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CONFERENCE REVIEW

Archives, activism and social media: building networks for effective collaboration and ethical practice, organised by the Cambridge Digital Humanities Network in collaboration with the Documenting the Now project, Cambridge, 21–22 September 2017© 2018 Australian Society of Archivists

The 'Archives, Activism and Social Media: Building Networks for Effective Collaboration and Ethical Practice' workshop ran on 21 and 22 September 2017 at the University of Cambridge's Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities and was supported by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council. The workshop was organised by the Cambridge Digital Humanities Network in collaboration with the 'Documenting the Now' (DocNow) project.[1] The workshop aimed to bring seemingly diverse practitioners together from archives and activist organisations to explore the issues of archiving and preserving content from social media and the Internet, both as future cultural resources and as semi-current records that act as a memory to sustain the work of activist and protest organisations.

The workshop had three aims. The first was to build communities of practice around the ethical and technical challenges in archiving born-digital social movement data. The second was sharing awareness of how to use specific methodologies, tools and services for producing and using archives of born-digital activist materials. The third was to foster cross-cultural dialogue by bringing activists and archivists from different regions of the world together for in-person conversation and network building.[2]

The structure of the workshop consisted of four sessions over the two days. The first session sought to introduce the main perspectives and themes of the workshop through a roundtable, 'Mapping the Terrain: Archives, Social Movements and Social Media'. The second day saw the presentation of four case studies, which focused upon the delegates' own projects and the challenges involved with archiving social media data for their own uses in terms of platforms, media forms and content. The second roundtable explored the practical aspects of archives from the perspectives of two institutions and one trade union researcher. The penultimate session (before the final 'wrap-up') was an ethics dilemma café, which explored real ethical examples of collecting crowd-sourced information and the presentation of those collections to the public.

The emerging first session addressed the relationship between the archivist and the activist where the archivist should be more active and aware about what is going on in the 'now' and help to construct narratives. The panellists discussed the importance of not having a binary understanding of the archives of movements and the archives of public institutions. The archives of movements may not necessarily be available for public consumption immediately but primarily a tool for the social movement. However, given the fragility of the digital, participants raised the question of the 'archivist at large', where professional archivists could assist those within movements that need archival assistance. DocNow has begun to provide tools to respond to this. The advent of social media means that there is no longer a 'master narrative'. Social media has allowed a multiplicity of perspectives instead of the one 'official account' and so these community archives are important to retain. The outcome of the first roundtable suggested that archivists need to move into the active, social space and help, especially if society wants to retain a robust narrative or the truest account that it can collect through social media.

The major issue arising from the second session was the longevity of the content collected, especially where somebody had either blocked their account or the content provider no longer provided the content. The ethical issue of collecting social media content was also discussed.

When collected in the context of bombing, death and damage, the issues become particularly pertinent and certainly concentrate the mind. This led to another issue: the use of archives beyond their original, intended use. For example, the authorities could search a publicly available archive and 'go after' those who may be viewed as being subversive to the authorities. Now the state has access to activist voices, we have to be aware of how this impacts people's lives, as social media can subvert the official line (the case studies of Egypt and the Arab Spring demonstrated this). It was also a humbling experience to hear of people working with social media and warzone reports to make a difference and hold authorities to account through such monitoring services. The content of the material they deal with is, in some cases, harrowing, especially that from Alex Hopkins (AirWars) and Jeff Deutch (Syrian Archive).

The practical perspective from archivists such as Elena Carter (Wellcome Library) and Nicky Hilton (Bishopsgate Institute) showed that work to support community archiving is being done and practice being formed within institutions as well. Archivists, especially those attached to activist communities, have a skill in making relationships with the communities, gaining trust and working with them to collect and preserve their social media content for the historical record. The presentations from Elena Carter and Nicky Hilton were evidence of this in practice.

The dilemma café further explored the ethical issues with collecting and exhibiting, concerning both living and deceased individuals. The room broke up around the three tables to discuss a dilemma that each delegate found relevant. Given the range of experience and disciplines in the room, the worked examples covered a wide range of possibilities and the discussions displayed a great depth of understanding.

The issue of the ownership or nomenclature of the term 'archives' and 'documentation' re-occurred throughout the workshop. The discussions moved towards the changing role of the archivist within the modern-day context. Perhaps it should be the concern of the twenty-first-century archivist to get out there and look for avenues of assistance for the records that they want to collect for their institution. Archivists are increasingly relying upon working – and strengthening ties – with the communities within which they intend to collect records. Bergis Jules (University of California-Riverside) made it very clear that while we cannot keep everything, if we can equip the communities and movements with tools to collect data and records on their activities, then the archivist can still make a decision about the key records that remain as the memory of the event. In the instance of the Ferguson Uprising, it was argued that not every tweet should be included in the archive of events, but enough should be selected to allow people to remember and present as many perspectives as possible.

The 'Archives, Activism and Social Media: Building Networks for Effective Collaboration and Ethical Practice' workshop met its aims. It highlighted that, among the diverse communities interested in retaining social media, there was much to be learnt from one another. From those assembled, there was a groundswell of practitioners in each field who were keen to form a community of practice around the complex technical and moral issues involved with archiving born-digital social movement data, who are more than willing to share with each other tools and methodologies to give the data the best chance of preservation.

There will be further opportunities and dialogue to build upon this first meeting of global practitioners concerned with the social importance of retaining digital social media of activist and social movements. As Vernon Mitchell (Washington University, St Louis) suggested, the 'way forward is to have a multi-disciplinary approach between the social scientists, archivists and activists'. It would be good see a repeat of this workshop to keep the newly formed network going to see where the participants have progressed their thinking and practice and to keep this important conversation going.

Endnotes

1. Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities, 'Archives, Activism and Social Media', available at <http://www.crassh.cam.ac.uk/events/27316/>, accessed 25 September 2017.
2. Ibid.

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