The Cobbler's Children: Invisible Work and Information Professionals in Museums

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In January 2003, Florida Governor Jeb Bush, facing severe budget cuts, proposed that the State Library and Archives be disbanded, its staff fired, and its collection of nearly a million books and documents given away. Fortunately, the professional community responded quickly, rallying sufficient support to save the State Library and Archives from the budget axe.

As a relatively new transplant to Tallahassee, I followed the events with some trepidation, because the building that housed the State Library and Archives also housed the Museum of Florida History, a fact that had apparently slipped the minds of the rallying public. Why, I wondered, was nobody asking what was going to happen to the museum?

It was rarely mentioned in newspaper articles at the time (Associated Press 2003; Roberts 2003). People knew about the museum; they loved the giant armadillo and dugout canoe, the steamship replica and Spanish artillery. But when push comes to shove, "Save the museum too!!" does not make for a good rallying cry. Again, why?

The answer to my question, I believe, lies firmly rooted in the field of cultural heritage informatics. Information professionals in libraries (and to a lesser extent, archives) have worked hard to help the public understand what happens in those institutions. Information professionals in museums, on the other hand, are often more focused on providing information about their collections than explaining their role in modern society. Thus, while people had some sense of what they might lose if the State Library and Archives closed, it was harder to say what would happen if they lost the Museum. What do they do in there anyway? If we need to save money, couldn't the staff be replaced by security guards to keep the exhibits safe, and janitors to keep the cases clean? If not, why not?

Why not, indeed. Over the past few decades, museum professionals of all types, and information professionals in particular, have worked tirelessly to make themselves invisible, while simultaneously enabling their visitors to access information about their collections, anytime, anywhere. As a result, museum information professionals face a stark paradox: the easier they make it for people to access their museum's information resources, the harder they make it for people to understand how much work is involved in making those resources available (Marty 2012; Marty 2014).

To be fair, all memory institutions, including libraries, archives, and museums, face this problem; many people falsely believe that "if it's free for me to access, it must be free for you to create." But with libraries, people at least think they know what librarians do (they are usually wrong, of course,

but at least they think about it), whereas with museums, people happily admit they have no idea what goes on in there. Everyone loves museums, but few people know what museum professionals actually do, especially behind the scenes, and while one might love a good mystery, it can be hard to support something one doesn't understand.

Connecting people and information about cultural heritage collections is an admirable goal, but it can also be dangerous if one's efforts to create high quality, well-organized information resources remain relatively invisible and largely uncredited (especially to funding agencies and governing bodies). As long as people believe their easy access to your museum's collections just magically appeared—no thanks to your invisible work—there is always the danger that someone will ask, "Why are you important? What were your contributions? and Who are you anyway?"

Much has been done to try to change this. From the #AskACurator tag on Twitter (Pearson 2014) to museum outreach programs in bars (Kiessner 2009), there have been many attempts to raise public consciousness that museum work matters. But whether any of this raises awareness of the actual work that happens in museums is another question. To be sure, when a museum is directly attacked, such as Governor Rauner's recent attempt to shut down the Illinois State Museum (Burnett 2015), people flock to support it. But do they really understand what happens in museums?

Much of what museums do has been invisible for a long time. Every museum professional has a story about someone who visits a museum with free admission, and comments, "These exhibits are great! You could totally charge for this!" Even worse, the invisible nature of museum work has done little to address the growing divide between people who feel museums are for them, and people who feel museums are for someone else—a problem that Michelle Obama recently addressed when she argued for museums to be more inclusive (Incluseum 2015).

Unfortunately, the more we look at visitors' understanding of information work in museums, the worse things get. In the late 2000s, when many museums were uploading images to the Flickr Commons project, there was hope that such efforts would increase understanding of museum information work. Sadly, while Flickr users were delighted to have these images available—the Smithsonian, for example, found that their images received more views in three months on Flickr than they had during the previous five years on the Smithsonian's website (Kalfatovic et al. 2009)— almost no one bothered to find out who created them or where they came from.

At this point, one might well ask, does it matter? Many museum professionals prefer to let their objects speak for themselves, and work hard to make themselves invisible to the general public. Unfortunately, while individually it might fine to say, "I'm just happy that people are using my stuff," institutionally it is an entirely different ballgame, especially when public funds are involved. When tough budgetary decisions need to be made, it's easy to attack things people don't understand.

Many who are good at sharing information about the things that others have done resist sharing information about their own efforts to make those same resources available. Is it possible to encourage museum information professionals to make their own contributions clear, while simultaneously meeting the information needs of a general public that wants increasingly unlimited access to everything, with as few barriers as possible, and all of it for free? Cannot information professionals in museums highlight their own contributions, and admit that they too have an influence on the society they serve? Or are museum information professionals doomed to become like the cobbler's children, constantly providing information about others for others while their own contributions to the betterment of humanity go unrecognized?

To achieve this goal, we need to stop pretending that our nation's cultural heritage information resources are created by magic elves—armed with enchanted scanners and paid in floor sweepings. It is my belief that the solution to the challenge we face exists within us all, museum professionals and museum visitors alike. The best way to make information work in museums visible is to develop connections with museum visitors that align with those of museum professionals, thereby involving everyone in the co-curation process as consumers and producers of museum information resources. By leveraging the ways in which visitors use collections information resources outside the museum, we can find new ways to make information work inside the museum more visible.

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Biography

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