Determining users’ motivations to participate in online community archives: A preliminary study of Documenting Ferguson

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ABSTRACT
The shooting death of teenager Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, spurred an immediate national and international response in the fall of 2014. Washington University Libraries in St. Louis, Missouri, established the Documenting Ferguson web archive to gather digital media documenting local protests and demonstrations as captured by community members in order to archive the materials for future research and scholarly use. This preliminary study identified the factors that motivated participants to contribute content to the Documenting Ferguson online community archive, uncovering themes of altruism, reciprocity, and personal development.

Keywords  
Participatory archives, motivation, Human-Computer Interaction.

INTRODUCTION
As libraries have embraced collaborative technologies and the stewardship of user-generated content, practitioners in the digital library community have begun to establish participatory archives (Theimer, 2014) to gather digital media and digital ephemera related to emerging events. One such site is Documenting Ferguson, online at http://digital.wustl.edu/ferguson/, which was built by Washington University Libraries in St. Louis in response to the shooting death of Michael Brown on August 9, 2014, and the resulting social protests. The archive was initially built for anyone who participated in events in and around Ferguson to upload their digital images and videos from the protests, with a goal of providing diverse perspectives on the events through the development of a community archive with an engaged user base. To date, the archive has grown to include more than 1,000 digital objects from 44 contributors, including photos, audio files, videos, and personal stories.

While many participatory archives are focused on past history, such as DIYHistory, online at http://diyhistory.lib.uiowa.edu, which encourages users to volunteer their time to transcribe materials such as Civil War-era letters, fewer are focused on gathering materials from recent and unfolding events. Besides Documenting Ferguson, one such is Our Marathon, online at http://marathon.neu.edu, which is focused on archiving digital media related to the Boston Marathon bombing in 2013.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK
This poster explores the factors that motivate users to participate in online community archives using the Documenting Ferguson web site and a questionnaire based on existing methodology from Clary et al. (1998). Taken from a human-computer interaction (HCI) perspective, related studies have identified factors motivating participation in similar kinds of online communities, such as Wikipedia (Peddibhotla & Subramani, 2007; Nov, 2007), open source software development projects (Hertel, Niedner, & Herrmann, 2003), and Usenet newsgroups (McLure Wasko & Faraj, 2000).

Understanding why people participate in an online community archive requires an understanding of their internal and external motivations, as explored through a review of recent literature. Peddibhotla & Subramani (2007) describe "other-oriented" motives (social affiliation, altruism, and reciprocity) and "self-oriented" motives (self expression, personal development, and enjoyment) in their study of motivations driving users to contribute to public document repositories, such as Wikipedia and Amazon.com reviews. McLure Wasko & Faraj (2000) highlight altruism,
reciprocity, and sense of community gained through sustained online interactions as key motivations in Usenet discussion groups. Rafaeli & Ariel (2008) describe a user’s sense of community “through membership, influence, integration, and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection.” Looking across these studies, common themes of altruism, reciprocity, and personal fulfillment via community engagement emerge.

While there is a substantial body of work describing why people participate in online communities, until recently there has been less focus on factors that may be dissuading or preventing people from participating in those same communities. In a recent study by Dillahunt, Street, & Arbor, (2014) the authors explored how economic status affects participation in social networks; key findings include that people with little social capital, such as those in economically depressed communities, are challenged in building expansive social networks, and that site owners should identify ways to connect community members with those in authority. Additional research in this area could help expand knowledge of the key barriers affecting participation in online communities and ways in which site administrators should work to bridge these social gaps.

A method for measuring user motivations to participate in online community archives can be derived from social psychology. In Clary et al. (1998), the authors identified, tested, and validated thirty statements that describe the factors that motivate people to volunteer. The resulting Volunteer Functional Inventory (VFI) contains thirty questions organized into six functional categories that reflect the psychological and social functions of volunteerism, including Protective, protecting ego of negative features of the self; Values, showing altruistic or humanitarian concern for others; Career, career-related benefits; Social, relationships with others; Understanding, new learning experiences and opportunities to exercise knowledge; and Enhancement, ego growth and development.

The Clary VFI instrument has been tested in other contexts, and was adjusted to identify factors motivating Wikipedia editors to contribute to the site (Nov, 2007). In the Nov study, two additional categories beyond Clary’s six were added: 1) fun and 2) ideology associating editing Wikipedia to open-source development. Results indicated fun & ideology ranked as the highest motivational factors, with career and social engagement as the lowest. This suggests that the Clary VFI is a flexible instrument that can be readily adjusted to determine motivating factors in similar participatory contexts, such as contributing digital media to an online community archive.

