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REFLECTION

Research, Access, and Digitisation: Reflections on Responsible Stewardship in the Online Era

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Abstract

This article reflects on the impact of digitisation programs for researcher access to archival materials. Using the author's experience as both a researcher using digitised material and as a manager of archival programs, the article considers the opportunities and challenges of researcher demand for digital access and suggests the archival value of responsible stewardship is a useful concept when navigating access in the online era.

Keywords: *Digitisation*; *Archival values*; *Research use*; *Responsible stewardship*; *Access.*

Most of my career in archives has been as a practitioner undertaking practice-based research, assessment, and analysis. Archival theory has informed and guided my work and how I think about that work, but so has my experience as a researcher on the other side of the desk. This has particularly affected how I think about access and use of archives. While preservation is a key component of digitisation programs and projects I've been a part of, access is the ultimate goal. Digitisation can extend the reach of archival materials, make archival material more visible, unlock material that can't easily be consulted or used without intervention, or allow users to access archives without coming into a physical archive and often without any direct contact with staff.

There is a growing body of research looking to understand and measure the use and impact of digitised archival and other primary source materials.[1] There is an equally growing awareness that digitisation – especially our efforts to make more of our collections available online – constitutes a kind of collection building with a profound effect on what material is used and the consequent research outputs from those collections.[2] Finally, digitising and making archives available online takes sustained effort and resources, with growing digital storage impacting our environment.

This has led me to consider three things: first, the kind of digital archives we're creating when we digitise holdings and the kind of research this enables; second, the kind of research we disadvantage; and, when considering the research and experience of the library and archival community over the past 15–20 years, the degree to which our digitisation practice has (or

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should have) changed to support researchers. To do this, I'm going to draw upon my experience as a manager and steward of archival collections and digitisation projects, and my work as a researcher and editor, to reflect on use, collection building, access, and sustainability.

My reflections in this piece are influenced by my positionality. I self-identify as both a White American and Pākeha New Zealander; I am middle class and have more than one graduate degree. I have worked in libraries and archives for over 20 years, mostly in research libraries or archives in the United States and New Zealand. From early in my career, I have been motivated to make archival materials more accessible, easy to find and use, and have seen online access as a powerful tool toward this goal.

In 2016, I worked on an independent project to co-edit the book *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist* by Alexander Berkman.[3] Originally published in 1912, the book provides an account of Berkman's attempt to assassinate Henry Clay Frick for his role in suppressing the strike at the Carnegie-owned Homestead Steelworks in 1892 and his subsequent 14 years in prison. It is considered a classic of prison literature[4] – a memoir of the author's psychological struggles and growth over 14 years in prison, as well as a documentary account of the anarchist and prison milieus surrounding him. The aim of our project was to provide an annotated edition that drew out the names, place, legal details, and contemporary literary and political references that might not otherwise be accessible to modern readers. As part of the project, we also transcribed and edited a previously unpublished diary Berkman kept while writing his memoirs.

At the time, my co-editor and I were living in New Zealand and travel to the various archives across the US and Europe that held the relevant records and papers was not feasible. Instead, we managed the project mostly with digitised sources, something that would not have been possible even 10 years earlier. Our main primary sources for this work were: the Alexander Berkman papers (including the diary) held and digitised by the International Institute for Social History in the Netherlands[5]; digitised photographs from the Library of Congress; and digitised newspapers from New York and the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania area available through the commercial database Newspapers.com. We also sourced digitised copies of materials including out-of-print books, journals, and pamphlets available through independent online community archives of anarchist and socialist history. Using sources that spanned both national and institutional boundaries allowed us to identify and locate relevant and required material. We could only do this effectively because so much of the material we needed was digitised.

The availability of digitised material had a fundamental impact on my ability to undertake the research and to successfully create a new body of work based on archival sources. Digitising material, especially archival content that cannot otherwise be used without traveling around the globe, creates the possibility for new kinds of research projects. The standard of digitisation did not matter to me as long as I could read the content. For handwritten documents, it did help to be able to view the items on a larger screen where I could zoom in to decipher handwriting, but overall I just needed the quality of digitised material to be good enough to read on a screen and in a few cases reproduce for publication.

