Connecticut Digital Archive in Context: Addressing Systemic Bias in Cultural Heritage Repository Programs

CNI Member Meeting, December, 2021

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https://bit.ly/3rm52eC
Connecticut Digital Archive

Who We Are

- Unit in the UConn Library
- 2 full-time staff
- Manage a 2.7 million object repository
- 85 institutional members –
  - Connecticut State Library
  - Connecticut Historical Society
  - Avon Free Public Library
  - Stanley-Whitman House
- 200 content managers

What We Do

- **Provide** technology infrastructure to manage, maintain, and disseminate digital collections
- **Support** members by providing resources, training, and collaborative opportunities
- **Advise** potential participants about the CTDA’s programs and refer them to alternatives if no CTDA program is suitable for their needs
- Cultural Heritage Coalitions
  - DPLA Hub
  - Islandora Foundation
  - State-wide digital initiatives
CTDA in Context

Our Program – [Website]
• Breakdown traditional power structures
• Inspire change

Timeline
• *Summer 2020* – intern Kayla Hinkson-Grant does preliminary work
• *Fall 2020 – Spring 2021* – Internal discussion to understand the baseline landscape of digital cultural heritage in the US and in CT
• *Summer 2021* – self-examination of the CTDA and an analysis of its peers in the Digital Public Library of America Hub network
• *Fall 2021* – CTDA in Context White Paper released
• *Spring 2022* – Introduce new policies on participation, more research on reaching non-customary groups, other unforeseen projects!
There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says “Morning, boys. How’s the water?” And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes “What the hell is water?”

—David Foster Wallace
Step 1: Examined DPLA Hub websites.

**Problem:** Websites were poorly designed and hard to navigate. We could not find information.

**Problem:** Information on websites often used technical jargon that would be difficult for a newcomer to understand.

**Problem:** Information on websites were sometimes contradicted elsewhere.

**Question:** Is the poor design of the website, and the lack of clearly displayed information, a barrier of entry?
Step 2: Survey DPLA Hubs

• Since we could not find the information we were looking for on the website, we sent surveys to DPLA hubs.

• 14 out of 27 hubs responded.
Most hubs have a $0 participation or membership fee!

Size of hubs vary considerably!
Important to take this into consideration when you compare the hubs.
Beyond the customary institution type, the only additional types mentioned were a theater troupe, an LGBTQ+ organization, and a government library.

Hubs seem to work primarily with customary institutions. How can we alter our outreach strategy and change our infrastructure in order to reach other institutional types?
• If no requirement is required by all hubs, then is any requirement truly necessary?

• Could hubs remove some of their requirements in order to improve the equity of the application process?
• No service is offered by all hubs.
• Hubs differ considerably when it comes to funding and experience, which can affect services offered.
• Which services are imperative when it comes to assisting newcomers?
We determined...

Poorly designed websites and technical language are a barrier of entry.

Hubs generally work with customary institutions (libraries, museums, archives)

No requirement is required by all hubs.

**Conclusion:**
1. We should update our websites and use clear language with no technical jargon.
2. We should alter our outreach approach in order to reach non-customary institutions.
3. We should reconsider our participation requirements.
Examining the Data: CTDA Members

- Who are we? How do our members define themselves?
- Exploring through mission/vision statements
- Public-facing summaries of who an institution is
- Not always publicly available
- Mission and vision statements are only a facet of an organization’s identity
Count of CTDA Member Types

- University: 5.2%
- Archive: 1.1%
- Research center: 1.3%
- State library: 1.3%
- Historical society: 14.3%
- Repository: 1.3%
- Professional association: 2.8%
- Academic library: 6.5%
- Organization: 7.8%
- Public library: 28.9%
- Museum: 24.7%
- School: 5.2%
How do we analyze this data?

- Align with the Strategic Diversity Manifesto (Mehra and Davis, 2015)
- Align with the Multicultural Development (MCOD) Model (Holvino, 2014)

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monocultural</th>
<th>Transitional</th>
<th>Multicultural</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exclusionary</td>
<td>Compliance</td>
<td>Redefining</td>
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<td>Passive Club</td>
<td>Competency</td>
<td>Active</td>
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- Actively promotes the dominant perspective of one group, culture, or style.
- Seeks to integrate others into systems created under dominant norms.
- Values and integrates the perspectives of diverse identities, cultures, styles and groups into the organization's work and systems.
Where Do We Go From Here?

CONNECT • PRESERVE • SHARE

Technology  Outreach  Policy  Inclusion
Outreach

How we describe ourselves to others currently speaks only to those who already know what we do and how we do it.

Improve our communications to be more understandable to non specialists and underrepresented community members.
Much of our technology and many of our practices are inherently biased; including search algorithms and metadata systems and tools.

We must ensure our technology supports multiple cultural viewpoints in intellectual structure, metadata standards and practices, search algorithms and more.
Inclusion

It is more difficult for us to change if we remain all the same

Investigate and learn from others how to encourage more inclusive participation in the CTDA

Expand the diversity of our Advisory and other committees
Policy

Current participation policies reinforce the hegemony of customary organizations.

Revised participation policies could focus on commitment to stewardship rather than institutional affiliation.
Questions?

Connecticut Digital Archive: https://ctdigitalarchive.org

CTDA in Context: http://ctdaincontext.org


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