Chapter 6
The contributions of family and local historians to British history online

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In 1987, the Family History Department of the Church of the Latter Day Saints began a project with the British Genealogical Records Users Committee to transcribe and index the 1881 British census. Some community history societies were already creating indexes for the 1851 census, so they were well placed to take on another census project. Several tons of photocopies were distributed to almost 100 family history societies for double transcription and checking; later, a multi-million-dollar mainframe computer created indexes from the results (Young, 1996, 1998b; Tice, 1990). This 'cooperative indexing' took eight years – the process of assigning parts for transcription alone occupied 43 months – and while the project was very well received, in 1998 it was concluded that ‘a national project of this scope has proved too labour intensive, time consuming and expensive’ to be repeated (Young, 1998). However, many years later, the US 1940 census was indexed in just four months by over 160,000 volunteers (1940 US Census Community Project, 2012), and cooperative historical projects flourish.

This example illustrates the long history of cooperative transcription and indexing projects, the significant contribution they made to the work of other historians and the vital role of community history organizations and volunteers in participatory heritage projects. The reduction in logistical overhead and the increased reach and efficiency of projects initiated in the 2010s compared to those in the 1980s also highlights the role of networked technologies in enabling wider participation in cooperative digitization projects. This chapter examines the important contributions of community historians to digital and participatory heritage, discussing how family and local historians have voluntarily organized or contributed to projects to collect, digitize and publish historical sources about British history. This insight into grassroots projects may be useful for staff in cultural heritage institutions who encounter or seek to work with community historians, or for those organizing community heritage projects.

The questions addressed in this chapter are drawn from research which sought to understand the impact of participatory digital history projects on users. This research included reviewing a corpus of over 400 digital history projects, analysing those that aimed to collect, create or enhance records about historical materials. The corpus included both community- and institutionally led participatory history sites. Points of analysis included ‘microcopy’ (small pieces of text such as slogans, instructions and navigation) and the visible affordances, or website interface features, that encourage, allow or disable various participatory functions. The analysis was fundamentally informed by the idea that any website or software application is embedded in social contexts and histories that affect how it is received and used. Accordingly, representative samples of project documentation, website interfaces, participant forum discussions and mentions of projects on the web and social media were also analysed. Projects studied ranged from crowdsourcing projects
initiated by museums, libraries, archives or academics, to ‘grassroots’ projects initiated and led by self-organized communities of genealogists, family and local historians.

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 29 historians who use or contribute to resources related to early modern England. Participants included professional historians employed in publishing or academia and family and local historians. The interviews included questions about participation in collaborative research projects, and how data was shared in any such collaborations. In addition to their own academic, family or local history research, seven interviewees were also contributors to grassroots, community history society- or institutionally-led participatory projects. These interviews were supplemented with formal interviews or informal discussions with stakeholders from several institutional and grassroots projects. In combination, the research provided a picture of participatory digital heritage projects at both the individual and group level.

Terminology
Before providing selected examples of community heritage projects, I will briefly define some key terms. Grassroots projects are initiated and run by participants rather than by commercial entities or cultural heritage institutions (traditional museums, libraries, archives) or universities. They often emerge from a common interest in the history of a region or the use of similar sources, or arise to address shared challenges. ‘Community’ history is used as shorthand for family and local history; community history projects are created through voluntary work by community and other historians or contributors. They may sell subscriptions to newsletters or (less frequently, these days) copies of indexes on CD-ROM, but are not for profit, unlike commercial resources such as Ancestry or FindMyPast. In this chapter I draw on Denning and Yaholkovsky’s (2008) definition of collaboration as requiring the ‘support and agreement of others before you can take action’, while cooperation involves following the rules of a project but does not require discussion with others. Finally, ‘participants’ actively contribute to a project or website by undertaking tasks such as commenting on, transcribing or adding content.

Participatory digital history projects take many forms, but the focus here is participatory projects formed to create, organize, publish and use historical sources. The main, tangible outputs of the projects I reviewed fall into several categories: partial text transcription (including indexing); full text transcription; proofread and corrected versions of computationally transcribed text; collections of historical materials; information including observations and personal or specialist knowledge; and other outputs. Projects in each of these categories may vary hugely in terms of their source materials, task types, participant interests, motivational frameworks and management structures. Tasks range from simple ‘microtasks’ – small, self-contained actions that can be completed quickly – to complex research tasks.

Examples of representative projects
Several other genealogies for cooperative resource-creation projects could be traced. Project Gutenberg, which began in 1971 (Hart, 1992) and publishes volunteer-transcribed text from previously published, out of copyright texts, is an early model for cooperative transcription projects. The National Library of Australia’s Trove optical character recognition (OCR) error correction project, launched in 2008 (Holley, 2010), has been both hugely successful, with over 200 million lines of OCR text corrected at the time of writing, and hugely influential. Many family historians informally pool resources and discuss their work
with others researching branches of the same families. However, here we discuss local and community history group-led projects focused on cooperative resource creation.

