

REFLECTION



Another archive is possible

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ABSTRACT

There's a classic motto that reads like this: Another world is possible. The aim of this study is to reflect: *Is another archive possible?* Are the archives created with the collection of material from social movements, such as the 15 M movement in Spain, or from the public's repulsion towards terrorist attacks, as happened with the September 11 terrorist attack in the United States, or the 11 March 2004 (11M) attack in Madrid, really archives? This is what the author will investigate in this paper.

KEYWORDS

Archives; record management; special archives

Archival power is, in part, the power to allow voices to be heard.

Rodney G.S. Carter¹

There is a slogan, popularised by the anti-globalisation movement, and that is already in the environment of social movements militancy, which says: 'Another world is possible'.² What we want to investigate in this article is if *Another archive is possible*.

Our purpose is to study the archives that are created from material that, in principle, is not the object of archival science, but that becomes so due to special circumstances, such as a terrorist attack or a social movement that takes on special relevance.

The study began with cases close to home, from the city I live in, Madrid, with the archive created with the objects that were deposited in the Atocha Station in Madrid as a result of the terrorist attacks of 11 March 2004 in which 193 people died, and which was given a very significant name: the 'Archive of Mourning'; and the Archive of the 15th of May (2011), which was formed during the occupation of the square by what came to be called the 'movimiento indignado', the 'indignant movement'. But in reality, the creation of this type of archives of (very) special materials is a global fact, as we are going to show.

This type of archives has generated a debate among some archive professionals, who raised critical voices against them, arguing that they are not really archives, but are closer to museum collections. Archival science has not dealt with this subject in a global way, although some specific comments have been published.³ For my part, I have tried to answer basic questions about these archives: *What* are they? *When* were they formed? *Who* managed them? *What* do they contain? *How* have they been treated? *Where* have they been deposited? And *What* are they used *for*?



Figure 1. Atocha Station (Madrid) the day after the attack.⁴

‘Think global, act local’, is another of the anti-globalisation slogans. In this case, we have inverted it, first studying concrete examples, in order to arrive at more general reflections. For lack of space, we cannot examine here all the data, we will only present a picture assembled from all the cases studied.

Table 1. Example of the method followed: The Archive of Mourning.

WHAT	The result of the conservation of the objects deposited in the train stations of Atocha, El Pozo and Santa Eugenia, following the terrorist attacks that took place in Madrid in 2004, in which 193 people died.
WHEN	1 year
WHO	Citizens Archivists Librarians Anthropologists
WHAT	2,482 photographs 64 sound recordings 13 audiovisual recordings 4 compact discs with 58,732 electronic messages 495 objects 6,436 paper documents In total: 70,000 documentary units
HOW	Delimitation of the collection Cleaning and conservation processes Inventory of fonds Digitisation Cataloguing and classification of materials
WHERE	Railway Historical Archive
WHAT	Study and research
FOR	Diffusion of results

The cases

What are they? Two categories could be distinguished. On the one hand, there are the archives created as a result of traumatic events, generally terrorist attacks. This is the case of the so-called Archive of Mourning,⁵ the result of the Madrid attack on 11 March 2004, the September 11 Documentary Project,⁶ and those created from the attacks in Paris (against the Bataclan concert hall, and against Charlie Hebdo), the ones in London, Nice, Brussels and Boston.⁷

The second category would correspond to the archives that emerged as a consequence of the mobilisation of citizen indignation against the political class and in demand of participative democracy, such as the 15th of May Archive in Madrid,⁸ which is very similar to the Occupy Wall Street Archives,⁹ the *Nunca Mais* (Never Again) Archive,¹⁰ which arose as a result of the oil slick caused by the sinking of an oil tanker, the Arab Spring Archives¹¹ or the General Archive of the Student Movement of Chile.¹²

When. From the first day of the attacks or mobilisations, objects of all kinds are generated and placed in the streets, displays of rejection and condolences in the first cases, and political material in the second.¹³ At the same time, the need to compile both photographic and oral testimonies of the events begins to arise. This period of 'creation' of the archive has a variable duration. It can range from a year, as in the case of the 11th of May in Madrid, to a few days, as in the case of Nice,¹⁴ which, by the way, generated complaints on the part of the population for being taken away too soon. After that date, on the occasion of the following anniversaries, objects are often still deposited, but they are usually no longer part of the collection.

