

EDITORIAL

Participatory archives in a world of ubiquitous media

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I dream of a new age of curiosity. We have the technical means for it; the desire is there; the things to be known are infinite; the people who can employ themselves at this task exist. Why do we suffer? From too little: from channels that are too narrow, skimpy, quasi-monopolistic, insufficient. There is no point in adopting a protectionist attitude, to prevent ‘bad’ information from invading and suffocating the ‘good’. Rather, we must multiply the paths and the possibility of comings and goings.¹

Many archivists in the past few decades have reassessed many of their core beliefs, challenging the positivism that was entrenched in professional thinking which favoured objectivity, detachment, authenticity and truth. In the wake of this reassessment, which in many other disciplines became associated with the label ‘postmodernity’, archivists have learnt to embrace diversity, subjective values and participatory principles. These developments have been fostered through scholarly dialogues within the archiving community, among users of archives, as well as through the impact of the contemporary media environment.

Today’s media is characterised by two critical factors: the development and adoption of ubiquitous mobile devices, and the strengthening of connectivity enabled by advances in ICT infrastructure and social media platforms. These developments have intensified the mediation of social relationships and interactions, bringing about a media environment that is more than the information being created or used, and more than just tools or platforms for communication. As van Dijck has explained, we are now in a culture of connectivity arising from technological innovations that have been instrumental in blurring the boundaries between the private and public throughout our contemporary existence, and no less so within archival cultures.²

With the introduction of social media in the early 2000s, archives have gone beyond being merely physical or digital entities; they are now also characterised by greater socialisations and networks that actively contribute to the signification of cultural heritage value. A range of new stakeholders, many of whom include the public, have sought to define what needs to be collectively remembered and forgotten. The world in which one or a few professional archivists worked on the sole mission of shaping how a society remembers is being displaced by a more democratised culture and the new generation of digitally networked archivists that are its natives.

Such explorations of new media demonstrate the democratic potential of contemporary archives, reflecting the ‘new age of curiosity’ referred to by Michel Foucault in an interview published in 1980.³ The technical means now present in the contemporary media environment, coupled with the present-day imaginations and expertise of social actors, have given rise to the construction of new forms of memories characterised by cooperative remembrance and recursive reflections integrated as part of everyday

practices. As Schwartz and Cook have pointed out, there is power in archives as they shape what is remembered about the past as well as what becomes of significance in the present and the future.⁴ The shift of archival practices and privileges from institutions to individuals underlies the changing power relations of contemporary archival cultures in persuading and mobilising, creating awareness and exerting influence on various social actors and political powers in society.

The possibilities are exciting, but challenges abound as fundamental and practical questions are raised about the archivist's role(s), existing practices and how to deal with the chaos of 'wild' archives popping up everywhere and the lack of structured metadata. The need to reconsider which contemporary archives need to be managed (or not managed), and how this will be achieved, is a primary occupation of the archivist today.

This special issue of *Archives and Manuscripts* is timely as we reflect on what it means for archiving in today's media environment, given the growing complexities brought about by technological innovations and broader social changes. Moving from the predominant preoccupation to institutionalise the keeping of records chronologically as history, archivists are becoming cognisant of the increasingly individualised and democratised processes and acts of collective remembering involved in producing and reproducing records as memories.⁵

The papers

The papers in this special issue straddle a continuum of new media possibilities. On one hand new types of records and interactions may be created, and on the other, new media offer opportunities to revitalise and 'save' records that are at risk of being destroyed and forgotten. In between, there are various possibilities in which new media mediate the keeping of records in archives.

Some of the papers here were originally presented at an international conference on 'New Media, Memories and Histories', which took place on 5–6 October 2012 at the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. The conference brought together scholars from leading research institutions in the United Kingdom, Australia, Taiwan, Japan, Singapore, the Philippines, Israel and Yugoslavia, all of whom have been working on various forms of contemporary archives. Out of the 19 papers presented at the conference, five have been included in the final selection here because they addressed issues that would shape the conceptual definitions and impact of archives. After the open call for papers, more papers were received and the resulting seven papers were selected and revised to align with the tighter focus of the special issue.

