





Creating Digital Collections: Museum Content and the Public

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Abstract. The internet is a valuable asset for making cultural heritage accessible to a broader audience, and in recent years many museums have experimented with methods of sharing their collections online. This move towards a digital presence for museums has raised questions about the role of curators, librarians, and other information professionals in creating and maintaining digital collections. If anyone can collect images, and display them together on their personal website, what work remains for cultural heritage professionals to do?

Using data collected from webscraping using Python, we evaluate the explicit metadata associated with online collections of objects created by both the public and museum professionals. We look at museum websites which offer the public the ability to develop their own, personal collections from the museum's digitized holdings, (namely the Rijksmuseum) as well as collections utilizing similar technology on the Pinterest platform, in order to answer questions about the difference between professionally curated online collections, and ones created by the public. With the understanding that perceptions of images can be manipulated and altered by the context within which they are situated, we argue that distinguishing between professional and public collections can help information professionals better manage and anticipate patrons' expectations and the methods they use to make meaning out of digital cultural heritage objects.

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Curation · Online communities

1 Introduction and Background

At the turn of the 21st century, professionals and scholars in the GLAM (Gallery, Library, Archive, and Museum) fields looked toward the future of their work online. The internet was seen as a valuable asset for making cultural heritage accessible to a broader audience, especially as digital infrastructure became better able to support high-quality image and other media files. As a result, GLAMs began making parts of their collections available online. The availability of collections in the digital space raises a number of questions pertaining to collections management and categorization. Public engagement with these collections has the potential to alter the process of collection development and even the formation of exhibitions. Issues such as cataloging terminology and object classification become more poignant when a greater number of individuals engage in this process. The application of tagging by the public

has the potential to alter the way in which a collection is viewed and how accessible it is (Bearman and Trant 2005; Marty 2011). The ability of the information professional to manage this process, or indeed if there is a need to manage it, raises questions about the ability to define any one collection in a space when everything is infinitely remixable.

Past notions of collections have depended at least partially on physical proximity of tangible objects, or a shared history of collocation, and literature around defining online collections grapples with the absence of physical provenance in digital space (Lee 2000). Likewise, GLAMs' engagement with the public through digital means is an expectation, and institutions have been grappling with ways to present their collections to a digital public in an impactful and sustainable way (Hughes 2012; McGann 2010). Although some presence on social media is all but required, the choice of platform and the way in which individual museums choose to utilize social media varies greatly and can impact the way in which the public converses with the museum (Kidd 2011). With the move towards a greater digital presence there is also a move towards digitization of collections, with an aim to secure, preserve and increase accessibility to collections (Johnson et al. 2015).

Hur-Li Lee (2000) and Currall et al. (2005) begin to address these questions in their articles, both entitled "What is a Collection?" Both papers grapple with the absence of physical provenance in digital space as a means of defining a "collection" of information objects. Lee calls for information professional to conduct further research into understanding "how users view and use collections" (p. 1112) before diving headfirst into creating digital collection platforms that simply mirror their physical counterparts. Currall, Moss, and Stuart, likewise forefront questions of realism in collection-making, both in the physical and digital worlds. In the decade and more since these papers raised their titular question, the tools and methodologies of online collection-making have expanded, and our work seeks to provide answers to them, at least in a single, specific context.

The current professional climate is heavily focused around the move towards digitalization. But beyond the act of digitizing objects from an institution's collection, there is ongoing debate about how and where digital engagement should take place, and whether priority should be placed on increased access to the collections, or on the potential revenue that digital licensing can provide (Bertacchini and Morando 2013). It has been said that "digital innovations have become companions in our daily life" (Lohrmann and Osburg 2017). The expectation of a digital presence is one which GLAMs have been working towards over the past decade. The increased presence of museums on social media has been intended to facilitate engagement with visitors in a way which creates a feeling of involvement with the institution (Kidd 2011). This has begun to develop into a means by which the public can engage with museum collections rather than simply viewing pieces from the museum's collection on their website.

Some institutions have attempted to address the question of their digital presence by providing tools and platforms for visitors to their websites to "curate" their own sets of images (or other digital objects) from their larger collections. This aims to keep visitors engaged with the institution, and to maintain copyright and ownership of collection materials by allowing a space to explore and remix within the "confines" of the museum's digital domain (Cooper 2006). Conversely, social media platforms not

associated with cultural heritage have become popular places for the creation of informal collections, often using digital assets from museum websites. Along with this have come questions about the role of curators, librarians, and other information professionals in creating and maintaining collections online. If anyone can collect digital images, and display them together on their website, what work then is left to do for trained professionals to do? These questions will form the foundations of our inquiry, shaping the investigation into an analysis of the possibilities of publically created collections in contrast to what is offered by those curated and managed by professionals.

2 Purpose

This project attempts to answer these questions through the evaluation of publicly-available data from social media and the Rijksmuseum website, in order to highlight the differences between online collections created by the public and those created by museum professionals. The Rijksmuseum's *Rijkstudio* tool allows visitors to their website to make their own collections out of more than 200,000 images of objects in the museum's holdings, and represents the cutting edge of museum digital engagement (Pijbes 2015). With this type of engagement in mind, we present this work as a way to develop a foundation for further research, with the aim of facilitating new directions of museum engagement with the public in the future, as well as fostering theoretical discussions of collection-making practice online.

