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Uplifting Diverse and Marginalized Voices through Community Archives and Public Programming

By Obden Mondésir, Annie Tummino, and Jo-Ann Wong

Abstract

Queens Memory is a local community archiving project co-administered by the Queens Public Library and Queens College Library. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Queens Memory embarked on a collaborative series of online programs that covered social justice, current events, and the creation of social change. This programming built upon ongoing community oral history and documentation efforts. This article explores how the public programs and oral history initiatives fueled one another, serving to uplift diverse voices within our communities and preserve those voices in the archives. Key ingredients of the programs are discussed, including technology, outreach, collaboration, consent, and format.

Keywords

Oral history, libraries, archives, library programming, COVID-19, SEEK Program

Author Biographies

Obden Mondésir is Associate Director of the Barnard Archives and Special Collections. He also teaches classes in archival theory at the Graduate School of Library and Information Studies, Queens College, CUNY. In the past, he served as Outreach Archivist in the Department of Special Collections and Archives at the Queens College Library, and as Oral History Manager at the Weeksville Heritage Center in Brooklyn, New York. Obden has a dual MA in Library Science and History from Queens College and is the recipient of a West African Research Center Library Fellowship and a Citi Center for Culture + Queens Library Fellowship.

Annie Tummino serves as Head of Special Collections and Archives at the Queens College Library, where her goal is to maximize access and use of archival materials. In the past, she worked as the Archivist at SUNY Maritime College and as a Project Archivist at Columbia University, the Museum of the City of New York, and Queens Museum. She received her MLIS and an Archives Certificate from Queens College in 2010, and an MS in Maritime and Naval Studies from SUNY Maritime College in 2020.

Jo-Ann Wong is a General Librarian at the Hunters Point branch of the Queens Public Library. She received her MSLIS at Pratt Institute, with a Certificate in Archives. In the past, she was the Librarian at the Chancellor Robert R Livingston Masonic Library.

Introduction

This article discusses our experience as librarians and archivists working together across institutions to carry out community archiving initiatives and programming during the COVID-19 pandemic. This work was carried out through Queens Memory, a local history program administered by the Queens Public Library and Queens College, City University of New York. Founded in 2010, Queens Memory has become an award-winning program that has collected over 600 oral histories and engages with the public through programming, training, a podcast, and more. While the public library documents neighborhoods throughout the borough, the college focuses on the history of the campus and its alumni, students, faculty, and staff.

In the early days of the pandemic, COVID-19 hit some areas of Queens harder than almost anywhere else in the United States (Barry & Correal, 2020; Correal & Jacobs, 2020). Because it can be difficult to reconstruct experience after the fact, Queens Memory initiated the COVID-19 Project to document how people were living, working, learning, and helping one another during this historic period in real time (Queens Public Library, 2020). Queens Memory partnered with the Urban Archive, a digital history organization, to create a technical infrastructure to collect submissions in a variety of formats, including photos, videos, written reflections, student work, and oral histories. In order to advertise the project and solicit submissions from the public, the social media team shared weekly prompts about various aspects of living under lockdown.

The Queens College SEEK History Project

In 2019, the Department of Special Collections and Archives at the Queens College Library began a two-year project to document the rich history of the Percy Ellis Sutton Search for Education, Elevation and Knowledge (SEEK) Program. The project was overseen by Head of Special Collections and Archives Annie Tummino and Adjunct Outreach Archivist Obden Mondésir, in collaboration with Queens Memory.

The Department of Special Collections and Archives at the Queens College Library collects materials on the history of the civil rights movement in the North and other

struggles for social justice. Given this focus, we felt that it was imperative to work with SEEK to actively preserve and illuminate SEEK's role in creating a more equitable and diverse campus. Launched in 1966 by civil rights luminaries including Shirley Chisholm and David Dinkins, SEEK is an opportunity program for economically disadvantaged students within the City University of New York system. SEEK reaches students who might not otherwise attend college, providing mentorship and tools for them to succeed throughout their university experience (Queens College SEEK Program, n.d.).

The SEEK History Project has multiple components, including oral histories and the archiving of program records. Tummino oversaw a SEEK intern in processing eighteen boxes of records from the SEEK office. Mondésir initiated and conducted interviews with SEEK alumni, staff, and faculty from 1966 to the present. The oral histories touched on many topics, including the SEEK rebellion of 1968-1969 (when SEEK faculty, staff, and students fought for autonomy over curriculum and personnel); the development of the SEEK counseling program; and fights for funding during times of budget crisis. Together, the archival records and oral history interviews provide a foundation for understanding the history of the SEEK program.

The SEEK History Project shifted focus during the COVID-19 pandemic but never ended. During the summer of 2020, Mondésir served in a listening capacity. He attended, and then helped facilitate, forums open only to the SEEK community. Staff discussed invisible labor taken on during the pandemic, the need to heal, and the anti-racism, anti-police-brutality movements sparked by the murder of George Floyd. These forums were intended to create a community of care; they took place outside of the "archival gaze" (i.e., were not recorded or preserved).

