The history and future of local history infrastructure:

Open access and Commodification of local history in the United States and the Anglosphere

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Abstract—This paper argues that constructing an open access infrastructure for the global sharing of local history information requires understanding the historical periodization of local history infrastructures across time and space. This paper presents such a periodization in the contexts of the United States and the Anglosphere. Local history infrastructure is composed of deliberately created institutions that make accessible the historical information of local, historical, organic communities. A key finding is that the global spread of information technology has enabled a business model to emerge for charging access to community information. This business model conflicts with the historical model wherein community memory is construed as a free, public good.

Keywords: information sharing, community memory, community informatics, public library, information history

1. Introduction

Recent research in communication history focuses on how a global infrastructure for information exchange spread across the globe during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, especially through the technology of the telegraph [1]. This paper demonstrates how a less systematic, but nonetheless critically important, infrastructure for the collection and dissemination of local history information developed over the last two hundred years, first among the elite and then among all sectors of society. As communications historians look back to the telegraph to understand contemporary digital communication, scholars interested in community informatics could examine how communities have documented themselves in the past to understand community memory in the informatics moment. This paper builds on the framework set by Williams and Durrance [2], which uses the history of public librarianship to understand present community informatics. This history's importance comes from the realization that extant local history infrastructure faces serious stresses from the increasing commodification of local history information by companies, governments, and tourism agencies, which have found and exploited a business model for selling to people digitized local history information [3, 4]. In the conflict between commodification and open access for information exchange, understanding how local history infrastructure has developed in the United States, and elsewhere, can help us build a sustainable open access model not only for local history information sharing and exchange, but for other types of information exchange.

2. Definitions

In this paper "local history infrastructure" is being defined as deliberate, institutionalized efforts to preserve and share with others the information sources of a locality's history. Historically this infrastructure can be categorized as being made up of: a) government-funded [23], b) government autonomous [26], or c) hybrid [21]. A fourth category has emerged largely in the last twenty years, the for-profit model [3]. See table 1 for a chart of these categories and examples of types. Although this paper looks primarily at how this infrastructure developed in the United States of America, mention is also made as to how different infrastructures have developed in other national contexts in the Anglosphere (predominantly English-speaking countries). The pervasive reach of information technology has made all digital local history simultaneously global history, yet the historical infrastructure that took two centuries to emerge has not yet come to grips with these revolutionary implications for information exchange.

3. Local History Infrastructure in the U.S.A.

3.1. Periodization

Although there is a relatively sizable secondary literature on the history of individual local history collections [5], there has been much less written on the over-arching infrastructure within which these different collections

Table 1. Categories of Local History Infrastructures

Category Type	Infrastructure Example
Government-Funded	Public libraries
Government Autonomous	Independent Historical Societies
Hybrid	Historical Societies in Public Libraries
For-Profit	Ancestry.com

Table 2. Periodization of Local History Infrastructures

Movement	Origin	Period Emerged	Institutional Example
Independent Historical Society	New England	ca. 1798-1830	Mass. Historical Society
Public Historical Society	Midwest	ca. 1850-1900	Wis. Historical Society
Public Library – Central Library	Large cities	ca. 1870s and after	N.Y. Public Library
Public Library - Branch/Rural	No specific origin	ca. 1970s	Austin History Center
University Collection	Land-grant institutions	1960s/1970s	University of Louisville
Digital History	No specific origin	ca. early 1990s	USGenNet.org

emerged, and how that infrastructure developed and spread across space and time. Nonetheless, a few trends can be discerned from the histories that have been written, visualized in table 2. These trends will be surveyed in this section of this paper.

3.2. Historical Societies

Independent historical societies emerged in the early nineteenth century in the New England (Northeastern) United States out of a desire among the landed elite to preserve the papers of the American revolutionary generation. A characteristic that united these early historical societies, regardless of location, was there private nature - they were open only to members during their early years. Relying on funding from their members to stay open, these historical societies were largely the tools of elite hobby antiquarians who felt local history was their responsibility and right. Over the years these early independent historical societies have shed their elite past, yet most, especially in the New England region, remain today entirely privately supported and controlled [6].

A break with this trend occurred in the Upper Midwest shortly before the Civil War (1861). State historical societies in Wisconsin, Minnesota and Iowa became officially part of the state apparatus, with the model then spreading elsewhere across the country and down to the local community level. Various reasons have been given for this shift from private to government supported local history infrastructure: 1) the frontier states were too new to have the landed elites necessary to support private historical societies [7], 2) historical societies were seen as tools that could tie together a heterogeneous mixture of different immigrant groups – grounding them in a historical narrative that would imagine a unified, harmonious community into the future [8], and 3) progressive politics in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century viewed the East Coast elitism of private historical societies with disdain. The new Westerners saw themselves as egalitarians and democrats – who because of this philosophy wanted to make historical societies public institutions [9]. Regardless of the reasons, when the United States celebrated its first Centennial in 1876 patriotic fervor grounded in the locality lead to a large-scale development of public historical societies across the nation [11]. Even when not receiving government funds, state and local historical societies have maintained to the present a public service orientation rooted in the model established in the Midwest during the mid-nineteenth century.

