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Integrating Community Archives into a National Digital Platform: Challenges, Opportunities, and Recommendations

**A White Paper Reporting on the 2016-2017 “Diversifying the Digital Historical Record”
Forums¹**

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Introduction

Some of the most valuable collections documenting the lives of marginalized people in the United States reside in spaces outside traditional academic and government institutions. They exist throughout the country as independently curated, highly valuable sites for remembering, and are owned by the communities they document. These archives are independent, grassroots alternatives to mainstream repositories through which communities make collective decisions about what is of enduring value to them, shape collective memory of their own pasts, and control the means through which stories about their past are constructed. Such organizations are often created in response to minoritized communities being shut out of dominant historical narratives created by mainstream memory institutions.

Although community archives are thriving, they have largely been left out of national projects to bring more access to digital collections. Ongoing conversations about documenting and providing access to a shared past through a National Digital Platform should include community archives because they are an effective means of diversifying digital collections in cultural heritage spaces to more accurately represent the diversity of the United States. In a recent report² on the National Digital Platform, IMLS acknowledged that including content that represents the full diversity of the United States will be a priority. Holding inclusive and broadly accessible conversations on the topic of community archives can inform this IMLS priority by gathering community archives curators and practitioners, community members, scholars, and digital

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² Institute of Museum and Library Services, “IMLS Focus: The National Digital Platform,” 2015, <http://www.imls.gov/sites/default/files/publications/documents/2015imlsfocusndpreport.pdf>

collections leaders to discuss broader inclusion of these types of materials in national efforts that seek to represent U.S. cultural heritage in digital spaces. By engaging and listening to the voices of marginalized communities in national conversations around the materials they collect, we can help ensure that traditionally absent voices will be represented as a National Digital Platform continues to be developed.

Literature Review

Recent research in archival studies notes a growth in community archives.³ Although much of the scholarship documenting these archives has been based in the U.K., a growing body of literature addresses the trajectories of such organizations and projects in the U.S.⁴ While definitions of community are contextual and shifting, Flinn, Stevens, and Shepherd define community as “any manner of people who come together and present themselves as such, and a ‘community archive’ is the product of their attempts to document the history of their commonality.”⁵ Archival communities can materialize around ethnic, racial, or religious identities,⁶ gender and sexual orientation,⁷ economic status,⁸ and physical locations.⁹ As U.K.-based archival scholars Andrew Flinn, Mary Stevens, and Elizabeth Shepherd note,

³ Jeannette Bastian and Ben Alexander, “Introduction: Communities and Archives- A Symbiotic Relationship,” *Community Archives: The Shaping of Memory* (London: Facet, 2009); Andrew Flinn, Mary Stevens, and Elizabeth Shepherd, “Whose Memories, Whose Archives? Independent Community Archives, Autonomy, and the Mainstream,” *Archival Science* 9 (2009), 71-86; Dominique Daniel, “Documenting the Immigrant and Ethnic Experience in American Archives,” *American Archivist* 73:1 (2010): 82-104; Terry Cook, “Evidence, Memory, Identity, and Community: Four Shifting Archival Paradigms,” *Archival Science* 13 (2013): 95-120

⁴ For a historical perspective on the differences between community archives in the U.S. and the U.K., see: Gilliland, Anne J. and Andrew Flinn. “The Wonderful and Frightening World of Community Archives: What Are We Really Talking About?” Keynote address, Nexus, Confluence, and Difference: Community Archives meets Community Informatics: Prato CIRN Conference Oct 28-30 2013, Centre for Social Informatics, Monash University. ISBN 978-0-9874652-1-4, http://www.ccnr.infotech.monash.edu.au/assets/docs/prato2013_papers/gilliland_flinn_keynote.pdf.

⁵ Flinn, Stevens, and Shepherd, p. 75.

⁶ Elizabeth Kaplan, “We Are What We Collect, We Collect What We Are: Archives and the Construction of Identity,” *American Archivist* 63 (2000): 126-151; Dominique Daniel, “Documenting the Immigrant and Ethnic Experience in American Archives”; Michelle Caswell, “Seeing Yourself in History: Community Archives in the Fight Against Symbolic Annihilation,” *The Public Historian* 36(4) November 2014: 26-37.