Who. The main creators of these fonds are the citizens, who create, produce and deposit the objects. It is usually the town councils, in the case of mourning archives, that collect the material, or the organisations that have suffered the attacks, such as the Spanish Railway Company¹⁵ in the case of the 11th of May archive. This is often done at the request of research and archival professionals, together with volunteers. In the case of demands movements, as they operate through commissions, it is usually one of them, the archive commission, which is responsible for the collection, organisation, custody and dissemination of all the material that is being produced.



Figure 2. 15 M archives commission.¹⁶

What. The physical materials present an enormous variety. The supports are heterogeneous and so are the materials, with sizes ranging from a post-it to a five-metre banner, including three-dimensional objects. They range from the most traditional paper documents: in the case of demand archives, banners, slogans, minutes of assemblies, pamphlets, announcements, press clippings, various resolutions; to letters of support, poems, diaries, cards, books, and printed materials for the archives resulting from the attacks. In addition to these, we can find objects of various formats and textures, such as flowers, dolls, buttons, and textiles; and of course digital documents, born-digital photographs, digital images, digital moving image formats, archived websites, and compact discs with electronic messages. There are also photographs of how the objects were arranged, and of the graffiti, which obviously cannot be preserved; and sound and audio-visual recordings of the testimonies of those who, directly or indirectly, had lived the events.¹⁷

How. At first there is a situation of confusion due to the accumulation of objects and the need for the authorities to remove them and reopen the streets occupied for one reason or another. Many times the cleaning personnel put everything in garbage bags. Many documents are wet, stained with candle wax, and even partially burnt due to the precariousness of their materials, their exposure to the elements, and their continuous moves from one place to another, so they need to be restored.¹⁸ From there, begins the work of identification, classification, description and often digitisation of the fonds.

Where. The first base of these archives is undoubtedly the public space: the stations and streets that were the object of the attacks, or the squares occupied by the indignant movements.¹⁹ As soon as these spaces are vacated, the archives usually spend some time in an improvised store. Then they move to a more permanent place. This place is generally an archive, as in the case of London,²⁰ Nice and Madrid, or a self-managed social centre, in the case of the 15th of May, a private archive company, as in the Boston case, and in some cases, as in Paris, the three-dimensional objects are conserved in a Museum (Carnavalet).



Figure 3. 'Archive: in order not to forget this'.²¹

Table 2. Examples of classification schemes.²²

15 M ARCHIVES	CHARLIE ARCHIVE COLLECTION
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 15 M Archival inventory<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Press archive• Sol Committee proposals• Camp Sol pictures• Camp Sol posters and banners• Indignant Marches Mural• Occupy Wall Street• Other posters• Authors• Subjects• Location• Attached documents• Images	<ul style="list-style-type: none">I. Ephemera<ul style="list-style-type: none">• I. A. Artwork• I. B. Posters• I. C. Clippings• I. D. MiscellaneousII. PublicationsIII. Digital imagesIV. Digital Videos<ul style="list-style-type: none">• IV. A. Faculty Oral History Project and Donor Digital Videos• IV. B. Student Oral History Project Digital VideosV. Archived Web SitesVI. Audiovisual materials

What for? The primary objective would be to collect the collective expressions, produced spontaneously, that bear witness to an essential event in present history, in which citizens express their feelings, their discomfort, their pain, their repulsion, or their solidarity. In the meantime, the professional teams seek to preserve, describe and digitise these documents, with the ultimate aim of making them accessible to the public and to research. There is another objective, let's say moral: that the most ephemeral voices of citizenship are collected and that the movements themselves are capable of writing their history, and do not run the risk of others doing it for them.

Archival reflections

The main question we have been interested in answering is: do these documents form authentic archives? To answer it, we have analysed the different parts that archival science has defined as parts of our science.

These cases fulfil the essential characteristics that mark the definition of *the archive* in Spanish law;²³ namely, that it is constituted of *non-current documents* (with the understanding that a document is a record, *whatever* its date, *form and material medium*); that they are accumulated in a *natural process* by a *person* or public or *private entity*, as a *testimony of its activity*, conserved in a way that respects that order, *to serve as testimony and information* to the person or institution that produces them and to the citizens, or as sources of history.

Most of the professionals who have worked with these collections are archivists or have sought advice from them. Therefore, *the methods* they have used are those of our profession. In addition to the *collection* and *restoration processes*, *classification schemes* have been created in many cases, as well as an *inventory* with an adequate *description* in varying degrees of detail of the contents of one or more records, using a *controlled language*, assigning a *reference code*, often even saving the data in ICA Atom,²⁴ and *digitising* them for preservation and use. In some cases, however, the MARC format and museographic methods have been used to describe the pieces, such as indicating the scale and the chromatic range.

