Library Review
Crowdsourcing our Cultural Heritage, Edited by Mia Ridge

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Crowdsourcing our Cultural Heritage provides a comprehensive view on the subject of working with our communities to increase our reach and enhance our collections. Though the book covers the entire GLAM sector (galleries, libraries, archives and museums), there's much here to learn and consider for libraries who work in this space.

The idea now known as 'crowdsourcing' – using others from outside a particular discipline to assist with computational or descriptive tasks – is not a new one. The creation of the Oxford English Dictionary, for instance, falls into this category. Digital technologies and the spread of the Internet have allowed this idea to blossom, and memory institutions were quick to realise the potential, both digitally and physically.

The first section of the book examines how different institutions worked with the potential, using it to both refine their collections and bring their communities closer. Each chapter looks at a project from across various GLAMs, some of which may be less well-known than others. These stories give the background and mission of the institution, how crowdsourcing fits with that mission and the details of the project. At times the chapters delve into the technologies used to capture the wisdom of the crowd, which is useful for those in search of such tools.

An interesting point of this first section was the analysis of how the community of the institution interacted with the projects. Most showed high engagement soon after initial launch that lessened over time, but instead of vanishing entirely seemed to fall into a plateau pattern. People were still performing their crowdsourcing roles, just at a lower, steady level. The ensuing 'what we learned' analysis helps contextualise these metrics, often investigating the motivations of the crowdsourcing community. As one might expect, the motivations vary based on material and task type but understanding these motivations can surely help libraries wishing to incorporate (or continue) crowdsourcing.

In some instances, the authors detail what impact the crowdsourcing had on the institution, from necessary staff intervention through changes to collection practice. Again, important things to consider before beginning a project of this nature.

Two things to note in this section: first, while the GLAM sector worldwide is relatively small, the subset of everyone involved with crowdsourcing is even smaller. Many chapters refer to other projects covered in other chapters, giving the interconnectedness a richer context. Second, whilst there were many mentions made of the National Library of Australia's Trove service and its crowdsourced newspaper correction, there is no chapter devoted to the learning there. This may be because the work has been documented in such detail elsewhere, but the lack was noticeable.

The second section of the book focusses on the more theoretical aspects of crowdsourcing, and the questions, opportunities and challenges presented therein. The seeming disparity between 'the official record' presented by the GLAM sector versus 'the unofficial record' gained through crowdsourcing is the undercurrent here, but the authors seem to agree there is a space in cultural heritage for both voices to be heard. As with anything in this sector, it's a matter of finding the balance that's right for the institution, at the same time understanding what our communities require from us in order to stay connected and relevant.