⁷ Marcel Barriault, “Archiving the Queer and Queering the Archives: A Case Study of the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives,” *Community Archives: The Shaping of Memory*. London: Facet, 2009.

⁸ Flinn and Stevens, 2009.

⁹ Ibid.

independent grassroots archival efforts first sprung up in response to the political and social movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Flinn and Stevens position community archives as parts of larger social and political movements whereby groups who have been ignored, misrepresented or marginalized by mainstream archival repositories launch their own archival projects as means of self-representation, identity construction, and empowerment.¹⁰

In the American context, the majority of the staff and volunteers of these community archives are usually members of underrepresented groups. In maintaining independence and encouraging participation, these archives strive to provide a platform in which previously marginalized groups are empowered to make decisions about archival collecting on their own terms. Flinn, Stevens and Shepherd found that political activism, community empowerment, and social change were prime motivating factors undergirding these fiercely independent archival efforts.¹¹ In this light, the creation of community archives can be seen as a form of political protest in that it is an attempt to seize the means by which history is written and correct or amend dominant stories about the past. Flinn and Stevens assert: "...The endeavor by individuals and social groups to document their history, particularly if that history has been generally subordinated or marginalized, is political and subversive. These 'recast' histories and their making challenge and seek to undermine both the distortions and omissions of orthodox historical narratives, as well as the archive and heritage collections that sustain them."¹² In this way, community archives are responses not only to the omissions of history as the official story written by a guild of professional historians, but the omissions of memory institutions writ large, and can thus be read as a direct challenge to the failure of mainstream repositories to collect a more diverse representation of society.

It is important to note here that the term "community archives" is a general umbrella term under which a host of different types of projects may fit. Community archives can range from entirely independent, permanent, 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations dedicated solely to archival endeavors, to archival projects within larger community organizations, to informal, loosely defined, temporary configurations of community members dedicated to shaping collective memory of a community's past. As such, the term "community archives" can be seen as an external imposition by archival studies scholars rather than emerging organically from within such community efforts.

The archives profession in the U.S. is only now coming to terms with this burgeoning community archives movement. In the realm of practice, the rise of community archives has meant a reframing of the functions of appraisal, description, and access to align with

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Flinn, Stevens, and Shepherd, 2009.

¹² Flinn and Stevens, 2009, p. 3-4.

community-specific priorities, reflect contingent cultural values, and allow for greater participation in archival decision-making.¹³ Community input into archives has also led to conceptual shifts, as Chris Hurley developed the notion of “parallel provenance” to better accommodate Indigenous Australian perspectives on record creation, Joel Wurl advocated for ethnicity as a form of provenance, and Jeannette Bastian echoed calls to expand the core archival concept of provenance to include descendants of the subjects of records.¹⁴ Terry Cook has even declared that the recent emphasis on community constitutes a paradigm shift in the field, akin to previous conceptual guideposts like evidence and memory.¹⁵

Although significant theoretical work has been done on community archives, little empirical work has examined the landscape of community archives in the U.S. or has uncovered their goals, priorities, and challenges. Through this white paper, the “Diversifying the Digital Historical Record” grant hopes to begin to address that gap.

Research Questions

Given the importance of community archives in representing marginalized communities-- particularly communities of color-- their participation is vital to the creation of a national digital platform that truly represents the nation. How can community-based archives participate in national strategies to digitize and make available materials documenting marginalized communities? What are the social, cultural, and technological barriers to participation and what are the benefits? How might national digital strategies leverage materials in community-based archives in order to diversify the digital record while at the same time respecting community-based autonomy and authority?

These are the questions explored by a consortium of community-based archives awarded a \$100,000 National Leadership Grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services. The project, "Diversifying the Digital Historical Record: Integrating Community Archives in National Strategies for Access to Digital Cultural Heritage" was led by The Amistad Research Center, in collaboration with the Shorefront Legacy Center, the South Asian American Digital

¹³ Katie Shilton and Ramesh Srinivasan, “Participatory Appraisal and Arrangement for Multicultural Archival Collections,” *Archivaria* 63 (2007): 87-101.

