Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Archival activism

Cassie Findlay

A keynote presentation given at the Australian Society of Archivists 'Forging Links: People, Systems, Archives' conference in Parramatta, Australia, 19 October 2016

Effective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and the access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation.

Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (University of Chicago Press, 1996, p. 4)

Archivists and other professional recordkeepers are an interesting bunch. Widely regarded as quiet people who are respectful of authority and rules, the stereotypes usually have us labouring away in basements, always dusty, and probably wearing a cardigan. Not typically courageous, and unlikely activists. However, both the archivist/recordkeeper[1] 'type' and the work itself are, in reality, a lot more interesting. We have a unique view of the world of information – the twenty-first century's most important currency – and our work is inherently political. In many of the jobs we do, we have agency or at least influence in matters of policy, recordkeeping systems design, the retention and findability of records, and records access. These are not trivial matters, in politico-social terms. Records – in all their forms – enable and leave traces of what governments, corporations and individuals do. They can be created in order to repress or to free, to nurture or to attack. They can be shared in order to heal, or withheld in order to deceive. Records and recordkeeping support and affect myriad aspects of the lives of individuals and can influence the direction of an entire society.

Today, for most professionals, the myth of archival impartiality has been thoroughly dismantled. Archivists/recordkeepers know that every recordkeeping act – record creation, destruction, access – occurs in and is influenced by its layers of context, from the systems and people that are directly associated with the act, to the motivations of the organisation that funded it, to the expectations and norms of the wider society in which it occurs. Part of the job of the archivist/recordkeeper is to manage these contexts and to implement recordkeeping which is appropriate to its time and 'place'. This is not always straightforward if our personal values and those of our employers, funders or stakeholders do not align. As Chris Hurley has observed: 'We cannot comfortably design a better system for documenting the number of heads being processed through the gas chambers as if good recordkeeping (in a technical sense) can be divorced from the uses to which it is put.'[2]

Thanks not only to leading archival thinkers such as Hurley but to a new generation of whistleblowers, publishers and information activists, archivists/recordkeepers can see with greater clarity than ever before that recordkeeping can be used to achieve political aims,

---

and that we have a role to play in achieving or, in some cases, speaking up against, those aims. So have non-archivists, leading to the emergence of a plethora of independent, online recordkeeping and archival projects. So today we have an extremely interesting professional landscape, featuring both the traditional recordkeepers in government agencies, archives and libraries, as well as independent archival enterprises and projects, and, in some cases, hybrids of these.

In his 2011 article 'Archival Activism: Independent and Community-led Archives, Radical Public History and the Heritage Professions,'[3] archivist Andrew Flinn explores developments in this independent, non-professionalised archival activity, including what he terms 'radical or counter-hegemonic public history-making activities'. Flinn cites examples that are largely concerned with creating archives that address gaps in official traditional archives; the black LGBT experience in the UK, for example, or the daily lives of the East London working class. In the US, Witness.org's Yvonne Ng has described[4] a number of community-centred archive initiatives that have emerged from the Black Lives Matter movement, including the Preserve the Baltimore Uprising 2015 Archive Project[5] and Documenting Ferguson.[6] As Ng explains, the projects share a 'collaborative approach between traditional archives and archivists, community organizers, and concerned individuals'. The Documenting the Now[7] project has developed a tool and a community around supporting the ethical collection, use and preservation of social media content, with a particular focus on protest movements. Here we see projects that come from a progressive standpoint, interested in themes of equality and anti-discrimination, of claiming a place in history for those who have been hidden or voiceless. These are projects that are both products of our web-based culture and, arguably, a response to early twenty-first-century 'post-truth politics'. The archival urge, it would seem, has never been stronger.

