Article

Desire Paths in the Information Landscape

Victoria Van Hyning, M. A. Jones, and Travis Wagner

ABSTRACT

Libraries and archives serve so many different users who come to information institutions with various perspectives, needs, experiences, and desires around accessing physical or digital collections. While our users may find what they are looking for immediately, many have to beat their own paths through complex systems and metadata that doesn't align with their needs. Their search strategies may leave digital "desire paths"–alternative routes through the information landscape that can show us how to better meet their needs. This article covers three scenarios where users' desire paths can be seen or where gaps around user experience can be better addressed. Through an analysis of institutional accessibility statements, queer archival experiences, and the affordances of volunteer crowdsourcing, the authors investigate desire paths in the information landscape and what practitioners and scholars can learn from them. This article also takes a highly experimental approach to scholarly collaboration, by revealing rather than concealing our writing process through the use of different fonts to represent the different makers of this piece: we preserve our comments, feedback, corrections, discussions, and the evolving perspectives of the authors, reviewers, and editors. Artifacts of collaboration are often invisible and obscure the many kinds of work and thinking that goes into a piece of writing. By making this process visible, we make our shared desire path visible to you, dear reader, and invite you to walk it, too.

Author-Generated Keywords: Accessibility, digital curation, community, crowdsourcing, queer theory

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Desire Paths in the Information Landscape[1]

Victoria Van Hyning (FurbyHater), Mace A. Jones (TopHat), and Travis Wagner (Obsoloser)[2]

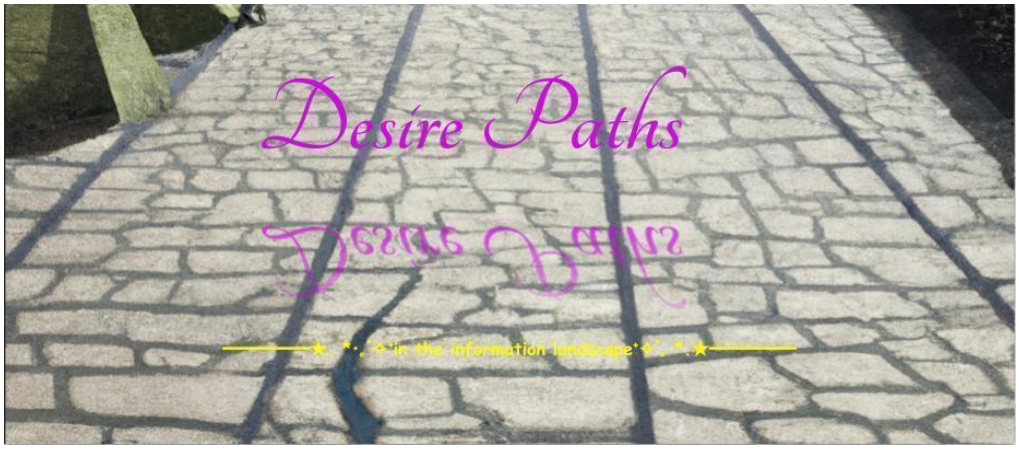

Image 1: *Title image for Desire Paths paper.* This is not a good representation of the concept of desire paths that we explore in this paper, but we have left it here precisely to draw attention to the iterative nature of our scholarly work. Confused? Keep reading.

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[1] Comment from FurbyHater to Team: what do you think of this title TopHat and Obsoloser? We talked today about the concept of desire paths in urban and natural landscapes--the physical paths people make to achieve a goal not foreseen by urban planners, or not afforded or needed in a natural landscape until something changes or the needs of the animals and the humans passing through the landscape changes, and they forge a new path. I heard about this while at the ALA conference in Chicago--I can't remember who introduced me to the idea, but it's been in my head since. All of our pieces in this article speak to different desire paths through information landscapes.

[2] The authors created something together that would fundamentally not have been possible without any one person. We are inspired to adopt a shared-first author framework by Amy Lapidow and Paige Scudder, "Shared First Authorship," *Journal of the Medical Library Association* 107, no. 4 (2019): 618-620, https://doi.org/10.5195/jmla.2019.700.

Orientation/*Welcome To Our Page*[3]*/ what is this weird thing you're looking at?--> "METHODS"*

This article looks weird. It is meant to look weird. This article is a collaborative, affective, and experimental approach to co-research and co-writing about digital cultural heritage. In order to share with readers the collaborative and affective elements of our processes, we have decided to leave traces of our collaborative writing in this document, through the use of different fonts, comments, suggestions, exhortations, corrections, etc. We hope that this visual explosion helps to peel back some of the realities of research and writing that are typically obscured by the publishing conventions in most scholarly literature. We have chosen to represent the process of our collaboration using different fonts for each author's comments and conversations with each other, and to capture the substantive comments and advice of our editors and copy editors throughout the document.[4] We originally wrote this paper under the pseudonyms **TopHat (aka Mace Jones)**, Obsoloser (aka Travis Wagner), and *FurbyHater (aka Victoria Van Hyning)* as a joke on *Victoria (FurbyHater)* by Travis (Obsoloser)--author identities did ***not actually*** need to be redacted. *FurbyHater magnanimously concedes and will not make everyone change their pseudonyms to their real names*). In addition to distinct fonts for each author, we represent all four members of the editorial team as Journal Editor or JE (Leah Duncan, Rachel Starry, and copy editors bri watson and Emily Zinger) with a single font. We are immensely grateful to the Journal Editors for allowing us to write in this way! We also sometimes directly invoke our readers *(yeah, you)* with a distinct font. (Basically this will be just like reading that one Italo Calvino novel you definitely *have* read when people ask about it at parties. Or as *we* joked at the onset of this project, the whole thing is going to have a real *House of Leaves* quality about it.) The different fonts concept was **TopHat's idea**: (I think

[3] This art was made with a combination of Google Drawings and the following DALL-E prompt: "Create a heavily trodden dirt pathway in an urban city in the style of the computer game Myst graphics. Make the image look like it is in a Geocities home page." The design was then edited by Obsoloser. JEs to Obsoloser: I love the image, but the yellow subtitle is almost impossible to read. Weird that it didn't make the path dirt, but more cobblestone. Also, the pink script is super hard to read. Obsoloser to JEs: I agree though I am keeping it as illegible, in response to the reality that many early webpages had some variation of this design (often including animated GIFs) which make it important to provide some degree of alt-text or descriptive work.

[4] This sentence was moved up per the advice of our copyeditors bri watson and Emily Zinger: JE to OL: "Consider moving this sentence to the top, even before the title, like a disclaimer. It's very disorienting to be thrown straight into the footnotes just reading the title without knowing the premise and then only getting to the explanation after reading a full page."

we should have a way that we denote our voices in the text, both in our sections and our responses to each other. I know we were thinking about using comments, which is great, but what if we also had fonts or bolded/italicized/underlined our voices in the text as well for each of our individual voices?) We've chosen fonts and colors that roughly correspond to the thoughts, feelings, and vibes of the authors.

The result of our different fonts and the iterative process of this paper means that you will see a lovely mess of thoughts between the authors as we independently and collaboratively work through our own case studies. To understand these case studies and their role and impact on speculating about a more equitable and inclusive future, we have chosen to each approach a section of the paper in an individual way that is then developed and connected through affective reading and discourse, which we have also decided to include in the final text of the paper itself. This paper is an examination of collaborative research and writing that reveals the speculative, disjointed, and at times contradictory, but ultimately generative, processes of knowledge co-creation. (JE to TH: like what you're doing here a lot, but I think it can be more effective. Something like: This paper is in itself a desire path, emerging from our collaborative and iterative footfalls through the writing process, revealing the speculative, disjointed, and at times....) It represents the three of us walking our own desire paths, signposting the trails we walk through collaboration and iteration, successes and failures. Our paths are walked through disjointed and inconsistent navigation, speculating on what an inclusive future for digital libraries and archives might encompass. We are not only speculating about our cases here, but about new ways to engage in collaborative scholarship, and making collaboration visible as part of the end result. Our intentional choice to approach this paper with a feminist and affective methodology presents part of our own desire paths in scholarship, demonstrating new ways to develop scholarly communication. (FH to TH: Yesssss! I love this. Spot on.)

INTRODUCTION

This piece reveals the iterative and interactive process of developing, editing, and revising an academic paper. It is also an exploration of three kinds of desire paths in the information landscape (discussed below), that we navigate ourselves as users and scholars. As part of our reflective process, we noticed the concept of "desire paths" emerge in each of our pieces, guiding our speculations. A "desire path" or "desire line" is a concept applied (JE: "coined?") by landscape architects to denote alternative routes created by people and/or animals moving through a designed landscape, such as a park, usually for the purpose of getting from point A to point B faster. Though some designers try to shut down these alternatives (JE: how? by actively closing them off with bollards, walls, or chains) others actively embrace them as a means of improving a system or space. Significant examples of desire paths that have reshaped the formal structures of

an environment include the re-pathing of Central Park and the Chicago Transportation Network in the 1950s.[5] The term and phenomenon is sufficiently well-known to have its own active Flickr collection since 2006, with 554 users sharing 736 images of desire paths around the world (at time of writing, summer 2023).[6] Myhill (JE: understands desire paths as a useful metaphor for human interactions with the physical world and everyday tools.) He writes, "Expressions of human purpose or desire are all around us, not just available as muddy tracks across open spaces. The urban planning concept of desire lines provides such a perfect expression of human desired purpose that it seems like a worthy concept to explore elsewhere".[7] Myhill also extends the concept from urban planning, applying it to signs of wear on physical objects, such as cooktops (hobs) and online user behavior conveyed visually by heatmaps of website clicks. He applies the concept to how wear on our bodies, for example Repetitive Strain Injury (RSI), can prompt us to seek out alternatives in the form of ergonomic keyboards. Designer Don Norman, whose work is widely applied in Human Computer Interaction, argues that wise designers attend to desire paths and use them to guide design changes. Moreover, he argues that "a relatively simple way to simplify [systems and designs] is to use the trails left behind by people's actual behavior to design systems that support their desires."[8] (JE: I love all the info here, I'm just looking for a bit more signposting to stitch everything together. Perhaps add one more sentence here telling us what we should glean from this first paragraph. Also, how do your 3 case studies ultimately connect?) Each author offers a case study below that walks a different desire path, demonstrating opportunities for representation and inclusion and imagining what a future for digital cultural heritage might look like.

Practitioners and scholars in a variety of disciplines have fruitfully developed theories of desire paths for other scholarly and practical domains. Sociologist Laura Nichols offers a theory and framework for what she calls "social desire paths," arguing that "just as desire paths in the landscape point to the needs and desires of individuals, social desire paths can similarly help us understand the paths that people have created to get around current limitations in social structures or the need for new structures".[9] Her two case studies include an analysis of the needs of unhoused people who ride an all-night bus rather than access a shelter or motel; and people who create co-housing communities in spite of various legal and national contexts that prohibit cohabitation or

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[5] Elizabeth Barlow Rogers, *Rebuilding Central Park: A Management and Restoration Plan* (New York: MIT Press, 1987).