¹⁴ Chris Hurley, “Parallel Provenance: What If Anything is Archival Description?” *Archives and Manuscripts* 33, no. 1, 2005: 110-145; Joel Wurl, “Ethnicity as Provenance: In Search of Values and Principles for Documenting the Immigrant Experience,” *Archival Issues* 29 (2005): 65-76; Jeannette Bastian, *Owning Memory: How a Caribbean Community Lost its Archives and Found its History*, Libraries Unlimited, Westport, CT, 2003.

¹⁵ Terry Cook, 2013

Archive (SAADA), Mukurtu, and Inland Empire Memories at the University of California, Riverside.

This core group represents a variety of collaborators with different institutional and independent missions who share the goal of increasing representation within our digital cultural history, and who represent the geographic, organizational, ethnic, and cultural diversity of the United States. The Inland Empire Memories Initiative is a collecting program centered at the University of California, Riverside Libraries, while the Shorefront Legacy Center and the Amistad Research Center represent independent archival institutions, each with a focus on documenting underrepresented communities both locally (Shorefront & the Chicago area) and nationally (Amistad). SAADA has used a post-custodial, digital-only approach to document the experiences of South Asian Americans, while Mukurtu is an open source content management system built with indigenous communities to manage and share digital cultural heritage. As a strategy to increase the diversity of the voices participating in these conversations, four forums were held in separate cities across the United States. Forum one was hosted by UCLA and UC-Riverside in Los Angeles, CA (October 2016), forum two was hosted by the Amistad Center in New Orleans, LA (January 2017), forum three was hosted by Shorefront Legacy in Evanston, IL (May 2017), and forum four was held at New York University in New York, NY (October 2017).

Forum Goals

The Diversifying the Digital Historical Record forums had three main goals:

Goal 1: Creating a Space for Critical Conversations

The Diversifying the Digital Historical Record project aimed to provide a public space for critical conversations about the makeup of our cultural heritage, including the digital, with the goal of addressing representation and the lack of diversity in those collections. Community archives are an effective means of diversifying the materials in our cultural heritage spaces and the opportunity to hold conversations in a public forum with representatives from community archives, traditional cultural heritage organizations and institutions, national digital initiatives and funders, provided an opportunity for open and honest conversations that we hope could lead to effective and sustainable solutions. The conversations aimed to critically address, among other issues, the current state of diversity in the profession, and diversity and inclusion in relation to collections appraisal, collection development, community engagement, and funding.

Goal 2: Developing Effective and Sustainable Networks

As community archives collections, projects, and consortiums continue to grow in the United States, it is vitally important that they define themselves, connect with each other and connect with larger, more traditional collecting initiatives, especially digital, as a way to increase knowledge of their holdings, share resources to support future growth and programming, and to introduce the cultural heritage materials they hold to a wider audience. While many community archives grew out of the necessity to include their stories in the national collective memory, a siloed existence does not support goals of diversifying the historical record. Community archives have the opportunity to truly realize their potential if they can develop a network to advance their goals. The Diversifying the Digital Historical Record project aimed to create an opportunity for the important conversations leading to these effective types of networks to be developed.

Goal 3: Increasing Collaboration with National Digital Initiatives

An important goal of the Diversifying the Digital Historical Record project was to design strategies for increased collaboration with inclusion in national digital initiatives such as the National Digital Platform. In the past three years, organizations like the Digital Public Library of America (DPLA), HathiTrust and the Digital Preservation Network have developed incredibly robust and connected models for sharing cultural heritage materials. Both representatives of such initiatives and community archives practitioners and organizations were invited to participate in this project in order to discuss effective means for future collaboration. We believe collaborations between community archives and national digital projects will have significant impact on what materials are represented in national digital library efforts and what communities are included in future conversations on national digital initiatives.