But of the 'radical or counter-hegemonic public history-making activities' we have seen over the last decade or so, the most potent, perhaps, have come from a convergence of archives and fearless journalism. In some ways more familiar to archivists/recordkeepers, these projects place the evidence of the record at the centre of their enterprise, as opposed to having a more generalised mission to document the experience of a group or movement. Perhaps the leading example here is WikiLeaks,[8] but also worthy of note for their focus on publishing primary materials are the National Security Archive[9] and MuckRock news.[10] The key differentiation of these projects from the community archives work described above is, in archival terms, similar to the distinction between a collecting archive and an institutional archive. The former aims to build a picture of a time, a place and/or a group through the conscious identification and gathering of records; in some cases, by the creation of new records, such as oral histories. For the community-driven online archive project, these are often records that have been created and have always existed in the public domain. In the case of an organisation like WikiLeaks, by contrast, the mission is to capture and pluralise records in the way a national or institutional archive might, but, in doing so, make access decisions on very different criteria. The US National Archives and Records Administration administers access using local laws and the expectations of political masters. WikiLeaks relies on the motivations of their whistleblower sources and gaining maximum impact for their risk-taking. Records published by these journalistic archives, having been secret but which are then manifested in new and powerful contexts, generally carry the potential to catalyse more radical change over a shorter period of time than community archives projects.

These have all been exciting developments for professional archivists/recordkeepers to watch. The fact remains, however, that these projects are usually not staffed by many of us, unless in a part-time or pro bono capacity. In order to make a reasonable living, the vast majority of qualified archivists still find themselves employed by institutions of power: governments and large corporations. In such settings, acting outside of the rules – for example, by failing to comply with a corporate executive's order to destroy a damning piece of evidence, or by facilitating public access to records which are officially 'closed' under law – presents risks to reputation, livelihood or personal freedom as a result of breaching codes of conduct and laws. And the temperament of many of us archivists/recordkeepers means we very rarely see or hear of any such actions. Indeed, if they do occur, there is so little protection or support from strong codes of ethics or the backing of professional guilds, that the few cases that do arise can instead serve as disincentives for others to act in similar ways.

It has been argued that operating outside of institutions of power like government departments, public archives and corporations is the only realistic way for archivists to be serious activists. In a post on *Medium* recently, American archivist and activist Jarrett Drake said:

> Archivists who give a damn about freedom (like *really* give a damn, and not just freedom for your personal self) should consider remaining free of an archive so that you can: 1) own your labor, 2) use your labor to make archives about freedom, and 3) distribute freedom-driven archives to the public to access free of charge.[11]

In a recent presentation for the International Council on Archives,[12] Anne Gilliland called for five areas for digital archives action to address issues of global access and equity, including digital safekeeping places and certification practices for those who cannot maintain their own records.

Who can we call upon to build these (likely virtual) places? Who will bring our professional knowledge to these projects? With a very few exceptions, the types of projects and organisations I have described operate on the slimmest of operating budgets, if any at all. How can members of a profession which, in many jurisdictions, requires a Masters-level education and years of experience, work with little to no reward? In addition, the personality type of many of our profession still continues to skew towards traditional, safe employment options. None of this bodes well for increased participation of professional archivists/recordkeepers in Flinn's 'radical or counter-hegemonic public history-making activities'.

So where does this leave the activist archivist? In our government and other institutional roles we hone our skills in understanding and documenting context, in improving records' usability, preserving the born-digital record and more. Some of us spend our spare time contributing to community-driven archives projects or collaborating with journalists. We work on some projects which are ostensibly community-driven or independent archives but which are, in reality, hosted by universities or government bodies (Documenting Ferguson, the Occupy Archive[13]). A notable exception is the People's Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland,[14] which remains wholly independent, and promises to remain online and active 'so long as the national crisis of police violence persists'. Such examples notwithstanding, none of these approaches seem ideal for projects that are serious in their political intent, by being either financially unsustainable or by failing to have true independence. In many ways, our predicament mirrors that of journalists who want to do serious investigative work. Without a benefactor, a generous fan base, a clever online business model or a combination of these, we will not be able to be truly independent and survive.

Of course I cannot offer a magic bullet for these problems here. But I believe that at least some of the answers to how the archivist/recordkeeper can both be a professional and act politically in the twenty-first century lie in: a) recalibration of our professional identity, and b) embracing decentralised models and technologies.

Like many professions, we need to come to grips with a necessary refashioning of our professional identity. We have long known that there is no single application of the core knowledge and skills of the professional archivist/recordkeeper, but rather that we use them in many different contexts and with many different partners. We know that in areas such as online presentation and findability, digital preservation and more, our work converges with that of librarians, curators, web designers, systems integrators, journalists, publishers and many others. We need to be prepared for further disassembling of the role of the archivist/recordkeeper, so that the most unique 'value propositions' that we offer can be combined with other, more easily monetised roles. Educational institutions and professional associations will need to keep pace with this shift.

