



Opening-Up Digital Platforms to Community-Based Research

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This presentation is informed by exploratory sabbatical research seeking to better understand the role of academic libraries in the creation, dissemination and preservation of community-based research outputs. Today's focus is on how library-hosted digital platforms might serve to leverage the impact and reach of work arising from this growing area of scholarship conducted at universities across Canada.

WHAT IS COMMUNITY-BASED RESEARCH?

“Research that is conducted *with* and *for*, **not on**, members of a community.”

- Strand et al., 2003, p. xx [emphasis added]

2

Community-based research is “research that is conducted with and for, not on, members of a community” (Strand et.al., 2003, p. xx). Similar terms include *community engaged scholarship* and *community engaged research*. Across Canada, universities have established centres and offices to facilitate this research, which often attracts support from governments and funding agencies alike. Meanwhile, community engagement has become a feature of many university strategic plans.

Approaches to community-based research directly involve community members as much as possible in the research process, from defining research questions guiding a project through to dissemination. Similar to open pedagogy, students are often heavily involved as collaborators as well. These projects tend to result in “non-traditional” community-based research outputs (e.g., reports, presentations, infographics, policy briefs, digital exhibits) that aim to inform policy and practice, and advance positive social change. Typically, these outputs end up on standalone project websites and community partner websites, or they are only shared with stakeholders offline. While existing literature illustrates the challenges and successes of sharing community-based research outputs (for instance, Elliott, 2017; Gallant, 2021; Jordan, et. al., 2011) these works tend to be context-specific, and do not include strategies that can be applied broadly to help researchers ensure widespread, meaningful, and measurable impact.

Exploring the Role of Academic Libraries

- **Semi-structured interviews:**
 - Researchers (n = 17)
 - Administrators (n = 6)
- **Survey:**
 - Librarians (n = 16)

3

Amid growing interest in exploring how library services can help advance the impact and reach of community-based research outputs (for instance, Abbott & Tiffin, 2019; Bradley, 2021; Moore, et. al, 2020; Ruttenberg et. al., 2022), the research findings I am sharing today shed light on why this work is so often not shared on open access platforms maintained by libraries. This includes institutional research and data repositories, and to a lesser extent, digital exhibit software and journal/book publishing platforms. Additionally, I will offer some strategies that university services can adopt, with a particular focus on academic library services, to better support community-based research to advance the impact and reach of this work.

Between November 2022 and February 2023 my research involved interviewing 17 Canadian faculty members who identify as community-based researchers (or similar terms) who had disseminated community-based research outputs in the last 5 years. These participants included a mix of early and more senior career researchers. Most identified as Caucasian women working in social sciences and community health. I also interviewed 6 university administrators responsible for supporting community-based/engaged research at their institutions, and I received 16 survey responses from scholarly communications librarians from across Canada. Each participant was asked questions about current services available on campus to support community-based research, and ways that libraries could better support work being done in this area.



The following slides provide a summary of responses, with illustrative quotes, as to why community-based researchers are not engaging with digital platforms hosted by libraries, followed by some suggestions and considerations that could help expand these services to better support this work.

Unknowns

"I've never actually thought about it until we're having this conversation, to submit it to the library where it could be accessible and searchable through that space." - Judith [pseudonym], researcher

"I think we need to be educated first. Like this interview has really revealed to me that I probably don't even know what libraries can do for my research program." - Hannah [pseudonym], researcher

Overall, the researchers that I spoke with were not aware of library services that could host and preserve their community-based research outputs.

Those who knew about their university's institutional research repository only considered it a space for open access journal articles and in some cases, student work.

None of the participants mentioned data repositories, with a few lamenting that data normally needs to be destroyed after five years (a norm that is likely to shift with increased access to data repositories across Canada and research data management requirements like that released by the Tri-Agency in 2021 that encourage archiving and sharing of data where possible; see: <https://science.gc.ca/site/science/en/interagency-research-funding/policies-and-guidelines/research-data-management/tri-agency-research-data-management-policy>).

Library publishing services supporting open access books and journals (e.g., Pressbooks and Open Journal Systems) were also not mentioned, while only one participant was aware of their library's service to host digital exhibits.

Mistrust

"... data has been used against the communities that I work with for so long, like *against* them. So, it's hard to consider making it completely open." - Stacey [pseudonym], researcher

"... people lost all their work. And so, I didn't want to fall into that trap. So that's why I have a separate standalone website." - Olivia [pseudonym], researcher

6

Mistrust was a common theme throughout my interviews. The quote above illustrates one researcher's concerns with making data tied to marginalized populations, in this case Indigenous groups, openly available.

Another participant discussed hosting a research project on their university's website only to have it abruptly deleted leaving them not wanting to trust any university with their publicly shared work in the future.

A few participants also noted not wanting to engage with librarians or related positions because they felt they would try to dictate what they could and could not do with their work, particularly when it came to copyright considerations.

Limited Discovery

“I don't really even know how to access the repositories at adjacent universities... It's hard to think about investing the time to do it, because I don't know how I would use it myself...” - Stacey [pseudonym], researcher

7

Several respondents pointed out that institutional repositories do not have user-friendly interfaces while questioning how discoverable repository content is beyond the confines of the university. Time and again participants reiterated how important it is for researchers to be able to imagine how they would use these platforms, and how the communities they work with would use these platforms.

Too Complicated

"... there was this 10-step process, and all of this paperwork, and I just ran. After that meeting, I was like, 'No, this is 100% not worth it.'"