These goals were achieved through four open and collaborative community archives forums during which significant discussions took place regarding the development of community archives in the United States and the impact they can have on our shared cultural heritage. The conversations were recorded and transcribed, then analyzed for emerging themes in order to uncover the participants' attitudes, needs, and thoughts about participation in a national digital platform. Below, we summarize the key themes that emerged out of the four forums and discuss their implications for funding agencies, those working on national digital platforms, community archives, and communities themselves.

Findings

1. Connecting Across Communities

Many of the community archives practitioners brought together at the forums did not know about each other or each other's organizations prior to the forums, despite overlapping aims and objectives, mutual goals, common challenges, and in some cases, geographic proximity. Community archives work is currently siloed off in individual communities without sustained opportunity to meet, share best practices, discuss mutual challenges, and collaborate.

Several participants remarked in both the forums' public discussions and in private conversations during breaks how important it was for them just to get to know each other. In this way, the forums succeeded in initiating a conversation across organizations. As one participant said in Forum 2 in New Orleans, "I could sit with you [other participants] and talk for hours and hours about this because it's so wonderful to hear from other people handling records in archives. It's very inspirational...because sometimes as you know while we have commonalities we work separately in our own little world; we can sometimes feel a little bit cut off from the larger group of archivists and people who are handling records so I really enjoyed sitting in a circle with you."

2. Collaboration

Participants talked about the value of collaboration as one way to address several issues community archives face but several of them also mentioned that collaborative partnerships have to be done in equitable and open ways in order for them to be successful. As one participant said during the Forum 2 in New Orleans, "I would think respect is a big issue when you're looking at community archives and the larger institutions. It's important for the larger institution to not be dominant in that role and to make sure that they're listening to the needs of the community and that they're really addressing those needs." There was also an acknowledgement that communication and developing clear expectations would be vital, especially in collaborative efforts that include groups outside your own community. Another participant at Forum 2 in New Orleans commenting on the what it takes to develop successful collaborations said, "I think communication is the most important aspect of any sort of project, and establishing what the parameters and goals are in the very beginning. These projects need to benefit your collaborators as much as your own institution and much like a negotiation or a contract; everyone needs to come out winning and compromising to some degree and that level of direct communication of expectations I think are key, without that everything kind of breaks down."

There are several examples of these ideas being put into action in collaborative efforts between community archive and other groups. One such partnership is the Shorefront Legacy Center's work with the Black Metropolis Research Consortium. The Shorefront Legacy Center is a community archives that collects, preserves and educates people about Black history on

Chicago's suburban North Shore. And the Black Metropolis Research Consortium is a Chicago-based consortium of libraries, archives, and museums that supports work of preserving Chicago African American history. Through this partnership the Shorefront Legacy Center was able to get archives interns to come work in their space to process collections and create finding aids. This work has led to increased access to the Shorefront collections and was done in a way that benefited both organizations.

As a participant noted during the New Orleans forum, when partnerships or communication with community members are not clear and honest, this leaves room for potential breakdowns in relationships. One important example the participant gave of how this could happen was with collection donation policies. They said, "The difficult part for us is once we take the materials at the history center, so for instance, if you give me your grandmother's photo, you transfer that ownership to me of that photograph. [The City] provides costs and fees, I then have the right to use that image in any way I would like, technically, but I do ask the community permission, I wouldn't plaster your grandmother's face on a billboard without talking to you about it, but I could if I wanted to, so it's just a matter of thinking about how that relationship works. Also, one thing I do find difficult about my job is sometimes our photos cost a lot of money. When people want to purchase a photograph or use an image, it's pretty costly and [The City] sets those prices, we don't, the library doesn't, the history center doesn't, the city... does the legal department. Maybe you lose your photograph and you come to me and you say I remember I donated that photograph to you guys twenty years ago, and then I'll say yes we have it, but it's going to cost you like \$50. That's part of my job that we sometimes feel guilty about."

