

Citizen history and its discontents

Mia Ridge, for the Institute of Historical Research Digital History Seminar 2014

Abstract: An increasing number of crowdsourcing projects are making claims about 'citizen history' - but are they really helping people become historians, or are they overstating their contribution? Can citizen history projects succeed without communities of experts and peers to nurture sparks of historical curiosity and support novice historians in learning the skills of the discipline? Through a series of case studies this paper offers a critical examination of claims around citizen history.

Introduction

In this paper, I will briefly define crowdsourcing and citizen history and introduce some key examples that show the potential of crowdsourcing for encouraging new historians and for engaging the public in the process of making history. I will review current models for 'citizen history projects', discuss the role of expert participation in community discussion and the social construction of knowledge in turning 'crowdsourcing' into 'citizen history'. I will consider some structural reasons why some projects with aspirations to 'citizen history' instead only manage to be crowdsourcing projects. I will conclude by considering the impact of this conflation of 'crowdsourcing' and 'citizen history' and by asking which historical skills should be considered a core part of the 'citizen historians' experience.

I became interested in how digital platforms and resources have affected how people 'become historians' through practices outside of formal academic training through my research comparing academic with non-academic historians (specifically, family and local historians). This is part of a wider exploration of the impact of digitality on historical research practices.

I used methods such as 'trace ethnography' (the analysis of 'documents and documentary traces'¹ that result from computer-mediated communication, including project documentation, interfaces, and forum and social media posts) to study online interactions between crowdsourcing participants and project stakeholders. I have also analysed dozens of history and science-based crowdsourcing websites in terms of their 'perceived affordances', the actions a visual interface appears to enable or discourage.²

Having worked on large partnership projects in museums, I want to make it very clear that I am sympathetic to the reality of implementing projects and

¹ R. Stuart Geiger and David Ribes, "Trace Ethnography: Following Coordination through Documentary Practices," in *System Sciences (HICSS)*, 2011 44th Hawaii International Conference on (IEEE, 2011), 1-10, http://ieeexplore.ieee.org/xpls/abs_all.jsp?arnumber=5718606.

² Donald A. Norman, "Affordance, Conventions, and Design," *Interactions* 6, no. 3 (1999): 38-43, <http://dl.acm.org/citation.cfm?id=301168>.

understand that there are many reasons why projects might not be able to live up to all promises made, and may have to prioritise internal concerns over certain types of public engagement. In acting as a 'critical friend' in regard to these projects, I am interested in the structural reasons why participatory projects cannot always support all of their state goals, and the effect on audiences when this does happen.

Definitions

Crowdsourcing

Crowdsourcing was originally defined in relation to 'outsourcing', as the act of putting out a call for people to take on work once performed within an organisation.³ Unlike outsourcing, the call is open to 'the crowd', so participants' skills and motivations for participation can be unknown to the institution. (However, in reality there is rarely an actual 'crowd', as a call for participation is only heeded by a small group with the relevant skills, devices, leisure time and interests).

Crowdsourcing is currently popular with cultural heritage institutions as it has helped digitise and enhance millions of catalogue records and primary documents. Ideally, in cultural heritage or history crowdsourcing, the public undertake meaningful tasks in environments with inherently rewarding activities or goals.⁴ Crowdsourcing in cultural heritage appeals to altruistic and intrinsic motivations, and offers a chance to follow personal interests, gain 'behind the scenes' access to museums, libraries, archives and academia, and opportunities for close encounters with historic material. The complexity of the task and the level of public involvement ranges from simple contributions through crowdsourced observation, transcription or categorisation tasks to independent research on set questions, or even collaboratively defining research questions.

Heritage crowdsourcing also references 'citizen science', a version of scientific crowdsourcing which has roots in the movement for public participation in scientific research.⁵ Citizen science projects follow the crowdsourcing model of online contributions via tasks such as image classification, text transcription or species identification.⁶ Definitions of citizen science fall into two camps, a pattern we'll see repeated in discussions of 'citizen history'. In its simplest form, citizen science is indistinguishable from crowdsourcing - members of the

³ Jeff Howe, "The Rise of Crowdsourcing," *Wired*, June 2006, http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/14.06/crowds_pr.html.

