A Participatory Archives Approach to Fostering Connectivity, Increasing Empathy, and Building Resilience during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: This paper explores two pandemic-era projects conducted by the Museum and Archives of North Vancouver (MONOVA) using a participatory archives framework during the COVID-19 pandemic. #NorthVanStories, a rapid-respond social media collecting project, ran from May to September 2020 and received over 200 submissions. #NorthVanStories–Living Histories, a digital video oral history project, ran from summer 2020 to fall 2021 and produced five videos with seven storytellers from diverse and vulnerable communities. This paper discusses the power of collaborative documenting, storytelling, and memory-making to foster connectivity, increase empathy, and build resilience. It highlights the benefits of working collaboratively with organizations and communities; successful approaches to planning and outreach activities; the importance of flexibility and sustainability when working with communities in times of crisis; and how to ensure the future relevance of archives by being responsive to contemporary events and community interests.

Keywords: participatory archives; pandemic collections; video oral history; digital archives; rapid-response collecting; COVID-19

1. Introduction

On 9 March 2020, the *North Shore News* (North Vancouver) reported on the first death in Canada from the novel coronavirus [1]. It occurred at a seniors' care home located in the picturesque mountain town of Lynn Valley, British Columbia. Within walking distance of the seniors' home is the Museum and Archives of North Vancouver (MONOVA), a municipally funded cultural heritage organization that operates as an archive and a museum. The archive acquires and preserves the archival records of the City and District of North Vancouver and the documentary heritage of communities on the north shore. In the weeks that followed, provincial health restrictions increased in response to the pandemic as health authorities learned more about the virus and tried to control transmission.

As Canadian libraries, archives, and museums closed to the public [2], the staff at MONOVA asked the question: What is the role of cultural heritage organizations during the COVID-19 pandemic? At this time, the museum was under construction and the museum curator position was vacant. This resulted in an increased emphasis on the archives to increase online services and community engagement. By examining past actions of archivists in documenting community responses to Hurricane Katrina in 2005 [3], the Occupy Wall Street Movement in 2011 [4], and the killing of Michael Brown by Ferguson, Missouri police officer Darren Wilson in 2014 [5], MONOVA's archives team decided to launch a rapid-response social media collecting project, #NorthVanStories [6]. Informed by the body of theory and practice on participatory archives, the project utilized prompts and social media platforms to engage MONOVA's virtual community in sharing personal experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic [7]. The project ran from May to September 2020 and gathered nearly two hundred submissions.

Participation in the #NorthVanStories project declined as community services in North Vancouver continued to be reduced, and economic security during the pandemic became a topic of concern. In response, the Mayor of the City of North Vancouver formed the Mayor's Healthiest Small City Social Resiliency Collective [8]. The Collective was comprised of selected representatives from community services, health, arts and culture, education, faith, business, and youth groups. The mandate of the Collective was to support and strengthen the City of North Vancouver's social resiliency and connectivity during and beyond the COVID-19 response and recovery [8] (p. 4). As part of the Collective, MONOVA's archivist participated in developing five quick start projects aimed at cultivating a sense of connection and inclusion and to foster an equitable and healthy community.

In fall 2020, under the auspices of the Collective and with the support of a steering committee, MONOVA's archives team led a digital video oral history project, #NorthVanStories–Living History. Throughout the next year, five video oral histories were co-created with individuals from diverse and vulnerable communities. The videos were posted on MONOVA's website as they were completed [9]. This paper discusses both the rapid-response social media collecting project and the digital video oral history project in the context of a participatory archives' framework. It highlights the benefits of working collaboratively with communities; successful approaches to planning and outreach activities; the importance of flexibility and sustainability; and how to ensure the future relevance of archives.

As noted, the approach to the #NorthVanStories project was informed by activities of U.S. archivists prior to the novel coronavirus pandemic to document contemporary events utilizing social media, but the geographic location and sociocultural context of western Canada is unique, and it has influenced how people responded to health restrictions during the novel coronavirus pandemic and the type of archives-led activities. Since 2020, there has been a growing body of literature discussing pandemic-era initiatives conducted by the GLAM sector worldwide [10–12]. In most cases, cultural and heritage organizations pivoted from in-person services and programs to online engagement utilizing social media platforms and websites [13]. It is important to recognize that these responses fall within the spectrum of digital transformation of cultural heritage creation, management, and preservation [14]. Furthermore, projects involving oral histories and Indigenous knowledge and practice have a dynamic body of literature on intangible cultural heritage to draw upon [15], including more recent examinations of digital intangible heritage [16] and digital documentation of "living heritage" [17]. The discussion presented in this paper is informed by recent reports and projects to an extent; however, deeper analysis of global responses and contrasts between approaches by GLAMs is beyond the scope of this paper.