- Rachel [pseudonym], researcher

8

Only one respondent noted a library service that was available to host digital exhibits (which is a less common service offering), but they felt that the process was far too complicated.

Another participant pointed out how much easier it is to host their projects using Google Sites than trying to work with whatever other options might be available to them.

Participants also admitted finding it very challenging trying to make sense of open access publishing, creative commons licenses, and institutional research repository deposit processes...

Low Priority

"The idea of learning what institutional repository policies are, and how to make them work for me is exhausting. I'm just like, 'Yep... nope, I don't have time or space for that.' ... it's not because I don't care, or because I don't think it's valuable. But like, we don't have space." - Jean [pseudonym], researcher

"Their [community partners'] priority is just like raising funds to keep the doors open or doing whatever delivery of programming that they have, so I just think that this is information that's going to be lost unless somebody steps up and takes a leadership role." - Anna [pseudonym], administrator

9

Many research participants admitted that things like ensuring long-term digital preservation of works arising from their community-based research projects was not a high priority amid competing demands on their time, nor were any activities where they couldn't see a direct and immediate benefit to the communities they work with.

At the same time, however, long-term access to community-based outputs was seen as important, in theory at least, and an area where libraries could potentially play a greater leadership role.

*Support for Library Hosting & Preservation

-
- Avoids duplication
 - Learn from past mistakes + inform future practice
 - Legacy building
 - Provides permalinks for (inclusive) citation practices
 - Track usage metrics

10

Participants noted that making community-based research outputs openly available to others online could help communicate information about ongoing projects while preventing researchers and community partners from feeling like they must at times reinvent the wheel.

Several also discussed how much we can learn from past mistakes to inform future practice while acknowledging that those who came before them rarely made their non-traditional outputs openly available to others. To this end, a few also mentioned the importance of legacy building in service to their communities within and outside of academia.

Participants also recognized the value of making this information available long-term, and citable, thus providing ways to acknowledge those who contributed (including the contributions of marginalized populations often not captured and represented in formal publications), while also providing researchers with usage metrics to help them assess and communicate the impact of their work.



When I asked about how libraries could do more to support community-based research, each response came down to having more people-centred policies and practices. As with doing community-based research, much of this involves relationship building, meeting with researchers and community partners to better understand their needs and providing flexible options where possible and practical.



People-Centred Policies & Practices

12

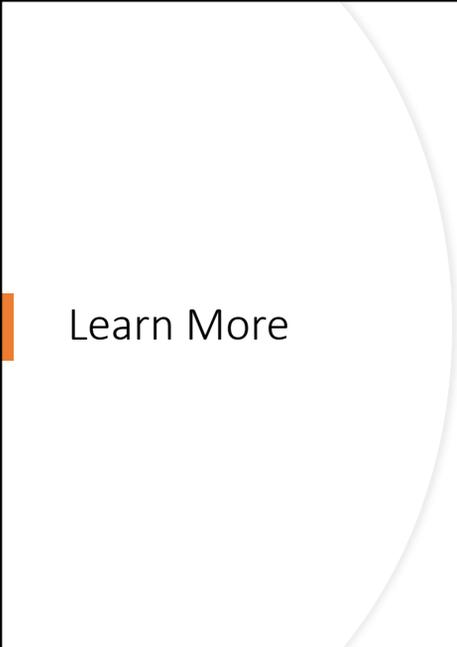
This could involve redesigning our digital platforms to be more user-friendly. Or, rather than expecting users to navigate sites like repositories--or hoping they land on content through search engines--librarians could encourage more researchers to house their works in repositories (receiving long-term preservation, detailed metadata, metrics, and permalinks) but then embed or link to these works on their existing user-friendly (yet ephemeral) project websites. Many digital platforms maintained by libraries could also certainly provide more support to make the process of submitting content less cumbersome. I also think there's a lot of value in putting human faces and names behind our library publishing and repository platforms alongside the generic emails we've come to rely so heavily upon to facilitate these services. This could also involve working more closely with research offices and various librarian positions (e.g., subject specialists, instruction librarians, scholarly communications, data, and copyright librarians) to help ensure researchers and community partners consider library platforms as part of dissemination and knowledge mobilization planning.

Of course, not everything should be open access, nor can we necessarily host *everything* resulting from partnerships with community. It's about available resources, and what's deemed appropriate to share and preserve by those involved. It's especially important that people working in this space understand things like First Nations principles of ownership, control, access, and possession, or OCAP (<https://fnigc.ca/ocap-training/>), and that content creators and owners have as much control over their research outputs as possible. Some of our platform policies may need to be reimagined and rewritten with this in mind.



Final Thoughts

And let us not forget that library publishing and repository services are often under-resourced and understaffed. While there are no easy answers to this situation, I call upon decision-makers at our institutions to consider ways to prioritize support and recognition for community-based research, including the sharing and long-term preservation of this work, where appropriate, in all its wonderful diversity. If not, we risk losing information of enduring public and academic importance and devaluing these contributions to scholarship that frequently make a direct, positive impact in the communities that we serve.



Learn More

Slides/Notes: <https://tinyurl.com/otessacbr>

Project Site: <https://osf.io/zj76p/>

Email: hallr27@macewan.ca

Community-Based Resources

- [Community-Based Research Canada](#)

- [Community-Based Research Modules](#)

(Community Research Centre, Trent University)

- [Resources for Community-Engaged Research](#)

(Community-Engaged Research Initiative, Simon Fraser University)

References

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