3. Sharing Best Practices and Resources

Participants also spoke about the importance of maintaining such connections across organizations once established. The possibility of local meetings based on geographic proximity was discussed, as was the idea of sharing physical resources such as scanners and preservation materials. At the New Orleans forum in particular, the conversation surfaced the need for a supported and sustained online space where community archives could discuss challenges, share successes, and provide mutual resources. Resources such as deeds of gift, preservation best practices, and fundraising strategies could easily be shared via such an online platform so that community archives practitioners do not have to reinvent the wheel in their practice if similar challenges have been solved already by other community archives.

As one participant said, "One of the goals of this conversation is to think about what would be useful in terms of a national network...If you didn't have to reinvent wheels or if there were easy places to go to see what's the best software, what are the top recommendations of people that have been here before, funding that could funnel to that would make a huge systemic difference." A participant at the New York forum explained what tangible resources could be

shared: “It’s crazy to me that...we all have our own servers; there’s so much duplication and there is no need to expect that community organizations and archives to create their own to further complement what has already been duplicated over and over and over again. Rather we need to share the infrastructure that we’ve created, but on terms that will make it make sense for archives that are outside a particular institutional context.” Another participant poignantly asked, “What if we could work together to give expertise supporting infrastructure for keeping and maintaining records and then [the resources] could stay a little bit closer to home, to the organization that created them, and the communities that most immediately are served by the organization?”

In the first forum in Los Angeles, there was also a sense of the need for each community archives staff and volunteers to figure out when to work collaboratively, that is, when their needs and best practices overlap, when they can share resources and technology and methods and even projects, and when, instead, practice must be rooted firmly in the identity and worldview of the community represented by the archive.

4. Respecting the Right Not to Participate

Several participants expressed that their organizations and communities would not want to participate in a national digital platform because they think participation might compromise the authority, autonomy, access, cultural embeddedness, and context that community archives have fought so hard to achieve. Why, some participants asked, would a community archives want to give up digital copies of the materials that it has fought so hard to preserve in the face of a legacy of devaluation and disrespect from mainstream institutions? As one participant at the New York forum summarized, “I also really do want to recognize the fact that there are also good reasons that a community archives might not want to participate in [a national digital platform]...there may be concerns about maintaining autonomy, authority, over the materials that you’re collecting.”

Resistance to participation was particularly notable for Indigenous community archives for whom notions of universal open access directly violate cultural protocols. For community archives based in Indigenous communities, the assumption of a desire to participate in a national digital platform is seen as furthering a colonialist agenda and, in some cases, seen to further carry out the epistemic violence of colonialism.

In a group discussion in the Los Angeles forum, a heated debate emerged about standards and the applicability or desirability of employing dominant descriptive and technical standards for community-based practice. Some felt very strongly that standards do violence to non-dominant ways of thinking and being and organization knowledge, while others argued that standards in and of themselves are not the problem, but how they have been constructed and used, by whom

and for what ends, that has done violence. Some felt a different kind of standard was necessary, while others felt the idea of standards was not recuperable.

Some participants expressed caution and raised serious issues about what participation in a national digital platform and its resulting exposure would mean for their communities. In New Orleans, a participant remarked, "...the same kinds of technologies that we want for open government to make things transparent, you know sunlight initiatives, those are also technologies of surveillance and can be turned around on the people who are building community archives." Privacy remains a big concern with digital participation. A participant at the first forum in Los Angeles said, "I think one of our big challenges...is how to move forward in the future and digitize... without alienating our community because they want to touch the archive, they want to touch the documents, they want to touch the images, so we have to make sure to maintain a lot of cultural sensitivity and also not put some of the information on the internet." A participant at the New York forum expressed a similar concern: "There's an important context for materials that a community archives are providing and the structure [of a national digital platform] may not reflect that context...losing that context may not be worth the added audience you're getting."

Some discussed how racialized disparities in economics, education, and access to technology could be exacerbated by participation in a national digital platform. A participant from the third forum in Evanston said, "Our research... is really about the people in the community and their relationship with each other and how that can be the social basis for any digital representation that takes place. Therefore, the new paradigm of the information society for a participant, for a citizen, for an activist is computer literacy and therefore the digital divide essentially excludes you from a society that's being created as we speak." Participants both felt a pressure to digitize materials so as not to be left behind *and* expressed concerns about what negative impact digitization and participation in a national platform would have on already vulnerable communities.