In late 2022, the *CultureforHealth Report* was released by Culture Action Europe. This report expands upon a 2019 World Health Organization report "What is the evidence of the role of the arts in improving health and wellbeing" and discusses, amongst other initiatives, 12 studies on how arts and culture have benefitted people during the COVID-19 pandemic [18]. Their analysis addresses the benefits of active participation, including co-creation and receptive participation, such as listening and watching. The report presents associated health and wellbeing outcomes for several types of creative and artistic interventions, such as photography, painting, storytelling, and singing. These outcomes include fostering community cohesion, providing a sense of belonging, and developing resilience [18] (p. 123). The report asserts that museums that transformed their programming to digital formats to engage online visitors supported people's mental health and well-being by counteracting the negative effects of COVID-19, such as social isolation; however, there was limited research on the actual effects of "digital cultural participation." The authors identify this as an area of growth brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic [18] (p. 126).

This paper explores the role of online heritage-related activities and digital storytelling during the COVID-19 pandemic to foster connectivity, increase empathy, and build resilience in the Canadian city of North Vancouver. Initially led by the Archives staff, the projects evolved to incorporate leadership from partnerships with cultural and social

sectors in the community. This shifted priorities from online engagement with social media audiences to direct activities of co-creation of digital heritage with participants from diverse and increasingly vulnerable communities on the north shore.

The following section presents the themes that emerged from the literature review, specifically participatory archives concepts and practices. The Section 3 will address both the rapid-response social media collecting project, #NorthVanStories, and the digital video oral history project, #NorthVanStories–Living History. The results of these two projects will be presented using quantitative and qualitative data gathered throughout 2020 and 2021. The Section 5 will explore the themes of fostering connectivity, increasing empathy, and building resilience. The conclusion will address key aspects of the participatory archives approach that may inform cultural heritage organizations interested in developing future outreach activities that document pivotal historical events in real time.

2. Literature Review

A literature review of archival approaches to event-based contemporary collecting practices and the underlying concepts revealed the early influence of postmodernism. Best summarized in the Canadian context by archivist and scholar Terry Cook in his essay "Fashionable Nonsense or Professional Rebirth: Postmodernism and the Practice of Archives" [19], Cook asserts that the static and orderly archives of the past have been replaced by a dynamic and virtual concept that reflects the collaborative and fluid networks that contribute to contemporary record creation, use, and preservation [19] (p. 29). Cook and several other archivists used postmodernism as a critical framework to re-examine the nature and function of archives in light of new communication technologies and to challenge the nature of memory and evolving social constructions of truth, evidence, and identity [20].

Postmodern tenets (such as critiques of western institutions and knowledge, the notion of objective truth, and the relationship between reality and representation) influenced archivists to develop archival theory and methodologies that would be historically situated and reflect contemporary social, political, and technological contexts. In 2013, Cook identified a new archival paradigm, which he referred to as the "community" mindset [21]. This paradigm reflects the new digital, pluralistic universe in which archivists "transform themselves from elite experts behind institutional walls to becoming mentors, facilitators, coaches, who work in the community to encourage archiving as a participatory *process* shared with many in society" [21] (p. 114). To fulfill this paradigm, Cook advises the importance of listening to Indigenous peoples and learning ways of storytelling and memory-making from communities outside the mainstream Euro–North American narrative [21] (p. 114). The outcome of these practices will result in shared collaborative approaches and stewardship of archival collections, along with new thinking about ownership of tangible and intangible cultural heritage. These changes will require archivists (particularly those trained in western traditions) to go deeper and consider the ethical implications of archival theory and practice [21] (p. 116).

In the United States, the Documenting the Now project has led the conversation on the ethical implications of archiving social media, particularly the content and data that document personal experiences of social justice events [22]. The project recognizes the ease of accessing social media content for archival and research purposes "without having to participate in equitable engagement as a way to understand [creators'] lives, communities, or concerns" [22] (p. 3). One of the ethical challenges raised is the potential harm to marginalized communities that use social media to participate in social justice activities. Efforts to protect a community while documenting include engaging with the community to explain the methods and intentions of documentation or, better yet, already being part of that community. Ideally, a collaborative approach with an intersectional group of people and professions will inform social media collecting projects [22] (p. 10).

In recent years, a growing body of archival literature on documenting social justice movements [4,22,23], human rights violations [24,25], climate disasters [3], and incorporat-

ing Indigenous knowledge into heritage protocols [26,27] has demonstrated the adoption and evolution of a participatory archives framework. This approach rejects historical relationships based on authority and exclusion and replaces them with peer collaboration and inclusion. Archivists are encouraged to acknowledge diverse traditions of evidence, storytelling, and memory-making. The role of born-digital communications and incorporating methods for capturing the complexity and fluidity of virtual communities continues to gain importance. Emphasis is on collaboration between archivists and communities throughout the processes of appraisal, acquisition, description, preservation, and access.

