

# Participatory and Post-Custodial Archives as Community Practice

The proliferation of digital content has been a disruptive force in the archival profession, in terms of both volume and volatility. The ease with which electronic files can be generated and manipulated and can be found in proprietary formats presents a host of challenges to appraisal and long-term access. Rather than stabilizing a single authentic analog original, digital content must be actively managed, backed up, and preserved, and it must remain human-readable. Benign neglect, though never desirable, is not a viable option. Yet though the paradoxical fragility of electronic records—digitized as well as born-digital—poses a challenge to the many archives already operating with minimal resources, this also presents an opportunity to recast and reimagine the role and relevance of archives, in terms of professional ethics as well as public perception.

When archivists are asked about some of the primary stereotypes they encounter in daily interactions and media coverage, “dusty boxes,” materials waiting to be “discovered,” and “repositories for the old, the obsolete, and the analog” are often cited. The literature and the discourse of allied professional organizations clearly show that the archival profession—like related fields such as higher education, libraries, and museums—is grappling with ways to diversify the voices represented in its collections and its workforce.

From questioning the presumed neutrality of the terms used to describe and categorize archival collections for access,<sup>1</sup> to calling attention to the conspicuous absence of people of color in both the archival record and the profession,<sup>2</sup> and even to pushing back on the reductive notion that archives and archivists are passive, reactive, and static, it is clear that archives are at a crossroads as such arguments increasingly gain traction in the mainstream of the profession.

One recent example is the 2017 annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists (SAA), which featured a day-long forum—“The Liberated Archive”—that sought to go “beyond good intentions to explore how archivists might partner with the public to repurpose the archive as a site of social transformation and radical inclusion.” Due to a confluence of factors, including a workforce that is increasingly contingent, socially aware, and eager to interrogate and embrace the ethical responsibilities and ramifications of cultural record-keeping in a

tech-savvy and culturally sensitive way, such explorations are becoming commonplace at the grassroots level. Nonetheless, SAA’s endorsement of such a progressive program, one that featured community activists as archival equals, feels significant—signaling that perhaps the mainstream profession is turning away from the notion of archives and archivists as unequivocal custodians, authority figures, and de facto gatekeepers of the historical record and moving toward an archival praxis that is collaborative, empathetic, and more fully self-aware of its limitations and strengths.

While technology has certainly been a disruptive force in an archival profession already in flux, it also presents a significant opportunity for participatory and post-custodial approaches that seek to shift curatorial authority and access to the communities represented. In this model, archivists work side-by-side with community members to actively rectify gaps in historical coverage and proactively document the present day. Digital preservation best practices already call for earlier intervention and dialogue with prospective donors or collaborators, both to draw on their subject expertise and to work with them to ensure that archived content is viable in terms of longevity and findability. Digital archives likewise have the potential to reach audiences beyond the physical space of a brick-and-mortar repository.

Digital archiving, moreover, invites archivists to revisit core assumptions about authorship and authority, about context and hierarchy, and about advocacy versus agency. In short, “we occupy a moment in history in which the largest percentage of the world’s population ever possesses the power and potential to author and create documentation about their lived experiences.”<sup>3</sup> While power and potential do not equate to effortless or automatically all-encompassing archiving, various types of digital archiving initiatives are harnessing the power of technology to expand the reach of participatory archiving, develop increasingly sophisticated and sensitive post-custodial approaches, broaden the cultural record to represent more diverse voices, and respond to current events.

Participatory archives in a digital context can include crowdsourcing description, such as enlisting community members for describing images, transcribing handwritten script, translating from or into other languages, tagging items, or otherwise contributing to making sense of what is preserved.<sup>4</sup> Some examples

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include DIY History from the University of Iowa Libraries, the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration's Citizen Archivist program, and Metadata Games.

Post-custodial archives, as the moniker implies, seek to separate records management from physical custody. In this model, records creators retain custody of their records, and archivists provide some oversight into management of the records.<sup>5</sup> A prominent institutional example of this approach is the University of Texas Libraries, which have partnered with organizations in several countries to digitally document human rights struggles, the records of which are often extremely fragile and susceptible to loss.<sup>6</sup> This work includes the Human Rights Documentation Initiative, Genocide Archive Rwanda, and the Digital Archive of the Guatemalan National Police Historical Archive.