Use of digitised archives

How does this compare with research on researcher requirements?[6] As a profession, we've been asking this question since we started digitising in earnest. In 2013, Alexandra Chassanoff found that historians were using digitised sources (among others) in their research.[7] However, at that time many expressed concerns over the quality of the digital reproduction and the trustworthiness of the sites (preferring recognised libraries and archives over other online digitised material), while some argued that they would still rather access the items in person

rather than online. Historians also reported that they wanted full runs of newspapers or entire collections digitised rather than individual items. A more recent study found a growing use of digitised archival material, but the lack of transparency about exactly what from a collection had been digitised and how led to feelings that ranged from a sense the archives were 'quietly incomplete' to the more violent 'virtual dismemberment'.[8] From my own experience, complete digitised collections – whether an entire archival collection, a manuscript, a newspaper, or a journal – were important, both when I was looking for a particular piece of information and when I wanted to be sure that I'd reviewed everything I could find on a topic. My professional background made it easy for me to quickly understand what kind of repository I was looking at. And I was less concerned with both trustworthiness and quality of reproduction than I was with my ability to access the material, though this may be because I trusted my own abilities to judge the authenticity of sources.

Recent evidence suggests a preference for using digitised archives. A 2021 survey in the United States as part of the Building a National Finding Aid Network Project found that over 50% of respondents either preferred or only wanted to use online sources, and only 14.7% preferred in-person access to materials.[9] To put simply, these results show that the vast majority – almost 85% – would either prefer or be equally happy accessing archival material online, rather than coming into a reading room. Even if this accurately reflects how most people work (or want to work) with archives, I wonder if professionally we are continuing to privilege the physical reading room, just as Paul Macpherson argued in 2010, because of the value we place on the sort of long and deep engagement with archival material that can happen there.[10] As Macpherson notes, the arguments against privileging digital and online access are compelling, particularly for traditional stakeholders. Not everything is (or can be) digitised, so historians and other researchers need access to physical material too. Relying on digitisation for access could prevent the creation of new knowledge and research. The lack of universal internet access means over-emphasis on digital use could impact the most economically and culturally marginalised people in society. And some people will always need access to the originals. These are all valid arguments that need to be carefully consider before shifting resources from staffing in-person reading rooms to making more materials available online.

And yet, we know we can increase the reach and impact of archives with online access. For example, those most economically and culturally marginalised may also be least likely to afford the time and money required to visit the reading room in person. It seems what our organisations have attempted to do is split the difference and try to prioritise both. We keep our reading rooms staffed at the same levels we always have in order to serve our in-person users while also increasing digitisation efforts and making more materials available online. The challenge becomes sustainability as we try and do more to serve our users without additional resources or changes in our practices.

Archival values & what to digitise

As a profession, our values include access to and use of records, preservation of records and archives, and support for the important role they play in memory, history, and accountability.[11] As a practitioner, these values can feel they are in opposition, but the important work is in balancing them in the service of improved access and use. It is through the use of archives, records, and other documentary heritage that we understand and make sense of our history and are accountable to history, memory, and truth(s). It is also through use that archives remain not only preserved but meaningful into the future. We must find new ways to grow and support digitisation efforts as one way of improving access to the collections, even as we know that only a sliver of the vast archives held will be digitised anytime soon.[12] When I think about myself as a researcher, or my experience working with other researchers, I have found

people want to be able to find and access the records they're looking for in the easiest or most frictionless way. That doesn't mean that all material should be delivered and accessible to all uniformly. It means that everything, from how we describe archives in online finding aids and catalogs to conditions of access and use, should be made clear and easy to understand.

Figuring out what to digitise becomes a critical challenge when I consider archival values and researcher access. Knowing that we've collected archives for accountability, memory, and history, knowing that while few may use them, they have lasting impact, and knowing that our users want to access material remotely, online, at a distance and are likely never to visit the reading room, how do we decide what to digitise?