The special issue begins with Joanne Evans's autoethnographical examination of her experience as an archival systems designer and developer in Australia for 15 years beginning in 1995. Reflections on archiving within contemporary paradigms are synthesised through her journey of involvements in a series of archives projects. The projects are also symbolic of the phases of technological development on the Web, and the evolution and development of archives standards. Her experiences and the developments of the projects are thus also a story of how the archives profession, at least in the Australian context, has reached where it is today, and the challenges as well as opportunities to be confronted.

Related stories are retold and new lessons discovered in Lisa Cianci and Stefan Schutt's discussion of the Keepers of Ghosts project, in which digital images of old

painted signboards from Melbourne are revived, remembered and reconstructed in an online archive characterised by the participation of multiple stakeholders: residents, café owners, enthusiasts, researchers, artists.

The opportunities and challenges of digital photographs, records that are commonly found in contemporary archives, are discussed by Jessica Bushey as she argues for their convergence, connectivity, ephemerality and performativity. The paper highlights the need to confront issues such as value and trustworthiness when keeping and managing archives containing digital photographs.

The rich possibilities of new media are highlighted in the interdisciplinary and collaborative work of Sven Norris, Michael Walsh and Thomas Kaffenberger. In their digital reconstruction of the historic walled city of Famagusta from Cyprus, they raise questions about how new community memories may be mediated, their sociopolitical implications and how reconciliation may be achieved through the multimedia archive.

In the work of another contested site, Natalie Pang and Liew Kai Khiun reflect on how a documentation and archiving team and ‘docu-tivists’ may come together using digital and participatory technologies to shape the meanings and what is to be remembered about Bukit Brown Cemetery in Singapore. The site has been marked for partial removal for a highway and, subsequently, the planned clearance of the site for residential projects. The participatory archive mediates meanings and perceived heritage value, but also shapes relationships and connections within and between interest groups and the state.

The disasters facing the world today make up a significant part of the external transformations contemporary archives have to deal with. On this note, Shigeo Sugimoto shares his experiences in digital archives initiatives in Japan, where insights and archives have been shaped by the Japanese earthquake of 2011. Focusing on the importance of digital archives for long-term longevity of community memories as resilience against disasters, he also suggests how digital archives may be developed as a platform for communities to actively participate in collective acts of remembering.

In their research on the South Asian American Digital Archive, Michelle Caswell and Samip Mallick expound on how archivists participate and govern the First Days Project, a project showcasing stories of South Asian immigrants’ first days in the United States in various forms: text, audio and video. New grounds and practices as archivists are being found and redefined, as the authors also reflect on the modern-day functions fulfilled by the participatory project.

Aspirations and realities

All of the papers in this issue are underlined by the common motivation to provide new conceptual frameworks and ideas whilst examining archives in the contemporary media environment. Read as a whole, it should serve to provide novel perspectives on the various forms of archives being constructed, preserved and sustained by the highly circulatory networks of new media.

The power and potential of archives in helping communities and stakeholders to navigate through present disasters, political instabilities and threats of disappearance is also evident in the way the authors in this issue make observations about the extended functions of archives, and their impacts on the state and society.

Such potential, not always realised in every project, suggests that the aspirations of contemporary archives are also punctuated by realities such as lack of funding, conservative definitions in the scope of archiving and inadequate access to technologies, as

well as negotiations of power between community stakeholders, researchers and the state. It does imply that the work of the contemporary archivist and archives is much more indeterminate and challenging.

Endnotes

1. M Foucault, 'The Masked Philosopher', in *Michael Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture, Interviews and Other Writings 1977–1984*, LD Kritzman (ed.), Routledge, London, 1988, pp. 198–99.
2. J van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2013.
3. Foucault, pp. 189–199. Interestingly, Foucault made these comments at the same time that Tim Berners-Lee, working at CERN, had started to develop the technology that a little over 10 years later would mature into the World Wide Web.
4. J Schwartz and T Cook, 'Archives, Records and Power: The Making of Modern Memory', *Archival Science*, vol. 2, nos 1–2, 2002, pp. 1–19.
5. J O'Toole and R Cox, *Understanding Archives and Manuscripts*, Society of American Archivists, Chicago, 2006.