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putting the pieces together: theory and practice

Navigating the Currents: Reflections from the Community Data Toolkits Workshop

Mikala Narlock, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN, US, mnarlock@umn.edu iD

Abstract

The Community Data Toolkits Workshop (CDTW) was held March 21-22, 2024, in Hamilton, Ontario. The CDTW sought to cross boundaries, and to forge relationships and connections between data professionals and community-oriented organizations. Drawing participants from across Canada and the local Hamilton community, the CDTW provided a distinct opportunity to reflect on the role of community, data, and community data, especially in an era of seemingly-never-ending change.

Below, I share a summary of the workshop, intertwined with meditations from *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals*. I reflect on the key themes that emerged, and end with a gratitude to all of the workshop organizers and participants.

Intro

> What does it mean to function as a group in a changing environment? How can we organize ourselves intentionally to combat the imbedded isolation of late capitalism? (Gumbs 2020, 51)

In *Undrowned: Black feminists lessons from marine mammals*, author Alexis Pauline Gumbs offers transformative meditations based on the practices of marine mammals, identifying the ways in which we can adapt, survive, and collaborate like various aquatic species (2020). Her meditations inspired me to reflect on my own role as a network leader, a community manager, a data professional—the currents I ride, the tidepools I inhabit.

My work is immersive, encompassing; I dive deep, looking for connections, forging relationships, making big changes and small modifications. I feel at home in the sea of data, but breathe the air of community management. I am the Director of the Data Curation Network (DCN), a gathering of practitioners shoaling, collaborating, teaching, supporting one another, and crossing disciplines and professions to share our knowledge and live our values as a community.

I carried these reflections with me when I traveled to the Community Data Toolkits Workshop (CDTW), held March 21-22, 2024, in Hamilton, Ontario. Throughout the workshop, themes of community, engagement, transparency, authenticity, and lived experiences flowed around us, was the water we inhabited. And in that spirit, what follows is a blend of workshop summary, personal anecdotes, and connections, loosely tied to yet deeply inspired by *Undrowned*.

Community Data Toolkits Workshop

This CDTW brought together librarians, research data management professionals, researchers, and community organizers into a shared space, with active inclusion for remote attendees, to freely discuss the challenges and opportunities in supporting community data. This diverse group of attendees, as well as the space to focus on the topic for two-full days was incredibly welcomed; it can be easy to churn, churn, churn, and get caught up in the nets of our daily "to-do" lists. This was a refreshing opportunity to reset, notice the water around us (Wallace 2009), and contribute our collective knowledge and expertise to a community-owned and oriented toolkit.

During the fully scheduled two days, the CDTW organizers centered the lived experiences of community data managers and advocates. The entire first day was spent learning from local community experts and connecting with other attendees. The phenomenal speakers included:

- Victoria Smith, Data Governance & Ethics Lead at the Digital Research Alliance of Canada,

- Dr. Ameil Joseph, Associate Professor, Social Work, McMaster University,

- Karen Robson, McMaster University, and Sally Landon and David Kanters from the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board, and

- Ted Hildebrand and Sara Mayo of the Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton.

These thoughtful presenters posed questions for us to grapple with: How do we ensure privacy while operationalizing and connecting data? How do we advocate for robust data management practices and know when to deviate from them to meet community needs? How do we uphold trust and foster relationships with our communities in an era of big data? Their expertise and lived experiences were invaluable for grounding our conversations from the theoretical to the practical.

The second day of the workshop put these pieces together, bringing our experiences and knowledge to the fore to start developing and collating resources. Community data need support throughout the research data management lifecycle, and the CDTW team identified the need for two toolkits: one to support data management planning, including resources like templates, consent forms, and community rights documents; and another to support data deposit, such as curation considerations or data access frameworks. Fortunately, The CDTW team had invited a wide-variety of experts which made for productive and lively conversations—and there was plenty of delicious food from local chefs (as well as candies, chips, and other snacks) to keep our energy up.

