

Community Digital Archiving

Providing a local resource

Communities are increasingly aware of the value of the heritage they maintain, but access to that culture is often difficult. Part of a community project in Assynt has resulted in a digital archive designed to be a transportable environment so that other communities who may wish to run a similar facility can by-pass the development work, and, with a little customisation and a modest cost, can get started on their own digital archive.

A common factor of communities in the Highlands and Islands is their rich cultural heritage. However, all too often this heritage is locked away, either in attics, garages and memories of individuals and families, in boxes belonging to special interest groups such as historic societies or, in some cases, taken out of the community completely. This inaccessibility of heritage artefacts is hardly surprising; a visit to the purpose-built Highland Council Archive in Inverness quickly dispels any illusion that keeping documents, photographs, videos or other forms of heritage is a trivial task.

However, maintaining and making accessible digital instances of these cultural artefacts is readily achievable at a community level.

Background

The Parish of Assynt recognised this issue when the opportunity occurred to take over the defunct Royal National Mission to Deep Sea Fishermen building in Lochinver. While the need to meet the needs of fishermen has disappeared with the fishing industry, the community wanted a café that was open all year round, and a bunkhouse to make visiting the area on a budget more attractive. A marine attraction was also envisaged, as was the need to maintain access to archival material, not only of Assynt's marine past, but ideally its other heritage too. The community won support from the BIG Lottery "Village SOS" project, a condition of which was that the project and its components should be learning projects other communities could use to their advantage.

The Archive, therefore, was conceived under the following circumstances:-

- It would not be a money-spinner, so establishment and running costs had to be contained
- It had to take long-term views because its remit was to secure items of cultural significance well into the future
- Much of the memorabilia needed context to give it community value
- It would build on the archival needs of special interest groups such as history groups, field clubs, interpretation groups, individuals and families but for all community use

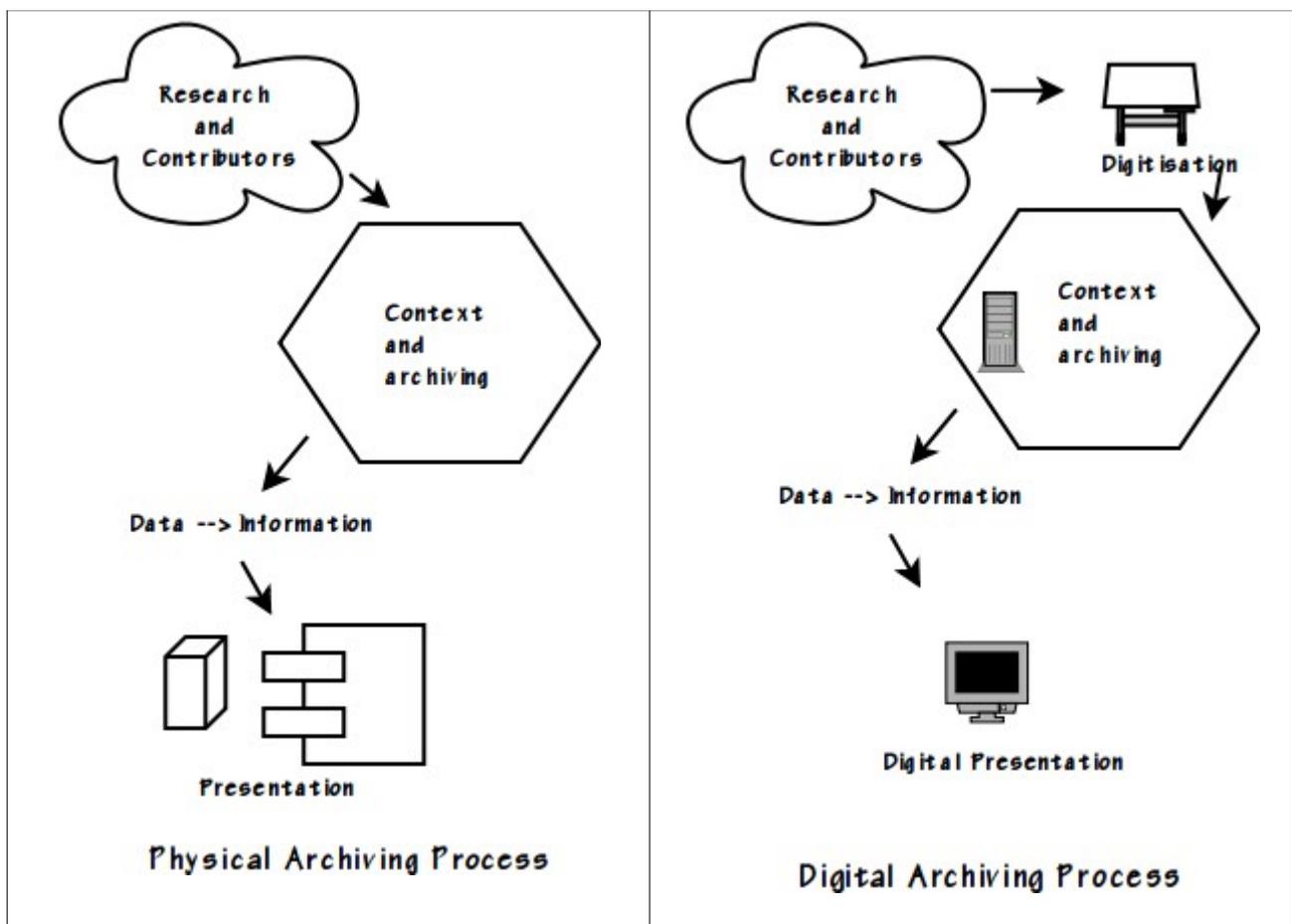
In addition, it was recognised that a community project cannot easily do justice to a physical collection the way a formal museum and artefact repository can. Space will always be an issue for a physical repository. However, a digital collection can go a long way to achieving the same value as a physical archive, with the added bonus of the possibility of making some or all