[6] "Desire_paths," Flickr Commons, accessed April 3, 2024. https://www.flickr.com/groups/desire_paths/.

[7] Carl Myhill, "Commercial Success by Looking for Desire Lines." In *Computer Human Interaction*, ed. Masood Masoodian, Steve Jones, and Bill Rogers (Heidelberg: Springer Berlin, 2004): 303.

[8] Don Norman, *Living with Complexity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010): 130.

[9] Laura Nichols, "Social Desire Paths: A New Theoretical Concept to Increase the Usability of Social Science Research in Society," *Theory and Society* 43, no. 6 (November 1, 2014): 647–65. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-014-9234-3.

pooling of resources to different degrees. In both instances, rather than see user behavior as deviant and therefore something that users should alter, she avers that we must understand the desires and needs that cause people to carve out alternative paths in order to improve public services, legal systems, and the design of physical and virtual spaces. Ninette Rothmüler uses the term "desire pathing" to mean a:

> Social activity…based in individual ways of meaning making and being in the world, and it is strongly tied with biographical desires as they relate to one's past and one's desired or imagined futures. In this sense, desire pathing is moving within relationship to memories, imagined futures, and thus to one's biography.[10]

Through cases of accessibility and design, queer archives and access, and cultural heritage crowdsourcing, we explore a range of desire paths in the digital information landscape that can and should be studied by digital librarians as sources for improving core services for users at their institutions and beyond. As we discovered during our own collaborative writing journey (detailed in the next section) desire paths are not always visible–they emerge through engagement and discussion, through asking how, why, and what if? (JE to authors: LOVE LOVE LOVE. Like I said above, I think there is a little work that can be done to smooth this intro out, but overall everything you've done to more clearly develop your ideas here is totally working for me.)

[10] Ninette Rothmüller, "Turfing, Desire Pathing, and Modes of Remembrance And Creative Citizenship Under Surveillance: Visuals Traveling Space—movement Traveling Time" *Event Management* 23, no. 2 (2019): 257-258, https://doi.org/10.3727/152599518X15403853721196

Desiring Pathways to Access, by TopHat

Image 2. *Title Image for TopHat section, "Desiring Pathways to Access"*

My experience with inaccessible websites and barriers to access began as an undergraduate and graduate student of English literature. I was, like many students, fascinated by the opportunity to physically handle rare books and manuscripts in a closed archival setting. I realized immediately that the information I could gather about those objects was irreplaceable. The relationship between my senses and the object was a necessary one for understanding. When I first took a student position in an archive's special collection, I was excited by the ability to work with books and manuscripts I had previously only been able to access online. My time in this archive introduced me to cultural heritage work, and to the very real needs of disabled community members and researchers who wished to also encounter the collections. After many discussions with my mentor in the archives and with patrons with a variety of physical and print access needs, I was motivated to pursue work supporting disability needs in archives.

Digital discovery and information access were severely limited for folks using assistive technology to access online library and archival catalogs. This work has motivated me to continue to learn from disabled folks to improve their experience using digital libraries and archives. Moves towards the digital were often problematic for print-disabled folks. The reliance on digital platforms and the need to continuously adapt and improve software and systems threatens accessibility, as "potential causes of future inaccessibility of collections include physical deterioration, a lack of old-generation technological know-how, and the replacement of hardware and software systems due to

obsolescence."[11] While technical solutions to inaccessibility are needed, how institutions and organizations approach accessibility is also essential for digital access in libraries and archives. Listening to the diverse voices of disabled folks in our institutional communities and beyond is vital, as "listening makes public that more than one point of view exists on disability support even while these different perspectives are not necessarily reconcilable."[12]

Libraries and archives have been radical forces for sharing information with broad groups of people. They have positioned themselves as stores of knowledge for their patrons and communities. In my own life, libraries have been safe spaces where a passion for learning and exploring is recklessly enabled. But that radical mission, information in the possession of as many people that want it, is still in jeopardy *(OL: and not always responded to equitably).* Professionals and organizations working to transition towards a digital future recognize that this move improves access for many folks. This digital turn, decades in the making now, inevitably makes some professional and institutional assumptions about who needs information and how they might access increasingly screen-dependent and internet-dependent resources. (JE to TH: Who makes the assumptions? Anyone who believes the digital is inherently better? Or are the assumptions evident in specific strategies for developing this transition to a digital future?)

We should be speculating about these futures for disability access and inclusivity informed by the pronounced perspectives of disabled patrons and users. Any speculation about such futures should not be done without those voices. ~~Through studies and surveys, library and archival users have made their concerns about digital collections known.~~(OL: We could simply state that we are awash in quantitative proof that cultural heritage institutions are failing to be inclusive (and maybe provide some references?)) Per an observation by the JE, a set of references to respond to Obsoloser's suggestions to "provide some references" might include the recent *First Monday* special issue on disability. While disabled individuals have been a part of that conversation, access to digital libraries and archives is still limited for many disabled individuals.[13] What do we mean when we speculate about digital curation for libraries and archives in light of disability and access? What does the future of access to digital libraries and archival materials look like for disabled people? (OL to TH: I think we can all agree it

[11] Lara Corona, "Digitalization: An Overview of the Advantages and Disadvantages," in *Aspects of Digital Libraries - Digitization, Standards, Open Access, Repositories and User's Skills*, ed. Liat Klain Gabbay (London: IntechOpen, 2023), 1-19, doi: 10.5772/intechopen.1002006, https://www.intechopen.com/online-first/1149791.

[12] Cate Thill, "Listening for Policy Change: How the Voices of Disabled People Shaped Australia's National Disability Insurance Scheme," *Disability & Society* 30, no. 1 (2014): 21, https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2014.987220.

[13] Gracen Brilmyer and Crystal Lee, "Terms of use: Crip legibility in information systems," *First Monday* 28, no. 1-2 (2023), https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v28i1.12935.

is inherently collaborative right? I think it would have to be collaborative and institutions should strive to be accomplices in accommodating/accommodation. Should be interesting how it evolves.) How does the evolving understanding of concepts of access change the ways institutions prioritize disabled access in policy and practice? Exploring the current landscape of digital curation informs our shared library and archival futures.

The ways libraries and archives try to accommodate folks with accessibility needs can be inconsistent. They often try to comply with standards instead of needs. Institutions may couch their public accessibility policies, such as a print-disability access policy, in terms of complying with the law. The style of these policies is often neutral in voice, a stock guarantee of compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) or WCAG 2.1 standards. (FH: Given how loaded "neutral" is in other LAM contexts, maybe unpack this here? Can you make a parallel point about the impossibility of neutrality? Or how attempts at neutrality might signal a legal compliance issue?) (TH: I wanted to bring that to the reader's mind without diving too deep because it is a neutral voice but it is also a neutral politics of disability. Whether or not a disabled community member is involved, that presence isn't made obvious in these statements. It still appears as and functions as institutions purely accommodating for a deficit (mostly because they have to by law). ~~(OL: Another place where we can link outward.)~~ The cold, monotone voice of institutional assurance. Their neutral voice indicates an assumed institutional politics around disability. Accessibility statements don't need to be cold, though. I wonder if this space could instead be used to communicate accessibility from the perspective of disabled folks with a stake in these institutions. (FH: I'm not sure if I'm overinterpreting here. I think you're making a distinction between how many policies are written, and how they could be written?) (TH: Yes. I want to imagine a future around how these things can be written and what being an accomplice with disabled folks or other marginalized folks can look like to enable a more inclusive and representative future.) They could be written in a welcoming way, one that includes more clear representational voices and signals care for affected communities.[14] Accessibility statements often represent at least some of an institution's commitment and labor, though much goes unrepresented in the statements themselves. Michigan State University Libraries discuss additional reasons for having accessibility statements, writing, "It is very important to the MSU Libraries that visitors know about its commitment to accessibility and that they can easily find information

[14] Abiodun Olalere and Jonathan Lazar, "Accessibility of U.S. Federal Government Home Pages: Section 508 Compliance and Site Accessibility Statements," *Government Information Quarterly* 28, no. 3 (July 2011): 305, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.giq.2011.02.002.

about accessibility on its website."[15] (OL: Let's link up here with my section somehow (perhaps shared phrasing) as queer archives face a similar challenge between institutional provision of materials and community needs and uses of those materials.) There is space for us to consider disabled people's gaps in information and representation instead of just talking around accessibility standards. Institutions should be complying with real and specific needs rather than broad standards.[16] (JE to TH: Yes--a version of this idea in the first sentence too. Institutions use legal standards as a way to avoid listening to and thinking deeply and sincerely about the needs of their specific disabled users.)

The ways that many accessibility efforts are determined and organized imply that the desire paths of disabled folks are not seriously considered when paths to access are formed. The privileged believe they have something of value for the needy rather than recognizing that those barriers are artificial and erected. (JEs to authors in response to the previous sentence:👏🏻👏🏻👏🏻). Relying on this deficit model has been a source of exclusion and marginalization in library and archival spaces. Schomberg states that "using a deficit model of understanding disability often leads us to conceptualize disabled people as lesser."[17] (OL: Much like there is a presumption that queer history is always a new phenomenon and not something visible across history and culture.) (TH: This connects with how OL and I both consider how queer and disabled folks might struggle to even find themselves in records whether they are present or not.) What accessibility is for someone, whether an individual, institution, or profession, will often be different. Charlton writes, "...accessibility means different things to different people. For me, it includes something that is less tangible than architecture and communication devices. It is the likelihood of receiving the support, services, and devices necessary for a reasonable quality of life." (FH to OL: Interesting. Maybe we can get a 'what if' or speculative phrasing in here like Obsoloser and FurbyHater have (below)? Maybe you can also get the desire paths concept in here? Like, let's try to understand access by exploring how people use or try to use digital libraries and archives?)

[15] Heidi M. Schroeder, "Implementing Accessibility Initiatives at the Michigan State University Libraries," *Reference Services Review* 46, no. 3 (2018): 406, https://doi.org/10.1108/RSR-04-2018-0043.

[16] Gracen Brilmyer, "'I'm Also Prepared to Not Find Me. It's Great When I Do, but It Doesn't Hurt If I Don't': Crip Time and Anticipatory Erasure for Disabled Archival Users," Archival Science 22, no. 2 (June 2022): 167–88, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-021-09372-1.

[17] Jessica Schomberg, "Disability at Work: Libraries, Built to Exclude" in *The Politics and Theory of Critical Librarianship*, ed. Karen P. Nicholson and Maura Seale (Sacramento: Library Juice Press, 2018): 116.