In order to accurately assess the implications of community developed collections both those curated within the context of the museum developed service "Rijksstudio" at the Rijksmuseum in the Netherlands, and those curated within the Pinterest platform will be analyzed. Pinterest is a social media platform which provides users with the ability to "discover and save ideas". According to Pinterest "every idea is represented by a 'Pin' that includes an image, description and link back to the image's source online" (Pinterest 2017). Pinterest users are referred to as "Pinners" within the context of the platform; content is provided by individual users and businesses from any online source both within the platform itself or from outside online sources, utilizing Pinterest's own browser extensions and the "Save" button.

The assessment of both museum and more general collection tools allows for discussion on how community curated collections are likely to differ by platform due to the intention behind engagement with the platform itself. Actively seeking out museum websites and collections speaks to a targeted searching approach which is not reflected within the Pinterest platform, which supports a more serendipitous interaction with the information. It is proposed that this difference will likely be evident within the content of the produced collections, where more integration and diversity may be seen as opposed to a more focused and detailed product. We believe that this study, by articulating and highlighting differences in public and professional digital collections across platforms will be able to guide the decision-making process of GLAMs in the future to create high-impact digital spaces that showcase their collections.

3 Methods

The choice to focus on the Rijksmuseum, specifically was made as they have an active presence on Pinterest and provide a tool for the public to develop their own collections on the institutions website. This purposive approach to sampling will allow for in-depth analysis within the context of a mixed methods approach (Patton 2002; Pickard 2013). Beginning with an initial evaluation of the collections available across both platforms, curated both professionally and by the public, the 25 most recent collections were chosen in each collection category.

Using Python and the REST API protocol, we collect data from the collection-building tools associated with the Rijksmuseum (<https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/rijksstudio>). This metadata includes: username of collection creator, association of the creator (if any) with the museum, collection title and description, number of items in the collection, item titles and descriptive metadata (creator, date, etc.) associated with each item, and any “likes,” “shares,” or comments associated with the collection. In addition, we collect similar data from the Pinterest platform, using the Pinterest API, focusing on the official Pinterest pages of the Rijksmuseum, as well as “Boards” created by Pinterest users explicitly labeled as being about or containing objects from the collections of the Rijksmuseum. This results in 2 sites of data collection (*Rijksstudio* and Pinterest), with 4 specific categories of object-collection data (Rijks-professional, Rijks-public, Rijks-professional-pins, and Rijks-public-pins).

Using this data, we evaluate the general methods of practice among and between these groups, via the application of grounded theory methodology of iterative assessment and categorization (Mansourian 2006). Individual collections are sorted into types by their content and explicit description, such as collections centered around a particular subject matter, art form or artist, or those associated with a particular aesthetic. Once categorized in this manner, we assess the demographics of the platforms and professional level of the creators for trends in who is making what, and where. Within the context of our initial qualitative evaluation this closer assessment will allow for the development of theories primed for further research into the evolution of the digital museum and opportunities provided by open access to collections.

4 Preliminary Findings

From an initial qualitative evaluation of the Rijksmuseum’s online professionally-curated collection it is apparent that there are a number of standard components which each digital exhibition contains. These include an overview of the collection including contextual information regarding the artist, theme or time period along with images of all ‘objects’ in the collection. This space offers more detail than the professionally curated content available on the museum’s Pinterest account, where there is little to no information regarding each one of the available “Pins”. The boards available on Pinterest which have been created by the museum do appear to reflect the same organizational structure which is apparent on the museum site.

In contrast, the community created collections (those pulled together by the public) seem to differ in the content and level of intellectual engagement. Those available on

Pinterest do not merely reuse the images which are available of the collection but also appear to include a number of images of the museum itself, in addition there are images of services provided by the museum. This changes the nature of the board from a representative depiction of the museum's collection to a representation of the museum experience as a whole. This is not the case with the collections which are created by the public within the museum website. The disparity here indicates a blurring of the line between "content" and the "institution" in public conceptions of the museum. These collections, although heavily laden with images of the museum's collection, do not fit the traditional museological definition of exhibition or collection, and indicate a difference in both the practices and goals of professional curators, and the public which until now, has only consumed their work. Making this distinction clear presents both a new challenge and a new opportunity for the role of the information professional within the museum sphere.

5 Conclusion

From the initial evaluation of the factors which are to be considered for this study it is evident that there are a number of variations on the concept of a 'collection' within the selected sample. By analyzing the way in which images are used within two online contexts, we aim to provide a level of guidance on the opportunities which GLAMs have to engage with visitors in the digital sphere. We believe that an increase in engagement with the public, as well as allowing for a space of personal meaning-making, can only result in a broader reach and deeper appreciation of the valuable cultural heritage and art objects held in the collections of galleries, libraries, archives, and museums worldwide.

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