**Indexing and transcription projects**

Indexing records – creating a searchable index of selected terms in a document by entering specific information from a source document into a data entry form – is particularly common for biographical records such as birth, death and marriage certificates. A range of commercial and grassroots projects focus on indexing genealogical records; both may use crowdsourcing or volunteer labour to achieve all or part of their indexing goals. Projects may have once relied on participants physically visiting archives to access original or microfilmed documents, but now generally work with online images.

Grassroots indexing projects include the UK-based FreeUKGenealogy group of projects - FreeBMD (transcribing the General Register Office indexes of Births, Marriages and Deaths for England and Wales), FreeCen (transcribing 19th-century census returns) and FreeReg (transcribing parish records). FreeBMD began in 1998 after the founders negotiated permission from the Office for National Statistics to publish the indexes to births, marriages and deaths for England and Wales online (von Massenbach, 1998). By 2014 over 12,000 volunteers had transcribed over 350 million records for FreeBMD (Raymond, 2014).

Syndicates are led by volunteers who manage the process of acquiring documents and assigning them to participants, who then transcribe records using Microsoft Excel or specialized software.

Another grassroots project, Online Parish Clerks (OPC), began in Cornwall in 2001 (Cornwall Online Parish Clerks, n.d.). OPC contributors ‘adopt’ parishes and ‘collect, collate and transcribe’ as many sources of historical data as they can find for those parishes (FamilySearch Wiki, 2011). Many Cornish parishes now have volunteer OPCs, and the model has been tried in other counties including Kent, Lancashire, Essex and Wiltshire, with varying levels of success. Unlike FreeUKGenealogy’s centralized repository and transcription interface, OPC projects are organized at a local level. This allows greater flexibility in collecting and digitizing a wide range of sources relevant to a region, but it creates a greater dependency on local technical expertise. In projects where volunteers can ‘adopt’ or ‘own’ a parish or county, volunteers may have a greater sense of ownership than in larger, centralized projects, but it also leaves projects more exposed to changes in the motivation levels and availability of individual volunteers.

Non-genealogical transcription projects include Herbaria@Home. Launched in 2006, the site aims to catalogue and transcribe historical herbarium specimen sheets from collections held by universities and museums. Inspired by an in-person volunteer digitization project, the online distributed project was designed to overcome ‘the problem of giving large numbers of volunteers physical access to a museum’s collection, limited numbers of computers and limited space’ (Humphrey, n.d.). Other specialist indexing projects include the Crew List Index Project (CLIP), which aims ‘to improve access to the records of British merchant seamen for the last part of the nineteenth century’ by indexing records at local record offices (‘What next for CLIP?’, 2013). While a specialized topic may draw only small numbers of interested locals, digital projects enable participation from any location with internet access.

**More complex projects**

While tasks such as photographing, transcribing or indexing documents are relatively uncomplicated (allowing for variations in the quality of the documents and handwriting), I
also found community history societies setting more complex tasks for participants, including ‘research quests’ – research projects with a specific goal and timeframe, devised around the records available and interests of their members. The Family and Community Historical Research Society (FACHRS) has developed models for ‘major’ and ‘mini’ projects. Mini projects generally run for a month and can be completed with records available online, while major projects run for a year or more, require visits to archives and ‘become a real labour of love’ (FACHRS, n.d.). For example, the ‘mini’ Stationmasters project sent information about individual stationmasters to FACHRS members, asking them to fill in a form about the individual’s life based on various census records (Smith, 2012), while the ‘major’ Swing Riots project asked members to search regional newspapers and local primary sources for evidence of riots in their area (Holland, 2004).

Many local history societies and special interest groups across the UK have organized their own transcription, indexing and collection projects. Over time, they have established successful models for cooperative and collaborative projects that collect, digitize and organize resources (particularly primary sources). A society’s collections might include physical and digital indexes and repositories of records including photographs, documents, newspapers and maps. Many have a mixture of original documents; photocopy, microfilm or digital images; and physical card indexes, shared spreadsheets and online databases of indexes and transcripts. Groups such as the Oxfordshire Family History Society, Manchester and Lancashire Family History Society, and the Hanslope and District Historical Society have transcribed parish registers, wills, census records and hearth taxes and have created indexes for other local records and books relevant to the area or local occupations.  

**Community historians and participatory resource creation**

The relative simplicity of publishing content online has made it easier for individuals or community groups to share the results of their collaborative indexing projects. As the data shared through these projects is collected specifically for these projects, it has neither the personal resonance of family history data, nor the career-building role of gathering data for publication by professional historians, making sharing it openly a less fraught process. In the past, local history societies may have sent CD-ROMs of their resources to local libraries, but now they can post them, or at least advertise their existence, online. However, in some cases the compiled results of local indexing projects have been seen as possible sources of income, causing some societies to resist calls to share information freely online (McLee, 1996). In some cases, copyright and uncertain licensing terms for material accessed in other repositories is a barrier to sharing material.