INSTITUTIONAL STATEMENTS AND POLICY FUTURES

(OL: These inconsistencies in institutional statements and actionable changes makes me think *we* might *want* to intentionally reference Sara Ahmed's ideas around "check box diversity" in On Being Included. Obsoloser *would* also like to note that this section has been altered based on comments from the JEs.)

Whether design choices consider disabled users or not, we rarely hear the voices of disabled folks openly represented in how institutions communicate about disability. (JE: good! strong, grounding opening sentence here.) Institutional univocality is the voice of accessibility. The library or archives may assume that they are always in a position to give to disabled folks. This further assumes that there are few disabled practitioners facilitating that access and that disabled patrons require an additional effort to accommodate because they aren't the average user. But what if we did hear disabled folk's voices when we read accessibility statements or policies? What does community collaboration look like in something that is otherwise procedural and often required by law? (OL to TH: I think it *would* have to involve a community-led crafting of those statements, *which* include iterative edits and updates, kinda like this project, right.) (TH: I think so! A more inclusive future and one which considers things like queerness and disability does require more intentionality and a re-imagination of the role policy statements have in the practice. Less siloing of practitioners from community members.) (JE: ok, I love this. The comments are talking to each other, and it's easy to follow.)

I wanted to find some examples of an accessibility statement or policy that includes the voices of disabled folks within that community. Barring that, at least to find disability statements or policies that are easily accessible and contain more than token gestures to the ADA or WCAG 2.1 standards. Thankfully, while I did not find any examples of disabled voices in accessibility statements or policy in major institutions, I did find some reflective thinking already present. From here, I think about what these statements are already doing and what they can further accomplish if the voices of disabled stakeholders were included in their creation,shaping how gaps in access are recognized and addressed.[18] I cannot speak directly for the specific needs of disabled people here or the needs of the patrons and stakeholders of the below institutions and communities. Instead, I aim to illustrate the benefits (FH: of recognizing existing desire paths and how institutions can conspire with disabled folks to map those desires into pathways of accessibility and transformative digital structures.)

[18] E. Stephan, "Writing an Accessibility Policy: One Library's Experience," *Mississippi Libraries* 69, no. 4 (2005): 85–86.

(FH to TH: I think the argument is about the value of recognizing that the desire paths exist, and figuring out how to write them into the policies, and enable later users to follow those same paths and find their own. Maybe think more in terms of carving path metaphor than voice?)

But why do I focus on accessibility statements? These documents might seem performative, hollow, or too brief or vague. Many statements and policies lack detail. Implementation rarely achieves compliance, much less examining historical pathways to access that LAM content and spaces require. Additionally, some practitioners who are uninterested or threatened by diversity may be hindering progress within libraries and blocking pathways to inclusion.[19] We must investigate this continuously.

But if the future of digital libraries and archives is one that is radically inclusive, then what if we strive for a future that is also radically accessible? What if we listen to those voices in public accessibility statements? And if not, we should at least strive to include those voices elsewhere to prove our profession is listening. For institutions that serve marginalized folks (all institutions!) who must continue to forge their own desire paths, it is important to include those voices *somewhere* and signal to those populations that they have an explicit place in the library or archives.

To find institutions with different kinds of accessibility statements, I completed a wider search of digital library and archival accessibility statements that are available to the public. This search mainly used the Google and DuckDuckGo search engines, as I wanted to simulate general search for these statements in different areas of the United States. After selecting the institutions I wanted to study, I dug deeper into their websites to account for their accessibility information on a larger institutional scale. I chose to analyze Oberlin College Libraries, Utah State Archives, and New York Public Library to represent different kinds of digital libraries that would have different (but potentially overlapping) accessibility needs within their communities. As I explain in the individual sections below, each institution differs in their approaches to and assumptions about what accessibility is and how it is achieved.

OBERLIN COLLEGE LIBRARIES

I approach the statement of Oberlin College Libraries (OCL) here with the intent to highlight opportunities for representation and community support available to an academic library. I want to show the clear space where voices that are already organized in the community could be represented. The OCL "Accessibility Statement" is fairly simple. It pairs with another accessibility policy, simply titled "Accessibility." The accessibility statement communicates the libraries' commitment to equitable access and their efforts to comply with the WCAG 2.1 standards for web accessibility. This

[19] J. J. Pionke, "Library Employee Views of Disability and Accessibility," *Journal of Library Administration* 60, no. 2 (2020): 120–145, https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2019.1704560.

accessibility statement points patrons over to the fuller institutional accessibility policy. The statement also shifts some burden for fixing inaccessibility within OCL onto the disabled user, saying they can contact their User Experience Librarian about any issues. Though there is some guarantee of the user experience being improved, this statement does place an expectation of labor onto the user to bring the institution's attention to the issue. (OL: Maybe you could track the evolution via the Wayback Machine?) (FH: That would be cool!) (TH:According to the Wayback Machine from the Internet Archive, the OCL accessibility statement was published in or around 2020 and has not been updated since.)

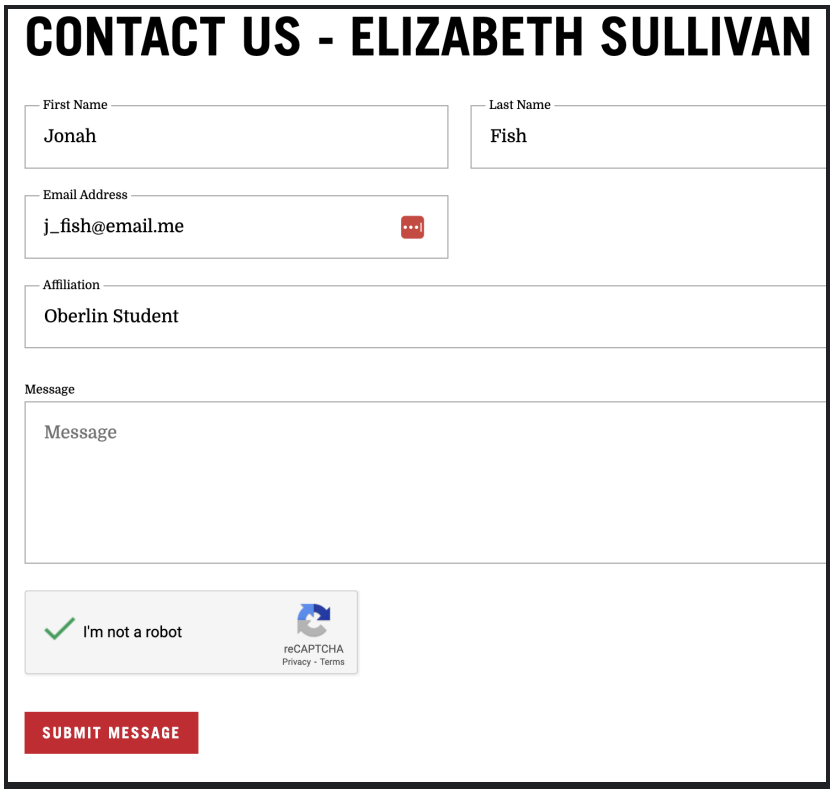

Image 3. *The contact form for accessibility issues at Oberlin College Libraries, including fields for first and last names, email, affiliation, and "message."*

What might this statement look like if it were to include voices of people from the community with specific needs and disabled positionalities? OCL might have to intentionally reach out to their users, seeking that perspective from both within and outside of their library. Their statement could function to capture institutional policy and access goals. They could look within their communities, (students, staff, faculty) to see what disabled perspectives are already present in some parts of their work. This act of

listening could expand the presence of voices in documentation and representation in digital collections. As it stands, those voices are at best only tacitly present. If they are there at all, that acknowledgment is missing from the text and subtext of their disability documentation especially if those perspectives are present in the library.[20] (OL: Another place where our sections intersect! There is a need to evaluate what representations already exist within collections that are invisible due to normative presumptions.) (FH: And also who is already present in an institution and might have valuable input.) Whether it is disabled practitioners, disabled students or faculty, or other disabled stakeholders that have been ignored or whose experiences have not been included, institutions have resources for checking their goals and achievements against the needs of real users (who can provide the best insights about how LAM practitioners can provide equitable access to LAM spaces, collections, and web properties.) Library awareness and expression of disabled experiences in their institutional policy can take accessibility for disabled users to a real place for students who might need that advocacy. The inclusion of a clear positionality of the institution towards disabled users would go a long way in making the library actively inclusive to disabled folks.

Oberlin College and its libraries have a unique opportunity to engage organized groups of students or other individuals who have specific needs. Obility is a campus group designed around dis/abled solidarity and advocacy which could be an important point of contact for the library staff and faculty to begin building relationships with disabled students and community members. Disabled voices and perspectives exist on campus already and can become a part of the institutional voice that otherwise speaks to and over the community they seek to serve. If organizing like this is happening, then Oberlin College Libraries and Obility are prepared to take the opportunity to explicitly include those disabled voices in institutional policymaking.

UTAH STATE ARCHIVES

I chose to analyze the Utah State Archives because they represent what I consider a missed opportunity to actively engage their citizens and userbase, while serving as a large government archive recording the documentary history of Utah. The Utah State Archives does not have an accessibility statement of its own but instead refers back to the State of Utah's Accessibility Policy. (OL: Is this good or bad? Would it be better to have an institution specific approach, or a shared approach across, say, consortia?) (TH: I'm cautious about making a value

[20] Liz Caringola, Hannah Frisch, and Marcella Stranieri, "Consciously Editing SCUA's Finding Aids" (presentation, Libraries Research and Innovative Practice Forum, 2021); Michelle Caswell, "Dusting for Fingerprints: Introducing Feminist Standpoint Appraisal," in "Radical Empathy in Archival Practice," eds. Elvia Arroyo-Ramirez, Jasmine Jones, Shannon O'Neill, and Holly Smith. Special issue, *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 3,no. 2 (2021).

judgment here about this one way or another. I'm not convinced it's necessarily bad, but I lean towards it because I do think digital archival materials are sufficiently different and the needs of accessing them in a digital space can be different than general web content.) There are no particular items of note about the usability and accessibility of the archives from the State Archives, whether physical or digital. The Utah policy has a complete, though boilerplate, accessibility statement followed by a list of a few digital amenities that the Utah State Government websites have (e.g. Style Sheets and Hypertext Links). But as the State Archives themselves do not have an accessibility statement or policy, at least publicly, the specific access needs archives would require are not represented, and the role of providing access to that information to the Utah public is obscured entirely. It seems to suggest a commitment to the idea of accessibility, and execution of accessibility standards and compliance, but what more could a dedicated archival accessibility statement offer? (OL: Accountability, amongst other things.) (TH: Absolutely! Accountability is critical, especially for a governmental institution.) Is there room for disabled voices in places where no dedicated digital library or archival commitment to access for disabled folks exists?