⁴ Mia Ridge, "Crowdsourcing Our Cultural Heritage: Introduction," in *Crowdsourcing Our Cultural Heritage*, ed. Mia Ridge, Digital Research in the Arts and Humanities (Farnham, Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2014), <http://www.ashgate.com/isbn/9781472410221>.

⁵ Rick Bonney et al., "Public Participation in Scientific Research: Defining the Field and Assessing Its Potential for Informal Science Education. A CAISE Inquiry Group Report" (Washington D.C.: Center for Advancement of Informal Science Education (CAISE), July 2009), <http://caise.insci.org/uploads/docs/PPSR%20report%20FINAL.pdf>.

⁶ Examples include *Galaxy Zoo* (classifying images of galaxies), *Herbaria@Home* (transcribing historical herbarium specimen sheets) and *Snapshot Serengeti* (identifying animals in images).

public assist professional scientists with their research by taking on data processing tasks like image classification or observation.⁷ In other cases, citizen science projects additionally include participants in data analysis or research design, or support participants in taking on parallel analysis and research projects.⁸ Projects such as *Galaxy Zoo* initially asked the public to help classify images, but realised that self-selected participants wanted to learn about and contribute to the analysis of the data created through the project.⁹

Generally speaking, the practice of history has a lower barrier to entry than science, and particularly these days can be started from home by accessing digitised resources. There is a long tradition of avocational historians,¹⁰ sometimes working on collaborative projects - local historians in the UK sometimes undertake long-term, complex research projects.¹¹ These avocational historians might have had some undergraduate academic training in history but followed careers in other fields, returning to history on retirement or after raising a family. Others learnt their skills through practice, particularly family history, often taking courses to learn specific skills as needed. They often participate in 'communities of practice' through discussions with others, in-person or online.¹² The richness, variety and depth of the discussions can be astounding. While they are by no means perfect, these communities of practice in local or specialist history who meet in online forums or village halls around the country have set the standard to which I compare citizen history projects.

Communities of practice

A community of practice can be viewed as 'a social learning system'¹³ where newcomers 'learn and acquire knowledge through participating in everyday activity with colleagues'.¹⁴ Online forums support many of the activities typical

⁷ For example, Andrea Wiggins and Kevin Crowston, "From Conservation to Crowdsourcing: A Typology of Citizen Science," in *Proceedings of the 44th Annual Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences* (2011 44th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences, Koloa, Hawaii, 2011), doi:10.1109/HICSS.2011.207.

⁸ For example, Muki Haklay, "Citizen Science and Volunteered Geographic Information - Overview and Typology of Participation," in *Crowdsourcing Geographic Knowledge: Volunteered Geographic Information (VGI) in Theory and Practice*, ed. Daniel Z. Sui, Sarah Elwood, and Michael F. Goodchild (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2013), <http://www.springerlink.com/index/10.1007/978-94-007-4587-2>.

⁹ M. Jordan Raddick et al., "Galaxy Zoo: Exploring the Motivations of Citizen Science Volunteers," *Astronomy Education Review* 9, no. 1 (2010): 18, <http://dx.doi.org/10.3847/AER2009036>.

¹⁰ 'Avocational' has less problematic overtones than 'amateur'.

¹¹ This may show the influence of the Oxford and Open University's distance education courses in Local History which included topics like database design. The shared experience of students might have helped seed some communities of practice for local history groups.

¹² Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger coined the term 'communities of practice' for their 1991 book, *Situated Learning. Legitimate peripheral participation*, Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press.

¹³ Etienne Wenger, "Communities of Practice and Social Learning Systems: The Career of a Concept," in *Social Learning Systems and Communities of Practice* (Springer Verlag and the Open University, 2010).