5. Acknowledging Gaps in Technical Expertise and Resources

While some community archives practitioners *do* want to participate in a national digital platform, many expressed the inability to do so because of a lack of technical capacity. Participants across forums noted that they lack adequate technical infrastructure, material resources, labor, and expertise to digitize their materials on any kind of large scale. As one participant at the New York forum stated, "often the small institutions [and] community organizations that actively collect and preserve our culture...don't have the resources, staff [and] infrastructure to actually digitize and share those materials online." Furthermore, copyright clearance and anxieties about the ownership of intellectual property prove to be a significant barrier to digitization as well.

The staffing required for digitization is a major concern. A participant from the second forum in New Orleans said, "...we fluctuate from having a staff of two, to having a staff of five sometimes, so the biggest challenge is having a regular staff trained to know how to complete a digitization project."

A lack of infrastructure is also a barrier. Describing her technical capacity, another New Orleans forum participant said, "My personal computer has Excel and I have one drive where I can store our documents. I really hate to be that basic, but my computer and my email and all of that is really basic because we don't have any other IT infrastructure. That's what I started working with as a graduate student and the founder didn't have anything else to offer me so we started using my personal stuff and kind of just kept it there until we can figure out something else."

The New York forum also surfaced that copyright is a significant barrier to digitization. One participant said, "Basically what I wanted to show is how difficult the process of digitization is in the first place in terms of copyright issues and then if you are able to do that the problem of getting your voice out to the right people." Participants confessed a lack of basic knowledge about copyright, and when such knowledge did exist, the lack of resources to track down copyright holders and obtain permission.

6. Balancing Competing Priorities

For many community archives, much more pressing needs such as preservation, description, and fiscal sustainability take precedence over digitization. Digitization is thus seen as a luxury many community archives cannot afford.

Across sites participants spoke of the challenges of raising money to keep the lights on and/or hire a minimum staff, and told harrowing stories of rising rents, damaged physical infrastructure, and fluctuations in volunteer labor. As an example of the kinds of basic sustainability challenges facing many community archives, a New Orleans participant said, "...at any day, any month, any year, when it rains... the collection is threatened." One New York participant described, "the labor to create and maintain a digital infrastructure by necessity occurs with the volunteer energy that is left over after keeping our physical space open and the bills paid. For an all-volunteer archive open 4 days a week and supported through individual grassroots donations this is no small feat." Another explained, "we are actually closed right now because we were evicted in August and are in the process of moving to a new location and our catalog isn't online because our server is literally in a box." A third participant echoed, "some of the challenges that we faced in the past and the future include the stabilization of the center because we are often under attack. Anytime there is a budget hiccup then they are trying to close the center to save money." It is clear across sites that fiscal barriers prevent many community archives from embarking on digitization.

Participants also spoke about prioritizing processing over digitization. One participant at the New York forum in described acquiring the papers of an important civil rights lawyer. While there is a high demand for the collection, the participant noted, “all of the landmark cases of the 60s and 70s and 80s are included in that collection of some roughly 60 boxes, [but they are] still currently unprocessed; we’ve had it about three years now.” Materials cannot be digitized if they are not processed, so lack of resources to process a collection impedes digitization.

When digitization is prioritized, it is because it is seen to solve a preservation issue, rather than provide large scale access. As a New Orleans participant noted, “In terms of reproduction technology, I would really like to see us be able to create digital surrogates of our materials because a lot of them are very very damaged. We have these beautiful photographs from Martin Luther King Jr.’s funeral, because a lot of the people in Flat Rock knew MLK through his mother, and they are just so damaged.” Clearly community archives have a wealth of materials in their collections that is of national (and international) interest, but without meeting basic fiscal, staffing, and preservation needs, digitization remains a low priority.