An absence of any specific commitment to accessibility by the archives itself is an opening to conceive of access not as accommodating a deficit among disabled folks but instead to have the new pathways laid out by disabled experiences. The empty space where a digital archives-focused policy might go is also an opportunity. This is space for the Utah State Archives and institutions like it to craft policy and set priorities for the institution. Including perspectives on the needs of the disabled community in Utah is important, and there exists the space for the archives to develop a connection with disabled citizens who rely on their digital materials. Stakeholders for a state-wide cultural heritage institution are diverse in numerous ways. These institutions have users from many different backgrounds with interests in deeds, family documents, or genealogies. The lack of such a dedicated policy is a significant absence, but also an opportunity to include more perspectives and experiences.The Utah State Archives is in a position to implement a whole new kind of accessibility policy work and community advocacy.

NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

(OL: So I do this thing in my section *where* I situate NYC as an exception to a lot of the challenges faced by digital curation given its support, large population, and premier status as a cultural heritage institution. It might be *worth* drawing connections *between* both sections.)

Of the three cases examined here, the New York Public Library (NYPL) has the most comprehensive accessibility statements. They have dedicated materials about accessibility and information for disabled users that are easily available. It is excellent to see, given the landscape. The NYPL goes beyond its Web & Mobile Accessibility at The

New York Public Library statement and also includes a larger Accessibility at NYPL statement and an Access for Researchers with Disabilities statement. The NYPL focuses on accessibility beyond just digital access for disabled folks. They include answers to other barriers like language and non-digital disability needs, like mobility. *(FH: how is mobility distinct from disability in this case?)* (TH: Meant to distinguish between print-disability and other kinds of disability. Added "digital" to distinguish better.) The NYPL also directly acknowledges its limitations and directs its statement at disabled folks, saying "Even when surpassing these criteria, we realize that we might not meet the needs of all users. As new techniques emerge to address accessibility issues, we are committed to incorporating them into our development processes."[21] *(FH: Nice.)*

But, again, if there were disabled experiences, perspectives, or voices considered by, or authorial of, these documents, there is no explicit indication of this in the policies themselves. Even such an otherwise excellent set of accessibility documents could become a real point of communication that states the institution's investment in understanding and representing disabled concerns in how accessibility is achieved. There is space, even in comprehensive policy documentation, for an institution to explicitly acknowledge its community and provide intentional space for their disabled users, practitioners, and researchers to speak for themselves and to the institution's purpose in accessibility.

What if we...?

(OL: Is there a way here to play on *FurbyHater's* "what if" framing?)

What if we recognized the lack of marginalized voices and disabled experiences in our institutional voices as a kind of replication of past silences in our libraries and archives? What if, instead of treating accessibility as compliance with standards, we treated accessibility as a living and reflexive thing that is navigated and improved actively in relationship with disabled community members and stakeholders? *(FH: I like this a lot.)* Could we imagine a collective future for digital cultural heritage that embraces institutions as accomplices rather than as gatekeepers? We ought to consider what it is like to be present and to use these tools, especially in digital spaces. What desire paths are already being walked and why are these voices present in the institution but silent in its voice? While we consider those questions, we turn to queer desire paths within the

[21] "Web & Mobile Accessibility at The New York Public Library," New York Public Library, https://www.nypl.org/policies/web-mobile-accessibility.

information landscape. (OL: I wonder if there is a way for us to connect closing sentences and opening sentences between each section) (FH: I think we could have a 'get the job done' transition like 'And now, we turn to queer histories and archives -- desire paths in the information landscape.) (TH: I added a bit more here to see if it fits better. Does that work?)

[22]

Image 4. *Title image for Obsoloser section, "Making Visible the Paths of Queer Archival Desire"*

(Author's Note: My section is inspired by a less than ideal desire path within queer history.) (FH to OL: Is queer history the desire path within a broader and often cis-normative, homophobic history?) (OL to FH: The path shaped by the secrecy and surveillance queer folks often face when seeking out bonding and comfort in deeply public spaces, such as bathhouses and public restrooms always running the risk of being arrested under sodomy laws (FH to OL:

[22] In editing this Obsoloser shared a draft with their friend and former colleague Dr. Katrina Fenlon who reminded them that she technically coined this term. This is true and Obsoloser would like to acknowledge that and also shout out her work around digital curation and preservation! Her 2021 paper with Grimmer, Reza, and Thurston is a really great place to start!

my ignorance here, but would that apply to women/female-identifying people?) (OL to FH: Absolutely! Though the considerable lack of documentation on anti-queer legislation impacting within history reveals the power inequities even latent within queer history as well). (FH to OL: kind of ironically or perfectly, are you missing the word "women" or similar here.) (OL to FH: Ironically perfect or perfectly ironic perhaps :(I should have more explicitly said that queer history skews towards and prioritizes cisgender, gay white men). Desire paths here are embodied and affective and were uses of pathways that were quite literally "against" design. For archival history of these events, I cannot recommend enough William E. Jones' documentary Tearoom, which chronicles police stings on gay men in Mansfield, Ohio.

My finger presses a small, smooth round button. The word TOSHIBA rests horizontal to me. The sharp snap and sizzle of the cathode ray television fading in from a black mirror of my own reflection to the simulacra of blackness that is the scan lines of a television. I hold in my hand a black rectangle, with windows revealing uneven circles of black, white irises on the inside ridged with dull teeth.

"Insert this side into recorder ⬆️ Do not touch the tape inside"

The instructions seem clear, the object I am holding is fragile. Yet I must touch it to use it. In an homage to emoticons, the visual might have looked something like this, sans the antenna

Per the suggestion of IEs, Obsoloser removed the antenna from this original piece of art.

The tape in question is a copy of Alexandra Juhasz's *Video Remains*, which I picked up for the late-stage capitalism-inspired price of $1 at the Philadelphia AIDS Thrift. The tape was standing amidst other non-documentary queer classics released on video, all within hovering distance of the store's VHS queer pornography collections. (FH to OL: So is the idea that prices are crazy low in late-stage capitalism? Is the Philly AIDS thrift complicit/caught up in it? This is my ignorance asking.) (OL to FH: Great question! And one also raised by the JEs. I think it is startlingly low considering not only the rarity of the documentary, but also that it is this cheap alongside the rising nostalgia for VHS tapes vis-a-vis record collecting, where people love rare items, even if they don't necessarily love the content itself [Case in point a documentary about AIDS].) (FH to OL: Ah, ok. I wonder if there's another factor though, of trying to keep materials like this accessible to a wide audience? Or maybe we just can't say that about VHS anymore...)

In an attempt to respect the wishes of the tape, I try to find an alternative way to view Juhasz's video. My varied searches of "video remains vhs" across Google and Ebay yield no results. Adding "alexandra juhasz" to the search provides me with two promising results. The first is the desert mirage Amazon link that implies the possibility of watching the documentary on their streaming platform immediately followed by the statement: "This video is currently unavailable to watch in your location." There's something interesting here about the deception of access. How the presence of something implies that access might be possible. But this is so often a false promise for one reason or another, whether it's inaccessible to people because of some quality about themselves or because the presence is really an absence. (FH to OL: snap snap snap. And the challenges of international copyright law. So fun.) (OL to FH: Folks have actually argued that torrenting is the only viable future for media archives.)[23]

The second link surfaces the metadata record for a copy of *Video Remains* within Juhasz's own archival database of VHS activism. There is no method with which to stream the video here, but ironically enough I can click on an image from the film, which reveals that this Omeka page is housed on Amazon web servers. Juhasz's personal website suggests that the video is "featured on Vimeo" yet the Vimeo hyperlink is not merely broken, but has been removed entirely. Even my constant source of questionable

[23] "The Personal Digital Archiving 2015 Conference," *The Signal: Digital Happenings at the Library of Congress* (blog), Library of Congress, 2015, https://blogs.loc.gov/thesignal/2015/08/report-on-the-personal-digital-archiving-2015-conference/

legality for media consumption (YouTube) yields no viewable results. Internet Archive: no results. Attempts to buy the documentary in a different format: no results. Finding the documentary on an illegal, international torrenting site: no comment.[24]

I shouldn't have to put this tape into my VCR. Doing so runs the risk of damaging not only the tape, but the hardware itself: Never forget that Mike Casey told us this storm was coming--he even gave us a wonderful portmanteau of degradation and obsolescence.[25] If the storm I am experiencing now had clouds they would be cirro-degralesence clouds. At any moment these clouds could burst and the content held on the tape and its viewing surrogate could burst. The result would be one less copy of an already incredibly difficult to find documentary and the loss of an increasingly expensive piece of hardware used to view that documentary. The solution should be simple, make more copies of this documentary and make them available digitally, but what if this inability to reconcile with the obsolescence of queer media had everything to do with the social realities insisting that queer history, mediated or otherwise, remain inaccessible?

Like many information professionals, I started a Master's degree with the 🤩 hope of touching old things: reels of film, rare manuscripts, cool pictures. (TH: You and me both! In some ways, that's still the dream.) (FH: How is it that I'm always touching old things and you two get blocked? Is it because I'm cuter? Probably. Oh no, wait, I think it might be because I'm an able-bodied white lady. Yeah, that's probably it. I once spent a night at a facility with an archive out in the countryside. No car, no trains after 6pm, so I stayed in the guest house.) (OL to FH: Only slightly less unhinged than those Bodleian Library Oath statements which I know you are also familiar with and TIL can be purchased on tote bags from their gift shop. Maybe this is where I should actually talk about *Late $tage Capitali$m*) (FH to OL: 👍, but also, I think there's nothing wrong with an oath that essentially says "I won't burn down the library.") (OL to FH: Fair, but now it makes me wonder why they even had to say it in the first place 👀🚫🔥📚🏰.) (The "KEEPER OF RECORDS" (real title) at a smaller, but significant archive that shall remain nameless, gave me the keys to the archive overnight and just asked that I turn the light

[24] "LOL" (JEs, 2023)

[25] Mike Casey, "Why Media Preservation Can't Wait: The Gathering Storm," *IASA Journal* 44 (January 2015): 14-22, retrieved from https://scholarworks.iu.edu/dspace/bitstream/handle/2022/27255/casey_iasa_journal_44_part3.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

off when I left. I'm still haunted by this.) (OL to FH: The font didn't read "keeper of the records" so I took some liberties and changed it.) (FH to OL: haha, fair) (OL to TH: I think you are going to have to acknowledge that you originally picked the "keeper of the records" font for your sections) (JEs in response to all of this: "I laughed out loud AND holy shit FH, what a story!") I would learn quickly that my proximity to touching would be a finding aid at best. I had those dreams shattered by the harsh realities of academic archival practices. Nepotism-driven hiring, conservative collection policies, and an unwillingness to contend with the necessities of digital preservation both ethically and technically changed my general feel of archival work. Nothing prepared me for the queer-exclusionary realities of the field. As I attempted to raise issues around the profound failures of catalogs to make visible queerness, I realized that the institutions tasked with housing queer history were keen to make excuses for why they could not digitally curate their holdings rather than finding solutions to these challenges.[26] The excuses are almost liturgical to me at this point:

> *"What if one of our donors is offended by our preserving LGBTQIA+ archival materials?"*
>
> *"What if we get someone's identity wrong?"*
>
> *"We have a collection on AIDS. What other records could we need?"*
> *"Queer history is not old enough to warrant an archival collection."*[27]
> *"We don't have the staff or resources to contextualize queerness within our collections."*[28]

(FH: Just think, they could have hidden behind copyright to be polite. These are some dicey excuses–like, who says this shit out loud?!)