Increasingly, participatory and post-custodial digital archives initiatives are also visibly and proactively responding to document current events, seeking contributions on an ongoing basis, and documenting events close to home, with an emphasis on a digital presence. Participatory and multifaceted archives initiatives have arisen in response to events such as the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing (Our Marathon), the nationwide Women's Marches in January 2017 (Women's

to archive vulnerable government data related to climate change (the Environmental Data & Governance Initiative Archiving Data) and other areas of current political contention (Data Rescue Boston).

Technology has greatly democratized the archival process in some ways, introducing a proliferation of open-access tools and nascent participatory initiatives. On the other hand, the digital divide is real. Online access does not necessarily mean improved access for everyone, nor should it be mistaken for digital preservation in and of itself. Moreover, there are significant ethical considerations: What constitutes consent in an online environment, particularly when personal data can be mined by government or private organizations for punitive purposes?<sup>7</sup> When we digitize collections, who is doing the labor?<sup>8</sup> What about communities that do not want their information made publicly available?<sup>9</sup> Careful consideration and engagement of these ethical issues is a crucial component of a truly participatory archival practice.

As demonstrated here with just a few examples, many repositories and individuals are taking increasingly collaborative and interdisciplinary approaches to meet record creators where they are and to think critically about what gets saved, who has access, and who is at the table when these decisions are made.<sup>10</sup> Ultimately, libraries and archives are not neutral, and technology is not neutral.<sup>11</sup> Naming something, preserving something, valorizing something—all are critical acts that should be undertaken with great intention and recognition of our own biases and limitations.<sup>12</sup>



Notes

1. Sam Winn, "The Hubris of Neutrality in Archives," *Medium*, April 24, 2017.
2. Bergis Jules, "Confronting Our Failure of Care Around the Legacies of Marginalized People in the Archives," *Medium*, November 11, 2016.
3. Jarrett M. Drake, "RadTech Meets RadArch: Towards A New Principle for Archives and Archival Description," *Medium*, April 6, 2016.
4. Kate Theimer, "The Future of Archives Is Participatory: Archives as Platform; or, A New Mission for Archives," *ArchivesNext*, April 3, 2014.
5. Society of American Archivists, Glossary, "postcustodial theory of archives," accessed September 12, 2017.
6. Theresa E. Polk, "Archiving Human Rights Documentation: The Promise of the Post-Custodial Approach in Latin America," *Portal*, August 5, 2016.
7. Bergis Jules, "Surveillance and Social Media Archiving," *Documenting DocNow*, October 3, 2016; April Hathcock, "Creative Commons Requires Consent," *At the Intersection*, March 20, 2016.
8. S. Williams, "Implications of Archival Labor," *Medium*, April 11, 2016.
9. Tara Robertson, "Digitization: Just Because You Can, Doesn't Mean You Should," *Tara Robertson* (blog), March 20, 2016.
10. Jules, "Confronting Our Failure of Care."
11. Stacie Williams, "Librarians in the 21st century: It Is Becoming Impossible to Remain Neutral," *Literary Hub*, May 4, 2017; Ellen Ullman, "Gender Binary," *Harper's Magazine*, July 2017.
12. Winn, "The Hubris of Neutrality in Archives"; Netanel Ganin, "White Privilege Is Not in the Library of Congress Subject Headings," *I Never Metadata I Didn't Like*, October 10, 2015.

March on Washington Archives Project, Art of the March, UW Libraries Special Collections, Women's March on Washington Archives Project), various efforts to document the Black Lives Matter movement (#blacklivesmatter Web Archive) and police violence (A People's Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland), as well as exclusively digital archives dedicated to documenting underrepresented communities and stories in their own words and on their own terms (the South Asian American Digital Archive, the Transgender Archive).

Social media is another area ripe for collaboration, as evidenced by projects such as Documenting the Now, a partnership between Washington University in St. Louis, the University of California at Riverside, and the Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities to develop tools for archiving and analyzing tweets and related links in an ethical and effective way. Archivists are also collaborating with data scientists and many others

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