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DIGITAL STORYTELLING: AN OPPORTUNITY FOR LIBRARIES TO ENGAGE AND LEAD THE COMMUNITY (Paper)

Abstract:
This paper describes a case study of the "*Love Your City, Share Your Stories*" digital storytelling initiative in Hamilton, Ontario. Data collection involved one-on-one interviews, document review, and participant observations with governance stakeholders from the Hamilton Public Library, McMaster University Library, and the City of Hamilton.

Résumé:
Cet article décrit une étude de cas de la "*Love Your City, Share Your Stories*" initiative numérique de la narration à Hamilton, Ontario. La collecte de données implique un entrevues, l'examen des documents, et les observations des participants avec les parties prenantes de la gouvernance de la Hamilton Public Library, McMaster University Library, et la City of Hamilton.

1. Introduction

This paper discusses how digital storytelling – the art of telling stories with the use of digital media (Couldry 2008, Hartley & McWilliam 2009, Lambert 2013) – is a new opportunity for libraries today to help exercise their capacity to be leaders in the community, improve relationships with the public, and deliver enhanced services the community expects.

Specifically, the paper describes a case study investigation of the "*Love Your City, Share Your Stories*" (LYCSYS) digital storytelling initiative in Hamilton, Ontario led by the Hamilton Public Library (HPL), McMaster University Library (MUL), and the City of Hamilton. The initiative involves the capture and dissemination of digital stories from Hamiltonians concerning significant cultural icons, such as historical figures, architecture and events, in a wide variety of digital formats (e.g., audio, video, text). To enrich and support these stories, a variety of library resources (e.g., photographs, geo-coded digital maps, archival material) are used. The initiative is viewed as a significant community-based mechanism to promote Hamilton's cultural and historical identity.

The purpose of the case study is to better understand the phenomenon of library-led digital storytelling initiatives and the opportunities they offer libraries to engage and lead their communities. The high-level research questions guiding this study are as follows:

i.   What are the benefits and challenges of library-led digital storytelling initiatives?

ii.   To what extent can such initiatives provide libraries the opportunity to engage and lead their communities?

2. Conceptual Framework

A recent report from the Council of Canadian Academies (2015) entitled "*Leading in the Digital World: Opportunities for Canada's Memory Institutions*" serves as the study's conceptual framework. In essence, the report sets the boundaries of investigation and serves as a lens upon which to guide analysis.

The report advocates ways in which memory institutions, such as libraries, archives, and museums, should take a leadership role in today's digital world. Here, memory institutions are viewed as collectors and preservers of cultural heritage, and digital technologies are described as offering many opportunities for the public to both access and contribute materials entrusted to memory institutions. The report asks how memory institutions can embrace such opportunities.

Specifically, the report outlines important **benefits** to memory institutions with participatory digital initiatives among their communities. These benefits include helping memory institutions to exercise their capacity to lead, establish sustainable and authentic relationships with the public, and deliver enhanced services that users expect in today's digital era by leveraging collaborative opportunities with other memory institutions. The report also identifies numerous **challenges** inherent with such digital initiatives including: the basic technical requirements of digital preservation; dealing with large volumes of digital data; selecting and appraising digital heritage, including its user relevancy; determining reliability and authenticity; and understanding legal, accountability and copyright issues. The report outlines a variety of **organizational actions** that can impact the successful implementation and roll-out of such digital initiatives, such as: prioritizing digital opportunities; developing new business models and human resources; promoting a standardized and generic ICT infrastructure; and managing collaborations, outsourcing, and copyrights. Last, the report describes **national factors** that support the realization of digital opportunities: leadership across memory institutions, legislative and policy drivers, and digital infrastructure.

3. Methodology

A qualitative case study investigation was conducted on the LYCSYS digital storytelling initiative. Data collection involved one-on-one interviews, document collection, and participant observations with governance stakeholders from the three participating organizations (HPL, MUL and the City of Hamilton). Future research will involve input from citizens who contribute and/or view digital stories housed within the LYCSYS database. A citizen's view is outside the scope of the current investigation.

In total, eight semi-structured **interviews** were conducted with key informants from the three participating organizations. Seven of the eight informants were involved in the management of the LYCSYS digital storytelling initiative through their membership on the project's steering committee; all informants were involved in varying capacities in the project's implementation. In this sense, interview participants formed a representative sample. The interviews ranged between 30 and 60 minutes in length, and were held in private meeting rooms. The study's conceptual framework informed the design of the interview instrument. That is, informants were asked to provide their perceptions of both the benefits and challenges of the LYCSYS project, as well as the organizational actions and national factors that fostered or impeded the project. Seven of the eight interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were reviewed by participants to ensure accuracy of the data collected.

A variety of **documentation** pertaining to the LYCSYS initiative (e.g., funding proposals, project-related documents, steering committee minutes, e-mail communications) also was collected. Last, **participant observations** by the lead researcher on the case study were conducted. These observations were gathered through the lead researcher's membership on the project steering committee meeting since August 2013, as well as attendance at various gatherings and events pertaining to the project.

To facilitate data analysis, a qualitative textual analysis software package (QSR NVivo) was used. Data analysis involved the four steps of grounded theory as advocated by Strauss & Corbin (Strauss & Corbin 1990, Corbin & Strauss 2015, Myers 2013): i) open coding; ii) axial coding; iii) selective coding; and iv) coding for process.

4. Findings

At the time of writing of this paper in January 2016, data collection is complete, a first round of data analysis has been conducted, and preliminary qualitative results have been produced. These preliminary findings indicate that digital storytelling is a viable mechanism by which libraries can engage and lead their communities.

Specifically, digital storytelling has led to:
- Enhanced partnerships among local cultural memory institutions;
- Positive public perceptions of libraries and city cultural departments;
- Increased emotional engagement and attachment among the public to their city.

However, findings also show that these benefits are constrained by certain challenges, organizational actions, and national factors. These include:
- Time and resource constraints among library staff;
- Change management issues within the library;
- Tensions between national archival standards and story collection in the field.

Further rounds of data analysis will occur over the next several months. This analysis will yield further insight into the benefits of library-led digital story initiatives, as well as the challenges and concerns that potentially can limit these positive benefits. This analysis is expected to lead to several salient best-practice recommendations for libraries that plan or are currently conducting digital storytelling initiatives in their communities.

By the time of the CAIS conference in June 2016, a final set of detailed findings and recommendations will be available for dissemination.

5. Concluding Remarks

This paper discusses how digital storytelling can provide libraries with an opportunity to engage and lead their communities. Specifically, the benefits for libraries with digital storytelling programs were contrasted with the challenges, as well as organizational actions and national factors that could potentially undermine any such initiative. In order to better understand library-led digital storytelling initiatives, a case study investigation of Hamilton's "*Love Your City, Share Your Stories*" digital storytelling initiative was conducted with governance stakeholders. Preliminary results suggest that these library-led initiatives are viable mechanisms for community engagement and leadership, but that libraries also must be concerned with a variety of challenges, organizational actions, and national factors that may constrain their effectiveness.

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