7. Navigating Restrictive and Inadequate Funding

Participants across sites, but particularly at the New Orleans and New York forums, discussed the ways in which the current funding landscape does not adequately reflect their community’s priorities and needs. While large federal agencies and private foundations offer some support for digitization projects, there is little or no funding available for basic organizational upkeep such as staff support or physical infrastructure. When funding is available, it is often diverted to larger organizations with larger budgets and track records of getting large grants, further impoverishing already strapped organizations.

As a New Orleans participants stated, “Another thing that was requested was grants that are people based and staffing grants; something as simple and broad as paying for a paid intern, someone to do the catch all work, which is great experience and lets interns or lower level staff get exposure to all sorts of activities within an organization without defining what those activities are ahead of time so that both the organization and the new employee can learn on the job.” Another said, “We had a really rough winter, last winter, so we had a lot of pipes bursting...sometimes it would be nice to use grant money to pay for that, but that’s a different grant, to pay for your facility issues that pop up, so just a grant that didn’t limit us so much because our preservation progress and our digital progress is often limited by basic issues that we have and need to pay for.” Across sites, participants spoke about how the current funding landscape was inadequate for supporting their organizations’ most basic needs.

Community archives practitioners also noted that, while some limited grant money might be available for digitization, grants typically do not fund additional work such as marketing and outreach that accompanies digitization. As a participant at the New York forum said: “Our second major challenge was to reach our audience because when you put things on the web it does not mean that people are going to come to your website and find them. Unfortunately it’s not just we’ll get on the web and all of a sudden people will come; you have to have a marketing plan, you have to have money, and you have to have a way to get your message to the people that you want.”

Recommendations Based on Findings

Based on the findings reported above, we make the following recommendations to support community archives and a national digital strategy moving forward:

1. A National Network of Community Archives Should Be Established

Community-based archives will benefit from a network of similar organizations that support activities around sustainability of their spaces, collections management, care and access, and advocacy. Several participants in the four forums mentioned the importance of collaborative efforts and they gave examples of all the diverse ways a network could happen. Many of them talked about how beneficial it would be to know about and connect with other community archives as a way to understand common issues across their organizations and communities and to potentially tackle those issues collectively. If a national network is established, it should be led by community archives practitioners and advocates and developed based on their shared values and needs.

2. Cultural Heritage Sector Grant Funders Should Prioritize Investment in Community-Based Archives and Develop New Funding Practices That Support Sustainability

Community archives can benefit greatly from direct support from grant funders but generally these spaces are not prioritized, and when they are supported, it is usually through partnerships where larger, more traditional cultural heritage institutions lead the work. Grantmakers who fund cultural heritage projects should prioritize community archives by first acknowledging their legitimacy as vital memory spaces that contribute to the preservation of our shared cultural heritage and by also naming community archives as focus areas in their funding priorities. Grant funders should also encourage community archives to pursue business planning and other funding raising activities that could lead to sustainability by structuring their own funding and other resources in ways that support these activities.

In addition to funding community archives more intentionally, grant funding agencies should offer more--and more flexible-- grants for community archives. For example, funding should not be restricted from supporting the operations or administrative needs of community archives. Money, labor and time are frequently the biggest barriers to community archives spaces operating successfully and remaining active for the long term. Current funding models are heavily project based, which limit how community archives can use funds to achieve baseline goals of keeping the doors open, perform collections management, provide better access, and how they plan and implement outreach efforts. If funding agencies decide to prioritize community archives, then they should make every effort to ensure the funds are flexible and based on the values and real needs on the organizations.

3. National Digital Platform Projects Should Acknowledge and Respect Communities' Right to Non-Participation

Every person, especially members of traditionally marginalized communities, should have a right to decide whether they are represented in an archive. Every community and community-based archive should have that right as well. The National Digital Platform should support efforts that respect the privacy of individuals and communities and their rights to not be included in digital archives. The National Digital Platform should encourage caution and care ethics in digital archives projects where potential harms may exist for certain communities.

