Excerpts from crowdsourcing papers by Rose Holley (2009, 2010)

This document reflects an unofficial re-ordering and minor re-wording of text from Holley’s original and revised texts on crowdsourcing. My intent was to fully preserve the original arguments and style while extracting a few of its key arguments; feel free to report any errors. Compare also with (Evans 2007). ~ Matthew Lease, ml@ischool.utexas.edu, 2/24/11.

Libraries and archives will never have the resources to fully do what they or the users want, so crowdsourcing is an opportunity that should be seriously considered. Crowdsourcing could bring great benefits to libraries:

- Achieving goals the library would never have time, financial or staff resources to do by itself.
- Achieving goals in a much faster timeframe than the library may be able to achieve by itself.
- Actively engaging the community with the library and its other users and collections.
- Utilising the knowledge, expertise and interest of the community.
- Improving data/resource quality (e.g. text, or catalogue corrections) for more accurate search.
- Adding value to data (e.g. by addition of comments, tags, ratings, reviews).
- Making data discoverable in different ways for a more diverse audience (e.g. by tagging).
- Gaining first-hand insight on user desires and answers to hard questions by asking the crowd and listening.
- Encouraging a sense of public ownership and responsibility towards cultural heritage collections, through user's contributions and collaborations.

Examples of crowdsourcing goals for libraries could be: getting users to mark the errors in our catalogues; rating the reliability of information/records; adding information to records; verifying name authority files; adding user created content to collections; creating e-books; correcting full text; transcribing handwritten records; and most especially describing items that we have not made accessible because they are not catalogued/described yet. A prime example of this is photographs. The normal procedure in a library is that a photograph is not digitised until it has been catalogued. If instead it is digitised first and users are given the chance to describe the content this would radically open up access to a lot of 'hidden' and difficult to describe photographic collections.

In the 'pre- digital library days' a user did not expect to go to a library and have a simple information transaction. They wanted the information but they also wanted to discuss with the librarian (or any other user) what they thought of the latest novel they had just read, the results of their research, what else they know about steam locomotives that was not in the book they just read, or the error they just found in your card catalogue… When libraries first started delivering digital resources all these social interactions were taken away from users and they simply got an information transaction by downloading content. It has taken libraries a while to realise that users still want more than a simple information transaction and they want the same and more social interactions than they had in the 'pre-digital' days. In our digital library world they want to: review books, share information, add value to our data by adding their own content, add comments and annotations and 'digital post-its' to e-books, correct our data errors, and converse with other users. And now they are telling us they can do even more, they can organise themselves to work together to achieve big goals for libraries and make our information even more accessible, accurate and interesting. Why are we not snapping up this great offer immediately? The potential of crowdsourcing for libraries is huge. Libraries have a massive user base and both broad and specific subject areas that have wide appeal. Libraries could
get hundreds of thousands of volunteers if they really publicized and appealed for help. Anyone with an Internet connection is a potential volunteer.

There is a major barrier which is preventing some libraries and archives from seriously considering crowdsourcing and that is loss of power and control. Pre web, information was produced by a relatively few large and powerful publishers; discovered by metadata hand-crafted by librarians; expensive and centralised. Post web, information is produced by anyone; discovered by full text and bottom-up linking effects; cheap and distributed. What this means is that there is a changing role for libraries and librarians because technology has turned discovery on its head; content can be created by anyone; content can be described by anyone. We are in a time of flux. But technology is not the challenge. The challenge is for libraries to be flexible in their thinking and change their long held viewpoints on information power, control and freedom. To embrace change requires changes to workflows, systems, and staffing. Libraries can do this but they tend to move slowly. In the business world it would not be a question of “will we or won’t we?” it would be a question of “this quarter or next quarter?” for their survival. Crowdsourcing is a good example of a major change for a library, and a perceived change in balance and power from the libraries to the people.

A shift in thinking is required by libraries to fully embrace the potential of crowdsourcing. Up until now libraries have been in control of creating, collecting and describing data and have held the power to do this. Individuals as well as organisations such as Google can now easily create, organise and describe content which is seen by some as threatening the role of libraries. Giving users the freedom to interact with and add value to data as well as create their own content and upload it into our collections is what users want, and helps libraries maintain their relevance in society... Libraries need to give up 'power and control' thinking and look to freedom instead. Harriet Rubin, business publisher and author talking about success says "Freedom is actually a bigger game than power. Power is about what you can control. Freedom is about what you can unleash"[17]. And librarians need to be courageous about this… Do we have the courage, and dare we give users something greater than power — freedom?

There are very few described examples of successful crowdsourcing projects in libraries because it is not really happening yet. In March 2009 I published my own research into the text correction activity by digital volunteers on the Australian Newspapers Digitisation Program ('Many Hands Make Light Work'). This report generated a huge amount of positive interest in the international library community... Many libraries are unwilling to take the lead/risk of being the first library to undertake something new on a significant scale, but hopefully the information in this article will lead libraries to move into this area of activity with knowledge of how to do it.

References

Max Evans. 2007. Archives of the People, by the People, For the People, American Archivist 70 (2): 387-400.