Local historical societies were incorporated into a national framework only during the 1930s with the establishment of the United States National Archives and the related Historical Records Survey. The Historical Records Survey focused national attention on records not only of local governments, but also of churches, businesses and, less frequently, individuals [10]. The 1930s were a time of renewed interest in American local culture. Michael Kammen has argued that the heavy interest of the federal government in funding folklore and local histories as part of its Works Progress Administration (WPA) caused state and local historical societies to become increasingly significant at the national level [11]. As the federal government became more ubiquitous and pervasive in the U.S., it paradoxically both challenged regional differences and simultaneously supported local history as part of official, national policy.

3.3. Public Libraries

The public historical society movement influenced the development of local history collections in new public libraries in large cities during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Reuben Thwaites, director of the Wisconsin Historical Society, became the president of the American Library Association (ALA) at the turn of the century [10]. Thwaites imagined and disseminated the vision a historical society that existed to serve the public – a philosophy that brought him into the public library movement. These public library local history collections emerged first and strongest within central urban libraries. The New York Main Public Library was one of the earliest and largest builders of local history collections in public libraries. Local history collections were found less frequently in smaller towns and branch libraries.

Dee Garrison has documented how the first generation of public library leaders in the United States saw themselves first as historians [12]. This historical sentiment lead the first generation of library leaders to appeal to new public librarians to became the collectors of their town's history, with frequent discussions on local history collecting during the first meetings of the ALA [13]. This historical sentiment among librarians was to a great degree extinguished by the second generation of library leaders, such as Melvin Dewey, who in the march

for efficiency and order saw little appeal in the dis-ordered antiquarian universe of local history and local historians [12].

A resurgence of interest in local history collecting in public libraries emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. This latter movement was (and is) much more democratic in character, with local history collections emerging in branch and rural libraries across the United States. A cultural interest in local and family history emerged in this time period as Americans searched for roots in families and communities [11]. The realization that extant resources in large urban libraries were not engaging audiences led to the creation of community information files [2], which in some cases became the basis of local history collections [36]. Public libraries were, in part, able to meet this groundswell of interest in local and family history with the support of federal funds by agencies like the National Endowment for the Humanities [14]. However, much of the work of creating and maintaining these local history collections was (and is) done entirely by a committed group of volunteers in communities across the nation. In numerous towns and cities, rather than officially funding a local history collection, public libraries offer to host an independent local historical society within the public library itself [15].

3.3. College/University Local History Collections

Beginning in the 1960s, local history collections emerged in a number of colleges and universities, usually in those with land-grant missions. These collections fit within the land-grant mission to support not only the academic community, but also the civic community of colleges and universities [17]. This trend grew, also, out of changing conceptualizations of history within the academy. As social, urban and cultural history replaced economic, political and military history as the central focus of history departments across the nation local history collections developed to support this new scholarship [16].

3.4. Digital Local History Collections

The most recent development in local history infrastructure is collaborative digitization, which transcends conventional boundaries. Perennially difficult to catalog, and thus to access, local history collections have been given more robust description and access through the use of digital technologies. Furthermore, the early adopters of this technology were not institutionalized, government-funded libraries or historical societies, but rather amateur historians and amateur collectors. Cohen and Rosenzweig note that:

> Virtually every historical archive, historical museum, historical society, historic house, and historic site – even the very smallest – has its own website. So does just about every reenactment group, genealogical society, and body of historical enthusiasts. [18]

These grassroots initiatives have not only found new ways to broadcast and share their local history information, they have also found ways to come together across the nation, and indeed, around the world, to support their digital initiatives. Groups such as the USGenWeb Project, the Genealogy Trails History Group, and USGenNet have created free, national/global networks that draw on volunteer energy to digitally document communities across the United States in support of family and local history research [19].

Institutional local history collections have begun to catch up to this grassroots movement with financial support from the Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS). The IMLS has increasingly allocated funds for state libraries to support the digitization of local history collections in public libraries, museums and historical societies and aggregate these collections into open-access, state-wide networks [20]. These government projects have also begun to address digital inequalities in communities by providing funding to schools and other community centers to digitize and share their histories [21].

A third trend in digital local history infrastructure is the commodification of local history information. Tapping into the grassroots desire to access and discover local and family history, corporations such as Ancestry.com and Footnote.com have begun charging access to their digital collections of local history. Ancestry.com alone currently has over 1.5 million paid subscribers [22]. It is unclear at this point which of these four models (grassroots, government, corporate, or hybrid) will emerge as the predominant model for sharing and accessing local history information in the United States in the twenty-first century.

4. Local History Infrastructure in the Anglosphere

To understand the past and future of local history infrastructure and information sharing, we can learn from cross-national comparison [23]. This section will provide an overview of recent trends in local history infrastructure in Anglosphere nations, including the United Kingdom, Canada, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand. In many respects these commonwealth nations have quite similar local history infrastructures, with important national differences. What unites these countries is a good-faith effort by central governments over the last 15 years to provide financial and professional support to grassroots local history movements. Table 3 shows how this hybrid model of government support and local control emerged in these different contexts. Although individuals in these different countries all use the term "community archives," their use of this term differs in different national contexts.