¹⁴ Claire McInerney, "Knowledge Management and the Dynamic Nature of Knowledge," *Journal*

of communities of practice, including problem solving, making and answering requests for information, coordinating activities and undertaking documentation projects. While the work itself may be solitary - as is most historical research - communities of practice develop 'a shared repertoire of resources' including 'experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems'.¹⁵ While the original theoretical work on communities of practice involved in-person discussion, online communication, including social media, forums and discussion lists, similarly show many traces of the development of shared practices.

Online conversations are also examples of another aspect of situated learning called legitimate peripheral participation (LPP), where 'newcomers start off by engaging in simple practices', a level of participation that 'makes them legitimate but peripheral members of the community' and offers opportunities for 'observing more experienced members of a community' as they work and learning the 'tasks, vocabulary and organizational principles of the community'.¹⁶ For example, someone transcribing records also has the opportunity to observe discussions or find answers posted to a website forum. LPP is the process of going from being an outsider, making a tentative first post, to becoming an insider within a community of practice, able to share ones growing expertise with others. LPP was inspired by watching apprentices at work, which has echoes of the traditional history PhD.

You also see this 'learning through participation' on family history or genealogy sites, where someone might post a request for help and learn about new sources, discuss how to better interpret or question the sources they have, and be pointed to sites or books that will provide more background for their question. Arguably, the process of explaining their research processes also helps others reflect on and strengthen their own historical skills.

My analysis of these online communities has additionally been informed by interviews with family and local historians, which act as a useful reminder that discussion visible online is often only part of the story - personal correspondence; events and meetings (particularly for local historians) are also important. It is also important to note that online discussions only represents those confident enough to post, and favours the articulate and those with leisure time to post.

It is interesting to note that many successful avocational history projects and

of the American Society for Information Science and Technology 53, no. 12 (2002): 1009–18, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/asi.10109/full>.

¹⁵ Etienne Wenger-Trayner, "Communities of Practice: A Brief Introduction," *Wenger-Trayner*, Undated, <http://wenger-trayner.com/theory/>. The *Old Weather* forums may be the most impressive examples of these, with hundreds of pages of documentation and related summaries to help participants transcribe historical ships logs.

¹⁶ Gabriel Mugar et al., "Planet Hunters and Seafloor Explorers: Legitimate Peripheral Participation Through Practice Proxies in Online Citizen Science," accessed June 3, 2014, http://crowston.syr.edu/sites/crowston.syr.edu/files/paper_revised%20copy%20to%20post.pdf.

communities of practice are based around particular regions or around specific topics (such as family history or the First World War), suggesting that a shared bond linked to the specificity of local experiences and connections or shared approaches has a role in the formation of communities of practice.

Defining 'historians'

In order to ask whether projects are (or should be) teaching historical skills, it is necessary to ask what is it to be 'a historian', and how one gains the skills and experience associated with the label. So what is a historian, and what is a 'citizen historian'? The answer is not straightforward. Ludmilla Jordanova describes the discipline of history as 'a set of practices' rather than beliefs or theories.¹⁷ The lack of a formal definition makes assessing claims about 'citizen historians' more problematic, echoing earlier issues with the reception of avocational historians, particularly family historians and genealogists.

The American Historical Association (AHA) lists six 'core competencies' for students in history courses and degree programs: the ability to engage in historical inquiry, research, and analysis; to practice historical empathy; to understand the complex nature of the historical record; generate significant, open-ended questions about the past and devise research strategies to answer them; to craft historical narrative and argument; and to practice historical thinking'.¹⁸ Jordanova posits three inseparable groups of skills: technical (e.g. palaeography); skills related to 'the finding and evaluating of sources' to investigate a historical problem, and 'interpretative skills'.¹⁹

If '[h]istory is indeed about what historians do',²⁰ then crowdsourcing is an excellent opportunity to observe the things historians do, learn technical skills like palaeography and gain some familiarity with sources. But gaining interpretation and solid source-based skills might require more support.

