The complexities of shared digital curation: a case study relating to Lesotho material held in the Royal Commonwealth Society collection at Cambridge University Library

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The demand for digitisation seems greater than ever. While there are enormous possibilities for digital repatriation and resource sharing, digitisation projects are far from easy solutions. Using a recently completed digitisation project focusing on Southern African material at Cambridge University Library as a case study, this paper provides practical insights into an attempt at shared digital curation, from the selection of material for digitisation through to opportunities for resource sharing. Challenges in the form of a lack of pre-project planning and institutional barriers are considered alongside examples of successful collaborative efforts with partners in Southern Africa. It is concluded that shared digital curation, particularly in the context of colonial-era collections, remains largely aspirational.

Keywords: digitisation, co-curation, digital repatriation, digital curation

1 Introduction

The terms co-curation and co-production abound in discussions among archival professionals in the United Kingdom. In recent years there has been an explosion of digitisation projects which seek to open up collections to the communities where material originated in the first instance, and which are framed and presented in the broad and ambitious lens of digital repatriation. Some recent examples include: the Building Shared Futures (2019) project between the University of Bristol and partners in Kenya; Digital Benin (Museum am Rothenbaum – Kulturen und Künste der Welt, 2020), an online platform to bring together collections from across the world to document the looting of artefacts from Benin Kingdom in the nineteenth century; the establishment of the Qatar Digital Library (2014), a partnership between the Qatar National Library and the British Library; a digital repatriation effort to recreate the dispersed library of a convent in Manila (Repatriating a lost archive of the Spanish Pacific, 2022); and many more in this vein. But what does co-curation and co-production look like in reality? Are these meaningful approaches to digital exchanges or mere buzz words? How does the digital open up possibilities and what are the limitations to these kinds of projects? What responsibilities do British archival institutions, particularly those which hold records of former colonies such as Lesotho, have to truly deliver on co-curation and co-production?

Using a recently completed digitisation project (Creating new connections: shared digital curation of the Royal Commonwealth Society (RCS) Southern African collections at Cambridge University Library) as a case study, with a particular emphasis on material relating to Lesotho, this paper will give practical insights on an attempt at co-curation or co-production. The paper will cover the selection of material for digitisation and the opportunities for digital resource sharing. It will address the complexities of engagement work carried out at a distance as well as the challenges of collaboration, balancing the expectations and needs of partners and institutions with starkly different priorities, funding bases, time pressures and digital infrastructure.

For the purpose of this paper, the term co-curation or shared curation is used to refer to collaborative efforts between an archival repository or recordkeeping institution and a group, or groups, with clear and obvious interests in a particular archival collection (Brewis et al., 2023). The group could be a research community with the knowledge and expertise to interrogate the collection or a local community with personal knowledge and lived experience pertaining to the collection. In an ideal scenario, shared digital curation brings these groups together to consider all aspects of digital archival curation from identifying and selecting material to determining conservation and digitisation priorities, and, ultimately, informing or challenging the presentation and interpretation of the material.

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2 Project background

The aim of Creating new connections, a two-year project funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York running from November 2021 to December 2023 at Cambridge University Library was to focus on shared digital curation as defined above. The project encompassed a fairly standard programme of conservation, digitisation and enhanced cataloguing to open up the Southern African material in the RCS collection to communities and researchers in Southern Africa where most, if not all, of the material originates. In part, shared digital curation was to be achieved through the creation of a dedicated digital collection hosted on Cambridge Digital Library. Another key element was to be the appointment of an Engagement Officer to develop relationships with groups or individuals in Southern Africa to promote engagement with the collection and to facilitate a more robust interrogation of the collection.

3 Challenges

3.1 Pre-project planning

Engagement around the project proved a particular challenge for a number of reasons. Most fundamentally, any shared curation project should involve partners from as early a stage as possible, ideally before an application for funding has even been submitted. Without this involvement in the framing of a project, shared curation can never be an equitable venture and, in the particular context of colonial-era collections, may actually serve to perpetuate Global North – Global South divisions.

