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Sharing Your Stories Online: A guide for community organizations and their partners

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Sharing Your Stories Online:

A guide for community organizations and their partners

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About this Guide

This guide was written by metadata consultant Sharon Mizota for Community-Centered Archives Practice: Transforming Education, Archives, and Community History (CCAP TEACH), an initiative of the UC Irvine Libraries - Department of Special Collections & Archives, Orange County & Southeast Asian Archive Center.

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About this guide

This guide is for community organizations and the institutions that hope to partner with them to share their stories online. It provides an introduction to two forms of online sharing common among archives and libraries—*aggregation websites* and *online storytelling* — and suggests key questions for community organizations to consider before they decide to share their content online, or before they enter into a partnership with another organization or individual to do so. Sharing Your Stories Online also includes questions and resources for more well-resourced institutions interested in partnering with community organizations.

A note on terminology

We use "community organization" throughout this document to refer to community-based archives and community-based organizations that are doing archival projects documenting the experiences of marginalized people. These organizations can take any form, from official nonprofits, to membership organizations, to loose collectives of individuals, etc.

We use "online storytelling," "online stories," and "online exhibitions" interchangeably in this document to mean any kind of online sharing
that involves selecting and presenting digital items—photographs, documents, videos, etc.—and telling a story about them that provides context and meaning for the viewer.

We use "aggregators" to refer to websites that assemble images of items and their metadata, or descriptive information about them, from a number of organizations in one searchable database.

Why Online Sharing?

It is increasingly the case that once something is put online, it might be there in some form, forever. Digitizing and sharing items that are significant to a marginalized community can be a great way to preserve and disseminate knowledge about the community's culture and history, but such materials could also be used for purposes that are beyond the awareness and control of the community. Online sharing also takes place within systems and formats—the Internet, the aggregator, the exhibition—that reflect Eurocentric, extractive, and capitalist worldviews. For all these reasons, the decision to share things online is often a difficult one for community organizations.

A bit like search engines, aggregation websites bring together content from different sources in one searchable place. Online storytelling or exhibitions, by contrast, are similar to museum displays; they present and interpret select digital items to tell a story and create meaning for viewers. If you have created a webpage with images and text that tells a story, you have created an online exhibition. Online stories or exhibitions can take the form of webpages, blog posts, social media posts, or other formats.

We undertook the research behind this guide because we wanted to know to what extent community organizations were participating in digital aggregators and online exhibitions. These two forms of sharing are widely used in academic contexts, but we weren't sure if they resonated with community organizations. We wanted to know if digital aggregators, in particular, the Digital Public Library of America Hubs, were welcoming to these organizations. We also wanted to know if community organizations were creating online stories.

As more content migrates to online spaces, we felt it was important to understand to what extent these spaces include and/or serve the needs of community organizations.

Our Approach

The content of this guide is based on the input of a variety of community organizations, DPLA Hubs representatives, and curators across the U.S. who shared their stories with us in a survey and interviews. The guide is based on what respondents told us about their experiences—both good and bad—with online sharing and in partnering with other institutions.

The research was conducted in 2023-24 by Sharon Mizota in collaboration with Community-Centered Archives Practice: Transforming Education, Archives, and Community History (CCAP TEACH), University of California, Irvine Libraries and the California Digital Library. This research produced the following outcomes:

- C-CAP Digital Collections & Digital Exhibitions Environmental Scan
- Two surveys of 1) Digital Public Library of America Hubs and 2) community archives with published survey results
- Interviews with representatives of community organizations and with curators who have created online exhibitions in collaboration with community organizations or community members, with published findings.

Although we began this research with the assumption that aggregators and online exhibitions should be more accessible and welcoming to all, we knew it was important to hear firsthand from respondents about their experiences with these forms of online sharing. In addition to research in the literature about online exhibitions, we used surveys and interviews to collect quantitative and qualitative data directly from representatives of community organizations, the DPLA Hubs, and curators who had organized online exhibitions with community organizations.

Their responses led us to understand that many community organizations still need basic information about aggregators, online exhibitions, and their pros and cons. We also wanted to provide a guide to partnership that makes use of the cautionary tales and negative experiences that some of our respondents shared with us in hopes that future collaborations can avoid these pitfalls.

We hope this guide can help community organizations evaluate whether sharing their content with a digital aggregator or through an online exhibition is right for them, and what to consider before embarking on a partnership to do so.

It is not a comprehensive "how-to" guide, but an overview of the benefits and considerations involved in aggregation and online storytelling, as well as some of the basic guardrails for ethical, mutually beneficial partnerships. We also hope this guide can serve as a baseline for the creation of future resources for responsible and ethical online sharing and storytelling.