The functions of the archive, namely to collect, preserve, guard, serve as a testimony, guarantee rights, disseminate information, etc., are fulfilled by these collections, as well as other functions of a sociological, anthropological and even philological nature. Access is usually free, except in some cases where if a victim's name appears, access may be restricted to family members. The



Figure 4. Some posters have aesthetic value.²⁵

archives are consulted by researchers, victims and others, particularly when an anniversary occurs, and exhibitions have often been made.²⁶

The records' creator is one of the most difficult points. They are archives that, in no case, start from the institutions; they start from the citizens.²⁷ Thus, the citizens would be the main record creators. In addition, the people who create the documents are often those who are involved in their conservation and decidedly those who are interested in them. Let us remember that the definition of archives covers both documents produced and those received by a natural or legal person. This has led in some cases to the archives being considered to be private archives since the authors are the citizens, and in other cases public archives since the recipient is usually the City Council of the city (like in Paris).

The Archives. According to archival tradition, archives are both the documentary collections and the building that contains them. Although in the beginning, as we have said, the locations have been public spaces, where things do not tend to remain, nowadays many of these collections are kept in Archives, as we have seen. In the case of the fonds of social movements, the decision of where to keep them is often a problem, since autonomy is something essential for these movements and they are reluctant to collaborate with the institutions for fear that they could lose control of the use of the archive.²⁸ However, all the cases studied call themselves 'archives'.

The documents in these collections seem to skip the primary *values*, administrative, legal and financial, and go directly to the secondary ones, informational value, support for research and testimony of history. It would also be interesting to ask whether some of the audio-visual documents could not be used as testimony in a trial, or even to claim some right from the administration. In addition, one could add an unusual value in the world of archives, such as artistic value, as many of their banners are not without great creative appeal.

Conclusions

We did not mean to establish a category for these archives. In fact, if there is anything that characterises these archives, it is their undefinition. Our obligation as professionals committed to the transmission of knowledge is to assume some form of responsibility for

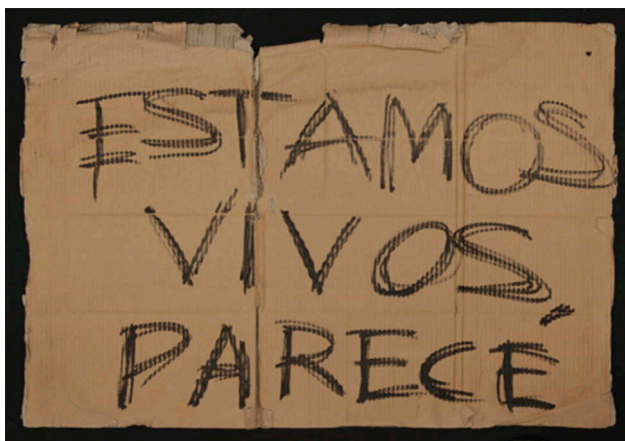


Figure 5. 'Looks like we're alive'²⁹ Let's hope the archives are alive, too!

the preservation of these documents, to manage them, if we need to, and if we do not, at least to include them in our discipline, the archive of everyone and everything, what some call the social archive, an unsettled subject in our profession.

The photographic and audio fonds no longer present problems, but it seems that other media still do. The archival doctrine has marginalised and scorned less conventional documentation, which has often found shelter in the field of libraries and museums. We have to overcome the borders between disciplines; indeed, a part of our work should consist in crossing them.³⁰

I propose to extend the traditional limits of our profession – and if necessary to reformulate the very notion of what an archive is – since the traditional concept of archive has become too narrow. We run the risk of being left out of what is happening in reality, since the document is no longer identified with paper text and the archive is no longer a mere repository; it is evidence of our ways of understanding reality.

The function of these archives is very broad. They document, but at the same time they create collective memory, they have a political and social impact, they provide a loudspeaker for the most ephemeral voices of citizenry, they democratise the objects of science, they can even have therapeutic effects, helping collective and individual mourning. The documents, in principle ephemeral and with no vocation for transcendence, end up becoming worthy of an archive. In this way, archives become something less institutional, they acquire a more social perspective. In fact, the ordinary citizens involved in the events generated by these archives, and who are generally very far from our environment, because they have no relationship whatsoever with the institution or because they are not researchers, or because they have never needed our services, could feel questioned by this aspect of the archival science, closer to their reality.

Notes

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

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