4. Develop New Practices for Collaboration and Shared Governance

New models of participation and shared governance need to be developed so that community archives may maintain autonomy and authority while participating in a national platform. Frequently, collaborative efforts and partnerships between community archives are unequal and lead to unethical practices that negatively affect the community archive as a result. The community archives sector should develop new models for collaboration and shared governance that can guide collaborative work. We believe libraries, archives/special collections or museums based at academic institutions can support and collaborate on projects with community archives, but they should not lead the work, determine the project's priorities, nor benefit from an inequitable allocation of funding. One way to ensure collaborations are fair is for grant funders to support partnerships that are led by trusted community organizations or community archives. Funders have an important role to play here in ensuring fairness, and so do community archives practitioners and all other potential collaborators including academic institutions, scholars, archivists, and community partners. Policies for equitable partnerships should be in place at the outset of such partnerships.

5. Develop Best Practices for Equitable Partnerships Between Community Archives and Collaborators

Community archives practitioners and their advocates should lead the development of formalized best practices for collaboration as a way to communicate their values to the broader community and potential collaborators. Partnerships involving community-based archives often lead to situations where these spaces can be taken advantage of. A few ways to address that is by naming one's values upfront, clearly communicating expectations, and letting formalized best practices guide how equitable partnerships and collaborative projects are designed and developed.

6. Any Effort to Diversify the Digital Historical Record Must Address the Structural Barriers Faced by Community Archives as Evidenced by Technological and Material Disparities

Community archives are at a disadvantage in terms of how resources are allocated in the cultural heritage community. The more traditional and already resource-rich spaces such as academic libraries, large museums, and government supported organizations, command a heavy portion of funding and other resources such as professional skills. This leaves community archives to function largely on their own or forces them to partner with larger organizations as a way to access technology or professional resources. This model is not sustainable for community archives. We recommend that national initiatives such as the National Digital Platform support projects and other work that looks more closely at the structural barriers faced by community archives as a way to better design, develop, and deliver solutions to some of the issues they face. Examples of areas that could use support for closer analysis are funding, technology capacity, access to professional services and people, and operational and administrative profiles.

Conclusion

The Diversifying the Digital Historical Record forums were an opportunity to bring together community archives and their advocates from across the country to share practices, learn new strategies, and plan for sustainable futures. Through the four forums in Los Angeles, New Orleans, Evanston (IL), and New York, we learned that community archives in the United States are diverse in the collections they hold and the communities they serve. We also learned that they each value their own unique identities and fiercely protect their independence as community memory institutions. As the staff at large cultural heritage organizations, universities, and funding agencies continue to learn more about these community spaces in the United States, it will be imperative that we protect them, respect the work that they do, and champion their efforts to add to our shared cultural heritage. The rich conversations and new knowledge shared during the forums reminds us that community archives are crucial sites of historical preservation and that initiatives such as the National Digital Platform and cultural heritage funding organizations

should do more to encourage sustainability, innovation, and growth in those spaces. As we move forward, community archives themselves, while maintaining independence, should embrace avenues for collaboration with each other at least at the local and regional levels. We learned from the forums that there are some extremely creative strategies being deployed at community archives throughout the country to address several issues, including funding, collections care, access, and outreach. We hope these spaces can learn from each other as a way to strengthen those practices and their organizations.

We are extremely grateful for everyone who travelled to attend the forums and to those who followed along via the livestream and on social media. As we continue to grow awareness of these spaces and their collections, it will be vital to foster a community around them. We are also thankful to the Institute of Museum and Library Services for launching the National Digital Platform initiative and for being inclusive in terms of the types of cultural heritage organizations that could participate. It is important for national initiatives to recognize the value of smaller, local, community-centered spaces. It's also important to thank the grant reviewers who saw the value in this kind of work for all the reasons mentioned before. And lastly, much thanks to the partner institutions on this project: Amistad Research Center, Shorefront Legacy Center, South Asian American Digital Archive, Mukurtu, University of California, Riverside, and specifically Dr. Kara Oridge, Christopher Harter, Dr. Michelle Caswell, Samip Malik, Tamar Evangelestia-Dougherty, Dr. Kim Christen, Bergis Jules and Dino Robinson for continuing to be exemplary models of how to create and support community archives organizations, projects, tools, and collaborations.