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Group 3

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Information Flows in a Social and Cultural Context:

How Information is Found in the UT Landmarks Art Program

Visitors to the University of Texas at Austin campus are sure to notice at least one of the many public artworks on display as they tour the Forty Acres. From the strikingly red, four story *Clock Knot* on the north side of campus to the hulking *Big Indian Mountain* in the AT&T Conference Center, these public art pieces can be viewed across the Forty Acres, and have been curated by Landmarks, the University of Texas at Austin's public art program.

Landmarks began in 2008, after the creation of the UT Public Art Master Plan. This plan lays out the best ways for art to be incorporated into the UT campus, and since 2008 Landmarks has been busy curating a unique selection of pieces that complement and accentuate the existing buildings and infrastructure. Landmarks is primarily a curatorial organization, and seeks to enrich the UT community through engagement with art.

Because of its status as both UT organization and a public art program, Landmarks is situated in a unique social and cultural context. The organization has connections to both the narrow context of the University of Texas system and the much larger international art community. It serves diverse populations ranging from UT students to art historians.

Because of this unique social and cultural context, Landmarks has unique information needs.

The information lifecycle of Landmarks involves many different interrelated actors, and this paper seeks to examine the actors and processes involved in the way information is found at this organization.

Finding information is integral to a healthy information lifecycle. After all, information must always

be found or created before it can be understood, transformed, shared, or preserved. In order to understand how information is found, we must first understand what information is.

In her article *Defining Information: An Approach for Policymakers*, Sandra Braman notes the “abundance and diversity” of definitions of the term information. These definitions come from dozens of academic fields and represent a broad range of ways to think about information.

Braman goes on to define four categories of information definitions: information as resource, information as commodity, information as perception of pattern, and information as a constitutive force in society. Buckland, on the other hand, identifies three categories of information definitions: information-as-process, information-as-knowledge, and information-as-thing.

Because there is such a vast array of ways to define and discuss information this paper will not attempt to narrowly define the term. Instead, information will be used to mean anything that informs a person or entity.

In order to study how information is found at or by the UT Landmarks Art Program, my group conducted an interview and a survey. Both the interview and survey were carefully designed, and contained questions relevant to each of the six aspects of the information lifecycle we are studying. In order to ensure that we received data that could be used to understand how Landmarks staff and volunteers find information, I created the following interview and survey questions:

Interview questions:

What resources are used to find and evaluate potential additions to the collection?

Who writes the art and artist information pieces, and how do they conduct the research necessary to do so?

Survey Questions:

When you have questions about the Landmarks program, where do you look for the

answer?

When you have questions about the art, where do you look for the answer?

When you have questions about your volunteer duties, where do you look for the answer?

Many of the questions we asked in both the interview and the survey elicited responses that were relevant to multiple aspects of the information lifecycle, which allowed me to draw upon multiple sources of data when conducting my analysis.

While all members of the group participating in designing these data collection methods, specific group members took charge when it came time to conduct the interview and disseminate the survey. Hannah Farmer and Evelyn Egheighu conducted the interview via phone with Nisa Mason, the Assistant Director of Landmarks. The interview took place on Tuesday, October 23, 2013, from 3:30 to 4:22 pm. The Qualtrics survey was initially created by Hannah, and then edited by the rest of the group. Once complete, the survey was sent to a link in an email by Hannah to Nisa Mason and Margaret Burke. Nisa then sent it via e-mail to the Preservation Guild volunteers, and Margaret sent it to the docent volunteers.

Through our interview with Nisa Mason, it became clear that UT Landmarks finds and assembles information from a broad set of sources, both within and outside of the UT community. The curation of the actual art works requires a large quantity of both formal and informal information. That is, while sources like subject experts and traditional research sources may be consulted, other more informal information sources come into play.

Nisa informed us that Andree Bober, the director of Landmarks, draws upon her own knowledge and experiences to evaluate potential artists and art works. Andree is fully immersed in the art world and this immersion brings her in close contact with many kinds of information. She attends gallery openings in NY and has many friends and acquaintances who are likewise immersed in the art world. Because Andree lives and works outside of the UT context, she can more easily

interact with art dealers, thus giving her an insiders view on artists and their works. The information that she collects in an informal way during her daily life is vastly different than the type of information available to people not living within the art community.

