By the People Transcribe-a-Thon

Library of Congress

Young Adult

|

Adults

By the People Transcribe-a-Thon

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Free

Byline

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The By the People Transcribe-a-Thon is a Library of Congress program that invites the public to serve as virtual volunteers, transcribing and tagging digital collections to make them more findable and useable.

The program is open to everyone. In-person Transcribe-a-thon events, held at libraries around the country, provide opportunity and support for participants to test out the virtual volunteering technology and tasks, build digital and historical

literacies, and forge relationships between the Library of Congress and their community's own history.

Advanced Planning

The Transcribe-a-thon program was successfully piloted in February 2019 with the D.C. Public Library (DCPL). At that event participants were introduced to By the People goals and tasks, then worked together to transcribe and review pages from the archives of D.C. hometown hero Mary Church Terrell and learned about other Library of Congress and DCPL resources for exploring Terrell's life and legacy. Documentation resulting from the DCPL event has been used by public and academic libraries across the country to host their own By the People transcription events.

The instructions and other supporting documentation follow the model of Wikipedia-edit-a-thons and give you everything you need to know to host a successful Transcribe-a-thon. The By the People campaigns represent the diversity of the library's collections. You'll find presidential papers, such as letters to Abraham Lincoln; materials from the women's suffrage, abolition and other movements; and the work of American writers, such as Walt Whitman, with much more to come.

We began conversations about the event several months before to set a date and reserve space. Logistical planning began about a month out from the scheduled event. Details that needed to be considered and planned for included:

- scheduling and location
- technical needs including Wi-Fi, electrical power and devices
- event goals, focus and run-of-show
- Special Collections materials to pull for display

For this event, one staff member each from the Library of Congress and DCPL planned and led the event.

The By the People Resources page provides a detailed "How to host a Transcribe-a-thon" guide that walks through everything you need to consider when planning and hosting a By the People event. It also provides a handout of Instruction "Quick Tips" (PDF) and a "Getting Started" presentation template (PowerPoint) you can use to

orient participants and lead them through activity. (**View both documents under Attachments at right**). Familiarize yourself with these resources and modify them to meet your needs.

An important planning step is to define goals for the event, such as:

- What do you or your organization hope to gain from the event, and what do you hope volunteers will take away?
- Will the event focus on a specific topic or activity?
- What is some local/community relevance, or any other context you want to provide participants?

Once you decide on your event goals, do a little research and look at the available resources on the By the People website so you can provide participants with some context about the materials, person, time period, etc. you will be focusing on during your event.

For the DCPL event, we decided to focus on Mary Church Terrell's speeches. Focusing on a local historic figure gave us a "hook" for the event and a way to tie the public library's own local history resources. We were also able to include the event with the library's Black History Month programming.

You'll only be able to plan and lead a successful By the People event if you're at least a little familiar with the website, project goals and the campaigns or material you will focus on. The best way to get started is to create an account so you can try the full range of activities, including transcribing, reviewing and tagging. An account will also allow you to see all of your activity under your profile. Then you can spend time getting to know the materials available.

For the DCPL Mary Church Terrell event we created a run-of-show document, which then became the "How to host a Transcribe-a-thon" guide.

Marketing

The Mary Church Terrell Transcribe-a-thon event was shared across DCPL Special Collections' communication channels, including on social media and an e-newsletter. Fliers were also posted in DCPL branches. (**View a sample flier under**

Attachments). Partnering with other organizations interested in history or public service to share the event will help increase your reach.

We also encourage you to let By the People community managers know about your event! If you share your event with the By the People team, we can share it in our communication channels. We also encourage posts about community events on Twitter and our discussion forum on History Hub. You can also contact By the People community managers via email at crowd@loc.gov.

Budgeting

There were no event costs aside from printing promotional fliers and use of existing technology infrastructure.

Day-of-event Activity

For the DCPL pilot event set-up began half an hour before the event. Staff set up a projector and made sure the presentation to introduce participants to the activity was ready and working properly. The DCPL event was hosted in the Special Collections reading room rather than a computer lab. Participants were encouraged to bring their own devices, but DCPL also had several laptops on hand for event use. These were charged, turned on and logged in. Instruction handouts were also printed.

Archival materials from DCPL Special Collections materials related to Mary Church Terrell's life were pulled and an ad-hoc display was arranged. Staff gathered the numbers of not-started and completed items from the Mary Church Terrell Campaign homepage so they could track the progress made by the event.