Sharing your content with aggregators

What is an aggregator?

Aggregators are websites that assemble images of items and their metadata, or descriptive information about them, from a number of organizations in one searchable database. Most provide this content freely on the Internet for anyone to search, browse, and download.

An aggregator typically includes "thumbnail" images (small or partial images) and metadata in their database, which is what users see in their search results. In some cases, an aggregator may also include high-resolution images that users can download, but they usually provide a link to the contributing organization's website to see the full image and any additional metadata or information.

Examples of aggregators include:
- Digital Public Library of America
- Minnesota Digital Library
- PA Photos and Documents
- Umbra Search

What kinds of content do aggregators include?

Aggregators can include any type of digitized or born-digital content (content created using a digital device), but many of them are focused on a particular geographic area, a general subject area, or a particular type of media. Because aggregators originated in the library and archives world, they tend to include content of historical or cultural importance. Most aggregators include photographs, documents, and audiovisual material; some also include publications, websites, and datasets.

What is required to contribute?

Requirements vary widely by aggregator. Very few aggregators provide "end-to-end" services from digitization to metadata creation to hosting your content on their site. Most only provide the hosting of thumbnail images and metadata, and require you to have your items digitized, described with metadata, and made available online. In most cases, you will need to provide an individual link or URL for each item you share. You may also have to provide assurances that the images and metadata you share are in the public domain or licensed under Creative Commons.

If you have the technical capacity, some aggregators can automate your contributions using the Open Archives Initiative Protocol for Metadata Harvesting (OAI-PMH), which is a kind of "handshake" between two database systems that enables the transfer of data and images from one to another. However, setting up an OAI-PMH connection can be a heavy lift, especially if you don't have a technology team. Many aggregators are flexible in how they work with contributors, however, and you may be able to contribute your metadata via a spreadsheet. The best way to know if contributing is an option for you is to contact the aggregator you are interested in working with and set up a meeting to discuss your particular situation.

How do you find an aggregator?

To find aggregators in your geographic area, this list of the <u>Digital Public Library of America (DPLA) Hubs</u> is one place to start. There are many other **local**, topic- or media-specific aggregators, some of which feed into the Hubs and others that do not. Local universities and public libraries that have archival collections may be able to direct you to appropriate aggregators.
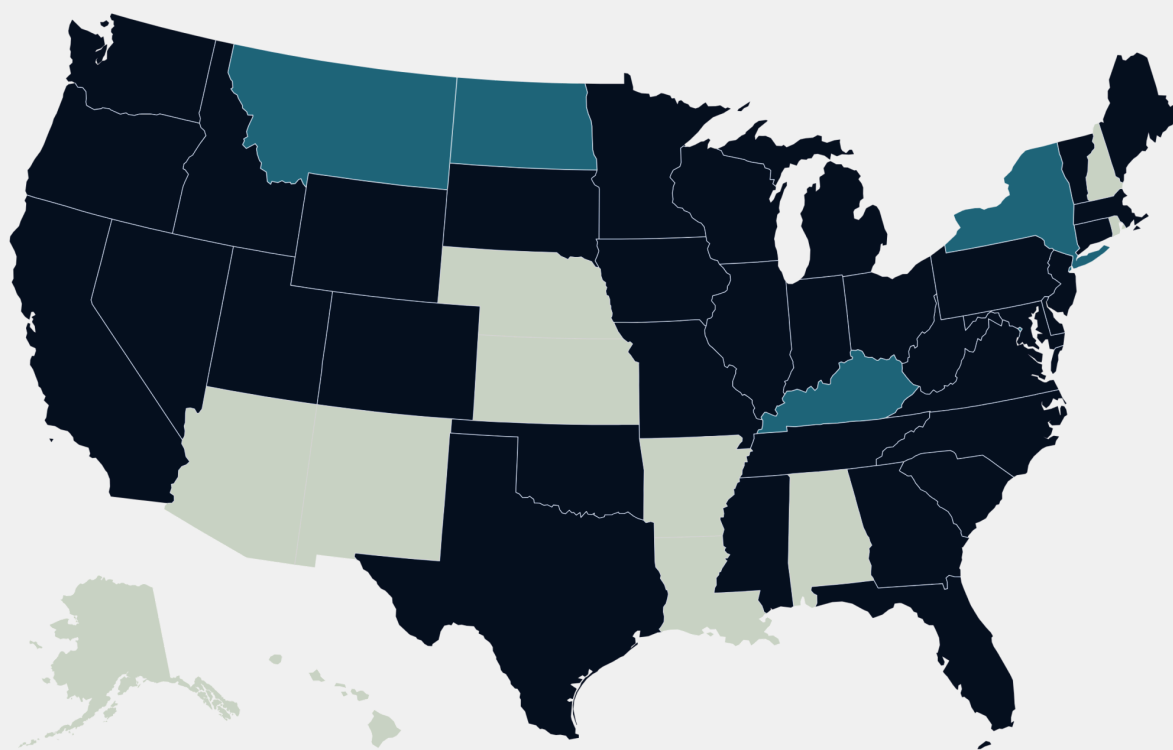
Map of states represented by DPLA Hubs, 2024. Dark blue states have active Hubs,
light blue states have inactive Hubs, and beige states do not have a Hub.