4.1. United Kingdom

Of all the Anglosphere nations, the United Kingdom has arguably the most robust government-supported local

Table 3. Government/Grassroots Local History Infrastructures in the Anglosphere

County	Movement Title	Period Emerged	Rationale
United Kingdom	Community Archives	ca. early 2000s	Multicultural, immigrant society
Canada	Total Archives	ca. 1960s	Archives as a right for all/Indigenous heritage
South Africa	Post-Apartheid Community Archives	ca. 1998	Repression of Black/Colored South Africans by mainstream archives
Australia/New Zealand	Community Archives	ca. early 2000s	Archives as a right for all/Indigenous heritage

history infrastructure. Peter H. Reid, a faculty member of Information Management at Robert Gordon University, writes on the development of this infrastructure:

> Over the last forty years the image of local studies departments has been heightened through current awareness schemes, through active involvement with all types of community organisations, through strenuous marketing activities and, not least, through the work of the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals' Local Studies Group [24].

The local history infrastructure in the United Kingdom has flourished through a combination of government support, professional support (by librarians and archivists) and aggressive outreach to community organizations interested in the history of their communities. The systematic development of this infrastructure owed much to the ways in which British libraries and archives re-developed and re-created themselves as part of the general post-World War II redevelopment activities [25].

A second recent development in local history infrastructure in the United Kingdom comes in the form of what have become known as community archives. In the U.K. community archives have become associated especially with the local history collections of marginalized populations (often immigrants and labor groups), who have developed their own archives in response to feelings of alienation from mainstream repositories [26]. Many of these community archives either exist entirely online, or have a strong virtual component to their work [27]. Community archives have also enjoyed financial support from the U.K.'s Heritage Lottery funds, which has made a priority of supporting the U.K.'s increasingly diverse heritage. However, there is concern that a change in national leadership could cause these funds to either disappear or become re-allocated to different programs [28], which may threaten the future of these agencies.

4.2. Canada

In Canada local history collections have been similarly well supported by the central government since World War II. This support increased substantially in the 1960s when the leadership of the National Archives came under Hugh Taylor, who envisioned the archives of the future

as free, public and inclusive in how they document the stories of communities and support community identity [29]. In Canada there is a sense that, as Hugh Taylor points out, "community archives are going to proliferate as the local repositories of the future" [30]. Taylor coined the term "total archives" to describe the state's mission to provide financial support to preserving all of Canada's diverse community histories. Taylor elaborates on what makes community archives so appealing at the grassroots level:

> in the community archives ... all can feel and experience a dynamic heritage experience in which they can be personally involved, and which will be passed down to their descendants [29].

As this language suggests, official policy in Canada has been to support the grassroots energy to create and preserve engaging local history collections.

4.3. South Africa

In post-apartheid South Africa, archivists immediately latched onto the idea of community archives as an antidote to the repressive and intimidating legacy of government archives. A special issue on community archives in the South African archives journal in 1998 lead to a large change in how the archival community in that nation connects to communities and marginalized populations in preserving and sharing their histories [30]. Following that publication, academics, professionals and community activists have continued to revolutionize the extant local history infrastructure to reflect the post-apartheid reality.

4.4. New Zealand/Australia

The recent history of local history infrastructure in Australia and New Zealand has focused on trying to find ways to include diverse indigenous voices in both the records of communities and of the nations [31]. There is also evidence that digital technology has been incorporated into this infrastructure in innovative ways. For example Heap and Pymm report on how they use digital technology to find new ways to connect institutional, text-heavy local history collections to indigenous populations with more orally-oriented ways of preserving community memory [32].

5. Conclusion: Towards a Global Local History Infrastructure

Over the last ten years individuals both inside and outside of the academy have observed how local history has gone global. On the academic side, Wright [33] and Schäfer [34], among others, have shown how the histories of small communities can be understood in the framework of global history. On the public side, Reid [24] and Heinlein [35] show how digitized local history information has created a group of family historians

accessing and sharing local history information from around the globe.

Online, multi-national, for-profit aggregators have been able to operate at a scale that individual nations and communities have not, thus far, been able to reach. There is a very real risk that the local history infrastructure of the future will be held by multi-national corporations if a concerted and organized response to this trend does not emerge from the public information community that can match the scale of the corporations. Such large-scale, grassroots networks have emerged in the United States through genealogists coming together to build collaborative networks built on local history information. Elsewhere, in the United Kingdom, community archives of Diaspora communities have been able to create global connections between local immigrant communities and their communities of origin. Furthermore, these initiatives have often been able to receive some level of governmental support.

This brief survey has shown that across time and space, the local history infrastructure, to operate as a public good, has typically relied on a combination of national and/or state funding and support (but not national control), coupled with grassroots labor, support and decision-making. We argue that this periodiziation provides the historical context and consciousness necessary to understand what is at stake and what factors are in play in the construction and implementation of digital infrastructures for open access information and knowledge sharing and exchange of local history information.

6. Acknowledgment

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