information available to a wider audience via the Internet if so desired. That way, space issues would be minimised, opportunities for learning and training would be wide as a range of skills and processes would be required to run the archive, information would be released for a variety of uses and the depths of a community's heritage could really be plumbed.

The concept

The requirement, then, would be to re-create the processes of a physical archive or a museum, but on a digital platform, with the same aims of a safe storage repository, giving artefacts context through skilled record keeping, and presenting interpreted subsets of the information to the public in an accessible way.

In a physical archive, researchers and contributors bring artefacts to an archivist, who labels them with information such as who, what, where and when and then stores them appropriately. At a later stage, those responsible for presenting artefacts or developing displays would choose items, perhaps adding some information or group them to make them understandable to an audience. In the same way, researchers and contributors would bring items to the digital archive, where an archivist function would be responsible for creating the digital record, using photography, image scanning, audio or video recording or other technique. That would be stored in a database along with the same "who, what, where and when" information the physical archivist records. At a later stage, a presentation project would be completed to display groups of images, recordings or documents and additional context would be provided. This will often take the form of a web presentation, but could be an audio-visual presentation too.



The Digital Archive

The Assynt Community Digital Archive has been built using Free and Open Source software purpose built for maintaining digital artefacts. The software is in common use among most universities and other institutions, so has wide support and familiarity among the academic community, whose standards a community would do well to emulate. Among groups and individuals consulted to determine the best way forward were the University of the Highlands and Islands, especially the Cultural Studies Department as well as the History Department, a former digital archivist with Tate Modern, a former archivist and system administrators of equivalent systems.

The result is that other communities may be able to meet their own digital archive needs by simply using copies of the systems developed for the Assynt Community Digital Archive. The community can therefore concentrate on the processes that are necessary to run an archive, specific to their own needs, rather than also being concerned about the technical environment.

The Archive systems are designed, too, either to allow suitably skilled local people to administer it, or to allow for a choice of external technical administrators. The barrier that technical issues present has therefore been removed.

Archivists and contributors may be responsible for their own area of the Archive, with suitable security giving people a sense of ownership over "their" part of the Archive, although the whole continues to be accessible to all for browsing.

The system and community involvement in the Archive is well documented, including example contributor licensing, conditions for use documents to meet legal obligations and so on.

Costs

How practical is it for a community to set up its own Archive? The use of Free and Open Source software helps to ensure costs are contained, especially as none of the software used incurs any cost at all and can be used by any number of people. The Archive itself consists of a single server-style computer, along with suitable disk storage. If the Archive is connected to an Internet connection, which is recommended for administration purposes, though not necessarily for public access purposes, then a second, small machine to manage security is advised. Such a system could cost as little as £2500.00. If the community needs assistance in setting up the system, additional cost should be factored in according to requirements. Additionally, archivist workstations and digitising equipment such as scanners and cameras may be required.

To provide indicative costing, a system comprising of the necessary actual archive systems, plus four archivists workstations, some suitable scanners, cameras and other needed equipment, in addition to a minimum amount of third party technical set-up costs, would be around £10,000.00

Ongoing costs would include internet connection costs, some third party system administration costs, and equipment replacement costs, over time. These running costs are difficult to estimate as local requirements may vary, but would be between £600.00 and £1800.00 per annum. For communities, income from community energy projects is a good way of meeting this type of ongoing operational cost.

Social aspects

Running a community digital archive does require some commitment from parts of the community who can contribute to a heritage pool. In general, existing social structures like interest groups or other community bodies may be able to see that their own needs can be met by a suitably run community digital Archive.

There are other advantages to communities running their own digital archives. Not only will local special interest groups be involved, but opportunities for training in the various skills required are available to those interested in these. People can learn about archiving, digital preservation techniques, interviewing techniques (audio and video,) systems management, other IT and communication skills, web site development, presentational techniques, database management and so on. In addition, the needs of the archive and making the presentations accessible will help to develop the communication infrastructure of the area. Finally, it is possible that the availability of such a deep pool of easily accessible local knowledge will attract not just researchers and specialists to the area, but also visitors interested in particular aspects of culture.

Next steps

Matching a community's archive needs against a conceptual introductory document such as this is not always easy. Communities wishing to explore the possibility of having their own community digital Archive may therefore request a demonstration either at the Lochinver Mission, the location of the Assynt Community Digital Archive, or in their own communities with a fully working instance of a community Archive which can be used to generate interest, initiate discussion or determine final requirements. Travel, accommodation and subsistence costs, if required, are expected to be met, along with a charge for the demonstrator's time.

Further information

For further information, please contact Stevan Lockhart by email at stevan@tncat.co.uk