What are the benefits of contributing?

Do you want increased online exposure and awareness for your stories and your organization?

Contributing to an aggregator can provide additional exposure and access to your online content and raise awareness of your organization. People who find your content on an aggregator's website may not be familiar with your organization and may not otherwise find your content in a general Internet search. Because aggregators generally link to their contributors' websites, sharing with an aggregator can result in more traffic to your website and greater visibility for your organization.

Do you want your content to appear in different contexts and relationships?

Sharing with an aggregator allows your content to be seen in relation to similar content from other organizations. Users who search for general subjects, time periods, or events may find your content alongside similar items that provide additional context or shed a different light on your items. Inclusion in an aggregation website may also help your content appear higher up in search engine results. This exposure may result in additional opportunities to exhibit or share your content and/or to partner with organizations that are aligned with your mission and values. Once your content is digitized and shared online, it is easier to include it in online exhibitions, whether the exhibitions are created by you or someone else. Some aggregators provide a platform for creating online exhibitions with the items included on their site.

What should you consider before contributing to an aggregator?

Are you concerned about loss of control and context for your content?

Like museums, libraries, and search engines, the concept of an aggregator—a "one-stop shop" for digital content—derives from imperial and colonial notions of collecting, categorizing, and providing access to objects and information under a unified and totalizing organizational scheme.

The idea that all things can and should be accessible and knowable to everyone reflects a Eurocentric worldview within which many communities and histories have been excluded, marginalized, or mischaracterized. While your contributions to an aggregator may serve to diversify and correct this biased historical record, they may also be subject to misinterpretation, misuse, or cooptation. Items you share with an aggregator are usually accessed one at a time, outside the context of your collections, organization, and mission. While many aggregators are responsive to takedown requests, like the rest of the Internet, most of them provide free and open access to your content. Once something is shared, it is impossible to completely control who will access it, or how it will be interpreted and used. If you have content that should only be accessed by a certain group of people, or have concerns about the privacy or safety of people mentioned or depicted in your content, you may not want to share your content with an aggregator.

Do you derive income from your content?

When you share with an aggregator, you are usually providing access to your content for free. If your organization relies on fees for access or reproduction, sharing with an aggregator may result in a loss of income for as long as you contribute to the aggregator.

Is it worth the effort?

Depending on your situation, sharing with an aggregator may not be worth the effort. If your materials are not already inventoried, described, digitized, and hosted online, sharing with an aggregator can become a major project. Although it is possible to share a very small number of items with an aggregator—even a single item—it is important to evaluate whether the additional awareness, web traffic, and associated opportunities are worth the effort and resources required to contribute your content.

Does it serve your mission?

Think about who you want to reach and whether those folks are likely to use an aggregator. Although aggregators are available to anyone with an Internet connection, they are mostly used by researchers, students, and those who already have an interest in history, cultural heritage, or genealogy. Depending on whom you are trying to reach, there may be other ways of sharing your content online that better serve your mission and goals.

Are your materials copyrighted?

You may need to ensure that the materials you share with an aggregator are not copyrighted, that you own the copyright, or have obtained permission from the copyright holder(s). Most aggregators require, at a minimum, that your metadata be in the public domain or licensed under Creative Commons 0. If you see your metadata as original, proprietary work that requires copyright protection, sharing with an aggregator may not be the right thing to do.

Here are a couple of free resources to learn more about copyright:
- Open Copyright Education: free courses on copyright fundamentals
- Cornell University Library's Copyright Services: Copyright Term and the Public Domain: chart for assessing whether an item is in the public domain