The institution was not my friend in expanding queer history and the rich histories housed on obsolete formats were only running the risk of ruin. I turned to

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[26] Obsoloser and Joshua Whitefield, "Queer COLA Oral Histories and Digital Archives," in *LGBTQ Public History: Reports from the Field*, ed. Nicole Belolan (National Council on Public History, 2019), 32-35.

[27] TH to OL: This is wild. They all are, but this is egregious and plain false.

[28] Admittedly, this is a very real concern within the day-to-day labor of information professionals, but this particular point was said to me by a curator, whose holdings also include records with page long descriptions of airplanes and a collection specific subject heading for describing World War II, so I count it as an reactionary excuse here. Or as JEs note: "incredible. If we deviate any resources to contextualizing queerness, we might not have adequate resources for the aeroplanes!" The TL;DR of this is that in the world of information organization ✈️ > 🏳️‍🌈

others for inspiration and guidance. Some work came by way of radically counter-institutional practices like Jasmyn Castro's insistence that a culture of African American Home Movies exists intentionally outside the conventions of white, colonialist academia meaning that the creation and distribution of Black cultural artifacts remain outside institutional gazes.[29] In parallel to Castro's work, I began to realize that queer communities curated their histories outside institutions as well, often looking to community venues (physical and digital) to curate their history. Tumblr (JEs: would it be possible to link to the Tumblr piece in this same issue?) was a landscape for queer culture making and an archive of its own and it only grazes the surface of this radical community work.[30] Digital archives of historic marginality exist without the support of institutions, but that is not to say that collaboration between communities and media preservation experts cannot exist.

The XFR Collective (pronounced transfer) is a New York-based organization that works to provide accessible and sustainable audiovisual digitization and preservation services aimed at accounting for histories of marginalized communities and alternative art spaces. Designed to offer mobile and low-cost solutions for multi-format media preservation, the XFR Collective often brings a rack of digitization materials on trains, cars, and other forms of transportation to get to communities to make digital surrogates for their materials. This work helps to ensure that analog histories translate into digital histories, and, more importantly, that the individuals who produced this media are provided access to their digital records. While institutions certainly offer these services (shout out to the Memory Lab Network and the Media Archaeology Lab), histories of colonialism and extractive research practices mean that once a media object ends up behind the walls of an archive, its use and accessibility become dictated by that institution. (TH to OL: This is exactly the problem with disability that I'm encountering. Accessibility, even within compliance models, is still at the whims of the institutions that house and make materials accessible. There's a genuine problem when those institutions, accidentally or otherwise, make choices that obscure or prevent access or that have policies and protocols which have targeted consequences for marginalized folks.) Sure a finding aid can show what is there, but showing is not the same thing as using, or in the case of a digital video, viewing. The provision of a digitized surrogate from an analog artifact, sadly, remains a rare occurrence. In this way the XFR Collective aims to change this narrative and allow for a proof-of-concept of community-centered media preservation. The XFR Collective is radical in this regard, but it also benefits from the geographic privileges latent in New York City. (TH to OL: This connects well with my section above! NYC has a unique set of benefits

[29] Jasmyn Castro, "Unearthing African American History & Culture Through Home Movies" (Masters thesis, New York University, 2015).

[30] Andre Cavalcante, "Tumbling into Queer Utopias and Vortexes: Experiences of LGBTQ Social Media Users on Tumblr," *Journal of Homosexuality* 66, no. 12 (2019): 1715–35. doi:10.1080/00918369.2018.1511131.

and freedom to imagine a future possibility, but that seems so taken for granted. How can we build out a speculative future for digital cultural heritage and digital content more broadly when the possibilities of desiring in the first place are so stratified?) (OL to TH: Jack Halberstam would call this "metronormativity," but that is for another paper.)[31] As noted, public transit and proximity of target populations make providing hardware for digitization a relatively streamlined endeavor. Were one to work with collections from other regions within the United States, as Obsoloser & Bischoff observe, moving materials across a state proves impossible, especially when one compares the invaluable role of robust transit options within that work.[32] Take the difference between XFR Collective traveling from their location to a prominent queer activist organization in the city via public transit to the time it would take to get University of South Carolina to the state's queer activist organization with or without public transit. Such a distance requires, as a result, hyper-localized approaches to digital curation, ones that exist within the tensions of institutional indifference and an ever-increasing need for communities to digitally preserve their media. (TH: Yes, such an important point about the systems that support this work.)

Solutions to this are countless, albeit varied in their degrees of shared collaboration, exploitation of unpaid labor, and long-term sustainability. Nonetheless, approaches such as service learning offer methods for sandbox style digital preservation that create digital surrogates and while imperfect, fill otherwise present gaps within digital media histories.[33] Event-based outreach (changed from "event-based events" per the astute catch of the IEs) tied around types of media or communities also prove generative à la Home Movie Day or the magnetic media-focused Basement Tapes Day.[34] Less ideal solutions include for-profit companies who utilize the fear of artifact loss to overcharge families for their mediated memories via digitization-in-a-box alternatives. While, like class-based projects, the work does often create digital surrogates, the products are often absent of the trifecta of descriptive,

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[31] J. Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: NYU Press, 2005).

[32] Obsoloser and Bobbie Bischoff "Defining Community Archives within Rural South Carolina," in *Rural and Small Public Libraries: Challenges and Opportunities*, ed. Brian Real (Leeds: Emerald, 2017), 155-180.

[33] Obsoloser and Elise Lewis, "Teaching Through Activism: Service Learning, Community Archives, and Digital Repository Building in MLIS Classrooms," (paper presented at the Association of Library and Information Science Education Conference, Denver, February 6-9, 2018), https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/libsci_studentpubs/9/; Colin Post and Kassidy Hof-Mahoney, "The Pandemic at Home: Learning from Community-Engaged Covid-19 Documentation Efforts in the Southeastern US," *Journal of the Society of Georgia Archivists* 38, no. 2 (2022): 4-21.

[34] Miles Levy and Yuri Shimoda, "Preserving Home Recordings through Community Collaborations at Basement Tapes Day," *ARSC Journal* 53, no. 11 (Spring 2022): 100-110.

administrative, and structural metadata and lack distinctions between preservation and access copies (rarely offering the former and sometimes failing to offer the latter). For-profit digitization evidences a need and desire for more sustained media conversion and such realities extend to queer communities and their histories. As such, I worked with a variety of students, community activists, academic departments, and local media collectors to digitize the history of queer South Carolinians. The work was an earnest attempt to aid the institution in making available digital surrogates for which they alleged having the lack of resources, labor, and technology to do so. Over a year Obsoloser and others digitized more than 100 media artifacts of queer activism across the American South and returned the materials to the institution, with relevant metadata and both preservation and access copies. The results of that work are available here. As you can see, this link does not work. While I would love to tell you that these materials are readily accessible and it is merely a web design flaw, the university has made no attempt to ingest the files into their existing records. (TH to OL: I don't like assuming malice, but Pionke mentions that there definitely is some very intentional resistance to access, inclusion, and diversity. Part of the future we may be speculating about is one where these virtues are more integral to practice at all levels.) (OL to TH: Yes! Actually there is an amazing article by Julia Gilmore that dropped while we were constructing this piece that has drastically shifted my own perceptions of digitizing queer analog media! It is a MUST READ!)[35] Such hesitance suggests to me something beyond a lack of structural support and an explicit unwillingness to make visible queer history. The institution, of course, is only so much to blame as there are chronic and continuing examples of reprimands (FH: and outright censorship) emerging as cultural heritage institutions attempt to make visible queer identities. Many of these reprimands come with real impact included but not limited to: withdrawing of tax-based financial support, the firing of employees, and doxxing and trolling across the digital collections highlighting these materials.[36] What follows is a speculation of an alternative, a hope for what queer digital futures can and should look like. A what if and a what can be. (FH: based on what is there, like a desire path, and just needs to be acknowledged in the core system.)

[35] Julia Gilmore, "Be Kind Rewind: Navigating Issues of Access and Practising an Ethics of Care for Magnetic Media from Vulnerable Communities," *Archivaria* 96 (Fall/Winter 2023): 70-95.

[36] Melinda Marie Jetté, "Through the Queer Looking-Glass: The Future of LGBTQ Public History," *The Public Historian* 41, no. 2 (2019): 6-18; Sarah Barriage et al., "Drag Queen Storytimes: Public Library Staff Perceptions and Experiences," *Children and Libraries* 19, no. 2 (Summer 2021): 14-22; Tim Squirrell and Jacob Davey, *A Year of Hate: Understanding Threats and Harassment Targeting Drag Shows and the LGBTQ+ Community* (London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue), https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Understanding-Threats-and-Harassment-Targeting-Drag-Shows-and-the-LGBTQ-Community.pdf.

I made yet another trip to my local thrift store, choosing the one with vaguely religious ties over the Goodwill (™) because I know the latter rarely keeps obsolete media anymore and, if I am being honest, is hardly any less vague in its religious undertones. While an entire shelf has sealed copies of that one JESUS VHS *(FH: I long to know what this is.)* (OL: I will make sure to grab you a copy when I inevitably see it again.) *(FH: Movie night!)*, there are also pockets of foreign home recording tapes with a mixture of 한글 and 漢字, representing the long-term impacts of my town's close proximity to a military base. There is Party at Joe's, a found footage tape of a few working-class white guys who are celebrating a friend's birthday after another day at the chicken packing plant getting stoned and rapping about being white boys (an important artifact that others should see, but one mired with the ethics of consent). Tucked in a further corner though is a tape with the words Matrix and Ms. Altered Affairs 1990 and 1991 written on it. I grab these tapes and bring them home with me, excited to watch their contents while using my lo-fi digitization set up to convert the files just in case the tape deteriorates while viewing.[37]

There is a certain absurdity to the odd proximity of queerness and Christianity in these spaces, ones that remind me that despite Christian ideology often being severely anti-queer, they often must co-opt queer language and issues in order to make their points. It is like how anti-queer rhetoric on conservative college campuses make use of queer artists' work to make their point. Alternatively, it is kind of like, how whoever made this now long out of context GIF I found on the Internet Archive had to acknowledge HIV while also implying some heinous things about its religious underpinnings

[37] "Damage, Scratches and Tape Wear," *AV Artifacts Atlas*, https://www.avartifactatlas.com/artifacts/scratches_and_tape_wear.html.