Historical thinking is another useful concept. Tally and Goldenberg defined it as observation ('scanning and parsing' documents), sourcing (asking who made the document and why), making inferences, citing evidence for arguments, posing questions (cultivating puzzlement), and corroboration (comparing what is found to other documents and prior knowledge).²¹

Historical transcription projects provide an excellent grounding in some technical skills, while community forums show participants posting many

¹⁷ p 14 Ludmilla Jordanova, *History in Practice*, Second edition (London, U.K.: Bloomsbury Academic, 2006).

¹⁸ American Historical Association, "AHA History Tuning Project: History Discipline Core," *American Historical Association*, September 2013, <http://www.historians.org/teaching-and-learning/current-projects/tuning/history-discipline-core>.

¹⁹ p 151 Jordanova, *History in Practice*, 2006.

²⁰ Ludmilla Jordanova, *History in Practice* (London: Arnold, 2000).

²¹ Bill Tally and Lauren B. Goldenberg, "Fostering Historical Thinking With Digitized Primary Sources," *Journal of Research on Technology in Education* 38, no. 1 (2005): 1–21.

questions and discussing sourcing, inferences and evidence. These discussions also provide evidence for people corroborating information between sources (for example, looking at other sources to check personal and place names). Even 'mechanical' tasks can provide hooks for quite in-depth historical work. But many of these activities do not take on what academic historians might regard as the final stage of making explicit historiographic arguments in narrative form.

Examples/case studies

I have selected some projects as examples of participatory, or 'citizen' history projects. 'Citizen' and avocational history projects, broadly defined, include a range of tasks, from 'type what you see' transcriptions (varies in difficulty depending on handwriting and state of doc but requires little subjective judgement) to complex research design and interpretative tasks.

FreeBMD

FreeBMD began in 1998 to 'provide free Internet access to the Civil Registration index information from England and Wales'.²² Ten years later it had over 200 million records. Transcribers are not necessarily undertaking research projects while contributing to *FreeBMD* but they are learning historical skills and contributing to public knowledge through their work.

World War One forums

Some WWI forums function as large, long-term communities of practice. Conversations on these forums have informed my expectations about the depth of expertise and the learning possible through participation in communities of practice. These forums do not usually organise digitisation or transcription projects, as other community groups might, but as large communities where novices can learn from experts, they could be considered a form of citizen history, with many avocational (and the occasional professional) historians among the participants in discussion.

Old Weather

Old Weather is a 'Zooniverse' project²³ that aims to extract weather information from historic ships logs for use by climate scientists. Other structured transcription projects work on historical materials including restaurant menus, theatrical playbills, census and other biographical records. These projects are all very productive, often running out of material following high levels of participation. But more importantly, these close encounters with original, often handwritten, documents seem to be opportunity for awakening curiosity about the stories behind the documents. In turn, curiosity is linked to motivation to

²² Camilla von Massenbach, "RootsWeb: FreeBMD-Admins-L FreeBMD Project," *FreeBMD-Admins-L Archives*, September 25, 1998, <http://archiver.rootsweb.ancestry.com/th/read/FreeBMD-Admins/1998-09/0906727973>.

²³ The 'Zooniverse' is the organisation behind many citizen science projects, some of which have developed into partial citizen history projects.

learn more about the sources, and to learn new skills.

While originally intended as a platform to deal with the huge numbers of questions coming in via email, the forums on Zooniverse projects provide almost canonical examples of the role of discussion in supporting informal learning experiences in crowdsourcing projects. While *Old Weather* was envisioned as a citizen science project, the logs themselves contain fascinating details and many participants turned to the forum to discuss interesting things they had found in the logs.

Like other transcription projects, the *Old Weather* forums contain traces of people using other sources to check their transcription of people and places names mentioned in the documents. Experienced transcribers have compiled guides to specific ships to help newer participants, written a Compendium of Maritime and Weather Information, and worked with maritime historians to compile information for ships histories. They've also followed their initiative in developing a research project to track 'the relationship between the 'Number on Sick List' section of the log and the well-known 'Spanish flu' outbreak in 1918'.²⁴ The *Old Weather* forums are a great example of a community of practice.