When looking beyond the archival domain towards interdisciplinary projects employing collaborative and community-driven practices towards digital technologies and intangible cultural heritage, one finds a growing number of curatorial projects exploring Indigenous living history through online portals (e.g., Virtual Museum of Canada) [28,29] and exhibitions with both virtual and physical installations sharing stories via images, videos, and soundscapes [30]. In the Canadian context, these projects demonstrate how digital technology can change the relationship between memory institutions and communities. These projects provide an opportunity to revisit and reflect upon earlier assertions that "[t]he integration of a participatory culture into the daily operations of memory institutions will ensure that they establish a sustainable, authentic relationship with the public" [31].

In the context of adapting collaborative practices to enact living heritage during the COVID-19 pandemic, UNESCO reported that there was an increase in the use of online platforms and virtual means to allow people to meet and identify themselves, despite physical distancing and isolation [17] (p. 31–32). The act of storytelling and sharing music performances via social media during the pandemic provided "social connectedness" (i.e., a sense of social cohesion, community, and continuity) [17] (p. 42). In many countries, new forms of collective rituals emerged during the pandemic lockdown, for example in the lower mainland where North Vancouver is located people would come out of their homes and onto the balconies of their apartments at 7 pm each night to cheer for frontline healthcare workers. "Such collective acts, anchored in the community's living heritage, played an important role in connecting people during the crisis" [17] (p. 43).

Digital spaces provide new creative opportunities for collaboration, and in many ways the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the public use and reliance on collaborative programs, such as Zoom. However, digital adoption by memory institutions and the integration of heritage collections and social media platforms need to consider the uneven level of digital skills among potential participants and the persistence of the digital divide. Additional concerns include the sustainability and interpretation of born-digital and digitized collections, which may share certain characteristics with intangible heritage, such as being enacted, socially transmitted, and constantly evolving [16,32].

The following section will discuss how MONOVA employed methods of social media collecting and digital video oral histories in its approach to documenting personal experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic in North Vancouver.

3. Materials and Methods

This paper presents the results of a rapid-response social media collecting project conducted by MONOVA in spring 2020 and a digital video oral history project conducted throughout 2020 and 2021. This section addresses the materials and methods used in both projects.

3.1. #NorthVanStories: Methods

Unlike traditional approaches to acquiring archival records decades after creation, rapid-response collecting focuses on gathering born-digital content of contemporary events in real time with the intent of preserving and making these collections accessible to current and future audiences. The #NorthVanStories project was created by the archivist, the marketing and communications lead, and a member of the fundraising team. Working together, MONOVA used its website and social media channels (Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram) to

post weekly prompts encouraging virtual communities to share their experiences of living through the COVID-19 pandemic in North Vancouver. A local television program interview with MONOVA's archivist about the project also provided information and encouraged the north shore community to participate.

The social media posts comprised three parts: an image of an archival record from MONOVA's archives (e.g., photograph, illustration, diary, letter, map, etc.); a caption about the archival record; and an invitation to submit digital media to the COVID-19 collection via email or to make a post including #northvanstories. The posted image was selected by MONOVA's archives staff. Criteria for selection included archival records created by women and Indigenous peoples, and images that depicted events and activities that cultivated a sense of connectivity and inclusion. The caption included the image title, its collection identification number, and creator's name. MONOVA's post included a prompt that connected the content of the archival record with contemporary experiences, such as: "Walter Draycott kept a diary of his experiences during WWI. What are you doing to document your experiences during this global pandemic?" The post concluded with the aim of the project: "Your submissions will be part of a digital collection that will be preserved for future generations to explore, study and understand the diversity, strength and creativity of the North Vancouver community." MONOVA shared posts every week for a period of 6 weeks.

Immediately after the launch of the #NorthVanStories project, MONOVA posted the community-generated posts that were tagged with #northvanstories to the organization's website. A process of review and approval was required prior to releasing the posts on MONOVA's website to restrict harmful content from being shared. After several months, submissions declined, and the primary use of the hashtag was by businesses on the north shore and the MONOVA marketing and communications team. The end of the project was announced on the MONOVA blog, along with a summary of the central themes and appreciation for the participants [7]. Virtual communities were encouraged to continue using the hashtag to share their experiences and an assurance was provided that the archives staff would manage the digital collection and make it available to future generations.

3.2. #NorthVanStories–Living History: Methods

In the summer of 2020, MONOVA's archivist joined community leaders from non-profit service providers, faith communities, youth groups, emergency services, and the arts sector to form the Mayor's Healthiest Small City Resiliency Collective. Working collaboratively, the Collective developed five community engagement projects, including #NorthVanStories–Living History, a video oral history project aimed at cultivating a sense of connection and inclusion to foster an equitable and healthy community during the COVID-19 pandemic in North Vancouver.