However – and I think this has the potential for much more powerful effects – we need to use technologies to create models for archival work that remove or at least reduce some of the most costly overheads for sustainable independent archives, and that allow us to build communities with a direct interest in the recordkeeping we are doing and who are willing to fund it. This means the use of decentralised technologies like blockchain, which offers us models for direct interaction with consumers of our product without needing extensive infrastructure, so we share permanent and incorruptible evidence with that community and gather reward for our work as we do so. Reward for the work done is essential if we are to retain both professionalism and sustainable, quality recordkeeping, and blockchain-based systems offer us low-cost and highly targeted ways to enable it. For example, a blockchain-based/decentralised recordkeeping system could be established for dispersed communities such as refugees needing their identity and other records to be kept in uncensorable repositories with useful metadata, making only micro-payments for their upkeep. Of course some free access can be part of the picture but we need to think about this much in the way online businesses offer staged subscriptions, view only, or view and contribute models. Our metadata structures are ready to support this, and in some sense what I am proposing is no different to governments subsidising the keeping of records on behalf of whole societies, records which then are available to the citizens of those societies. It is just that the scale and focus of the community with a stake in the records change.

So we need to shake off the vision of the impartial archivist safe in her fortress (and her cardigan) and look to the coder/recordkeeper making truly alternative systems of memory available to the marginalised, the vulnerable, and to the journalist/archivist releasing records with the power to shift the course of global affairs, and making sure they remain available and usable forever. I hope that by pursuing these kinds of professional futures, the activist archivist will have a real and very powerful role into the future.

Endnotes

1. I am choosing to use 'archivist/recordkeeper' in this article in order make an explicit point about professional identity. The Australasian view of the work of professional archivists is that a common set of knowledge, skills and techniques are used by recordkeepers working in any environment – including in contemporary business settings, or in an archive. This core knowledge and these skills are used by archivists/recordkeepers to support the creation and

management of evidence of business activity in all its forms, including physical, digitised and born-digital records, documents, data and everything in between.

2. Chris Hurley, 'The Evolving Role of Government Archives in Democratic Societies', Plenary Address delivered to Association of Canadian Archivists Annual Conference, Winnipeg, 9 June 2001, available at <*http://www.descriptionguy.com/images/WEBSITE/the-evolving-role-of-government-archives-in-democratic-societies.pdf*>, accessed 15 November 2016.

3. Andrew Flinn, 'Archival Activism: Independent and Community-led Archives, Radical Public History and the Heritage Professions', *InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2011, available at <*http://escholarship.org/uc/item/9pt2490x*>, accessed 15 November 2016.

4. Yvonne Ng, 'Community-Based Approaches to Archives from the Black Lives Matter Movement', Witness.Org, available at <*https://blog.witness.org/2015/09/community-based-approaches-to-archives-from-the-black-lives-matter-movement/*>, accessed 15 November 2016.

5. Preserve the Baltimore Uprising 2015 Archive Project, available at <*http://baltimoreuprising2015.org/*>, accessed 15 November 2016.

6. Documenting Ferguson, available at <*http://www.digital.wustl.edu/ferguson/*>, accessed 15 November 2016.

7. Documenting the Now, available at <*http://www.docnow.io/*>, accessed 15 November 2016.

8. WikiLeaks, available at <*https://wikileaks.org/*>, accessed 15 November 2016.

9. National Security Archive, available at <*http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/*>, accessed 15 November 2016.

10. MuckRock, available at <*https://www.muckrock.com/*>, accessed 15 November 2016.

11. Jarrett Drake, 'Archivists without Archives: A Labor Day Reflection', *Medium*, 2 September 2016, available at <*https://medium.com/on-archivy/archivists-without-archives-a-labor-day-reflection-e120038848e - .qtzf1jabs*>, accessed 15 November 2016.

12. Anne Gilliland, 'Rising to the Challenges of the Twenty-first Century and a Digital World', Plenary Address to the International Council on Archives International Congress 2016, Seoul, Korea, 7 September.

13. Occupy Archive, available at <*http://occupyarchive.org/*>, accessed 15 November 2016.

14. People's Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland, available at <*http://www.archivingpoliceviolence.org/*>, accessed 15 November 2016.