Image 5. *He Intends Victory (HIV) logo*

The Matrix and Ms. Altered Affairs tape begins with shadows cast over a picket fence. The fuzzy blur of the magnetic tape makes seeing anything difficult, but eventually figures step onto the screen and what is very clearly a drag show unfolds. In my mind this can't be right. South Carolina is a deeply red state and queer visibility in the 90s seemed impossible. Here though is proof of the thriving of that queerness and I cannot wait to share it with others.

I look around and find that there is an LGBTQIA+ archival collection at the University of South Carolina which includes a variety of digital objects representing the complex intersections of the state's queer history. Within the digital holdings are multiple points of access. I can look for identity-specific materials, sort holdings by geographic bounds and even suggest potential information and description potentials for content. More important than this, however, is the option for me to submit materials for digital inclusion within the collection. More than a mere upload button, the space offers the chance for me to provide not only the digital object, but context on where I located the item, what is potentially on the item and any other information that might prove relevant as metadata. Moreover, I am extended the opportunity to schedule time to provide an interview on the object (following an understandable double checking of who I am to ensure I am not trolling). This interview then pairs with the object and provides both a contemporary lens into queer culture in the city, as well as a new document affirming the ongoing presence of queerness within the state. I am also offered the opportunity to join part of an ongoing community collaborative workspace

(probably Discord given its queer transformative uses via Floegel's 2022 work).[38] This collaborative space also provides me with access to a set of database tools that allow me to *crowdsource* with the other community collaborative workers to add to the collection, make relevant connections with other digital materials, and engage in outreach and education with the materials when relevant. This desire path is one that is both additive and community-centric allowing me to embrace the moments of queerness I have discovered and archive this discovery to make the work easier for others moving forward.

The desire to see a path can be complicated by the sheer lack of willingness by others to accept how those paths are already quite visible. I, Obsoloser often reflect on this when it comes to embracing one's queer identity. The mantra is almost second nature to queer folks growing up. "I lived so much of my life assuming I was the only person like me." Strides in queer activism, historiography, and archiving have continued to challenge this misperception, but the desire to see queer representation still runs against a chronic inability to consistently curate and make visible all the ways that queer identities continue to exist despite erasure and cisheteronormative silences. In fact, what histories we have of visible queerness are often ones rooted in trauma, or as I will note later, regulation and surveillance. A path towards seeing desirable queerness, as such, is one fraught with affective turmoil. *(FH to OL: I think there are a few important points in here, but they feel slightly at odds with each other. Maybe a gentle reframing could be: on the one hand there are the very real queer identities (metaphorical desire paths) that exist, and on the other there are many people that refuse to acknowledge and make visible those paths. Taking the metaphor another step further, cisheteronormativity is like the urban planner who says, I see that people are beating different paths than the ones I built, but what do they know? Why can't they just conform and use the system like a normal person? Some such planners might go so far as to try to shut down the desire paths. So instead of saying hey, people are finding a way to fulfill their needs by creating this new path, they put up a wall or barbed wire. The desire path is there, the needs are there, but the planner says 'I know better' through bricks and mortar, barbed wire, whatever.)* (OL to FH: Instead of a reframing, I will offer here a response that affirms these points and then suggest that the readers take these thoughts into consideration by revisiting the section. However, to your observation the literal example of this is gay bars (read queer

[38] Diana Floegel, "Porn Bans, Purges, and Rebirths: The Biopolitics of Platform Death in Queer Fandoms," *Internet Histories* 6, no. 1-2 (2021): 90-112.

bars more broadly) which tend to get destroyed and removed to make way for cisheteronormative paths within cities making the ability to preserve gay bar history challenging. This also reminds me to hype the amazing work of the Gay Barchives Project.

OL to readers: Furby Hater makes brilliant points here and I would encourage you to read this framing as an alternative approach to what I lay out above, hell you can even skip my parts and read her observations if you so desire.) (PLEASE DO NOT SKIP OBSOLOSER'S PARTS.) (OL to readers: If you for some reason didn't skip any of this, I will let you in on a little secret, there are some easter eggs hidden throughout this paper, at least one involving the tv show *What We Do In The Shadows*.) Desired paths can sometimes be as simple as wanting to not only see one's self in the world, but to share in that discovery of shared identities in an easy and sustainable way. (OL: Simply, queer archival creation is always about making desire paths from a place of lived, embodied experience.)

Crowdsourcing as Desire Paths, by: FurbyHater

(⚰️ 2 fur-🐝s everywhere)

As TopHat and Obsoloser explore above, experiencing a sense of belonging, and finding space for and evidence of people like oneself in the information landscape are vital human needs that many LAMs fail to meet for significant numbers of the population. As a result, individuals and community groups end up pursuing alternative paths to meet their own needs. The lack of care and space can be deeply hurtful (JE: Maybe even harmful?) to those whose needs are not being met, and the remedy (in part) is for LAMs to look at how users are meeting their own needs and then partner with users to convert that information into better pathways through collections. (copyeditor 1: I think this is an absolutely brilliant point; it gets a bit lost in the end because the sentence is too long; maybe make it two separate sentences? Copyeditor 2: Agreed. I edited one suggestion of how to break the sentence up here, but the author is free to break it up as they see best.) (Thank you both. Edit taken). In this section of the paper, I explore how crowdsourcing projects are an important source for hidden digital desire paths. I argue that crowdsourcing projects are boundary objects that sit between the worlds of LAM practitioners whose core work is to enhance the authoritative record, and the worlds of people who volunteer on crowdsourcing project for myriad reasons, including a desire to

expand their own knowledge and skills, and contribute to the store of human knowledge. Practitioners and volunteers interact with crowdsourcing systems in different ways, and at least in my nine years of experience, very few practitioners or GLAMs are using the kinds of data I will discuss below to align core GLAM systems with user desires.

But before I get into an exploration of crowdsourcing (particularly about my time at the Library of Congress), I want to share two things related to desire paths that prompted me to suggest this framing for our article. The first was mention of the concept by a colleague at the American Library Association annual conference in Chicago, 2023. I don't remember how it came up, but it offered me a name for a thing I had observed in Stanton Park in NE DC, near where I used to live. In March 2020, during one of many pandemic walks through the neighborhood, I wondered why there were snaking dirt paths through the grassy areas in each quadrant of the park. These weren't shortcuts, they were longcuts. As a deeply impatient New Yorker always looking for the most efficient route between two points I couldn't fathom an explanation for the paths unless they were somehow related to Covid: were people walking in the grass to avoid passing close to others on the pavement? But the paths were too established-looking to be the result of that–they were beaten much lower than the surrounding grass. When the weather warmed up and the trees came into leaf I saw that the paths were made by people seeking shade while walking through the park. Just as the desire to be a little bit cooler and spared the worst of the sun caused the desire paths in Stanton Park, so too desires other than speedy search results might shape people's movement through the digital information landscape. (JE: this is so so good.)

Image 6. *This is Stanton Park in Washington DC, NE. The photo was taken from a building overlooking the park and shows two desire paths created by people walking off the paved routes in the park. One cuts a faster route through the park, but the other wiggles between*

large trees that provide shade in the hot DC summers. This wiggling path sparked author Furby Hater's thoughts about how information seeking is often not linear or simply about expedience, which ultimately became a helpful metaphor for us as a team in framing this paper. Photograph contributed by Mark Dubielak to GoogleMaps. Stanton Park, 6th St NE &, 226 4th St NE, Washington, DC 20002, https://maps.app.goo.gl/mZkgX4DteALyXjNX8.

CROWDSOURCING BACKGROUND

Crowdsourcing–call it commons-based peer production, niche-sourcing, participatory cultural heritage, social tagging–is a multifaceted method of distributing labor and information gathering to inform or create a dataset or answer a question.[39] Crowdsourcing projects often go in one direction–from a "caller" to a "crowd" who respond by supplying data of some kind through a platform or protocol chosen by the caller (OL to FH: Maybe link out to citations?) (FH added) →[40]. The caller (a GLAM, an academic, an NGO) has a need or a problem in mind (OL to FH: Maybe link out to examples?): a survey for their research, non-machine readable documents or AV materials to be transcribed, images to be described or tagged, folksonomies to be generated to enhance search results, locations to be mapped, for example during a crisis when crowdsourcing about the impacts can be an effective tool for emergency response teams.[41]

Millions of people participate in thousands of volunteer crowdsourcing projects around the world. Their collective effort is immense and moving (no citation needed). Many studies have looked at volunteer motivation in crowdsourcing to try to understand why people give their time.[42] Altruism and subject matter interest (not expertise) comes

[39] Mia Ridge et al., *The Collective Wisdom Handbook: Perspectives on Crowdsourcing in Cultural Heritage* (2021), https://britishlibrary.pubpub.org/.

[40] Jeff Howe, "The Rise of Crowdsourcing," *Wired*, June 1, 2006, https://www.wired.com/2006/06/crowds/; Daren C. Brabham, *Crowdsourcing* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013).

[41] Corey Jackson et al., "Folksonomies to Support Coordination and Coordination of Folksonomies," *Computer Supported Cooperative Work* 27 (2018): 647–678, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10606-018-9327-z.

[42] Jānis Daugavietis, "Motivation to Engage in Crowdsourcing: Towards the Synthetic Psychological–Sociological Model," *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities* 36, no. 4 (2021): 858–870; Joe Cox et al., "Doing Good Online: The Changing Relationships Between Motivations, Activity, and Retention Among Online Volunteers," *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 47, no. 5 (2018): 1031–1056, https://doi.org/10.1177/0899764018783066.

top of the list in most studies as the participation drivers.[43] Some attention has also been paid to the social affordances of online crowdsourcing platforms, such as the Talk discussion forum on Zooniverse.org, where volunteers can engage with one another and the research team, develop their own communities of practice, learn new things, and share their findings.[44] Posts on Talk, and on History Hub, which serves as an open reference and community forum for participants on National Archives and Records Administration's (NARA) Citizen Archivist, and the Library of Congress's (LOC) By the People crowdsourced transcription project, reveal abundant evidence of participants' interests, and how they use crowdsourcing sites, GLAM resources, and other web- and print-based media to deepen their understanding of the topics they're engaging with. Further scholarship discusses the affordances for GLAMs of engaging with crowdsourcing, and the potential mutual benefits for GLAMs and volunteers.[45] However, for all the good work on what motivates people to participate in GLAM crowdsourcing, and how and why GLAMs can go about starting and sustaining a project, little has been done to reflect on what we can learn from the digital traces of volunteers' participation behavior (OL to FH: Right, the "if you build it they will crowdsource"

[43] Sultana Lubna Alam, Ruonan Sun, and John Campbell, "Helping Yourself or Others? Motivation Dynamics for High-Performing Volunteers in GLAM Crowdsourcing," *Australasian Journal of Information Systems* 24 (2020), https://doi.org/10.3127/ajis.v24i0.2599; Diana L. Soteropoulos and Travis D. Marsico, "Community Science Success for Herbarium Transcription in Arkansas: Building a Network of Students and Volunteers for Notes from Nature," *Castanea* 87, no. 1 (2022): 54-74, https://doi.org/10.2179/0008-7475.87.1.54.

[44] Corey Jackson, et al., "Motivations for Sustained Participation in Crowdsourcing: Case Studies of Citizen Science on the Role of Talk," *2015 48th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences* (2015): 1624–1634, https://doi.org/10.1109/HICSS.2015.196; Dick Kasperowski and Thomas Hillman, "The Epistemic Culture in an Online Citizen Science Project: Programs, Antiprograms and Epistemic Subjects," *Social Studies of Science* 48, no. 4 (2018): 564–588, https://doi.org/10.1177/0306312718778806; Frauke Rohden et al., "Tagging, Pinging and Linking – User Roles in Virtual Citizen Science Forums," *Citizen Science: Theory and Practice* 4, no. 1 (2019), https://doi.org/10.5334/cstp.181.

[45] Samuel T. Barber, "The Zooniverse is Expanding: Crowdsourced Solutions to the Hidden Collections Problem and the Rise of the Revolutionary Cataloging Interface," *Journal of Library Metadata* 18, no. 2 (2019): 85–111, https://doi.org/10.1080/19386389.2018.1489449; Rose Holley, "Crowdsourcing: How and Why Should Libraries Do It?" *D-Lib Magazine* 16, no. 3 (2010), https://doi.org/10.1045/march2010-holley; Trevor Owens, "Making Crowdsourcing Compatible with the Missions and Values of Cultural Heritage Organizations," in *Crowdsourcing our Cultural Heritage*, ed. Mia Ridge (London: Routledge, 2014), 269–280; FurbyHater, "Harnessing Crowdsourcing for Scholarly and GLAM Purposes," *Literature Compass* 16, no. 3–4 (2019), https://doi.org/10.1111/lic3.12507; FurbyHater and Heather Wolfe, "More Content, Less Context: Rethinking Access," in *Archives: Power, Truth, and Fiction*, ed. Andrew Prescott and Alison Wiggins (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 2023): 174–191, https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198829324.013.0013.

approach. A real Digital Platform of Dreams problem.) (FH: wahahaha.)

Crowdsourcing represents a shared desire between GLAMs and their users for content and information to be produced at a scale typically not achievable by institutional staff. (TH to FH: Is there room for volunteers to direct this work more? How participants engage in the evolution of crowdsourcing projects seems like a significant place for speculation.) (FH to TH/the reader: TopHat and FurbyHater had a really good conversation about this on 8/22/23 trying to figure out how to/whether to keep track of comments that we ultimately don't incorporate into the paper. We decided to leave the evidence of the comment, but agree that this is a really interesting and sort of tangential topic that is worth exploring together in another paper in future.) This is not to say that volunteers displace the labor of staff, but that staff invite volunteers to perform kinds of labor that have never been undertaken at that scale. Transcription epitomizes this point–few institutions have ever had the time or resources to transcribe every document in their collection, but increasingly researchers expect to be able to find any word in any part of any document. Crowdsourcing is an attempt to meet this expectation: it is a desire path between user needs and the architectures of traditional GLAM practice. The logics of crowdsourced transcription fundamentally diverge from traditional cultural heritage descriptive practices–instead of metadata people want full-text data.[46] (OL to FH: 🔥) (JE: yeah, agreed, this is 🔥)

As both a researcher and a community manager who has run crowdsourcing projects in academia and GLAMs, and as a crowdsourcing volunteer myself, I've enjoyed getting to know people who come to projects with no prior interest in the topic, and watching them fall in love with the material, the problem, the time period, the documents or subject matter in order to satisfy their own curiosity or contribute to human knowledge. Their curiosity and desire to contribute leads many participants to try to figure out how to navigate a catalog, a finding aid or some other GLAM resource, and most often results in people being flummoxed by the jargon and structures they find. How can our core digital services and discovery systems make room for exploration and desire for people with little or no expertise on a topic? What can we learn about our authoritative record management systems by attending to the digital traces of desire left by people who participate in crowdsourcing?

SYSTEMS

Most GLAMs in North America and Europe that run crowdsourcing projects use third party platforms such as FromThePage, Zooniverse, or (less frequently) Omeka with a

[46] FurbyHater and Heather Wolfe, "More Content, Less Context."

Scripto plugin. These projects are typically separate from a GLAM's authoritative discovery system or content management system, catalog or repository of finding aids.[47] Authoritative record management systems are generally expensive commercial products or fragile internally created systems of knowledge management precariously stitched together (OL: I guess this means my section isn't the only one thinking about the realities of #LateStageCapitalism.) That so many GLAMs create crowdsourcing projects with the explicit goal of generating new knowledge and access points to their collections, and yet few have built a crowdsourcing mechanism directly into their authoritative record management systems, can be interpreted in many ways. It might be a quirk of the market for knowledge management tools–maybe the average CMS vendor hasn't had enough market interest to build crowdsourcing tools into their applications. But some research suggests this gap may actually be the result of a conflict within GLAMs between a desire to engage the public, and a desire for clean lines of authority over collections description, which results in crowdsourced data not being integrated into the core authoritative record.[48] In other words, the desire to run crowdsourcing projects and the desire to use the resulting data are not fully aligned with GLAM practitioners' mission of producing authoritative content (JE: very good point.) Therefore, crowdsourcing at many GLAMs is at the desire path stage rather than the core infrastructure stage.

The current status of much volunteer-produced content strongly suggests that our desires and our core methods of descriptive practice don't line up. For example, volunteer work may be subject to intensive vetting and editing, or in some cases a purgatorial existence, when the data produced is considered suspect, unverifiable, not authoritative, or it simply doesn't fit where GLAM practitioners assumed at the outset.[49] Worryingly, some institutions have undertaken crowdsourcing projects to generate data to enhance search and discovery as well as accessibility for people with print disabilities, only to find their content management systems and practices cannot accommodate the

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[47] FunkyHater and TopHat, "Data's Destinations: Three Case Studies in Crowdsourced Transcription Data Management and Dissemination," *Startwords* 2 (December 2021), https://doi.org/10.5281/ZENODO.5750691.

[48] Ina Maria Jansson, "Organization of User-Generated Information in Image Collections and Impact of Rhetorical Mechanisms," *Knowledge Organization* 44, no. 7 (2017): 515–528; Chelsea Renshaw and Chern Li Liew, "Descriptive Standards and Collection Management Software for Documentary Heritage Management: Attitudes and Experiences of Information Professionals," *Global Knowledge, Memory and Communication* 70, no. 8-9 (2021): 697–713, https://doi.org/10.1108/GKMC-08-2020-0129; Katherine Crowe et al., "Inviting and Honoring User-contributed Content," in *The Lighting the Way Handbook: Case Studies, Guidelines, and Emergent Futures for Archival Discovery and Delivery*, ed. Mark A. Matienzo and Dinah Handel (Stanford: Stanford University Libraries, 2021), 115-131, https://doi.org/10.25740/gg453cv6438.

[49] Anne Bowser, et al, "Still in Need of Norms: The State of the Data in Citizen Science," *Citizen Science: Theory and Practice* 5, no. 1 (2020): 18, https://doi.org/10.5334/cstp.303.

resulting data[50]. (TH to FH: A lot of assumptions seem to be made about where data go and what end-users can do with that information. Do you think crowdsourcing data is actually a good stress-test for accessibility and, if so, how can CMSs and workflows benefit from crowdsourcing post-project?) (FH to TH: You know it! "It" being crowdsourced data as a good stress-test for accessibility at least insofar as print-disabilities. So yes, I think crowdsourcing has many benefits while projects are live and have staff to engage with participants, but I also think the data produced by crowdsourcing has so much potential for future engagement, and becomes a kind of desire path or network when these new kinds of data facilitate access and search queries we didn't know our users wanted to use.) These are desire paths with large bodies of water at the end–not impassible, but often unexpected and costly to cross (OL: despite the sunken costs.) (FH to OL: good point. You'd think that would motivate people to deal with the data!) We need to build a boat or bridge to get across, and this takes time. Based on lived experience and research, I assure you the question of where to incorporate user-generated data is a (JE: widely-shared but little-discussed problem.) I think it's fair to describe this as a source of shame for many practitioners, which is (I think) why it is so little talked about, but it shouldn't be kept in the dark–we need to talk about these challenges in order to find and share solutions. (OL to FH: Could you create a collaborative document here to provide comments and thoughts on these problems and link it?) (For us or for readers post publication? I kinda want to link to https://www.instagram.com/fesshole/ But, if you want something more contained, readers, please feel free to share your experiences in this Google Doc.) (JE to FH: I think it's great you've created a Google doc for reader engagement - it almost feels buried and might be good to highlight again in the Conclusion with any other calls for action.) (FH to JE: done!) For an example of how one organization has tackled crowdsourced data integration, check out this short data paper describing data collection and quality checking methods for both individual transcriptions and bulk datasets from the By the People project at the Library of Congress.[51]

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[50] Lucinda Blaser. "Old Weather: Approaching Collections from a Different Angle." In *Crowdsourcing Our Cultural Heritage*, edited by Mia Ridge, 45–55. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2014; FurbyHater and TopHat, "Data's Destinations."

[51] FurbyHater, Lauren Algee, TopHat, Carlyn Osborn, Trevor Owens, Lauren Seroka, and Abby Shelton. "By the People Crowdsourcing Datasets from the Library of Congress." *Journal of Open Humanities Data* 8, no. 5 (February 4, 2022): https://doi.org/10.5334/johd.67.