These transcription projects provide many examples of participants discovering or rediscovering a latent interest in history and going on to historical research related to the source material they worked on. But in some ways, *Old Weather* is a grassroots history project that just happens to be hosted on a crowdsourcing platform. The inherent interestingness of historic documents drew people into discussion, but that success has been hard to replicate.

Operation War Diary

Operation War Diary is another Zooniverse project, created in conjunction with the Imperial War Museum and National Archives. *Operation War Diary* aims to extract metadata from British military unit war diaries. The site mentions 'citizen historians' on its front page and in various publicity materials. As a Zooniverse project, I would expect that their expectations about citizen history were heavily informed by the success of the *Old Weather* project.

As in *Old Weather*, we see examples of participants using other sites to cross-

²⁴ Philip Brohan, "HMS Africa in Action against Orthomyxoviridae," *Old Weather Blog*, January 12, 2011, <http://blog.oldweather.org/2011/01/12/hms-africa-in-action-against-orthomyxoviridae/>.and Fiona Romeo and Lucinda Blaser, "Bringing Citizen Scientists and Historians Together," in *Museums and the Web 2011: Proceedings*, ed. Jennifer Trant and David Bearman (Museums and the Web 2011, Toronto, Canada: Archives & Museum Informatics, 2011), http://www.museumsandtheweb.com/mw2011/papers/bringing_citizen_scientists_and_historians_tog. Operation War Diary participants may also have found evidence for the first outbreaks in Various, "Epidemic," *Talk Operation War Diary*, 2014, http://talk.operationwardiary.org/#/boards/BWD00000ob/discussions/DWD00002ef?page=1&comment_id=52e80baef11e0413040001dc.

check names and experts answering questions on the site forum. However, we also see that potentially interesting material in the diaries is being noticed by participants but not discussed further on the site forum. This is partly perhaps because of a lack of participants available or able to respond, but it also speaks to the absence of experts who could answer the question or provide pointers to related discussion.

Taking a step back, this absence of experts throws an inherent tension in the *Operation War Diary* project into relief. Looking at their stated aims,²⁵ the project's goals are to create material for use in the *Lives of the First World War* project, for academics and for the National Archives. While the project uses the term 'citizen historians' in promotional material, if supporting the development of participants as historians is not an explicit aim then the project might not have prioritised the allocation of resources to supporting the emergence of a community of practice. The project had invited academic historians to take part in its advisory board and participate in discussion, but again, the way this has been implemented may have unintentionally created tensions. When viewing the forum, you may notice that some posters have the label 'historian' next to their name. This raises questions about the status of the purported 'citizen historians' who are not so labelled - does it mean 'potential historian', or 'wannabe historian', or, for the moment, are they really just 'transcribers'? This unintentional but revealing juxtaposition of 'real' and 'citizen' historians raises the spectre of the 'faux' historian.

Finally, a statement on the project blog shows the difficulties in managing participant expectations - 'we do not wish to create the expectation that we will ever guarantee any level of response from us to your history enquiries' - and directs participants to 'discuss their findings in the diaries with each other'.²⁶ It is true that digital history projects, particularly those with name-rich sources that might interest family historians, can attract large numbers of research enquiries. However, this post seems to contradict the spirit of the Zooniverse project application form which prompts, 'Are there members of your team willing to write blog posts, join forum discussions on scientific topics or otherwise take part in outreach?'.²⁷

***Children of the Lodz Ghetto* Research Project**

In contrast, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's *Children of the Lodz Ghetto* was intentionally designed to 'encourage more people to become historians',²⁸ or least to practice historical thinking and skills. Following the

²⁵ Operation War Diary, "About Operation War Diary," *Operation War Diary*, 2014, <http://www.operationwardiary.org/#/about>.

²⁶ Luke Smith, "Inside Team War Diary...", *Operation War Diary*, April 8, 2014, <http://blog.operationwardiary.org/2014/04/08/inside-team-war-diary/>.

²⁷ Zooniverse, "Submit a Proposal," *Constructing Scientific Communities*, 2014, <http://conscicom.org/proposals/form/>.