Sharing your content in online exhibitions
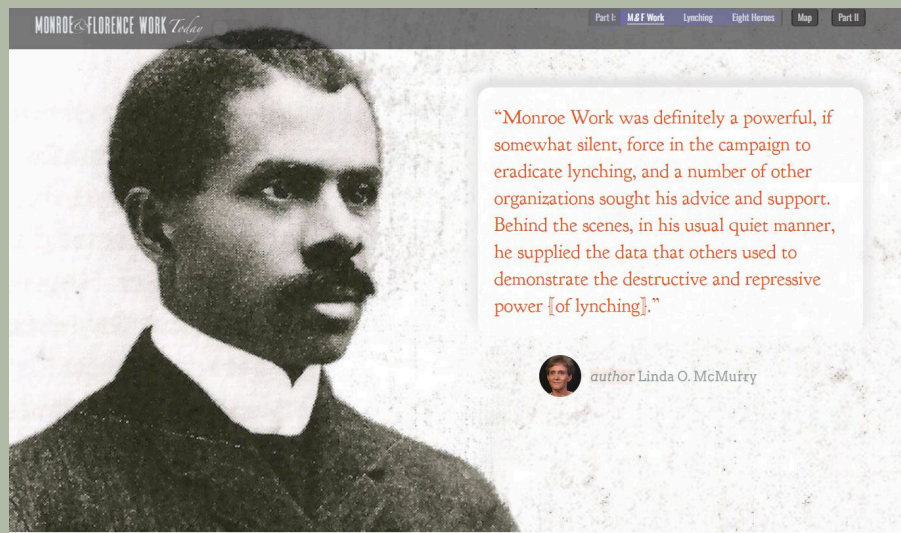
What is an online exhibition?

In museums and academic institutions, online exhibitions typically take one of two forms: a virtual, 3D environment that mimics the experience of walking through an in-person exhibition, or a collection of interrelated web pages that feature images or audiovisual content accompanied by text. However, there are a number of other formats that might be considered online exhibitions, including timelines, maps, blogs, and data visualizations. While these are often considered "digital humanities" projects, they are united with online exhibitions in situating images and information within a story or historical context. If you are using digital items to tell a story online, you are creating an online exhibition.

Examples of online exhibitions include:
- Native American Boarding Schools in Montana
- Lee Tung Foo — Vaudevillian, Actor, Native Son of Watsonville
- Monroe Work Today

How are online exhibitions different from online collections?

While both involve digitizing, describing, and putting content online, an online exhibition tells a story or makes an argument, whereas a digital collection is simply a representation or sampling of the things in a collection. Of course, digital collections are curated—someone selected the items to digitize and share online—but they don't make a specific argument or seek to elicit a response. Online exhibitions and stories, especially those with a social justice agenda, are designed to elicit empathy and inspire action. Because they can be created using readily available software and web hosting services (such as blogging software), an online exhibition may be a faster and easier way to get your content online than sharing with an aggregator.

Some aggregators provide the ability to create online exhibitions on their platform, using items from any of their contributors. Depending on your situation and the requirements of the aggregator, this feature might make contributing to an aggregator more attractive.

What resources are available for creating online stories or exhibitions?

There are many guides to planning and creating online exhibitions, and the guidance you need will depend on your situation and the kind of exhibition or story you want to create. There is no one way to make an online exhibition, and the tools and technologies available to do so are constantly changing. (Remember, an online exhibition can be as simple as creating a blog post.) Guides like these deal mostly with planning, curatorial, and technical concerns, while some address the ethical dimensions of exhibition-making.

Helpful guidance for online exhibitions

Below are several freely available guides that may be useful to you. They deal mostly with planning, curatorial, and technical concerns, but the resource from Art Libraries Society of North America (ARLIS/NA) also includes some guidance on the ethical dimensions of exhibition-making in the section on diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility. (While our research did not fully support creating a guide to ethical online exhibition-making, this is certainly an area for further research.). Bear in mind that these guides are written mostly for institutional archives and libraries workers, although the language and concepts they use are applicable to most audiences.

Digital Exhibitions: Concepts and Practices

A concise guide to the factors to consider in creating an online exhibition, including the relationship between exhibitions and collections, strategies for harnessing technology to tell your story, and principles of design and implementation.

Created by: Grace L. Barth, Laura Drake Davis, Amanda Mita. Mid-Atlantic Regional Archives Conference. Technical leaflet series #12 (2018). Accessed March 7, 2024.

Best Practices for Library Exhibitions

A more detailed guide for creating exhibitions, both physical and digital. There is a section on digital exhibitions, but sections on curation, diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility, community engagement, documentation, evaluation, and financial management are useful for online exhibitions as well. Includes an extensive list of additional resources grouped by topic.

Created by: ARLIS/NA Exhibitions Special Interest Group (2021). Accessed March 7, 2024.

DPLA Digital Curation Guidelines & Digital Curation Project Chart

A very brief and high level overview of the process of making an online exhibition, with lots of examples. The Project Chart details three levels of online exhibitions from simplest to most complex.

