

The Citizen Archivist Initiative

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Organisation: National Archives and Records Administration (NARA)

Country: United States

Level of government: Central government

Sector: Recreation, culture and religion

Type: Digital, Methods

Launched in: 2011

Link to the innovation's website

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Description

The National Archives has elevated the importance of public participation by creating a role for “citizen archivists” and encouraging substantive contributions like tags, transcripts, and digital images that increase public access to the records of the Federal Government. The Citizen Archivist Initiative is a new way of working with researchers, genealogists, and the public, so that records can be more easily found online. The National Archives has developed tools and participates in external communities like Wikipedia and Flickr so that it can harness the benefits of crowdsourcing activities to help make records more accessible and useful to the public.

Why the innovation was developed

Finding something in the National Archives could be compared to trying to find a needle in a haystack. With more than 10 billion pages of paper records alone, there is no shortage of records to digitise or transcribe. The public expects to find exactly what they are looking for online, but only a small percentage is currently available. The Citizen Archivist Initiative was developed to make it easier to find what you are looking for and easier to contribute to the records of the National Archives.

Objectives

Improve access, Improve effectiveness, Increase citizen engagement

- Increase contributions from the public to enhance historical records.
 - Improved access to historical records.
 - Expand community engagement in the mission of the U.S. National Archives.
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Main beneficiaries

Academia, Civil Society, General population, Students

- The general public with an interest in historical records, historical topics, and crowdsourcing projects.
 - Researchers, genealogists, historians, students.
 - Non-traditional stakeholders.
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Existing similar practices

Crowdsourcing, citizen science

Federal agencies and cultural institutions

Crowdsourcing projects within federal agencies and cultural institutions that utilise public enthusiasm for contributing toward the public good.

Examples include NASA's citizen science projects, the USGS' transcription of bird migration cards, USAID's improving geo-location information for a loan dataset, and New York Public Library's project to transcribe historical menus.

- <http://science.nasa.gov/citizen-scientists/>
- <http://www.pwrc.usgs.gov/bpp/>
- <http://menus.nypl.org/>

<http://www.usaid.gov/results-and-data/progress-data/data/dca>

Results

Efficiency

Online tools from the Citizen Archivist dashboard facilitate more efficient methods of citizens contributing to the historical records of the National Archives. Citizens can now contribute 24hours/day, 7 days a week.

Effectiveness

Improved effectiveness in the mission of the US National Archives. Crowdsourcing activities further civic engagement, online access, and the use of historical records. The greatest increase in online access has been realised through the incorporation of historical records on Wikipedia articles – an increase in hundreds of thousands of views.

Service quality

Accessibility:

- Metadata contributions from the public, including tags and transcriptions, increase the accessibility of the historical records of the National Archives online.
- Inclusion of National Archives historical images on third party platforms (Wikipedia, Digital Public Library of America, Flickr) has dramatically increased accessibility.

Responsiveness:

The variety of missions, projects, and activities on the Citizen Archivist Dashboard provide a menu of options for citizens who are interested in contributing to the historical records of the National Archives.

User satisfaction

Customer expectations have included greater online access to the records of the National Archives and greater opportunities to contribute to the records. Prior to the launch of the Citizen Archivist Initiative, there were very few opportunities for users to contribute – primarily through in-person traditional volunteer work. The launch of the Citizen Archivist Initiative has opened a wide variety of participation opportunities – many online. Users have responded to opportunities through significant participation and through feedback on social media, email and in person. Although increase in customer satisfaction is indicated through participation and feedback, further analysis is needed to quantify the increase.

Evaluation

The Citizen Archivist Initiative has been evaluated as part of awards processes and was the recipient of the 2012 Walter Gelhorn Innovation Award from the Administrative Conference of the United States (ACUS).

The Citizen Archivist Initiative was named in the Top 25 programmes of the 2013 Innovations in American Government Award Competition from the Harvard Kennedy School, Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation.

<http://www.acus.gov/best-practices/awards/archives/>

Development

Design

David Ferriero, the Archivist of the United States, drew upon citizen science and proposed that the US National Archives develop projects to try to capture what researchers learn about the records and what the public is interested in contributing. National Archives staff members in the Office of Innovation launched the Citizen Archivist Dashboard <http://www.archives.gov/citizen-archivist/>, welcomed a Wikipedian-in-Residence, and launched a wide variety of crowdsourcing projects on both internal and external online platforms. Citizen archivists, including researchers, are crucial contributors and influence the direction of specific projects.

Design time: 4 months

Testing

- For crowdsourcing projects on external third party site, the agency uses testing (to determine functionality and approach) and piloting (to experiment in order to determine effectiveness) to launch new initiatives.
- For internally controlled crowdsourcing projects, the agency uses prototyping and testing internally with staff and contractors and then piloting for external customers.
- An active pilot example is the National Archives Transcription Pilot Project at <http://transcribe.archives.gov>.

Testing time: 3 months

Implementation

Tools used:

- Open source software, including Drupal.
- Wikipedia and related sites.
- Flickr.
- OldWeather.org.
- Social Media communications.
- Scan-a-thons, edit-a-thons, transcribe-a-thons, tag-a-thons.
- Community crowdsourcing events.

Implementation time: 2 months

Diffusion

Presentations and demonstrations to a wide variety of domestic and international audiences promoting the use of crowdsourcing and presenting the Citizen Archivist Initiative as a case study for comparison. Online resources, including video demonstrations, are also available. Events hosted at the agency have promoted further collaboration with the Wikipedian community.

Diffusion time: ongoing

Challenges and solutions

Challenge: Managing the diversity of records.

Solution: Projects and tools are developed to meet diverse needs. Developed online tools with a content agnostic approach so that they can be repurposed for a wide variety of records.

Partnerships

Wikipedia Community

Civil Society

The US National Archives partners with the Wikipedia Community in efforts related to Wikimedia projects.

Genealogical organisation Census

Civil Society

The agency partnered with private genealogical organisations to index the 1940 U.S. Census.

Other stakeholders

Other Public Sector

The agency partnered with another federal agency, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, on digitisation and transcription of historical ships logs to feature on Oldweather.org.

Lessons Learned

Lessons Learned

- Crowdsourcing experiments do not have to be costly or involve a tremendous time commitment.
 - Engage interested communities in your work and get their ideas for how they would like to contribute.
 - Try to offer a variety of opportunities if your historical records are diverse.
 - Experimentation with platforms inside and on third party sites to learn what works.
 - Be open to successes and failures; not everything catches on.
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Conditions for success

- Connection to mission of the organisation.
 - Executive leadership in the implementation of the innovation.
 - Engagement from stakeholders.
 - Willingness to publicly pilot and experiment prior to commitment of an ongoing activity.
 - Willingness to experiment outside of the organisation's "digital four walls".
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Other information

The Citizen Archivist Initiative taps into the digital transformation of citizen science and applies it to the needs of the US National Archives as a Federal agency and cultural institution. The mission of the agency is fundamentally about providing access to records to support democracy, promote civic education, and facilitate an historical understanding of our national experience. By using an approach that leverages the "wisdom of the crowds" and adapting it to fit the public need for greater access to historical records, the Citizen Archivist Initiative empowers the public to affect the very fabric of our democracy.

The Citizen Archivist Initiative is closely tied to research opportunities available to the public at the US National Archives. Transcribing a letter from President Lincoln will help a member of the public feel more confident to take the next steps to research their own ancestor's role in the Civil War. In this way, citizen archivist crowdsourcing activities provide a gateway to more in-depth research at the National Archives.