Mondésir's participation in the SEEK forums over the summer of 2020 helped him develop trust with the staff. Building on these relationships, he collected interviews with faculty and staff throughout the 2020/2021 academic year. Narrators discussed their personal backgrounds and careers at Queens College, the sudden switch to online learning in March 2020, and how they supported students who were dealing with economic hardship, loss, and sickness due to the pandemic. These formal interviews were contributed to Queens Memory and to the archives at Queens College.

The Black and Latinx Faculty and Staff Association

Through SEEK, Mondésir connected to the newly revitalized Black and Latinx Faculty and Staff Association (BLFSA) on campus. In June 2020, the "Queens College Black/ Latinx Faculty and Staff Against Anti-Blackness and for Systemic Change" statement served as a powerful call for Queens College to address systemic

racism and to make antiracism changes in administration, curriculum, and student services (Queens College, Black and Latinx Faculty and Staff Association, 2020). Interviews conducted by Mondésir with several members of the BLFSA provide greater context for this statement and its demands. Like the SEEK History interviews, the interviews with members of BLFSA have been submitted to Queens Memory and to the College's archives for long term preservation and access, and are shared with the public using Creative Commons noncommercial licenses.

Public Programs and Content in the Virtual Realm

At the start of the pandemic and the city's shutdown, Queens Memory, like many other organizations, transitioned its programming to the virtual realm. Jo-Ann Wong of the Queens Public Library played a major role in leading this transition. As always, the main goal for programming was to highlight the voices of Queens communities.

Wong helped create a variety of prerecorded and live programs throughout the pandemic. For example, "What Shapes Our Communities" was a miniseries consisting of interviews with local artists, businesses, and organizations about life and work under COVID-19. These interviews were prerecorded and edited into full programs (thirty to sixty minutes), and then released online. In contrast, "Snapshots of Queens" consisted of short thematic clips (three to five minutes) culled from COVID-19 project submissions and shared as social media posts. Other programming included a podcast, game nights, and virtual open-mic nights.

A variety of technical tools were employed to run these virtual programs. OBS Studio, an open source software program, was initially used to record and edit prerecorded materials. Later, we transitioned to using Streamyard as both a virtual recording studio and a third-party platform to stream events to social media platforms. Specifically, we streamed our programs to the Queens Memory Facebook page for live streams. Programs with high levels of audience interaction, such as trivia and game nights, were conducted through closed video conferencing platforms like WebEx, to ensure the privacy of participants. Regardless of format or length of the programs, community engagement and uplifting marginalized voices were a priority.

Public Programs and Current Events

As the Queens Memory team hosted these programs, current events impacted us and our communities. As such, we wanted to use these virtual spaces to inspire discussions about political and social issues. In dreaming up new programming, we

formulated three goals: 1) address timely issues; 2) reach the widest possible audience; and 3) create active discussion. Staff of the Queens Public Library and Queens College Library teamed up to create a series of programs with these goals in mind, targeting both the campus and the larger community.

The first event, “Model Minority versus COVID-19: Education Through Crisis, for Asians in America,” took place on June 17, 2020 on Facebook Live and was moderated by Frank Wu, the first Asian American to serve as president of Queens College. This event focused on the racial backlash caused by the association of COVID-19 with Asians, and the historical context for this racism. The discussion helped make clear that COVID-19 did not cause social injustices; rather, it amplified existing inequities.

The police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020, and the subsequent protests against police brutality and racism across the country heavily influenced the discussion among speakers and audience members attending the panel on June 17th. Many of the comments and questions were about how to be better allies in the movement for racial justice and how to eliminate anti-Blackness in our communities. This interest inspired us to expand the series and to plan an event that would speak specifically to the Black Lives Matter movement.

Building on the “Model Minority” event, for the fall 2020 semester, we created a three-part series of programs titled “How Can We Do Better? Creating a More Just and Inclusive Future.” In selecting speakers and topics, our goal was to empower diverse and multigenerational voices, and to support leaders on the Queens College campus who are at the forefront of ongoing diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts. Specifically, we asked the SEEK program, the BLFSA, and the Center for Ethnic, Religious, and Racial Understanding (CERRU) to cosponsor the series. Representatives of these entities helped shape the topics and themes, suggest speakers, and connect us with student activists.

The programs took place about a month apart, starting with “The Black Lives Matter Movement and Anti-Racism in Public Higher Education” on September 22, 2020, which included academics, activists, and staff. Together, the speakers provided critical perspectives on historical and current fights against racism in higher education and in society at large. The second program, on October 6th, was on “Fighting for the Future: Political Engagement and Student Leadership.” This program, scheduled a month before the November election, demonstrated the myriad ways students are making a political and social difference during and after their Queens College careers. The final program, “Power and Oppression in the Archives,” took place on November 17th, and addressed the role and responsibility of archivists in building a more diverse historical record.