Created by: Digital Public Library of America (DPLA) Digital Curation Task Force (2023). Accessed March 7, 2024

More resources are available in the Digital Exhibitions Bibliography section at the end of the C-CAP Digital Collections & Digital Exhibitions Environmental Scan.

What are the benefits of creating online stories?

Are you interested in framing the narrative around your collections?

Creating an online exhibition enables you to tell a story from a particular perspective and to place items from your collections in a specific context. Unlike sharing with an aggregator, an online exhibition allows you to control how your content is presented. It may be a way to create a counter narrative to dominant histories, or to highlight, celebrate, and analyze stories that have been ignored, suppressed, or misrepresented.

Is there a desire to honor or celebrate community members or stories?

Online exhibitions can present previously marginalized histories, stories, and people in a format similar to that of dominant histories. This type of recognition and validation isn't important to every organization, but online exhibitions can reflect a community back to itself in ways that are empowering and joyful.

Do you seek increased exposure and awareness of your collections or organization?

Like sharing with an aggregator, online exhibitions are a way to increase exposure and awareness of your content and your organization. Creating online stories that are freely available online may lead new people to your website and organization. It can make your content more accessible to those who are unable to visit your physical site due to disability, distance, or financial constraints. It can also increase your visibility to potential funders and partners.

Do you need to showcase the value of your organization?

Online exhibitions are a way of showcasing the value and strengths of your organization. They can serve as examples of your principles and mission in action, as well as show how your organization is contributing to discussion and education around the issues you care about. They can be a good way to show potential funders and donors the importance of your organization.

Are you invested in creating a sustained resource for research and knowledge?

Compared to in-person exhibitions, which are typically confined to a limited space and time, online exhibitions potentially have a much broader reach and life span. With planning and ongoing technical support, online exhibitions may be available for a long time and can become trusted and reliable resources for education and awareness.

What should you consider before creating an online exhibition or story?

Is it right for your audience or mission?

If your organization is focused on in-person interactions and relationships, creating an online exhibition may not serve your audience or mission. Online exhibitions are also part of a long history of exhibition practices rooted in imperial displays of plundered wealth or "exotic" life forms—often including marginalized people, dead or alive—such as the World's Fairs. You may not want to present your stories within this context. This guide focuses on online forms of sharing while recognizing that these forms are not appropriate for every organization or message.

Is it worth the effort?

Creating a thoughtful and impactful online exhibition takes time, resources, and effort. It requires research, planning, the careful selection of items, writing, designing, building the exhibition, and hosting it online. There may be multiple stakeholders with competing perspectives and needs to include. It will require promotion to let people know about it, and eventually, maintenance—both in terms of technology and content—if it is to remain online and relevant. Although there are many "lightweight" ways to create online exhibitions, including blogging and website creation software and services, it is not an endeavor to be undertaken without careful consideration and planning.

Is it safe and comfortable for the people you serve and represent?

Organizations that collect or manage information about people who are or have been subject to discrimination, incarceration, disenfranchisement, and other forms of oppression may not be able to share content or materials about them without exposing them to further persecution, harassment, or harm. Also, because online exhibitions can have a long lifespan, and can be accessed from anywhere, the people represented in the exhibition may not feel comfortable having their image or information available in perpetuity online.

Is it sustainable?

Although things can stay online for a long time, they don't last forever. As technologies change, the software and services you use to create an online exhibition may become obsolete, taking your content with them. Your content can also become out-of-date, requiring updates or additions to keep it relevant. Or you may not be able to keep paying for digital storage and hosting. You may want to decide on an end date for your exhibition or establish periodic reviews to assess whether it is still functional and timely. Although it is tempting to create an online exhibition that will be available "forever," it is important to be realistic about what you can support and maintain.

Do your audiences have the right technology to access online stories?

It's important to tailor your online exhibition to your audience. If a large portion of your intended audience does not have access to high-speed Internet or WiFi, they may not be able to access online stories that include videos or large image files. If they access content mainly on their phones, you need to make sure your exhibition is accessible and legible on a small screen.

Are your materials copyrighted?

Make sure the items you wish to include in your exhibition are in the **public domain**, licensed under Creative Commons, or that you own the copyright or have obtained permission from the copyright holder(s). Reproducing an image online can be a violation of copyright and the intention to keep an online exhibition up in perpetuity can expose you to potential lawsuits. It can also influence rights holders to demand higher reproduction fees for the use of their images.

Some reproductions of copyrighted works are permissible under the provision of U.S. copyright law known as Fair Use. If you are presenting an item in a nonprofit, educational context and/or the work is already freely available on the Internet, your use may qualify as fair use. For a basic overview of fair use, see Mary Minow's blog post, How I Learned to Love FAIR USE… on the Stanford Libraries website.