²⁸ Elissa Frankle, "More Crowdsourced Scholarship: Citizen History," *Center for the Future of Museums*, July 28, 2011, <http://futureofmuseums.blogspot.co.uk/2011/07/more-crowdsourced-scholarship-citizen.html>.

model set by citizen science projects, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum began using the term 'citizen history' in 2011 to describe their *Children of the Lodz Ghetto* project, conceived of as an 'experiment in finding out what happens if we trust visitors' with the research work of the museum.²⁹

The projects discussed previously were largely based on 'microtasks' - small, discrete tasks, such as transcribing lines of text - where the interest in history that developed was an unexpected side-effect of exposure to historic records and participation in a community of interest. In contrast, USHMM's *Children of the Lodz Ghetto* goes beyond the 'type what you see' model of most transcription projects, and asks people to help them undertake research tasks. These complex tasks require navigating through multi-lingual archives, dealing with transliteration issues and uncertainty about variations in names - and all with no guarantee of a positive result at the end. Participants are prompted to make subjective decisions about the relevance of historical materials to the question at hand, and to reflect on their decision-making process. While transcription projects teach some technical skills, participating in this project requires participants to develop source-based skills and to link evidence to arguments.

The workspace structure developed for the project provides a form of scaffolding by breaking the research process into smaller tasks. Scaffolding in the form of personal feedback on specific tasks is also provided by the Community Manager role. This role is responsible for both checking records for accuracy³⁰ and encouraging citizen historians as they iteratively learn the skills required for each stage in the process of 'moving from a question to a data point to a narrative'.³¹ The moderator feedback visible in forum posts shows both the patience required to convey and convince newcomers to act on the project's concern for accuracy, and the educational value of being gently challenged to practice and reflect on the research skills that may help create new citizen historians.

To me, this project is the pinnacle of institutionally led citizen history, but it is also resource-intensive and difficult to scale up to the thousands of participants seen in other crowdsourcing projects.

Conclusions from case studies

From these, and other case studies, I can conclude that exposure to historic material during tasks is powerful. Arlette Farge called the 'exact recopying of words' an 'exclusive and privileged way of entering into the world of the document';³² it seems there is something about the active, intimate encounters

²⁹ The earliest use of the term I could find seems to be from the Children of the Lodz Ghetto project in 2011. Frankle, "More Crowdsourced Scholarship: Citizen History."

³⁰ Accuracy is a particular concern for moderators 'since inaccuracies are often used to fuel the fires of Holocaust denial'. Frankle, "More Crowdsourced Scholarship: Citizen History."

³¹ Frankle, "More Crowdsourced Scholarship: Citizen History."

³² p 16. Arlette Farge, *The Allure of the Archives*, trans. Thomas Scott-Railton (New Haven,

with documents that encourages people to engage with them beyond the crowdsourcing task of transcription. Providing online spaces for discussion is important, as is attracting and retaining a critical mass of participants. Participants benefit from translating their knowledge into conversation, and learn more skills by observing those with more expertise. Online discussion allows participants to notice potentially interesting content, to look for and collect other examples, and to discuss patterns or connections - all skills relevant to the discipline of history.

In my abstract I asked, 'can citizen history projects succeed without communities of experts and peers to nurture sparks of historical curiosity?'. Assuming a definition of success for citizen history projects that includes supporting novice historians in learning the skills of the discipline (which is not a given), the silences on the *Operation War Diary* forum suggest they cannot. While in no way denigrating the value of *Operation War Diary* forum posters helping each other, novices in conversation with each other do not have the same opportunities to engage in situated learning as when they are able to learn by observing experts at work and in conversation. Expertise can be gained through discussion and as participants build up their knowledge of the source materials, but it does need experts to provide models to emulate, and to seed the community with shared examples and patterns of historical thinking. These experts do not need to be academic historians; early posts on the *Operation War Diary* forum showed members without official affiliations demonstrating expertise and relevant historical knowledge. However, participation in the *Operation War Diary* forum seems to have dwindled slowly since launch, perhaps because it has to compete with pre-existing internet forums devoted to specific aspects of WWI history, or because the project hasn't been able to create strong links with those existing communities. If a project fails to attract or supply experts willing to engage in discussion then it will struggle to create an effective learning environment for citizen historians.