As community archivists, in addition to generating important dialogues, we saw these programs as important methods of documentation, set against the backdrop of

the pandemic, the movement for Black Lives, and the 2020 election. The discussions captured the reflections and analysis of participants during a turbulent time in national and world history. In soliciting speakers, we were transparent about our desire to contribute recordings of these programs to the archives for long-term preservation, and obtained consent forms from all speakers.

Why a Roundtable Format?

What is a roundtable format, and why did we choose this format? In our programs, this format involved having a single moderator and two to four speakers. The moderator asked and passed questions to the speakers throughout the event. Questions from the audience were always asked at the end, and each event totaled ninety minutes. There were no canned PowerPoints or static presentations.

The roundtable format was ideal for these sessions, as our goal was to engender dynamic dialogues. Speakers engaged in a fluid conversation, which in turn encouraged audience participation in the chat. During the question-and-answer period, the speakers provided multiple perspectives depending on their backgrounds. Overall, the format was enjoyable for the speakers and the attendees, and included expressions of joy as well as serious reflection and sharing of research. Given the perils of “Zoom fatigue,” it was important to create lively events which held audiences' attention.

Tips for Planning a Virtual Roundtable

Active preparation and planning are key to creating a successful roundtable event. The following represent practical tips based on our experience. First, always have a premeeting with the moderator and offer to draft the questions that will be used for the event—moderators appreciate it (in our experience, only one declined this offer). Use a cloud-based editing program such as Google Docs to create a collaborative document. Share the draft with your moderator, and ask them to edit as they see fit. Group the questions in themes, which together create holistic coverage of the topic.

Once the themes and questions are approved by the moderator, share the document with the speakers and solicit their feedback. Have your panelists initial which questions they feel strongly about and are interested in answering. While the conversation is designed to be fluid, knowing who will answer each question first will facilitate more seamless transitions, without awkward pauses or silences. It also allows speakers to draw upon their areas of expertise, and give forethought to

the conversation. Once the first person answers a question, others can add their thoughts.

Always have a premeeting with the moderator and all speakers, at least seven days before the actual program. This meeting will ensure that everyone is comfortable with the technology and the final set of questions. Opening scripts and speaker biographies should be prepared in advance. It is important that speakers be introduced properly and that all cosponsors and contributors be thanked.

Remember that transparency is key. In our case, even after all consent forms were signed, we reiterated that the program would be archived and fully accessible online after the event. Speakers must understand where their image, opinions, and conversations will be publicly available. Wong has made a template and tip sheet for the roundtable structure available online at <https://bit.ly/RT-Template>.

Technology and Social Media

Streamyard is a third-party platform that can be used to stream to various social media platforms, specifically Facebook Live and YouTube Live. There is both a paid and a free version of Streamyard; we used the paid version. An advantage of Streamyard is that it provides users with control over the visual presentation and layout. It is easy to have multiple speakers on screen and/or to bring speakers on and off of the screen. It is also seamless to drop in links, images, audio-visual clips, and banners. Streamyard ensures quality streaming and is browser based, with no need to download any applications or software. With the paid version, we were able to personalize logos and obtain quality recordings of both video and audio files of the event. Much of the functionality is available even with the free version.

In our experience, Streamyard easily integrated with Facebook Live for streaming. Participants did not have to log in or have a Facebook account to view the programs. Streaming via the Queens Memory Facebook page made the content easy to view, share, and rewatch. Overall, the combination of using Streamyard and Facebook Live helped us inform a larger demographic and reach a broader audience than traditional academic programs, which are often advertised only to the campus community and require preregistration. Robust calendar listings and social media outreach by all sponsors helped promote visibility to diverse communities.

After the Series: Continued Success, and the Archival Process

Informing and educating is part of our core library values. These values should also extend after an event is over. Queens Memory events streamed via Facebook Live

are automatically stored on the Queens Memory Facebook page, allowing people to rewatch and share, and ensuring longevity and growth of viewers on the platform. In addition, the final version is preserved by the Queens Public Library Digital Archives, and uploaded to Aviary, Queens Memory's online portal for archival audio-visual material.

Facebook data is useful to evaluate the success of programs through live attendance, postevent views, and shares. Especially in this virtual world, replays are extremely valuable, and continue the mission to inform and educate our communities. For instance, while our second event had the lowest live attendance, its audience grew tremendously through replay views. The metrics jumped from 253 estimated end-of-stream views on October 6th to 945 views as of November 30, 2020, due to continued outreach and sharing of the link.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 initiative strengthened community relationships: between Queens College Library and the Queens Public Library, and between our libraries and various programs, centers, research institutes, and organizations. More broadly, the oral history interviews and public programming outlined in this article fostered timely and needed discussions, and ensured that diverse experiences were represented in the historical record during this unprecedented time.

Please find out more about the Queens Memory Project through the project's website <https://queensmemory.org/> and the online digital portal, <https://queenslibrary.aviaryplatform.com/>. Learn more about the SEEK History Project via the online guide at <https://qc-cuny.libguides.com/SEEKProject>.

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