

I was a digital volunteer for a month, this is how it went...

By Ana Salas

I think we can all agree 2020 was an interesting year, to say the least. A global pandemic changed our world and for a while, things got worse and worse. Now we have a vaccine and things seem to be getting better, but it will take some time until everything goes back to how it was in the *before* times. The pandemic changed the way we have meetings, work, school, fitness classes and even hanging out with friends and family...Remember zoom happy hours? Today you can join a yoga class, have a work meeting and then have dinner with your family, who lives in Florida, without ever leaving your apartment!

This may be an unpopular opinion, but I've gotten used to not having to leave my apartment that often and... I kind of like it! I do schoolwork from home, do work for my internship from home, attend meetings from home, and this past month I also been volunteering from home. That's right, I was a *digital volunteer* and I'm here to tell you all about it.

Surprisingly, digital volunteering is not a side effect of COVID-19 like all the other virtual activities we have now. It first started in 2018 with the Smithsonian Transcription Center. It requires a laptop, an internet connection, and an account, then you're ready to start transcribing! Since the Smithsonian launched their Transcription Center, other cultural organizations have jumped

on the bandwagon for crowdsourcing transcription for their thousands of records.

Cultural organizations like the Smithsonian and the National Archives hold thousands of records that

they are constantly digitizing to then upload

on to their public facing databases. Transcribing

these records makes them more discoverable

not just on specific

databases but mainstream search engines like Google. So, thanks to a digital volunteer like me, finding primary sources for your research paper just got a lot easier.

After initially learning about digital volunteering, I was mesmerized and wanted to find out how this concept actually works in practice. I set up an account with the Smithsonian Transcription Center AND the National Archives' "Citizen Archivists" platform. For a month I volunteered four hours a week, two at the Smithsonian Transcription Center and two at the National Archives.



Smithsonian's Transcription Center Interface

Both sites have curated missions for their volunteers to pick from but past that similarity, both sites are pretty different. I found I preferred the Transcription Center interface because it was a lot easier to use. In fact, at first, I thought the Smithsonian Transcription Center was overall better because it felt a lot easier to pick a mission and get started on work but the more I worked on both sites the more I realized they both have advantages and disadvantages.

The Smithsonian Transcription Center shows its users how close to complete each mission is, once you have selected a mission, a green marker on the thumbnails makes the pages that have been transcribed stand out so, a red marker means 'continue transcribing', yellow signifies 'needs review', and grey means no other volunteer has worked on that page. This color system seems straightforward and easy to understand, the catch is, the pages you are transcribing can be kind of difficult to decipher.

If you're starting out, I recommend you visit the Citizen Archivists first. When I first started transcribing, I found their interface confusing but after a couple of times working with the website, I found my way around it. Citizen Archivists doesn't use color coding, but if you scroll all the way down to the bottom of their missions page you will see different projects divided by difficulty! So, if you're a beginner and want to understand how the process of transcribing works, you can pick one of the easier difficulties and work on those pages.

The Transcription Center also offers the ability to parse their missions by difficulty but during my first month as a digital volunteer, I was not able to find any lessons in the 'easy' or 'intermediate' category.

One main difference between the two sites is that Citizen Archivist allows you to tag pages as another form of volunteering, this expands the kind of volunteering you can

do in one website; maybe you'll enjoy tagging pages more

than transcribing. I did not try tagging pages during my time as a digital volunteer

since I was more

interested in doing transcription. Ultimately, you don't have to either...both the Transcription Center and Citizen Archivist allow you to transcribe as much or as little as you like, whenever you like. Sometimes I've only been able to complete a page in an hour and that's okay because every little bit you can do helps.

If you're interested in learning more about the material you are transcribing I recommend you visit the Transcription Center, often they will have additional



*NARA's Citizen Archivist Interface*

information on the missions you are working on! The Transcription Center also hosts monthly group meetings with any volunteers that wish to attend, virtually of course. These meetings are intended to create a community of digital volunteers and make space for volunteers to chat about the work they do.

Overall, being a digital volunteer is highly rewarding. You're helping create access to important archival documents and you can do it from the comfort of your home and at your own pace! And because this is digital work, the whole country benefits from the work you are doing. It's no question that digital volunteering is popular, the Transcription Center community alone has over 48,000 digital volunteers, but don't worry, there is room for more! I highly recommend you visit the Transcription Center and Citizen Archivist websites to see for yourself what digital volunteering is and how you can contribute to this crowdsourcing effort to enhance access!