**CURATESCAPE**

**Mobile Storytelling For Community Archives**

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Think for a moment about how often you use your mobile phone every day. You text. You talk. Maybe you check email, facebook, or twitter…download a new single from your favorite artist or watch a Youtube video your friend sent you…use Google maps to find that new Thai restaurant and then share a quick Instagram of your lunch. Maybe you read books on the Kindle or iBooks apps or play collaborative games like Clash of Clans.

Whatever type of communication and information you are accessing on your mobile phone, chances are, you’re doing it a lot more than you think. In fact, a recent study by psychologists in the UK found that young adults in particular use their cell phones an average of five hours every day — roughly one third of their total waking hours.[[1]](#footnote-1) And in case you’re curious about your own usage…yep, there’s an app for that.

In a world where more people have access to mobile phones than toilets,[[2]](#footnote-2) the communication and information sharing potential of mobile platforms is unprecedented…and community archivists are in a unique position to harness this potential. Just as the advent of the digital world opened up new possibilities for preservation and access, mobile technology represents a growing force of social interaction and connection.

In this video, we’ll be taking a look Curatescape, one potential mobile tool that could be really useful for encouraging participatory engagement in a community archive that wishes to explore how space and physical location shape the community experience. But first, let’s take a look at some of the compelling reasons why community archives should be serious about pursuing mobile technologies as part of their strategy in the first place.

Mobile technologies have completely shifted how, when and where we access information. Nearly 50 percent of Americans use smart phones — and ownership among poor and disadvantaged populations is at an all-time high as mobile technology increasingly replaces landlines and offers a means of Internet connection for these communities.[[3]](#footnote-3) On a global scale, mobile access is growing in unprecedented numbers: in emerging industrial and developing nations, more than half of all internet traffic occurs on mobile devices (granted, these devices are typically low-cost and have limited functionality, but technology is catching up quickly).[[4]](#footnote-4) Some estimate that by 2016, 80% of all internet access will occur on a mobile device.[[5]](#footnote-5)

With over 17 billion mobile apps distributed worldwide — giving rise to what is being called a global “apps culture” — there is little doubt that mobile technology has evolved the paradigm around how we interact with digital information — and with each other.[[6]](#footnote-6) How and when we access information and interact with others in the digital realm is no longer limited to a physical location or desktop computer (in fact, By 2011, sales of mobile devices had exceeded sales of desktop computers). For a community archive, this new mobility presents an opportunity to create a broader interpretive framework for its collection as well as engage the community in more meaningful participation.

Curatescape was the outcome of a project developed by the Center for Public History + Digital Humanities (CPHDH) at Cleveland State University that explored the interpretation of place in the digital age, and specifically, how a city’s cultural heritage could be curated on a mobile platform. The collaborative curation effort included the participation of many sources in the initial development of content, including the Cleveland Memory Project, the Cleveland Press Newspaper archives, the Cleveland Public Library, Ohio Memory, the Western Reserve Historical Society, and the Cleveland Regional Oral History Collection at the Michael Shwartz Library (Cleveland State University).

The first iteration of the project was released in October of 2010, and within two years, the app had been downloaded 13,000 times and hundreds of collaborators had developed more than 500 interpretive, geo-located multimedia stories, tapping local archives for historical images, oral histories, video, and text.[[7]](#footnote-7) The project was so successful that the CPHDH decided to use the platform they had created as a basis for a low-cost mobile tool that could be put to use by any cultural heritage organization, and so Curatescape was born.

Curatescape brings together the visual, auditory, physical, and social aspects of cultural heritage into a mobile digital experience. Unlike other mobile apps that, for example, focus on displaying individual archival objects, Curatescape is unique in its emphasis on a holistic approach to storytelling — pushing curators to “move beyond text, to create layers of meaning through the addition of archival images and other media, especially oral history audio and video.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

These “layers of meaning” are constructed in a mobile framework that includes mapping and GPS capabilities; inclusion of archival imagery, video, and oral history; custom tour creation; common sense tagging and subject headings; and free/open search ability. The app uses a custom, mobile-responsive Omeka theme as its user-facing design, which allows it to make use of Omeka’s robust analytics, social media tools, and customization options.

Combining these components in a single app creates a powerful platform for interpretive storytelling, bringing the culture, history, and experiences of a community together into a more collaborative and participatory manner. The layered interpretive approach of the app also allows curators to create “threads of meaning — connections between stories.”

Curatescape’s potential for supporting co-creation of highly personalized content, as well as its ability to help users make these critical interpretive connections, is what sets it apart from other mobile apps on the market. Some similar apps worth considering, depending on the target audience and the objectives of the project, include History Pin and Murkutu. Murkutu is billed as “cultural heritage preservation with indigenous communities in mind,” and it uses mobile technology to simplify the process of capturing images, audio, and video. The app, however, is designed to enable administrators to capture and create content on the fly and upload it to their digital archive, where Curatescape’s mobile app is designed with user access in mind.