AN ALTERNATIVE PATH

NARA's Citizen Archivist is a notable exception to the paradigm of separation between the authoritative record and the crowdsourcing platform. People can transcribe and tag any publicly visible item with an image, audio, or video file in the NARA catalog. Transcriptions immediately become a searchable and discoverable part of the authoritative record. Citizen Archivist Community Managers work with NARA collections and subject matter specialists to identify interesting themes and documents, and utilize metadata to group materials into "missions" that volunteers are invited to transcribe and tag. These missions are overlaid on the catalog, rather than being part of a core descriptive metadata path or a faceted search. (TH to FH: I see a lot of overlap with my own thoughts on policy here. How these projects are organized and prioritized impacts the practical realities of experiences folks have when they interact with cultural heritage work. (JE: great connection!) An intervention happens when we decide how certain processes occur in an institution that we see in the experiences of people who volunteer with or use digital libraries.) These are temporary desire paths that will result in more easily discoverable full text material in future. In that sense, the missions are a blend of desire paths on the part of the institution and sometimes in response to the interests of users who may frequently ask to find or transcribe certain kinds of materials. In addition to transcriptions, volunteers can add tags of their own to any record, and create themed collections for their own purposes: individuals or groups, such as students in a class, can curate their own journeys through the catalog. Their tags are desire paths through which they can run a search to surface *their* materials, *their* interests. (TH: What sorts of desires come out of tags? Are participants asking for things, providing things, or building out possible futures? Do they speculate on the post-ingest life of their contributions?) (JE to FH and TH: I'm loving how TH's comments in the final section are linking back to their original section. It gives a cool feeling of participation and payoff. Specifically, do these questions call for a response? Cus now I'm wondering the same thing. Or maybe just a "that remains to be seen" from FH?) (FH to TH and JE: I've experienced volunteers having an interest in what happens to the data they provide in other projects, and suspect the same is true at NARA. That said, there isn't a "post-ingest" as such because the tags, the transcriptions-the desire paths-are immediately evident and part of the record at NARA. That's what's so magical and wild about that system.) If different tags by different users start to coalesce around the same objects, this might tell us how collection materials are being used and interpreted by different individuals or groups. The flexibility of this system, with this degree of fluidity between GLAM producers and public consumers of information is remarkable,

particularly for a large, authoritative, federal institution. The other big federal institutions with crowdsourced transcription projects (Smithsonian Transcription Center and LOC's By the People) created transcription platforms outside of their core discovery platforms for a variety of reasons, including a desire to use more modern web architecture than the in-house created authoritative record systems allowed at the time of the original builds. By the People provides many links back to authoritative sources on loc.gov, but the authoritative record only links to By the People in relatively obscure ways. The desire underlying that decision (for which FurbyHater was in the room) is that By the People is meant to be a passthrough application, and not the final resting place for data. An FAQ on the By the People home page explains the rationale:

> After a campaign is completed and we've published all transcriptions and created a dataset, it is ready for retirement. Retiring campaigns maintains By the People website performance and ensures researchers use the transcriptions within the loc.gov digital collections where they are full-text searchable and sit in context with other Library resources. You can still find info for retired campaigns on the Completed Campaigns page and all your contributions to retired campaigns remain on your profile page.[52]

This parallel track between the authoritative record and By the People platform allowed us to pursue other desires, such as to use more plain language (language at the 8th grade reading level) rather than archival descriptive language for project names and descriptions, and to use language that might interest people and draw them into the task. For example, the campaign to transcribe what are called the "Clara Barton Papers" in the authoritative record at LOC, is framed on By the People as an invitation to transcribe original documents by "Clara Barton: 'Angel of the Battlefield'." We also provided how-to scaffolding for volunteers that generally isn't found in the authoritative catalog or finding aid. A note on the By the People transcription conventions for the Clara Barton: Angel of the Battlefield Campaign page offers guidance about transcribing letterbooks:

> *An important note on Letterbooks:* Letterbooks are bound volumes containing copies of correspondence on thin, tissue-like pages. The sender created these copies to have a record of outgoing letters. The front of each volume typically contains an index of included correspondents and subjects. The thin pages present two transcription challenges: text bleed-through and mirror image text from preceding pages. Bleed-through can make transcribing a page more difficult, but

[52] "About By the People," By the People, Library of Congress, accessed April 13, 2024, https://crowd.loc.gov/about/.

try your best to decipher the document. Ignore backward mirror image text and go to the proceeding page to view and transcribe the document.[53]

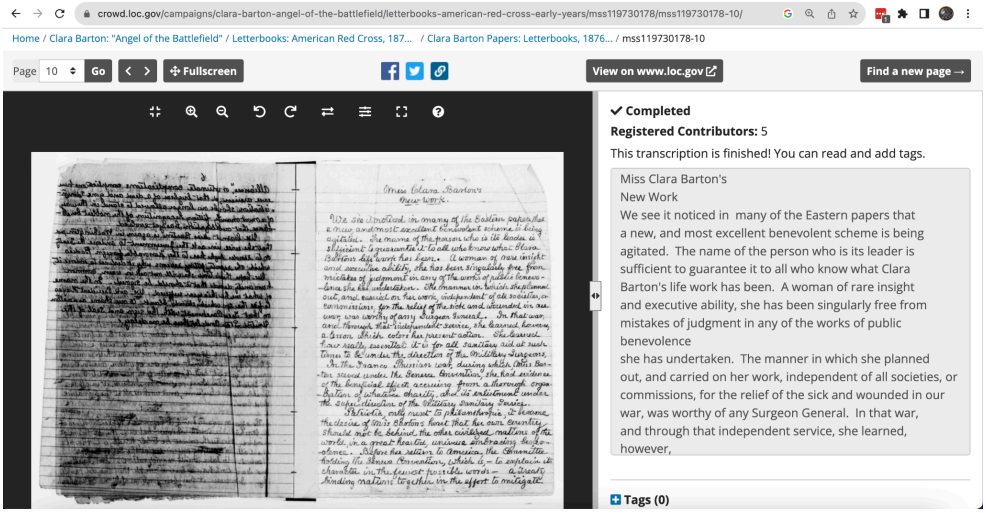

Image 7. *This is an example of such an image with the transcription provided by volunteers on* By the People

No equivalent guidance about trying to read these materials in their original form is provided on the LOC's finding aid or collection page for the Clara Barton papers, where different assumptions are at play about how people are interacting with content–that these are resources for *researchers…Researchers even, with a capital R*. (TH to FH: It's so important to acknowledge that these assumptions a) exist and b) influence information outcomes for users. FH to TH: *Yes! And it's cool that we're finding that in our emerging research for my early career grant funded by the IMLS:* Crowdsourced Data: Accuracy, Accessibility, Authority (CDAAA).) In my experience, a common assumption amongst collection specialists (many of them dear friends of mine), is that people *should* know how to read cursive or the relevant language or script the documents they have called to the reading room or asked to be digitized are written in. It is assumed that serious researchers have these skills, and it is considered an annoyance when they don't, but rarely is there existing scaffolding or pathing to help people gain skills in the moment if

[53] "Clara Barton: 'Angel of the Battlefield,'" By the People, Library of Congress, accessed April 13, 2024, https://crowd.loc.gov/campaigns/clara-barton-angel-of-the-battlefield/.

they don't have them. I've been that "annoying" researcher–trying to wade through an archive I didn't yet understand, sometimes having spent considerable time and money to get there, based on tantalizing but ultimately misleading information in a finding aid. There was the time I booked three days to work with an archive that contained a greater amount of Flemish and Latin than I'd expected (neither of which I read or understand), given it documented the origins of an English community of exiles in the sixteenth century. I was afforded an English-to-Flemish dictionary and an eye roll to assist in my work, a Flemish-to-English dictionary would have been nice, or even just an acknowledgment that I had a legitimate need would have been great.

For contrast, *By the People* and many other crowdsourcing projects assume that learning is part of the process of exploration and engagement. At the same time, volunteers are also assumed to be able to make valuable contributions to the authoritative record, that the learning they do along the way is sufficient, when combined with the efforts of fellow volunteers, to render good data. There's something joyful and radical in this–the interweaving of learning with the co-construction of authority. Two paths converging for the better.

So I'll close this out by asking what if crowdsourcing were a standard part of digital LAM workflows, core to the production of digital objects, data, and metadata, and fundamentally iterative? What if anyone could contribute to the authoritative record for any given institution in order to make it useful, legible, discoverable, accessible, and accurate for their own purposes and/or members of their community? What if (OL: people could easily provide their own materials for transcription and crowdsource metadata for inclusion in digital institutional archives?) How can memory organizations build play and exploration as well as resources for learning into all of their offerings? What if these iterative processes were core rather than parallel or peripheral to our interpretive and descriptive practices? What if our authority encompassed "I don't know. Do you? This task is too big, can you help?"

CONCLUSION

What is a desire path in the digital information landscape? Surely, it's many things. Surely, it is less visible than an unplanned footpath in a landscape. We need to have the skills and tools to surface digital desire paths, and the will to act on what we find–what are users and would-be users telling us through their digital traces?

Making sense of desire paths, and then forging new and (hopefully coherent) informational pathways in response to them, is not an easy task, as our own writing process reveals (though we assure you it's been a fun and liberating one!) We started out by coming up with a rough idea for how to write about things that interest us–accessibility, queer history, crowdsourcing–in ways that are speculative and less

hemmed in than much academic writing (FH: thanks to Obsoloser for seeing this opportunity and pulling us into it!) (OL: Of course and may all our future collaborations be this chaotic and exciting) At first we wrote on our own, checking in periodically, and began to see that our writing resonated in ways we did not initially expect when we (hazily) envisioned this piece. In fact, it was this resonance that prompted the theme of desire paths (TH: thanks to FurbyHater for this!) (OL to TH and FH: Yes! I can't stop seeing desire paths everywhere now [including one that involved creating a hole in a fence to cut through construction on my campus!]) to emerge as a valuable metaphor for the topics we are talking about, and the creative process of our collaboration. It took us each walking the pathways of our sections and then reading and responding to each other's work to make visible the ways our research areas converge and diverge. Just as desire paths meet needs that architects or urban planners don't foresee, we could not have foreseen the need for the system of representation that we've ultimately developed for our voices in this piece, had we not gone through the process of creation–separately and together–and desiring it to work out. We hope the end result–speculative and wild as it might look–offers solid ground for the next people coming through the information landscape, longing to represent their collaboration in non-traditional ways.

Throughout this process, we've asked ourselves and each other What if?. What if cultural heritage practice was more inclusive and representative, recognizing that the greatest motivation for our work is hope for a radically inclusive future? What if our digital cultural heritage represents more and more people among our user and practitioner communities? Our desires converge in pathways that, we hope, lead to a future where accessibility is easier regardless of ability level, where queer histories and materials are available and findable, and where crowdsourcing participants and their contributions are fully folded into the authoritative record (remember readers that you can share your struggles and solutions about how to incorporate user-generated content in this Google Doc).[54] We hope that this work continues to engage the future of digital cultural heritage, and that information scholars and practitioners can desire a future for our work together that is inclusive and radically transformative. What if we collectively ask ourselves and our communities What if?

[54] https://docs.google.com/document/d/1O-HevSwrptgfpN8iSugPD7wEpK_4rB8tTB3hakPjycc/edit?usp=sharing

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