Many community history projects expand over time, their scope and complexity aligned with the growing interests and skills of their members. A member of the Colne Engaine History Society described how it started with physical card indexes recording references to people, places and occupations and then developed a bespoke database system that better suited its historical data and allowed it to run complex searches (Hewes, 1995). Like many such projects, it relied on help from members with some expertise with computers. Participants in early digital projects describe mailing floppy disks in the post to a co-ordinator who manually checked and compiled a master copy of the dataset; more recent projects may share Microsoft Access databases, or use Flickr or Facebook to discuss records. Several village history websites in the Milton Keynes area use specialized software written by the late Robert Dymond to link different types of local records to specific people and addresses (Dymond, n.d.).
Altruistic motivations such as contributing to the greater good, and the intrinsic rewards of learning, discovery, enjoyment and spending time with like-minded others help to motivate contributors to community history projects. The ethos of ‘giving back’ (Yakel and Torres, 2007) can be seen in forum posts and social media comments on community history and genealogy sites. My interviewees also discussed the personal importance of reciprocation and altruistic motivations.

Community historians benefit from relationships of trust, aided by their shared histories or goals, and sometimes from the ability to meet in person. Broadly speaking, local history societies seem to rely on in-person meetings or private correspondence to manage participatory tasks, while participatory projects about more specialist topics with more geographically dispersed participants tend to rely on online discussion.

Project phases
My research found that community history projects tend to have a collaborative initiation phase in which stakeholders negotiate mutually agreeable goals related to the historical materials and/or questions, and select or design the necessary recording systems and processes. Once input formats are agreed, projects move into a cooperative phase in which distributed recording systems (whether spreadsheets, databases or web-based interfaces) manage the co-ordination of data inputs. Reviewing and moderating contributions, and providing feedback on how they are aiding the wider project, is important for the success of a project. In community history projects this communication may often be integral to the project. As projects mature, discussion amongst participants may in turn lead to new projects with their own initiation phases. While the initiation phase may require a significant investment of time from participants, it can produce crowdsourcing-style microtask-based systems to which anyone can contribute.

In future, the initiation phase may require less technical development as more participatory platforms become available for community history projects. However, as each dataset, research topic or specialist interest is slightly different, some initial work on specifying requirements and record formats will still be required.

Preservation and sustainability challenges
The variety of data formats, standards and scope of community history projects, particularly those hosted on bespoke websites or stored on personal computers, makes the preservation of their data challenging. Projects can also be vulnerable to the attrition of volunteers over time, particularly those who contributed to the development of bespoke recording systems. While sites can be nominated for inclusion in the UK Web Archive or the Internet Archive, web archives can capture only part of the rich tapestry of participatory heritage represented by British community history sites.

Conclusion
As examples from the past four decades have shown, family and local historians can be highly motivated contributors to digital resources. In addition to their significant transcription and collection efforts, many are willing to learn new technologies in order to improve or extend the capabilities of their projects. While their methods and motivations are different, grassroots projects face the same copyright and preservation challenges as institutionally led projects, and greater links to traditional museums, libraries and archives projects may be mutually beneficial. The vast amounts of shared effort and good will that
have gone into these community history resources should not only be preserved – they should be celebrated.

Notes
1. This was part of wider doctoral research investigating the impact of digital tools, resources and methods on the research, sharing and collaboration practices of historians.
2. Including various forms of e-mail listservs (discussion lists), newsgroups, web-based bulletin boards and forums. Mailing lists for grassroots projects such as FreeBMD date back to the late 1990s, providing rich insight into participant motivations, activities, challenges and co-ordination methods over time.
3. Defined here as a form of engagement with cultural heritage in which the public contribute towards a shared, significant goal or research area by undertaking tasks that cannot be done automatically, in an environment where the tasks and goals (or both) provide inherent rewards for participation (Ridge, 2014).
4. I imported the interview transcripts into the NVivo software tool and analysed them using thematic analysis, a method for ‘identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006).
5. Some interviewees were in overlapping categories, or moved between categories over time.
7. Unfortunately, while we corresponded briefly, Mr Dymond passed away before we could meet to discuss his work for local history societies.
8. Online communities of historians have developed their own patterns of interaction around information exchange, including 'look-up requests', which are requests for another researcher to look up information in a specific archive or resource. One grassroots project, Random Acts of Genealogical Kindness, was created to co-ordinate the impulse to help strangers with their research.
9. Participants in cultural heritage crowdsourcing projects similarly respond to altruistic, intrinsic and extrinsic motivations (Ridge, 2013).
10. Groups able to meet in person, or formed around a strong, shared goal or approach (such as FACHRS members, many of whom had studied a family and community history course at the UK’s Open University) may have an advantage over purely online, distant groups. Further research into the impact of these factors would enhance our understanding of these grassroots projects.

References