In terms of methodology, the Collective began by holding a series of five, three-hour virtual meetings in which they identified community assets that strengthened social resilience during the COVID-19 response and gaps in community support that had increased during the pandemic. From there, the Collective members reflected on their respective communities and participated in a survey to arrive at a vision statement to guide their work: "We envision a resilient city of North Vancouver where people feel connected and included and participate in compassionate acts of mutual support to help create an equitable and healthy community" [8] (p.11). Next, a set of criteria was generated to guide the creation and selection of the final projects. From a list of sixty-five possible projects, the Collective selected five projects that could be launched within a five-month window; would address immediate gaps; advance the Collective's vision of helping community members feel more connected; and incorporate an equity and diversity lens, particularly a design to include and involve diverse communities and those made increasingly vulnerable during the COVID-19 pandemic.

#NorthVanStories–Living History project had a steering committee to provide oversight, guidance, and support. The steering committee comprised representatives from the

North Shore Pride Alliance, Impact North Shore (formerly North Shore Multicultural Society), and St. Agnes Anglican Church. Funding was made available for a project coordinator, a recent graduate with a master's degree in the History of Art and Visual Culture who worked closely with the archivist and the storytellers. Leveraging existing relationships between the steering committee and members of their respective communities quickly built public awareness and engendered trust in the digital video oral history project. An introduction to the project was shared on the MONOVA website. Storytellers were selected by MONOVA's archivist and the steering committee based on a willingness to share personal stories with a wider audience. Emotional support was available to the storytellers, as the steering committee recognized the risk of trauma when recalling experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Initial contact with the storytellers was made by MONOVA or a member of the Collective who already knew them. In all cases, participation in the project was based on self-selection. Interested storytellers agreed to receive an introductory letter and have a pre-interview conversation about the project. The letter included a description of the project and highlighted the importance of co-creation, dissemination of the video on MONOVA's website, and preservation of the original recordings and transcripts by the Archives as part of the COVID-19 digital collections. Health protocols required social distancing and masks; therefore, all conversations about the creative process and recording the digital videos had to be communicated with storytellers over the phone, email, and/or Zoom. This communication was an important part of the process, as the storytellers shared their ideas with the archivist and project coordinator to determine the best approach to support their personal storytelling. Any images or other media deemed important by the storyteller were shared with the project coordinator for inclusion in the final video.

The next step involved sharing a consent agreement. The consent agreement was adapted from MONOVA's standard oral history form with changes made to address unique aspects of the #NorthVanStories–Living History project, such as its digital video format; donation of the recordings to MONOVA (original and edited versions); public access to the recordings (immediately, after 5 years, or after 10 years); transfer of intellectual property rights; future uses; and an appendix on COVID-19 protocols. A separate consent agreement was created to address the intellectual property rights of the video oral history involving intangible culture and Indigenous knowledge. Indigenous protocols were followed throughout the process of creating, recording, and producing that specific video. All the storytellers were given the option to withdraw from the project at any time and to review the final video prior to public release.

The next step involved sharing a questionnaire with ten questions aimed at supporting the aims of the project as established by the Collective (i.e., fostering connectivity, increasing empathy, and building resilience) and providing storytellers with a structure (if needed). Some of the storytellers chose to include the questions in their videos (like a script), whereas others used the questions as scaffolding for their stories without any direct mention of it in their videos. There were no requirements to adhere to the questions as a script. The collaborative approach between MONOVA and the participants encouraged the storytellers to create their contribution on their own terms.

MONOVA used a variety of digital audiovisual tools and platforms to capture the oral histories, including video productions services in some cases. The collaborative and creative approach resulted in a variety of documentation including original recordings, full-length transcripts, notes, and the final edited version in digital video format with closed captions. Transcriptions were completed by an archives volunteer with extensive experience in oral history interviews. Specific translation and transcription of the *Squamish* language was provided by one of MONOVA's Indigenous cultural programmers. In most cases, the videos were recorded and edited by the archivist and the project coordinator. The editing process involved several rounds of identifying themes and reflecting on the criteria established by the Collective. The final videos vary in length, from 12 to 25 min.

Information about the project was shared through the MONOVA website, e-newsletter, and social media platforms. Prior to posting the videos, emails with links to the videos were shared directly with the storytellers and the steering committee, and indirectly with the Collective through a representative from the mayor's office. Participants were encouraged to share links to the digital video oral histories with their respective communities.

4. Results

Quantitative data were gathered from available web and social media analytics, and questions about the project were included in MONOVA's annual surveys of archival services and programs. Qualitative data were gathered from comments on social media and responses provided to the annual surveys.

4.1. #NorthVanStories: Results

#NorthVanStories project participants resided in the City and District of North Vancouver, reflecting the geographically limited design of the project. Participants were comfortable with technology, had existing social media accounts (and in many cases were following MONOVA's social media accounts). In response to survey questions about how they had heard about the project, respondents identified MONOVA's website and the e-newsletter as sources. As the use of the hashtag spread, more businesses, cultural organizations, and individuals not associated with MONOVA, yet located in North Vancouver, started tagging their social media posts with #northvanstories.