Here are a couple of resources to learn more about copyright:
- Open Copyright Education: free courses on copyright fundamentals
- Cornell University Library's Copyright Services: Copyright Term and the Public Domain: chart for assessing whether an item is in the public domain

Partnering with another organization

With all the complexity involved in online sharing, it can be attractive to collaborate with another institution, especially one that has more resources and know-how. However, when there is an imbalance between two parties, there is always a risk of exploitative and extractive behavior on the part of the institution with more resources, despite the best intentions. Below are some questions to consider when entering into a partnership with any organization, but especially a more well-resourced one.

Is there alignment with your mission, goals, and values?

Do you and the partner share the same or similar mission? Are your goals aligned, or at least complementary? Do the partner and its representatives conduct themselves according to values that you both share?

Is the partnership reciprocal?

Does the partner provide things that you need? Are they willing to commit resources and funding in ways that complement or build upon what you bring to the partnership? Do you feel like they recognize and value your staff's expertise, labor, and time? Do they offer fair compensation for the services or resources you provide to them?

Does the partner acknowledge inequities in resources, staffing, and funding?

Do they make an effort to understand your situation and the limits or conditions it might impose on the collaboration? Do they respect those limits and make an effort to mitigate or bridge them?

Does the partner recognize and respect your autonomy?

Do they respect your expertise and experience? Do they provide unrestricted funds or resources that you control? Do they respect and abide by the decisions you make? Is there a clear division of roles and responsibilities between your organization and the partner's? Are these roles mutually agreed upon? Does the partner respect these boundaries?

Is there shared leadership and credit?

Are both sides involved in determining the direction and goals of the collaboration? Do you feel like the partner listens and responds to your concerns and needs? Is there shared credit and authorship for any final products or results of the collaboration?

Does the partner communicate transparently and in a timely manner?

Does the partner share all relevant information, including funding amounts and resource allocations, with you? Are they responsive to requests for information? Do they take the time to explain things using language you understand? Do they alert you in a timely fashion to any changes or adjustments to the partnership or the project?

Is the partner invested in a long-term relationship?

Do they express interest and investment in the overall well-being of your organization? Do they attend, support, or promote your events and initiatives beyond the scope of the specific collaboration? Do they look for and encourage future opportunities to collaborate?

Is the partner flexible?

Are they willing to adjust their procedures and processes to the needs of the collaboration? Can they adapt to changes in the scope or nature of the collaboration? Are they open to embarking on projects that might change due to fluid and evolving conditions? Are they willing to explore and try out ideas or approaches that might be new to them?

Does the partner understand that "community" is complicated?

Does the partner recognize that communities are diverse and contain multiple points of view? Are they willing to navigate these complexities and find solutions that take different perspectives into account?

Is the partner willing to draft and sign a memorandum of understanding (MOU) or a contract?

Although it is important to assume good intentions, it is also important to have agreed upon methods, timelines, deliverables, and goals for any partnership. Written contracts are not appropriate in every instance, but if a partner is willing to collaboratively draft and sign an agreement, it shows they are committed to the collaboration and take it seriously. It can also help to resolve any disputes that may arise later.

As an example, UCI Libraries Special Collections & Archives, Orange County & Southeast Asian Archive Center uses this Community Centered Archives Partnership Agreement.

Does the partner accommodate "rolling consent"?

Will the partner agree to take down shared items at any time, for any reason? Will they consult with you or affected community members if requests for new forms of sharing come up? Rolling consent is consent to share that is always revocable. It acknowledges that a person's rights to their own image and creations do not end when that image or creation is shared, regardless of whether the sharing is legal. Rolling consent is an ethical approach to sharing that reflects care for the ongoing relationship between your organization, your partners, and community members.

For institutions interested in partnering with a community organization

If you work in a larger, more well-resourced institution, below are some questions to consider before engaging with a community partner. They may sound very basic, but in our research with community organizations we heard stories in which many or all of the principles suggested here were disregarded. The questions are followed by a list of resources that provide more detailed guidance and information on engaging with community organizations.

Much has been written about how large institutions can engage and collaborate on archival projects with community organizations. Although these articles and guides may not address online sharing explicitly, the same basic principles and recommendations for ethical, consensual, and collaborative behavior apply.

What are your institution's values and principles?

Before entering into a partnership with a community organization, it is important to understand and document your own institution's values and principles. What is your mission? What values, beliefs, and principles will guide your interactions with a community organization? What are your reasons for entering into the partnership? Is there alignment between your mission and that of the community organization? **If your values and goals for the partnership are unclear, we encourage you to document your principles for engaging with community organizations before engaging in a partnership**. If they do not align with those of the community organization you seek to partner with, we urge you to reconsider the collaboration. For an example of a principles document, see Community Centered Archives Partnerships, from the Orange County and Southeast Asian Archive Center, University of California, Irvine Libraries, which is also included in the list below.