We gathered at 51 Stuart Street, and the event venue was itself a silent speaker, an active participant. The Custom House has lived many lives, supporting different communities through various needs. Now the space for the Workers Arts and Heritage Centre,[1] the Custom House has active exhibits on display and inviting engagement opportunities to foster creativity, with strong messages of support for all forms of paid and unpaid labor. In the space where we primarily worked, two large banners dominated the hall (Personal communication with Sylvia Nickerson, Programming and Exhibitions Specialist, April 5, 2024).[2] The first, black silk with stark white words, reads "WE MOURN OUR LOSSES," (Vinebaum 2016)—a smaller piece that hangs by the door, behind the food and coffee. The second consumes an entire wall, reading: "We will not take the morsel of bread from the mouths of our sisters" (Lee 2023). Under these stark Declarations[3] which call for solidarity in labor, I found myself reflecting on the need for collective action, the process of slow and thoughtful creation and co-curation, and the responsibility those in positions of power have to oppressed, marginalized, and silenced voices. In short: there was no better setting for reflective discussions on supporting community data.

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1 https://wahc-museum.ca/.

2 There are four banners in the exhibit, but two had been removed to accommodate the needs of the event.

3 Read reflections on these banners in the exhibition essay, written by Danica Evering, Logistics Committee Chair. Accessible at: https://wahc-museum.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Evering_StepUpStandTogether.pdf.

Connections

By design, the CDTW was overflowing with connections: between people, between ideas, and between institutions over drinks, over food, over Discord. I've loosely identified three conduits across both days that resonated with me—and while I've described them separately, it is worth emphasizing that they in fact overlap, intersect, and diverge. After a brief summary of each theme, I include a passage from *Undrowned* with reflective questions to inspire and connect us. While reading *Undrowned* in February 2024 as part of an Emergent Strategy book club,[4] I found the meditations to be engaging, beautiful, memorable—and they have since become a useful reflective lens for me. I hope they will resonate with you, too, and invite you to consider your own reflective lenses.

Process

As I was developing my presentation for the CDTW, I had time to really reflect on the current process we have in place for creating and maintaining data curation primers.[5,6] The process has lovingly grown alongside the DCN, changing with technology and as key individuals found new opportunities. As with all organic growth, there are some aspects that work well, while others need some love and attention. In my presentation, I summarized my experience with the primers and highlighted the good, and the less than ideal, aspects of the process with attendees. I hoped that this transparency would encourage them to consider what active resource management could look like, especially one driven by community research data needs. In preparing the CDTW participants to develop their own toolkits, we had the chance to reflect on what these would look like tomorrow, five years from now, ten years from now.

> Where are you now and now and now? Navigating planetary and political retrogrades? Do you feel like the world is on its side? Sometimes I do too. And I wonder who decided up and down? (Gumbs 2020, 49)

The data curation primers are meant to evolve over time, as new community members join, as topics and formats emerge and change (Hudson Vitale et al. 2020). As the CDTW attendees start to build toolkits, key process questions emerge. How do we keep in touch with our communities to ensure the toolkits remain up to date with evolving data standards, formats, tools as well as needs, goals, obstacles? How do we build a process for the development and maintenance of the toolkits that, from the start, balances the need for data with the people and communities at the heart of our work? How can we, together, decide how we will orient these toolkits and ourselves?

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4 Shout out to my amazing local bookstore, Brain Lair Books.

5 The DCN was invited to present on the data curation primers. As the active manager of the library, as well as an occasional primer author, I was overjoyed at the opportunity!

6 The full DCN library of data curation primers is available on our website: https://datacurationnetwork.org/outputs/data-curation-primers/.