**METHODOLOGY**

We conducted a pilot study of the factors that motivate contributors to participate in an online community archive by surveying users who have contributed content to the Documenting Ferguson web site. We used methodology from Clary et al. (1998) to construct a survey that tests the six functions of volunteering on a 7-point Likert scale (Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree), with appropriate edits to relate questions to the Documenting Ferguson context. The instrument contained five questions for each volunteer function tested, for a total of thirty questions, ordered randomly. Table 1 shows the functions and a sample question for each.

The survey was sent to the 44 users who contributed content to the Documenting Ferguson web archive; 13 responded for a response rate of 29.55%. This list of participants was generated in collaboration with the Scholarly Publishing unit at Washington University Libraries, which runs the Documenting Ferguson web archive. To ensure confidentiality and to keep within the boundaries of the accepted Terms of Privacy, an email inviting contributors to participate in the survey was sent from the Documenting Ferguson curator, describing the study and including a link to participate. No personally identifying information was passed into the survey or collected within, ensuring the privacy and anonymity of participants. Data was gathered and analyzed using Qualtrics.

Demographics of participants include Age: 25-44 (66.7%), 45-64 (33.3%); Gender: Female (58.3%), Male (41.7%); Race: Black or African American (25%), White (75%).

**RESULTS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Motivation</th>
<th>Sample question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Protective</td>
<td>Protecting ego from negative features of the self</td>
<td>“Participating in Documenting Ferguson helps me work through my own personal problems.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values</td>
<td>Showing altruistic and humanitarian concern for others</td>
<td>“I feel compassion toward people in need.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career</td>
<td>Career-related benefits</td>
<td>“Participating in Documenting Ferguson allows me to explore different career options.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>Relationships with others</td>
<td>“People I know share an interest in contributing to Documenting Ferguson.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding</td>
<td>New learning experiences and opportunities to exercise knowledge</td>
<td>“I can learn more about social justice by participating in Documenting Ferguson.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enhancement</td>
<td>Ego growth and development</td>
<td>“Participating in Documenting Ferguson makes me feel important.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Functional motivations of volunteering, following Clary et al. (1998), with sample questionnaire statements.
Ferguson are not doing so to feel better about themselves. “fun.” These data suggest contributors to Documenting motivating factor for open software development projects, where Career functions, it’s important to note that the questionnaire statement that received the lowest mean score (1.82) across the board was, “Participating in Documenting Ferguson is a good escape from my own troubles.” This response differs from findings from Hertel et al. (2003), where a main motivating factor for open source software developers is “fun.” These data suggest contributors to Documenting Ferguson are not doing so to feel better about themselves.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR DESIGN**

A preliminary recommendation from this pilot study is to adjust the marketing messages that are being used to promote the site and encourage contributions. This follows recommendations from the Clary study, which advises organizations seeking volunteers to “strategically promote their organizations in ways that speak to the abiding concerns of the volunteers they seek to recruit” (1998). The questionnaire revealed that contributors are motivated to do so based on feelings of altruism and a desire to gain and share knowledge, so these messages should be the primary ones carried throughout all marketing campaigns and outreach, as well as labels and cues within the site. The current promotional flier for Documenting Ferguson features a call to action of “Don’t let these images be lost to history,” encouraging people to contribute materials for archival and preservation purposes. While an important message that certainly resonates with those working in preservation communities like libraries and archives, that appeal does not directly translate to the motivating factors present in the site. Instead, appeals and calls to action should amplify the motivations of altruism, humanitarian response, and sharing and gaining knowledge that are present through messages such as, “Share Your Photos, Share Your Story,” “Call for Assistance: Your Photos Needed,” “Contribute to the Conversation” or similar. Further, partnering with organizations that also promote social justice and humanitarian concerns would help reinforce those messages to potential contributors.

**CONCLUSION**

This pilot study has helped illuminate the factors motivating individuals to contribute to online community archives by identifying motivating factors that encouraged contributors to share digital content on the Documenting Ferguson web platform. The questionnaire has helped identify why people have contributed content to the site, mostly being driven by a desire to work for social justice and other altruistic intentions. The findings suggest that there are not hedonistic or “fun” reasons to participate in Documenting Ferguson, as with other online communities.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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**REFERENCES**