How do you find a partner?

Once you have established your institution's values, principles, and mission in partnering with a community organization, it is important to recognize that community organizations may not attend or participate in the same events, conferences, and activities that you do. You may need to do outreach at local celebrations, fairs, meetings, or other events in order to make community organizations aware of your institution and the services and resources it can provide.

Is the partnership reciprocal?

Are you providing what the community organization needs and has asked for? Are you providing appropriate financial or in-kind compensation for the time, information, or labor you receive from the community organization or community members? It's important to remember that traditional academic modes of research and knowledge-production are extractive and designed to benefit the scholar, researcher, or academic institution. What are you doing to disrupt or counter this tendency? Do you highlight the expertise and knowledge you receive from the community organization as much as your role in the partnership?

Are you listening to the partner?

When working with communities whose histories and stories have been marginalized, misrepresented, or ignored, it's important to make time and space to listen to them. Remember to listen more than you speak and respect their decisions about when and how they share their stories or information with you. It's also important to take what they say to heart and adjust your expectations and activities accordingly.

Are you communicating clearly, transparently, and in a timely manner?

Does your community partner know and understand what you are planning? Are you able to communicate with them in a language they understand without too much jargon? Have you told them what resources (including funding) are available to you and to them? Have you kept them abreast of timelines or deadlines they need to be aware of, including friendly reminders?

Have you clearly communicated requirements for grant or other forms of reporting at the start of the collaboration? Are you keeping them updated about changes that happen in a timely fashion? **Staff of community organizations are often juggling lots of projects and priorities.** It's important to be clear and consistent in your communications with them and to be flexible with timelines for their responses.

Do you respect the partner's autonomy and expertise?

Are you sharing leadership and decision-making with the partner? Are you giving them appropriate credit? Community organizations are repositories of knowledge and expertise that may present itself in ways that are unfamiliar to you. It's important to acknowledge this expertise and to respect and facilitate a community's ability to generate, keep, and share their stories in whatever ways are appropriate for them.

Are you in it for the long term?

Are you interested in building and maintaining an ongoing relationship with the partner? Are your missions aligned in a way that makes continued engagement mutually beneficial? Are staff at all levels of your institution committed to the partnership? Community organizations need sustainable solutions that enable them to continue to preserve and tell their stories. While short-term collaborations can be beneficial, they often result in a better outcome for the more well-resourced partner than for the community organization, which may have trouble sustaining the initiative beyond the timeframe of a single project. Additionally, if support for the partnership doesn't include the leadership of your institution, the collaboration may be difficult to sustain.

Can you be flexible?

Are you willing to adjust schedules and processes to accommodate the partner's needs? If you are contributing funds, are you able to distribute them in a manner that makes sense for the partner? Are you willing to re-think deliverables and outcomes as conditions change? Are you able to respond to emergency situations that might require you to shift priorities entirely?

Community organizations are often on the frontlines of unpredictable situations like natural disasters, political repression, or a global pandemic. You may need to change the nature of the collaboration, as well as your expectations for its goals and outcomes, when such emergencies occur.

Do you understand that "community" is complicated?

While it's obvious that communities are composed of individuals, in institutional settings, sometimes a "community" is seen as monolithic. It's important to recognize that community members do not always speak with a unified voice. Are you making an effort to listen to and understand the differences and disagreements that happen within a community? Are you willing to work with people who may not always agree with each other to arrive at a consensus? How will you and the partner navigate disagreements over the aims, processes, and outcomes of your collaboration?

Can you accommodate "rolling consent"?

Can you agree to take down shared items at any time, for any reason? Are you able to reach out to the community organization or affected community members if you receive requests for additional forms of sharing? Rolling consent is consent to share that is always revocable. It acknowledges that a person's rights to their own image and creations do not end when that image or creation is shared, regardless of whether the sharing is legal. Rolling consent is an ethical approach to sharing that reflects care for the ongoing relationship between your institution, your partners, and community members.

Are you able to do what you promise?

It seems obvious that for a partnership to succeed it's necessary to do what you say you're going to do. However, it's important to understand that many community organizations have been disappointed by partners who didn't live up to their promises. While every partnership goes through changes, it's especially important when working with community partners not to overpromise, and to follow through on what you've agreed to.

 If you're no longer able to fulfill your responsibilities, it's important to apologize and explain in a clear and timely way. Most community organizations are working with very limited budgets and staffing. If you are unable to fulfill your commitments, it may have a much more devastating effect on them than it does on your institution.

