includes clearly identified sources of information, preferably linked to original documents, and an indication of the credibility of contributors. Like the student respondents in Duff *et al.* (2013, p.93), this suggests a desire for continuing institutional control and authority over contributions rather than the open, democratic, participatory archive envisaged by Huvila (2008).

Just as Fulton (2009) found, reciprocal sharing is fundamental to NZSG members. As one respondent explained “*Genealogy is for sharing. No one owns it. It is all our history and we need to put it out there for all to learn from*”. They encourage information exchange by making direct contact with other researchers in their area of interest, potentially leading to ongoing information sharing. Hersberger *et al.* (2005, as cited in Fulton, 2009) described information exchange as fundamental to building online communities. To take advantage of this “sharing process”, as one respondent described it, and build an online community, cultural institutions need to use a range of methods to stimulate information exchange. These methods include face-to-face interviews or organized community events as the means of collecting information about communities. Other suggested methods such as contact by phone, emailed surveys and consultation through local genealogy groups. All involve an element of personal contact and the establishment of a relationship of trust. Social media was the least preferred method, not because NZSG members aren’t able to use it, as suggested in Paterson’s (2011) study, but because it isn’t viewed as a trusted environment for the exchange of accurate information.

This research offers some insights to Owen’s (2014, p.275) question on how to stimulate a community of users such as genealogists to provide their knowledge online – It may be necessary to begin from an offline setting. With the exponential increase of digital content available cultural institutions should not assume their communities are aware of the digital resources they offer. Institutions need to be open and transparent about the purpose of their DCH projects, and about the ownership, use and reuse of the information and resources provided. Cultural institutions should not expect communities to be willing to engage and participate, without a relationship of trust. Despite their desire to democratize the archive through open access to digitized collections, cultural institutions need to be mindful that there will always be information that is considered sacred, sensitive or too personal to share. When seeking contributions from indigenous communities, establishing a relationship of trust requires time and the commitment to involve the entire community in conversations and respectful consultations.

It is through two-way exchange of information that online communities are built and a participatory culture established. In her concluding remarks on the fostering of a participatory culture by cultural institutions, Liew (2014) suggests examining an institution’s “inclination to ‘control or exploit’ or to ‘trust and include’ its community” (Conclusion, para. 7). The nature of the two-way information exchange relationship sought by NZSG members, where accuracy and credibility of information and contributors take priority, suggests it may be equally a matter of examining the community’s inclination to ‘trust and include’ cultural institutions in their conversations.

This research provided a snapshot of views by members of the NZSG on contributing information to cultural and commercial heritage databases. As the respondents in this research are only a small proportion of the total membership of the NZSG, caution should be exercised in generalizing the results. This research is one of few studies that have sought a picture of engagement of DCH projects from the users and contributors point of view. To gain a fuller picture of participation and engagement with DCH projects, future research should seek the views of the wider community, including those from the research and education sectors. Another avenue for further research is determining if indigenous communities remain conflicted between their desires to share and to protect their knowledge, and the associated implications on their engagement in participatory DCH projects.

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