Complementing Andree's vast knowledge and connections is a standing advisory board which is made up of the Landmarks director and faculty and student representatives. This board considers upcoming projects and creates proposals that are then sent to the Subcommittee for the Review of Artwork (SRA) which then has the final say about all potential projects. In our interview with Nisa, she indicated that the members of this advisory boards, along with outside professionals such as art historians, are often consulted during the initial inquiries into potential artists or projects. In this way, information from outside contexts is discussed and understood by members of the UT community. This allows the information to be examined from multiple social and cultural contexts.

Our interview with Nisa was also enlightening as to the way that Landmarks find the sort of biographical and analytical information which they then make accessible to Landmarks staff and volunteers, as well as their visitors both in person and online. This information, most notably the highly detailed biographical sketches which can be found for each artist on Landmark's web site, is created by a curator, hired with that purpose in mind. These curators are experts in their fields, and write well-researched essays which are then published online. A bibliography follows each essay, assumably starting the finding cycle all over again with each new visitor to the page. It is interesting that this process is almost completely removed from the influence of the University. As such, the biographical information present on the Landmarks website is representative of the broader, international art community rather than the more narrow contexts that Landmarks simultaneously exists within.

Because Landmarks is still such a young institution, much of their work finding artists and art

has built upon the wide breadth of knowledge with which Andree first began the institution. It remains to be seen how this workflow will change over time as the organization and its staff grow and change.

After conducting our interview with Nisa, my group disseminated a survey to gather data from the organization's volunteers. Volunteers play an integral role in the UT Landmarks organization as they are responsible for cleaning artwork and leading tours, and are often the faces visitors see first and therefore connect with Landmarks. These volunteers must be able to find a variety of information from biographical information about artists to the proper way to clean a specific piece of art. Because they are so often the public face of Landmarks, it is also important that volunteers, especially docents, are able to provide visitors with correct and timely information. Our survey asked several questions designed to learn when and how volunteers look for information. We found that 71% of volunteers consulted reference materials often during the course of their duties. These materials included publicly available options like the Landmarks website, the UT iPhone app, and Google, as well as internal resources like Landmarks SharePoint site and training videos.

When asked how they found information when they have questions about the Landmarks program, 7 out of 7 respondents indicated that they used the Landmarks website. Two of the volunteers also said they would look for the answer in the printed materials they've received from Landmarks, while talking to a supervisor or other volunteer and checking the Landmarks SharePoint site were mentioned by one respondent. From these results it is clear that the volunteers expect to find the majority of the information they need on the web.

These findings are further supported by the volunteers responses to questions regarding finding information about specific artwork. The Landmarks website was a top response, mentioned by 4 out of 7 volunteers, however Google was the number one answer, and was mentioned by 5 of

the 7 respondents. Other responses included the UT iPhone app, the MET website, Wikipedia, and the physical artwork, all of which were mentioned by 1 out of 7 respondents. All of the responses to this question aside from physically visiting the artwork were focused on looking for information in an online context.

In contrast, when asked how they would find information regarding questions about their duties as volunteers, 6 of the 7 respondents indicated that they would email a supervisor. While this response still relies on technology, it is interesting to note that in this case volunteers prefer to seek information from a person rather than a web page. In fact, only three respondents indicated that they would look for information on the Landmarks website, and only one said they would look in their printed orientation materials.

After reviewing the results of our survey, it seems that Landmarks volunteers are aware of the necessity of searching for and finding information. They use many resources to do this, but rely heavily on the Landmarks website and other online resources. However, when the information they are seeking has a direct impact on themselves, such as questions regarding their duties as volunteers, they are much more likely to seek information from a trusted individual.

It would be interesting to discuss the information searching and finding habits of these volunteers in terms of their demographics, but sadly we did not gather this data. We do know that the volunteers are students and can assume some basic age and socioeconomic demographics from this fact. I think that it is safe to assume that most of Landmarks volunteers are of an age and socioeconomic status that has allowed them to become familiar with (if not reliant upon) information communication technologies. This seems readily apparent in our results, as so many of the responses dealt with interacting with information in a digital landscape.

Overall, information is found in a variety of ways within the UT Landmarks Art Program. Its unique situation within both the UT community and the greater art community allows for

Landmarks staff and volunteers to find information in a variety of contexts. The website, a predominant source of information for volunteers, is a prime example of these two contexts. It contains information created by both Landmarks staff and art experts, and balances between being a UT affiliated website and providing a broad set of information that can be accessed and used by people wholly unaffiliated with UT. These social and cultural contexts create a unique and interesting information lifecycle, of which finding information is only one aspect.

Works Cited

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