Balance

Building on that note, balance was an undercurrent of our conversations. The group I worked with spent our time considering the balances needed between developing new resources and aggregating existing tools so as not to reinvent the wheel or unintentionally commit a form of data colonialism, recreating tools for problems that have been known and addressed locally (Couldry and Meijas 2019). We also reflected on the balance needed in the resources themselves, which would need to provide guidance, support, and structure while being able to bend, to adapt to the different needs of communities. Our group discussed how to balance providing data management education while recognizing that communities may need to diverge from 'best practices' to use the tools in a manner that best serves their needs. And while not explicitly stated, an undercurrent of the conversations was about the speed of this work: how we can move quickly, developing something upon which to iterate, but ensure we are still moving thoughtfully.[7]

> It is the speed, the speedboats, the momentum of capitalism, the expediency of pollution that threatens the ocean, our marine mammal mentors, and our own lives. What if we could release ourselves from an internalized time clock and remember that slow is efficient, slow is effective, slow is beautiful? (Gumbs 2020, 141)

With the data curation primers, we try to encourage authors to complete their work within 6-8 months while making space for timeline delays. We emphasize that the primers will be updated—they are living documents and will be updated. This helps break the perfectionist narrative many of us have running through our minds to get at something useful. Similarly for the toolkits, how do we slow down our work appropriately, taking space and time and resources, to build something we know will be imperfect while making space for iteration? How do we balance this against our internalized capitalism clocks, telling us to move faster, to produce more?

Relationships

Unsurprisingly, in a workshop centered around community data, a central resonant was the importance of relationships. Hannah Hadley and I recently reflected on the different types of relationships that go into collaboration: between organizations, between organizations and individuals, between individuals, all within larger societal contexts (Hadley and Narlock 2023). Then, as in the workshop, we reflected on the need for institutional and organizational support to enable collaboration—but the work, the relationships and the connections must be fostered at the individual level. The toolkits provide an opportunity to build and share resources that center genuine, meaningful relationships between researchers and communities. This is a chance to offer guidance on how to ask permission, how to ask forgiveness, how to go against the

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7 Slow is always on my mind, so perhaps that is why I heard it in our conversations. Or perhaps we are all refusing crisis narratives and adopting a slow-from-the-start mentality (e.g. Meyers et al. 2021; Thielen et al. 2023).

principles of open data by prioritizing the needs and desires of the community over the values that academia holds: citations, grants, outputs, and above all else, production. Under the banner declaring that taking crumbs from colleagues is not the solution, is not sufficient, I was struck by the thought: we will not steal the morsel of data from the mouths of our communities. We recognize the tension of open data and scholarship with community needs for privacy and safety—and assert that it is imperative that the toolkits we make, and update and share are rooted in the needs of the community, which will require us to pay close attention.

> Listening is not only about the normative ability to hear, it is a transformative and revolutionary resource that requires quieting down and tuning in. (Gumbs 2020, 15)

In the data curation primers, we have made space for nuance: exploring when data should be shared, engaging with potentially difficult topics, and integrating ethical considerations into our CURATE(D) practices (Data Curation Network 2022). How do we approach the community data toolkits with nuance, holding space to nurture our own community, giving ourselves time to commit to this work? How do we quiet down capitalist demands to produce more, academia's call for citations and outputs, and patriarchal notions that those in positions of power know best to truly listen in to the needs of our community members?

Outro

Our energy in the workshop spilled over, carrying us past our allotted time and leaving us wanting more. Our group was not able to start developing our toolkit, simply due to the amount of brainstorming, reflecting, exploring and learning we were doing to be sure that whatever we developed or aggregated would be useful. I deeply appreciated the space and generosity of the workshop organizers to let us grapple with these challenges. The time to be slow with our efforts will produce a better toolkit at the end, and we will have built meaningful relationships in the process, which reinforced a value many of us hold close: people > outputs.

With gratitude to the workshop organizers and participants, all of whom ensured a safe and supportive environment in which to learn and work, thank you for being present with me over those two days. I end with a final meditation from *Undrowned*:

> What I do commit to for this lifetime and as many as I get, is to learn with you always. … I do commit to rigorously learning how to gracefully collaborate, and step back when it's your turn with nothing to prove. … I love you, and how generous—how downright miraculous—it is that life would let me learn like this. (Gumbs 2020, 57)

Acknowledgements

Competing Interests

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