Within the first six months of the project, more than 200 digital submissions were received. Most of the online community-driven engagement involved simply tagging social media posts with #northvanstories. A smaller number of online community-driven engagement involved responding directly to the weekly prompt with a similar image or content, for example, posting an image of sourdough starter in response to MONOVA's prompt about baking during the pandemic. Every prompt shared by MONOVA received several dozen of likes across each social media platform and was shared numerous times by followers. In terms of social media initiatives, the rapid-response collecting project was very successful, increasing MONOVA's online community by more than thirty percent. Comments in the annual Archives survey were positive, with respondents reporting that the #NorthVanStories program made them feel "more connected to community."

MONOVA used social media channels to acknowledge receipt of several submissions that were emailed to the archives and to encourage additional community engagement. One participant, a high school student, submitted several digital photographs of emptied public spaces in North Vancouver that were very powerful. MONOVA contacted the student and encouraged him to submit more images. He was also invited (and accepted) to be in the digital video oral history project as a storyteller.

The hashtag continues to be used, with more than 1500 tags across social media channels. MONOVA's marketing and communication team continues to respond to all virtual community engagement across its social media platforms, but the official acquisition period for the rapid-response social media collecting project is over.

4.2. #NorthVanStories–Living Histories: Results

The #NorthVanStories–Living History project involved seven storytellers and produced five digital video oral histories. The storytellers are members of diverse communities, as well as those communities at increased vulnerability during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participating storytellers identified with the following communities: *Black Canadians*, *Caribbean Canadians*, *Youths*, *2SLGBTQ+*, *Seniors*, *Faith-based*, and *First Nations*.

(Storyteller GCT) [33]

As a theatre professional, Storyteller GCT created and edited her own video. The central theme of this video is experiencing loss during the COVID-19 pandemic. The storyteller shares her experience of losing her mother, a resident of a care facility, to

the novel coronavirus. The painful and difficult process was heightened by quarantine restrictions, anxiety, and virtual memorial services.

(Storyteller JW) [34]

As a participant in the social media project, high school student JW submitted powerful digital images of an empty North Vancouver taken during the first lockdown. His video was recorded via Zoom while he was in quarantine in his parents' garage following his return from a trip to Europe. The central theme of this video is finding meaning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The storyteller shares his experience of finishing high school remotely and dealing with uncertainty.

(Storyteller NSPA) [35]

As a member of the Collective, the North Shore Pride Alliance (NSPA), an advocacy and support organization for the 2SLGBTQ+ community in North Vancouver, wanted to participate in the digital video oral history project. Acknowledging their absence in the archival holdings, MONOVA welcomed the opportunity. The central theme of this video is the importance of kindness and love during the COVID-19 pandemic. The storytellers share their experiences of support from friends and strangers.

(Storyteller AM) [36]

As a retired teacher and artist, Storyteller AM offered art classes to two girls in her church congregation during the COVID-19 pandemic. Initially held outdoors in the garden, then painting over Zoom, the central theme of this video is the power of art to bring people together.

(Storyteller X) [37]

As a respected *Sḵwx̱wú7mesh* (*Squamish*) Nation Elder, *Storyteller X* shared a blessing song, recorded in the *Squamish* language, and performed in the sacred longhouse of his people. The central theme of this video is the power of song to work through trauma.

The public response to the videos has been very positive. Nearly all the videos have received more than 300 views, and three videos have had more than 600 views since being launched in 2021. In terms of other video-related outreach activities by MONOVA, the digital video oral history project was very successful and continues to attract viewers. Comments provided in the annual Archives survey were positive. Respondents said that the #NorthVanStories–Living History project helped viewers "learn about community members," provided viewers with "interesting perspectives," and "brought stories to life during a difficult time." One respondent commented on how the project provided an "interesting approach to learning about history", and another respondent said that " hearing personal stories sharpens history." Two respondents expressed interest in becoming involved in the project.

5. Discussion

At the outset, MONOVA was interested in fostering connectivity between the organization and its communities (and between communities) by sharing experiences of living through the COVID-19 pandemic. Health requirements during the pandemic, such as shelter-at-home, social distancing, wearing masks, and quarantine, resulted in isolation and feelings of loneliness. The aim was to build connections and foster a sense of community across the north shore. The second phase of MONOVA's pandemic-era project identified the additional goals of increasing empathy and building resilience. The following discussion addresses these goals and the patterns that emerged from the contributions of participants.

5.1. #NorthVanStories: Discussion

Thematic analysis of the social media content and video oral histories included both deductive and inductive approaches. The use of prompts to engage virtual communities in the rapid-response social media collecting project was a deductive approach and influenced the themes reflected in the content collected. The prompts were based on the staff's experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the aim of fostering connectivity across the north shore community. An inductive approach was also used during the analysis of the

tagged social media content and digital submissions, which allowed for the emergence of new themes.