Crowdsourcing participants tend to be aware of other projects, and some Zooniverse projects have seen participants explicitly request the expert participation they see on other projects. One poster pointed out that the Galaxy Zoo project has continued to note serendipitous discoveries in forum posts, but that 'it takes a professional astronomer to read those posts, containing such discoveries, to recognize that there's something odd/really new/cool/etc, and then to take the time to look into them a bit more'.³³ These forum posts echo statements from staff involved with citizen science and citizen history at the (then) National Maritime Museum: 'professional researchers' must be involved in the community discussion, not only to 'set specific challenges and provide feedback', but also 'to respond to the questions and interests that emerge from the community itself'.³⁴

Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2013).

³³ Various, "The Unbearable Arbitrariness of Serendipitous Galaxy Zoo Discoveries?," *Galaxy Zoo Forum*, 2014, <http://www.galaxyzooforum.org/index.php?topic=281590.o>.

³⁴ Romeo and Blaser, "Bringing Citizen Scientists and Historians Together."

There may also be an issue around the agency of participants in institutionally controlled projects, or assumptions about who can be experts in a space once labels have defined particular individuals as authority figures. Grassroots groups may have an advantage, as they created the space, set the goals for their project, define the rules for their community and negotiate roles within the group. Conversely, *Operation War Diary* has labelled some as 'proper' historians, who can be appealed to for authoritative statements. However, this might have a quelling or dampening effect as participants dutifully defer their speculation until the 'expert historian' responds (which might never happen). For example, the *Operation War Diary* forum contains suggestions from participants for new hashtags;³⁵ a well-meaning response by a volunteer moderator that suggests asking 'how might this information be useful to researchers in future?' unintentionally discounts the possibility that the participant might themselves be a researcher in future.

Competing models of 'citizen history'

My abstract asked whether all citizen history projects are 'really helping people become historians'. One reason for my question is that the term 'citizen history' draws on 'citizen science', which often has explicitly educational aims inherited from its roots in public participation in scientific research. But the conflation of 'crowdsourcing' and 'citizen history' suggests that some projects are using the term 'citizen history' without intending to invoke a model that assumes participants should have the opportunity to learn historical skills or start historical research.

My analysis suggests there are several possible types of 'citizen history' project. In some ways the list that follow is also a list of ways in which crowdsourcing projects can fail to achieve the heights of 'citizen history'. Grassroots, or self-organised, projects are typically created by avocational historians. Examples include *FreeBMD* (transcribing the General Register Office's Civil Registration indexes of births, marriages, and deaths for England and Wales) and *Online Parish Clerks* who do similar work for parishes within counties. It may also include many research projects organised by local historians. Accidentally educational citizen history projects, such as *Old Weather*, did not include history among their original goals. However, the combination of interesting material, an active forum that provided opportunities to discuss or ask questions about interesting things, and encouragement from maritime historians eventually lead to historical research projects. Next are explicitly educational citizen history projects. The *Children of the Lodz Ghetto* project was carefully designed to guide participants through the process of finding reliable evidence for individual names while developing historical skills. Different stages of the research task were broken into individual steps, and participants who submitted possible matches received personalised guidance from a staff member. Marketing-led projects are those in which 'citizen history' is the new

³⁵ A special keyword which can link potentially interesting documents together.

crowdsourcing'. It is possible that some crowdsourcing projects are just using the term 'citizen history' in their marketing or funding applications as the latest incarnation of the buzzword. Saddest of all are projects that intended to be citizen history projects but failed to achieve that goal to any significant extent. It may be because they failed to reach or retain a critical mass of participants, or because the project did not provide the necessary forms of support to enable transcribers to learn historical skills.

Why do institutions promise 'citizen history' and deliver crowdsourcing?