Resources

Below are resources that include further guidance on ethically and responsibly engaging with community organizations and community members.

Community Archives Toolkit

A robust toolkit for library and archives staff on building a community-based archive within or in collaboration with an institution. It includes background information on community archives, guidance on finding and connecting with potential community partners, and how to establish funding support. It is also a resource for ethical and copyright concerns, collection building, working with community members, raising public awareness, and much more. This toolkit is a great place to start if you are new to community archives.
Created by: barrow, dindria, Cifor, Marika, Jowaisas, Chris, Nguyễn, Sarah, Trammell, Anna, & Young, Jason. Community Archives Center at Tacoma Public Library. (2023)

Community-Driven Archives

Includes resources and learnings from partnerships with "historically underrepresented history keepers in telling, sharing, and preserving their stories." Resources include overviews of archival concepts and skills you may need to start an archives, as well as guidance on storytelling, collection building, partnerships, and establishing a nonprofit. There are links to more in-depth resources and examples throughout. This is a great place to start for both community organizations or members interested in starting an archives, and institutional partners interested in collaborating with community organizations.
Created by: University Libraries, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. (2021)

Community Centered Archives Partnerships

Includes a statement of principles for collaboration between Orange County and Southeast Asian Archive Center (OC & SEAA) and community organizations, summaries of past and current projects, and links to a partner agreement and registration forms. This resource provides helpful examples for your own archives collaboration and accompanying documentation.
Created by: Orange County and Southeast Asian Archive Center, University of California, Irvine Libraries (2024)

The Community Archiving Program Listening Tour Report 2022

The report "summarizes the results of a listening tour conducted in Spring 2022 as the first step in planning for a new Community Archiving Program." Includes insights and considerations on how academic institutions can successfully partner with community organizations and members.
Created by: Hernandez, R. & Mora, T. University of California, Santa Cruz Special Collections & Archives. (2022)

Protocols for Native American Archival Materials

"Best professional practices for culturally responsive care and use of American Indian archival material held by non-tribal organizations...Proposed standards and goals are meant to inspire and to foster mutual respect and reciprocity." An important guide for working with Native American communities and their archives.
Created by: First Archivist Circle. (2007)

Guidelines for Collaboration

Two separate guides, one for museums and one for Native communities, on how to plan and carry out collaborative work. "Although the focus for both documents is on collections-based collaborations, the Guidelines apply to all types of collaborative work in museums, including education, exhibits and public programs."
Created by: Indian Arts Research Center. Facilitated by Landis Smith, Cynthia Chavez Lamar, and Brian Vallo. Santa Fe, NM: School for Advanced Research. (2019)

Intercultural Communication Handbook

Includes "the key themes related to intercultural communication that have been important in the work of Bawaka Collective, including our interactions with university students, student teachers, visitors and tourists at Bawaka," in North East Arnhem Land, Australia. Advances seven themes that undergird careful communication to build sustainable relationships between people of different cultural backgrounds.
Created by: Bawaka Country including Burarrwanga L, Ganambarr R, Ganambarr-Stubbs M, Ganambarr B, Maymuru D, Suchet-Pearson S, Wright SL, Lloyd K, Tofa M, Daley L. Bawaka Collective. (2018)

Architecting Sustainable Futures: Exploring Funding Models in Community-Based Archives

Report from a 2018 symposium that "gathered community-based archives to address one of their most pressing needs for sufficiency: sustainable funding." Includes recommendations for community organizations, funders, university library partners, and scholars that anticipated the suggestions provided in this guide.
Created by: Jules, B. Shift Collective. (2019)

Needs assessment to identify hidden collections documenting America's diverse culture and history

Provides recommendations on the funding and sustainability needs of community archives. While primarily addressed to funders, this report also anticipated the guidance provided in this guide.
Created by: Johnson, L., & Jules, B. Shift Collective. (2021)

Sustainable Futures Blog

Writings and case studies by and about a variety of community archives. A great place to get ideas for potential collaborations and to learn about what has worked for other organizations.
Created by: Shift Collective

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Sharing your content with aggregators: Screenshot of the "Our Hubs" page on the Digital Public Library of America website, June 2024.

Sharing your content in online exhibitions: Screenshot of Monroe Work Today, May 2024. © 2016 by auut studio, CC BY-NC 4.0 DEED.

Partnering with another organization: domdomegg, CC0, via Wikimedia Commons. Image has been colorized.

For institutions interested in partnering with a community organization: Scott de Jonge - https://www.flaticon.com/authors/scott-de-jonge, CC BY 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons. Image has been colorized.