MONOVA based its prompts on the concept of fostering connectivity, which included asking the virtual community about how they were coping with isolation and dealing with stress—for example, if they were journaling, painting pictures, taking photographs, or baking sourdough bread, as was so common across Canada and the U.S. during initial pandemic lockdowns. As a result, the most prevalent theme found in social media posts tagged with #northvanstories and email submissions was fostering connectivity. This was demonstrated through the activities of communing with nature and spending time outside playing with dogs and children. The geography of the City and District of North Vancouver—beaches, old growth forests, and snow-capped mountains—attracts families, retirees, and outdoor enthusiasts who want a work–life balance. With schools closed and orders to work from home, the north shore community took advantage of the spring season and spent the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic outside. Emergent themes of practicing gratitude, taking care of others, and being united against the coronavirus were discovered through repeated digital images of healthcare workers, colourful chalk-drawn hearts on sidewalks and painted rocks on forest paths, artistic murals on shuttered storefronts, and the trending of #kindness and #bettertogether.

At their best, social media platforms can foster connectivity within virtual communities by providing immediacy and interactivity with content through likes, comments, and shares. During the #NorthVanStories project, online community engagement significantly increased across all MONOVA social media channels. Prior to this project, the most active platform for engaging with the archives was Facebook. The significant uptick in engagement on MONOVA's Instagram channel during the pandemic was encouraging and will inform future outreach activities.

At their worst, social media platforms can invite trolling (i.e., posts that are inflammatory, insincere, and digressive). Many cultural and heritage organizations have existing social media use policies that protect the organization's right to remove or not approve of comments and posts that are deemed to present unacceptable content (e.g., threatening, obscene, personal attacks, etc.). MONOVA did implement a process of review prior to sharing social media posts on the website, but it was largely unnecessary as neither trolling nor spamming occurred. One interpretation of these results is the timing of the project, which was early in the pandemic, before topics of anti-masking and anti-vaccination gained momentum in Canada. MONOVA's positive experience reflects the emerging discussion on how social media was used by GLAMs during lockdown, with attention being paid to transforming institutional tone from brand promotion to interactive content that distracted and inspired audiences in isolation at home [38]. At this stage, perceptions about the value of social media activity for GLAMs has changed due to online engagement during the pandemic.

The challenge for MONOVA will be managing born-digital records acquired through social media platforms, as the context of these thematic collections rely on linking content and social metadata (e.g., comments and likes). The #NorthVanStories project focused on a discrete collection and did not pursue archiving social media as a data set. This decision was made based on MONOVA's limited technological infrastructure and staff expertise. The rapid-response social media collecting project presents an exciting opportunity for the organization to explore contemporary archival practices and share their experiences. The acquisition of the digital content and data collected during #NorthVanStories project introduces new voices and perspectives into the permanent collection and provides the organization, future researchers, and the north shore community with access to broad historical evidence of both individual and shared experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the closure of the museum and absence of a museum curator, physical objects were not collected, such as masks, plexiglass signage, and vaccine cards. This does not preclude a future initiative by MONOVA to acquire these physical materials for the museum holdings,

or to forge partnerships in the community to produce pandemic-related exhibitions and public programming activities.

5.2. #NorthVanStories–Living Histories: Discussion

The use of a questionnaire to engage storytellers in the video oral history project was an inductive approach and influenced the themes reflected in the content produced. The questions were based on the Collective's aim of fostering community, increasing empathy, and building resilience. An inductive approach was also used during the analysis of the video oral histories, which allowed for the emergence of new themes.

Informed by the previous social media project and work with the Collective, MONOVA engaged with storytellers from diverse and vulnerable communities to have in-depth conversations about their personal experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Each storyteller was treated as a peer colleague throughout the process. Emphasis was placed on capturing what was important to the storyteller. Interpretation of the findings is approached through the aims identified by the Collective: fostering community; increasing empathy; and building resilience.

5.2.1. Fostering Connectivity

The act of sharing personal stories fosters connectivity across different communities, groups, and individuals. By participating in this project and knowing that the documentation would be preserved and made accessible by the Archives of North Vancouver, the storytellers (and by extension, their communities) gained a sense of belonging. The theme of fostering connectivity is found throughout each oral history, in their reports of video chatting with isolated family and friends and window visits with seniors in care homes.

"Through March and April—we have family out in Ontario—and we would do bi-weekly, like, family Zoom calls, so we'd get all 18 of us on and we'd play Cahoots over Zoom, which was a lot of fun . . . [T]hat was probably the biggest change of all, you know, having to change your whole entire social life." (Storyteller JW) [34]

"And walks—once a week we would venture out to see Mum and have a giggle through the glass. We'd WhatsApp with my brother in England and his family; for those brief moments we were all together again. The miles weren't as long, and I could see the joy in everyone's eyes." (Storyteller GCT) [33]

The importance of being in nature and sharing art with others was prevalent for most of the storytellers.