Assuming that most projects start on the path of 'citizen history' in good faith, what structural issues might have affected their ability support the development of citizen historians? At a pragmatic level, copyright and the commercialisation of resources can hamper the ability of a project to provide the access to source records. Some organisations may still be more comfortable with broadcast than with dialogue - the challenges of enacting 'shared authority'³⁶ are not for everyone. Engaging in community discussion is resource-intensive. Some people enjoy community discussion and might welcome the opportunity to spend a coffee break reading over forum posts, but for others it is a chore. Not everyone has the skills to provide the right kind of encouragement at the right moment, to turn participant mistakes into positive opportunities to learn more. You only need to look at the talk page on a Wikipedia article to realise that not everyone is an empathic, constructive communicator online. In other circumstances, projects may be willing to lead communities in learning more about underlying discipline, but may lack a critical mass of participants keen to engage in conversation about the material. Monitoring discussions to spot interesting question or useful moments for expert feedback also takes time. Projects without historians on staff might rely on academic historians to answer questions. While those academics might intend to look in on participant discussion, in reality, research, teaching and administrative work do not leave a lot of unfilled time. Finally, some historians might not recognise the extent to which their training and experience has given them skills and tacit knowledge, not realising how much novices would appreciate learning from the abilities they take for granted.

Does the mislabelling of 'citizen history' projects do any harm?

My exploration of these issues was, in part, triggered by a tweet that said Easter is 'a wonderful time to become a citizen archeologist!'.³⁷ While transcribing text might help archaeology, it is nothing like being or becoming an archaeologist. Similarly, calling people who have transcribed a few lines of text 'citizen historians' undermines the time and effort that others have put into developing

³⁶ Michael Frisch, "From A Shared Authority to the Digital Kitchen, and Back," in *Letting Go? Sharing Historical Authority in a User-Generated World*, ed. Bill Adair, Benjamin Filene, and Laura Koloski (Left Coast Press, 2012).

³⁷ @Crowdcrafting, "Easter... a Wonderful Time ...," *Twitter*, April 17, 2014, <https://twitter.com/crowdcrafting/status/456887826563751936>. This tweet about a transcription project was written by an enthusiast rather than by the project itself.

their skills as amateur historians. It flattens expertise - if you are a specialist after transcribing some text from a card, then what do you call someone with a degree and years of experience?

Language like this probably also oversells the excitement levels of the work. One funding proposal talks about engaging 'citizen scholars' to help transcribe specific documents, yet it is clear that providing access to tasks does not automatically support the development of citizen scholars. If projects have not included an explicit plan for helping participants learn new skills, perhaps it would be more honest to talk about 'citizen transcribers'? It is possible to undertake tasks that are part of what historians do, such as transcribing documents, without doing the work of historians.

Promising that transcribers can become 'citizen historians' without supporting the process and ultimately over-selling the crowdsourcing experience could reduce the ability of real citizen history projects to attract participants and undermine the emerging field of citizen scholarship. Research into motivations for participation shows that that learning or mastering skills, and following a pre-existing interest, can be important reasons for joining projects. Is it unethical to apparently promise the opportunity to and not support it? 'Citizen historian', to my mind, should have an equivalence with avocational or 'amateur historian' - some are highly skilled, with long years of experience, while others less so, but they are all judged in comparison to skilled historians. Calling 'someone who has transcribed a bit of text' a 'citizen historian' undervalues the skills and experience of the actual citizen historian.

Conclusion

Ultimately, historical crowdsourcing and citizen history must both provide intrinsic and/or altruistic rewards for participation, but I have argued that to earn the name, citizen history must allow people to develop skills beyond the technical skills required for transcription. As a field, citizen history is clearly changing and expanding rapidly. For the sake of participants, whether transcribers or citizen historians, and for the reputation of citizen history as a whole, we should expect institutions to take more care when selecting labels to describe their projects. The term 'citizen historian' should not come to mean 'faux historian', and the term 'citizen history' should be used with an awareness of the promises it makes to the public.