In the context of Creating new connections the application was submitted in a relatively short timeframe with only the most cursory consultation of potential partners. Unfortunately, this scenario is all too familiar across cultural heritage institutions in the United Kingdom. There is seldom the appetite let alone the staff time or resources to support a period of scoping work prior to the submission of a funding application. Shared curation projects require sufficient time to plan and develop meaningful collaboration from the outset and the flexibility to accommodate different timescales and priorities of partners.

3.2 Selection of material for digitisation

For various logistical and administrative reasons, the Engagement Officer was only appointed in the second year of the project. Under the twin pressures of time and reporting requirements, the process of selecting and preparing material for digitisation began in practice before the engagement strand really took off. Indeed, the first tranche of digitisation was driven by the reporting requirements of the funder; that is, the University Library needed to show progress to the funder towards its stated outcome of digitising 7,000 images from the collection. Under these constraints, the first tranche was confined to photographic material from the RCS collection which could be easily digitised at bulk and which had no obvious copyright or provenance concerns.

By means of a practical example, which also includes Lesotho material, the decision was taken to digitise part of a collection of just over six hundred 35mm colour slides taken by the British diplomat John Ewart Marnham (1916-1985). A selection of slides from the wider Marnham collection relating to his time in the Caribbean had previously been digitised and it was relatively straight-forward to contact his estate for permission. As all the slides were of the same format, size and date, the digitisation process was similarly straight-forward. There was no element of shared curation in this decision-making. Whilst the 41 images documenting Marnham's visit to Lesotho at the tail-end of a longer tour of the High Commission Territories towards the end of 1965 provide a visual snapshot on the eve of independence, they were taken in a personal capacity. These slides do not really shed much light on Britain's diplomatic stance in this period other than confirming the places which Marnham visited during his tour. Other parts of the Southern African material in Marnham's collection also digitised as part of Creating new connections depict holidays, family visits and domestic life in Johannesburg. While these slides are not without value or research interest, in the context of a relatively small digitisation project, more accountable and equitable decision making could have been applied.

3.3 Institutional barriers

The library's internal procedures and patterns of working also played a disproportionate role in decision-making. In particular, the library was unable to supply low-resolution sample images of potential material to external partners to inform decision making. This is because the established procedure for digitisation involves staff-intensive conservation and copyright checks prior to the production of high-resolution images. Currently there is no halfway-house between fully digitised collection material and undigitised material. Consequently, it was difficult to engage with partners at a distance because quickly produced low-resolution scans of collection material could not be shared to facilitate discussion and debate.

4 Successes

4.1 Identifying research trends

By way of contrast, the experience and connections of the project's Engagement Officer was instrumental in challenging the library's standard approach to selecting material for digitisation. Through discussions with colleagues and researchers at the University of Cape Town, in particular the Archive and Public Culture (APC) Research Initiative, a number of current trends in scholarship and areas of future research interest emerged. In particular, vernacular language texts were identified as an area of current research (University of Cape Town, 2024a) alongside material relating to the pre-colonial history of the Kingdom of Lesotho (Morelli, 2021). As a direct result of these discussions, later tranches of digitisation moved away from photographic material and items which could be easily digitised according to format or items which were clearly out-of-copyright to concentrate on textual material for which there was a clear research interest. In the context of Lesotho, works by James Walton, Marion How and James Comyn Macgregor were prioritised, alongside other local publications which shed light on Lesotho's pre-colonial history.

4.2 Digitisation of the South African Native Affairs Commission report

In a similar vein, another priority identified for digitisation was the five-volume report and minutes of evidence of the South African Native Affairs Commission (SANAC) published in 1905 (Dubow, 1995; Kent and Rushovich, 2023). At well over 4,000 pages, the decision to digitise such a text-heavy item was in stark opposition to the visually stimulating material earlier selected, including the slide collection of John Ewart Marnham. The volumes were presented to the RCS by the daughter of the chair of the commission, Sir Godfrey Lagden (1851-1934), sometime Resident Commissioner in Basutoland and later a vice-president of the RCS. The commission was appointed by the British High Commissioner for South Africa, Alfred Milner, to examine and provide recommendations for what was referred to in the nomenclature of the time as 'the native question'.