"So a grandmother of two girls who I knew through church, so she phoned me up and said 'Could I teach art'? So, well, I can do it in the garden. So that's what we did. So we met in the garden, and I had to be very careful because they were in a completely different group than me, and my daughter was very nervous about me doing it. But it worked very well and they were great. We did watercolours and then we worked with inks." (Storyteller AM) [36]

"[I was] putting together the art show that we [NSPA] had for the art walk [during a Pride celebration] and it was socially, like, physically distanced because all the paintings were pointed outwards, right, and so people could just walk around the building, and it was something that we did for the community." (Storyteller NSPA) [35]

These activities were necessary to combat the loneliness, anxiety, and fear that everyone felt at some point throughout the pandemic. For members of the LGBTQ+ community, the coronavirus brought back traumatic memories of the AIDS epidemic.

"Because what happened in the gay community back then . . . is that it was so scary that we all sort of locked ourselves away . . . because we didn't know how it [AIDS] was passed. Once we had the information, then our community sort

of gathered together. . . . Sort of mid to late March I was having almost anxiety attacks because I think it was PTSD from living through that horror." (Storyteller NSPA) [35]

5.2.2. Increasing Empathy

The act of listening to others and recognizing their emotions increases empathy towards another individual and unites communities. Every time someone watches one of the video oral histories, there is an opportunity to increase empathy. The theme of increasing empathy is found throughout each oral history in the actions of identifying with others.

"I could hear the sirens that were going by Lion's Gate Hospital from my house, so I decided one night to walk up there and see what was going on. And that's when I took a bunch of the photos that I sent to you guys [MONOVA]. And that was quite powerful, seeing everyone out and people were out, up on their balconies waving and banging their pots and pans and stuff. Because you sort of forget that everyone's still here, right? It seems very quiet, but we are all still here hunkered away in our houses. So, at seven o'clock when you sort of get that reminder, that everyone's here and everyone's with you and we're all in this together, it's a very powerful moment." (Storyteller JW) [34]

"Coming from a customer service and the retail side of it is that your perspective changes on people. . . . They're working through COVID and you're working through COVID." (Storyteller NSPA) [35]

"My experience with COVID isn't singular. The thousands of families all over the country, the millions of families who have lost someone to this deadly, non-discriminatory virus are in the same boat as me." (Storyteller GCT) [33]

Several storytellers mentioned the impact of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement as part of their experience of the pandemic. Storyteller JW photographed BLM protests during the summer of 2020 and Storyteller NSPA recognized how difficult it was to gather and conduct activism under health restrictions. For Storyteller GCT, it was a call to action.

"And then George Floyd was murdered, and the world shook its head and demanded change. Not just Black people, people demanded change." She describes her response: "I started working on a piece to educate the young, to give context on what the past had done to Black people, what is happening now, and what the future could be." (Storyteller GCT) [33]

5.2.3. Building Resilience

The act of adapting positively and learning and growing from experiences builds resilience. For many of the storytellers, the process of creating and sharing their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic gave them a sense of purpose and helped build their resilience. The theme of building resilience is found throughout each oral history in the actions of thinking positively, having a support network, and looking after oneself.

"And I think we all know it, and especially in our LGBTQ community, love wins." (Storyteller NSPA) [35]

"I think about things in a very—I mean, it might not serve me too well—but I've been thinking more short term because you can't really plan anything now, right? Everything's so uncertain that you really sort of just have to roll with it, honestly. There's no other way to do it." (Storyteller JW) [34]

"She said, 'You know, when you fall, it's important that you get up, you get up on your own, but every once in a while you need some help, and we say that blessing a7nína, to keep your spirit and soul, your being together." (Storyteller X) [37]

"Take time for yourself if you're having a really rough or challenging day, be kind to yourself because, you know, again, through understanding and kindness and

love we're all gonna get through this and we are gonna actually be better on the other side, so that's the hope and trust that I have." (Storyteller NSPA) [35]

"I want to send you off with a blessing song, a healing song as we carry on. Take care each and every one of you. Take good care of yourself." (Storyteller X) [37]

The findings reveal that outreach activities conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic by cultural heritage organizations using a participatory archives framework can build connections and create a sense of community between an organization and its constituents and across communities. As discussed in the CultureForHealth Report, cultural activities that benefit health can be active (where participants are involved as co-creators) or receptive (such as listening to music or storytelling) [18]. The benefits of participating in receptive and creative cultural activities for populations made increasingly vulnerable during the COVID-19 pandemic (such as young people, seniors, and visible minorities) can be specific, such as acquiring new skills, or more general, such as decreasing anxiety and improving resilience [18] (pp. 10–12). Furthermore, different cultural activities can produce a variety of health benefits. Storytelling aids in social interaction, music and singing alleviate stress and anxiety, and photography and video invite self-reflection [18].

The process of participation in both MONOVA projects, analysis of the content of social media posts and video oral histories, and responses to the projects provided through online platforms and the annual Archives surveys reveal the power of collaborative documenting, storytelling, and memory-making to foster connectivity, create empathy, and build community. By creating a digital space to enact and share living history, MONOVA played an important social role in promoting well-being and social inclusion throughout the north shore. As a result, MONOVA's online presence became less about branding and promotions, and more about community connection and creating a sense of belonging. Future uses of these digital collections by MONOVA, community members, and scholars will contribute to and expand upon these values.