History Pin is more like Curatescape in that it is essentially a map-based archive of user generated media that any user can contribute to…so it’s more of a crowdsourced archive than a curated archive. It does offer some unique features, for example, the ability to juxtapose a historical photo over a current landscape, and some more robust social content development tools. The design focus, however, shifted in 2015 from a mobile platform to a “mobile-first” platform, in which the focus is designing a web site for display on a mobile device or tablet.[[9]](#footnote-9) Not all of the History Pin content has been transferred to mobile-friendly format yet, so there are still quite a few gaps in content availability and access.

Curatescape, on the other hand, is a tool designed to extend the reach of digital curation. Unlike History Pin, which randomly crowdsources its material, Curatescape offers users intentionally curated content delivered in a mobile environment. According to the design team behind Curatescape, it is not enough to simply collect content or crowdsource the production of knowledge. In fact, in an era of “big data” where information is being produced at a staggering rate, the ability to analyze and interpret information is key. Curatescape’s storytelling approach is unique in this sense as it builds context for a physical location through text, images, and multimedia.

There are, of course, limitations to what Curatescape can offer as a tool for community archives — perhaps most notably, the platform’s current inability to allow personal media contributions to the archive. There are basic social media capabilities, including sharing, liking, commenting — although in order to even comment, you have to be logged in via Facebook, Google, or Disqus. Again, as this is intended to be a curated experience rather than a crowdsourced experience, it’s not surprising that content creation is restricted. However, according to Mark Tebeau, Director of the Curatescape project, upcoming versions of the mobile platform will include options for submitting user generated media.[[10]](#footnote-10) The content will still be need to be curated by an administrator, but the door will be open for more robust participation in the process of content creation.

The intentionally curated nature of the platform also raises some interesting questions about preserving authenticity in the user experience. By its nature, mobile is a bite-sized platform — smaller screens, smaller chunks of information. As a result, curators must grapple with editing the archive and come to terms with what Tebeau calls the “tension between the raw and the cooked.”[[11]](#footnote-11) He gives the example of the Cleveland Historical entry for the Agora Theater, a unique music venue in the city, and its founder, Henry Loconti. In a lengthy oral history interview, Loconti describes the development of The Agora against the backdrop of the growing music scene of the 1950s, in particular the jukebox business. While this context may be the best way to understand how the Agora became a cultural icon in the city, the length of the interview makes it difficult to incorporate into a bite-sized platform, and so the Cleveland Historical team made the choice not to layer the narrative into the mobile archive.

Curatescape’s geolocation feature has its shortcomings, as well. As you can see with Cleveland Historical, large-scale projects with a lot of stories can quickly overwhelm the map, making it difficult for a user navigate and view items in context. In addition, the current geolocation capabilities are limited to Google Maps, although the team is exploring different mapping options for the next release of the platform, including custom maps that could be used inside a museum or library setting.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Currently, a vast majority of Curatescape users are local historical societies or other organizations where a sense of place plays an important role in the community. That sense of place doesn’t necessarily imply close proximity on a map, however; the Smithsonian Gardens’ Community of Gardens, for example, curates garden stories from across the U.S. Although their use of Curatescape is web-based and not mobile, in customizing their Omeka site, they’ve made it possible to upload files to be shared in the archive.

It’s also worth noting that Curatescape recently began a collaboration with Google Field Trip — “Your guide to the cool, hidden, and unique things in the world around you.” While the individual curatescape projects will continue to have their own sites and mobile apps, select works will be shared via Field Trip, which will provide links to the original content and media. This is a significant opportunity to raise visibility and broaden audience reach via mobile technology.

As Curatescape’s platform continues to expand with additional geolocation and content creation features, it could be a great way for smaller community archives to engage with mobile technology. Since Curatescape has been developed around standards-based, open-sourced tools, like Omeka, it is a more usable, affordable, and flexible option — which is especially important in a world where technology changes rapidly. The custom Omeka web theme itself is free to use and can be self-installed and managed, but packages that include licensing and development of a mobile app along with a fully custom web site (and full-service tech support) will run approximately 10,000 dollars over the course of two years. Licensing for subsequent years is 1,500 dollars per year. Still, this is ridiculously affordable when compared to the cost of a custom mobile app, which could run between 100,000 and 300,000 dollars. [[13]](#footnote-13)

However, like many open-source tools and software, the low cost can often be initially deceptive. Some expertise and time investment will be necessary to effectively install and manage the web-based content, and this should be planned for at the outset of any project. Curatescape cannot be used on a free Omeka.net site, so it will need to be hosted on its own server. This means purchasing and setting up hosting, domain name registration, installation of the theme on the server, and a host of other maintenance tasks which require a practical understanding of the web and some basic tech know-how.

While it may not be a perfect solution, or applicable to every community archive, Curatescape has been tested, tested, and tested again as a tool for place-based interpretation. The design and architecture of the platform incorporates many well-researched best practices while remaining flexible enough to accommodate the individual content needs of an organization. But perhaps most importantly, Curatescape offers an easy access point for a community archive to begin exploring mobile apps as a tool for compelling, place-based storytelling.

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**Recommended Readings**

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