The volumes of evidence give some access to the African voice which is so often silent or simply absent in official documents. To use Lesotho as an example, four interlocutors were consulted during a session in Maseru on 26th and 27th September 1904. The witnesses included George Hobson, a trader (SANAC vol. 4: 398-403), a member of the English Church Mission (SANAC vol. 4: 403-413), a member of the Paris Evangelical Mission Society (SANAC vol. 4: 413-426), and, significantly, the Paramount Chief Lerothodi [sic] (Lerotholi Letsie, 1891-1905), Jonathan Molapo and other leaders (SANAC vol. 4: 382-398). Through an interpreter, the group of chiefs were questioned on subjects as varied as the system of chieftainship, customary law, education, marriage and divorce, labour and property. Although an undoubtedly orchestrated interview, the voice of the Basuto leaders was captured at a pivotal moment in the history of race relations in southern Africa.

The SANAC volumes have now been digitised in full and can, in principle, be consulted online by anyone in the world with access to the internet (Kent, 2023). The material can be viewed, downloaded, and reused without the need to travel to the University Library. The purpose of Creating new connections, however, was not to be just another digitisation project to sit among 80-odd collections currently on Cambridge Digital Library. The project's stated aim was to think through what opening up the RCS collection really meant in practice in Southern Africa. It is far too simple to say that anyone with access to the internet anywhere in the world can access the digital collection. In the specific context of Southern Africa, there are many more factors to consider, not least the robustness and reliability of the internet connection and electricity supply, and the digital infrastructure required to access the digital library, and to view and download images as required. Access to the internet is largely through the medium of cell phones, and WhatsApp is by far and away the most common mode of communication. There is also the fundamental fact that communities in Southern Africa are still dependent on a digital platform set-up and based in the United Kingdom; in effect, still a whole step removed from the creation and dissemination of this digital material.

4.3 Collaboration with the University of Cape Town

One clear outcome of Creating new connections was to challenge the library's presumption that the current model of digitisation and reliance on the digital library was compatible with less well-resourced or differently resourced platforms, audiences and users. This was made apparent through collaborating with the Five Hundred Year Archive (FHYA) research initiative at the University of Cape Town. The FHYA is an initiative to bring together disparate collections on a digital platform to encourage research and the sharing of resources. Its work is predicated on the principle of enabling maximum searchability and maximum accessibility (University of Cape Town, 2024b). Whereas the library's digitisation efforts are concerned with producing high-resolution, IIIF compliant, and interoperable images, the FHYA is more concerned with the content and dissemination of archival collections irrespective of image quality.

Accordingly, images of the SANAC volumes were supplied to the FHYA at a lower resolution as searchable PDF files. The collection now sits on the FYHA's storytelling platform, EMANDULO, as an archival curation (Rushovich, 2023). The

collaboration with the FHYA was about more than simply sharing images and metadata; the FHYA, and its own research community, now has the agency to use and present this material on its own terms, for its own purposes. For example, they may do further work around other commissions held across Southern Africa to bring together other collections in one digital space or they may choose to enhance the existing metadata, or to do further work on some of the interlocutors.

5 Conclusion

Ultimately, creating new connections succeeded in creating a dedicated digital collection to open up a small fraction of the RCS Southern African material to a global audience. The project was in many ways a first-of-its-kind for Cambridge University Library, particularly in identifying and working with new partners in Southern Africa. While some progress was made on engagement, this was mostly confined to academic-to-academic collaboration. Due to the constraints of time and distance, funding mechanisms and reporting requirements, as well as the library's own institutional barriers, many avenues and potential partnerships remain unexplored. Communities and interested partners in Lesotho and Southern Africa more generally are still largely deprived of agency. For those unable to physically travel to Cambridge, access is dependent on a platform set-up, based and managed in the United Kingdom.

It is not enough to digitise material and present it online and to think our job is done; we need to think ever more critically about what we are digitising, why we are digitising and for whom we are digitising material. Shared digital curation remains largely aspirational. This project, and similar projects, are clearly only the first steps in building bridges with digital exchanges of knowledge. In a sentiment which will surely be recognised by all present at this conference, the work of the archivist, the librarian and the curator is never done. Such responsibility may weigh heavily but, collectively, we are working towards the same end: the preservation of knowledge and documentary heritage to tell the stories of nations and peoples.

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