Program Execution

Ten participants attended the two-hour event, following the "During the Event" section of the "How to host a Transcribe-a-thon" document. We opened with a staff

member presenting an overview of the goals of the event and By the People using the “Getting Started” presentation available from the By the People Resources page.

The DCPL Special Collections staff member presented information on Mary Church Terrell’s fascinating life and work and what additional resources are available at the public library. We then demonstrated how to navigate the site, find pages to work on, use the transcription interface, and view instructions and help section. We then went through slides on instructions and then passed out and reviewed the instructions handouts.

After presenting that information, we led participants through a group review exercise. Review is a nice entry point as it removes needing to start a transcription from scratch, which can be intimidating. We pulled up a short By the People page on the projector and reviewed it together as a group. The facilitator asked what was done correctly and what edits are needed. As a group, we discussed gray areas, including words that were hard to read and deciphering punctuation. The participants were eager to jump in as verbal transcribers as the facilitator added their edits to the page!

This is a good time to make sure participants know they can choose what to work on. They should not be afraid to start a page even if they can’t finish it. They should also feel they can move on if something isn’t their speed or isn’t interesting them, as long as they hit “Save” before looking for something else. You can then demonstrate how to find and use the “Find a new page” button.

After about 15 minutes of big-group activity reviewing together, the facilitators asked the participants split into pairs to do a few more reviews in these small groups before working on their own. The staff members moved between the groups, checking in on their conversations and answering questions. Encourage conversation and sharing of especially interesting or challenging pages. Talk through the gray areas of interpreting handwriting and text together. You’ve gathered for this event not just to type silently in the same room, but to form a community — even if only for a few hours — that will learn and grow together!

After some small-group activity, we asked if people wanted to split into clusters by their interest in specific topics or forms of activity. For example, one group could review and another transcribe, or one could work on diaries and another on letters. These sub-communities can then support each other in those specific areas of

interest or activity, sharing information, findings or tips as they delve into the materials. Our small groups were happy to stay where they were and had built confidence undertaking activity themselves and working with their teammates. They moved on to individual transcribing but asked each other and facilitators questions often. After about another 15 minutes, facilitators interrupted participants to encourage them to take a break to stretch their legs, get water and look at the Mary Church Terrell archival materials on display. Some did, but others wanted to just keep transcribing.

Individual work continued for the remaining time of the event, with frequent sharing by participants of questions and interesting findings.We recommend transcription events be scheduled for two to three hours and be led by a staff member to introduce the event. The staff member should go over By the People goals and instructions, answer questions and direct group activity. Modify the provided “Getting Started” presentation for your event to include your specific logistics and goals.

The DCPL event resulted in the By the People Transcribe-a-thon documentation now available on the website's Resources page. It also informed participants about DCPL resources on Mary Church Terrell and local history more broadly and introduced them to the By the People project. Participants were surveyed at the end of the program. The majority reported that they enjoyed the program, learned something new and planned to continue to volunteer virtually with By the People. Working together, 10 people transcribed 32 pages and reviewed 39 pages!

Advice

We recommend transcription events be scheduled for two to three hours and be led by a staff member to introduce the event. The staff member should go over By the People goals and instructions, answer questionsand direct group activity. Modify the provided “Getting Started” presentation for your event to include your specific logistics and goals.

Thank everyone who attended, especially anyone else who helped organize the event!

Make sure new volunteers know that they can keep contributing individually to By the People after the event and where they can reach Community Managers and the wider volunteer community. If you have another event planned for the future, make sure you announce it before people start to leave.

Jot down the numbers of not-started and completed items in the campaigns you worked on. Hopefully you did this before the event started as well so you could track your progress and contributions. You can't know if other people weren't also working on the site at the same time, but there will likely be an unusual jump in activity that could only be attributed to your event.

Take and share photos if allowed by your organization, and share your event outcomes with the By the People team!

Did you try this program at your library? Share your experience using this form.

Supporting Materials

Document
transcribeathonhowto.pdf
Document
transcriptionquicktips.pdf
Document
terrell_program_flier.pdf
Download this Program as a PDF

- Programming Librarian Facebook Group

Slideshow Images

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Tips for Hosting a Wikipedia Edit-a-thon

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Adults (21 and up)+ | □□
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Partnerships: Teamwork Makes the Dream Work

Audiences:

Audience
Adults (21 and up)
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[Local History Wikipedia Edit-a-thon]

Audiences: