

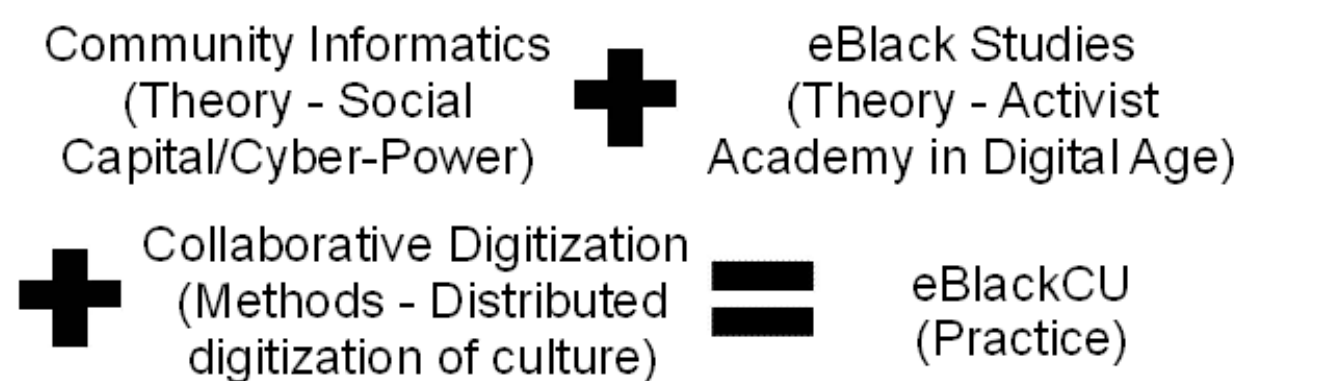
eBlackChampaign-Urbana: Community Informatics meets Data Curation

Noah Lenstra, Certificate of Advanced Study (C.A.S.) student
Graduate School of Library and Information Science, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Introduction

eBlack Champaign-Urbana is a campus-community collaborative that digitizes, aggregates and adds-value to historical information on the African-American experience in Champaign-Urbana. Our goals are to find new ways to connect this information to both community and academic research and information needs. This project fits within citizen curation/citizen science (Hand, 2010) -- the curation of data not only by and for academic researchers, but also by and for citizens and communities, both for their own purposes and for scholarly needs.

Literature Review



This project is rooted in three movements: 1) collaborative digitization – distributed digitization/preservation of local history data (Bromage, 2010; Halbert, 2009); 2) community informatics – the interaction between local communities and information technologies (Williams & Durrance, 2010); and 3) eBlackStudies – a disciplinary movement in African-American studies from ideology to information, based on the digitization of the African-American experience (Alkalimat, 2000). These movements have developed relatively independent of each other; bringing them together has the potential to enrich all three: The theories of social capital and cyber-power help us understand how and why communities curate their own data as that data feeds into African-American Studies scholarship. Collaborative digitization provides the methodologies to support this cycle.

eBlackCU in Practice = Variables and Attempts to Measure

With modest funding from the Illinois' Public Engagement Office, the project team investigated these issues through the creation of a digital library of local African-American history drawing on dispersed resources in both public and private repositories, using the labor of both University students and citizen curators, and both University and community infrastructure. The temporal model underlying this development is the actual-virtual-actual cycle theorized by Alkalimat and Williams (2008) in which actual communities use digital technology to make actual change in their physical lives in an iterative cycle. This model can be visualized in the following table - we digitally unite data, community, University to make actual change.

| | Community | Data | University |
|---------|-------------|--------------------|---------------------|
| Actual | Recruitment | Archives | Atomized projects |
| Virtual | Internship | Digital Library | Digital aggregation |
| Actual | Unity | Print Publications | Unity |

- The variables involved in measuring this project include (D=dependent) (I=independent):
- (D) African-Americans' independent digital curation of their historical information
 - (D) Local repositories' curation of African-American information
 - (D) University of Illinois engagement with local African-American community
 - (D) African-Americans' participation in technology infrastructure development
 - (I) Digitization of data on local African-American history by eBlackCU
 - (I) Paid and voluntary involvement of citizen curators in digital library creation
 - (I) \$30 million broadband network being built in historical Afro-Am neighborhood

- The variables were measured by:
- Assessment of online self-representation of local African-Americans (qualitative)
 - Mining Analytics of usage of the eBlackCU library over time (quantitative)
 - Audio-visual record of two-day Campus-Community Symposium, featuring discussions of technology and campus-community engagement (qualitative)
 - Assessing representations of eBlackCU from multiple perspectives: local media, project records, church records, digital and in-person feedback (qualitative)
 - Exit Interviews and ethnographic reports from eBlackCU interns (qualitative)

Results and Discussion

Facebook as Enabler and Limit



In the course of developing eBlackCU it became clear that the default platform for digital curation of local African-American history by local African-Americans was Facebook - where images of obituaries, historic photographs, buildings, links and discussions of historical topics could be found. This dependence on Facebook as a curation platform poses many issues, illustrated by the following example: A middle aged woman who regularly posts to Facebook photographs of community events heard about eBlackCU and successfully found information in the library on her late father, a local minister and activist. After contacting us, we encouraged her to add to the library her personal archives documenting her father's accomplishments. We expected her to deposit the digitized data using the "Contribute" feature on eBlackCU, which enables all to add to the digital library. Instead she uploaded the documentation to Facebook (see above), which we then downloaded and re-uploaded to the eBlackCU library. The struggle is to move the local community from the limited digital curation offered by corporate platforms such as Facebook to the rich, free curation tools being developed and implemented in eBlackCU and other University digital curation platforms with citizen curation components.

Youth as Citizen Curators: the Spiders Program
To address this dilemma, the eBlackCU team made a financial investment in the local community by hiring seven African-American high school and community college students to serve as Spiders: The thesis being that youth would be more receptive to move beyond the surface curation tools of Facebook to the underlying code involved in real digital curation for long-term preservation and access throughout the data life-cycle.



Citizen Curators at work at Salem Baptist Church Community Technology Center: the first generation of the eBlackCU Spiders. (Photo by Patricia Rosario)

Future Work

Our goal is to get the Spiders independent of the University through integration into community institutions supported by bonding social capital, such as churches, voluntary school and scouting groups. Through this integration we hope to positively change the grassroots digital curation of local history information in communities, first in the experimental case of Champaign-Urbana and second throughout the country through the professional education of archivists and librarians in I-Schools. In addition, through eBlackStudies, faculty and students can use the collaboratively-curated digital data to inform scholarship and policy relating to actual, historical African-American communities. In conclusion, we encourage digital curation projects with citizen curation projects to consider the theories and methods being used in this project to enable citizen curation projects to enrich both academic scholarship and self-sustaining, independent community digital curation of community information.

Acknowledgments

This research would not be possible without the financial support from the Office of the Vice Chancellor for Public Engagement at the University of Illinois; or the scholarly support and advice from the Community Informatics Research Lab, Graduate School of Library and Information Science, under the direction of Kate Williams and Abdul Alkalimat. Thanks are also due to community partners – Early American Museum, Champaign County Forest Preserve District; Champaign County Historical Archives, Urbana Free Library; Salem Baptist Church; and the Urbana School District.

References

Alkalimat, A. (2000). eBlack studies: A twenty-first-century challenge; Alkalimat, A. and Williams K. (2008). Cyberpower, in Liberating Voices!; Bromage, S. (2010). Benedict Arnold Slept Here: New Life for Local History On-line and In the Community; Halbert, M. (2009). Comparison of Strategies and Policies for Building Distributed Digital Preservation Infrastructure; Hand, E. (2010). People Power, in *Nature*; Williams, K., and Durrance, Joan C. (2009). Community Informatics.