6. Conclusions

In early 2020, the archives staff at MONOVA asked: What is the role of cultural heritage organizations during the COVID-19 pandemic? In response, MONOVA embraced a participatory archives approach and embarked on documenting the personal experiences of the north shore community. The first phase involved a rapid-response social media collecting project #NorthVanStories, and the second phase focused on a digital video oral history project #NorthVanStories–Living Histories. Throughout both projects, MONOVA's approach was responsive to contemporary events and community interests. The process of working collaboratively with members of the Collective to develop community-based projects that fostered connectivity, increased empathy, and built resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic expanded MONOVA's relationship with members of diverse and increasingly vulnerable communities. As a result, MONOVA became a central part of North Vancouver during a time of historical importance. The following sections address key aspects of the participatory archives approach [39] that may inform other cultural heritage organizations interested in developing future community-based projects.

6.1. Communities and Collaboration

The multifaceted mandate of MONOVA supports a participatory approach; however, it also represents power structures that previously excluded certain communities. An important aspect of participatory approaches is to invite diverse perspectives at all stages of the archival project, from planning through dissemination. MONOVA's engagement with interested members of virtual and north shore communities in interactive dialogues—forged new relationships. The Collective provided an opportunity for MONOVA's Archivist to work with community leaders who brought much-needed expertise and trusted relationships. It also provided funding for community-based work, which made it possible to hire a project coordinator with expertise in the theory and practice of visual culture. The knowledge and skills needed to manage and produce multi-media projects across

several platforms involving diverse and vulnerable communities requires intersectional collaboration and multidisciplinary partnerships. Through the process of collaboration and cooperation, MONOVA listened and learned new ways of documenting evidence, storytelling, and memory-making.

6.2. Planning and Outreach

Collaboration between departments within MONOVA was also a key to the success of these projects. Brainstorming sessions at the outset of the pandemic involved the archivist, the marketing and communications lead, and a member of the fundraising team. Identifying the ways that each department could contribute to the rapid-response collecting project made it possible to coordinate efforts and produce big results from a small staff with limited funding. By leveraging the Collective members' connections with their communities, it was easier to establish trust and build relationships that were vital to creating a meaningful digital oral history project. The stress of documenting an event in real time and including members of diverse and vulnerable communities makes it particularly important to establish a safe space and access to emotional support.

6.3. Flexibility and Sustainability

The nature of documenting contemporary events through a participatory archives framework demands flexibility and adaptation to changing situations. At the outset, MONOVA had no idea how long the COVID-19 pandemic would last, nor did anyone else. The rapid-response collecting project reflected the urgency and uncertainty of the moment. Learning from the virtual community submissions to the initial #NorthVanStories project and joining the civic Collective changed the scope of what was possible and led to the digital video oral history project.

A common attribute of participatory archives is the use of new technologies, specifically digital social platforms. The plethora of digital audiovisual formats, software, and platforms used throughout these projects was challenging; however, it was also symbolic of the global pivot to collaborative digital platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In conducting social media acquisition and engaging in outreach activities that involve digital platforms and multimedia production, cultural heritage organizations gain important skills and infrastructure that support the management and preservation of born-digital records and contextual metadata. It is important to consider the sustainability of digital collections at the outset of any project. Planning for each stage in the project, from acquisition through to access, will ensure that the human resources, technological infrastructure, and funding is available. Contemporary collecting projects can be complex and require ongoing management to ensure future access. Funding in times of crisis is often reactive and finite. Instead of merely planning isolated, ad hoc projects, a more sustainable approach is to integrate participatory practices into archival functions of appraisal, acquisition, arrangement and description, and preservation and access [39]. As discussed earlier, the sustainability of born-digital and digitized collections cannot be overlooked, as doing so puts these valuable resources in jeopardy of obsolescence and loss [40]. Reliance on proprietary social media platforms, multimedia applications, and formats to collect, present, manage, and preserve contemporary collections of living history is cause for concern. Archivists have been exploring the challenges presented by records created and preserved in digital systems for several decades; however, every technological advance is accompanied by a greater degree of complexity (e.g., cloud computing, artificial intelligence).

6.4. Future Relevance of Archives

MONOVA has learned that the participatory archives approach enables the organization to maintain its relevance to its diverse community. This connection is achieved through collaboration and community engagement with the organization. The early pandemic-era MONOVA projects offered a space for communities on the north shore to engage and contribute their experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic through digital images, comments,

stories, photographs, videos, paintings, and songs. Unlike traditional approaches to acquisition, the participatory archives approach pursues transparency through community involvement. Previously silenced voices are invited to contribute, and those absences are replaced by a presence that future generations will discover in archival holdings and build upon. MONOVA set out to collect personal experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the result is an inclusive and diverse account of a pivotal moment in the history of North Vancouver and the world.

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