Two strands guide my thinking when it comes to determining selection. The first is that digitisation programs are a form of appraisal and collection development. What we make available online becomes an 'archive' and is for many (most?) of our users, their only understanding of what an institution holds. Our decisions about what we digitise and make available must be made with as much rigor and integrity as we do when we make appraisal decisions about what comes into an archive.[13] Here I continue to be influenced by Terry Cook's thinking that archives should 'reflect multiple voices, and not by default only the voices of the powerful, an archival legacy shaped by an appraisal respecting diversity, ambiguity, tolerance, and multiple ways of archival remembering, celebrating difference rather than monoliths, multiple rather than mainstream narratives'.[14]

To do this through digitisation is a chance to rethink our holdings and the stories they can tell online. But I am also guided by my experience as a researcher who wants to read through the *whole* archive, who wants to know all the context, and who hopes to find lost gems hidden in a folder no one (except the processing archivist) has looked at before. This is one reason mass newspaper digitisation is so popular with researchers, from professional historians to genealogists – the obvious pleasure of being able to search across a whole corpus to find the particular bit of information you've been searching for. But this is only possible for newspapers because these particular records have 'made the cut'. Until recently, digitisation selection has been driven by a few key imperatives. The material had to be out of copyright or cleared copyright with rights holders, well described, physically easy to digitise, and visually appealing or already identified as a high value/high use collection. None of these criteria necessarily had to do with building more inclusive collections. They were by necessity concerned with what was possible and justifiable, within the legal and technical parameters that governed the institutions.

As our digitisation programs have matured, I see the future of our work being focused in two areas. The first is on-demand one-off digitisation required by researchers of material not yet digitised to fulfil individual researcher needs in the moment. The second, and where we should focus our energy, is the digitisation of whole collections so that researchers have the option to view what is in every folder, every line of a diary, or all of the meeting minutes and reports.[15] As an added benefit, this type of digitisation is likely to be of more use for computational research. This is not to say that issues of rights clearance, cultural responsibilities to Indigenous sovereignty over archival records, and our ethical responsibilities to the lives of those represented in archival records should be second to the rights of researchers to access material but rather to acknowledge that when appropriate, what is most useful to most users is access to entire collections or archives in context, rather than individual documents in isolation.[16]

Sustainability and responsible stewardship

As archivists, we aim to expand the reach of archives and connect them locally and across the globe, so that those for whom the information is important can grasp it and use it. I want

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this to be done ethically and responsibly. This work is an opportunity for our institutions to be in service to the values of accountability, memory, remembering, and history. But these values push up against our equally important role to be responsible stewards. As responsible stewards, we need to sustainably manage our institutions and to be responsive to the pressures that our digital work can put on our already strained infrastructure. Is it sustainable and ethical to continue to collect, to operate in-person reading rooms, controlled climate storage repositories, and exponentially growing digital collections of born-digital and digitised content knowing both the increasingly large impact they have on our climate, and the small and strained budgets under which archival institutions operate?[17]

The awareness that responsible stewardship must be a key value underpinning decision-making in archival organizations can help us navigate through this moment.[18] Our work is in some sense all about managing polarities: the need to support deep research in reading rooms with the need for access across geographical boundaries to archival records; the need to protect the rights of creators, copyright holders, traditional owners of information held in archives, and the personal privacy of those documented, with the need to provide access in support of memory, accountability, and truth telling; the need to be responsive to our researchers by providing the best access we can, with the economic and environmental pressure of more and more digital storage and infrastructure.[19] Shifting our thinking from ownership and custody of archives to stewardship by necessity involves inviting more people into the project of preservation and access to archival records. And it gives us room to be honest about the difficult decisions we make every day. It helps in deciding how to prioritise and fund access to archival records, in determining what to digitise, and to what sort of standards. It can help us understand how our 'best practices' can facilitate decision-making while also getting in the way of new and innovative ways to be of service to record creators, those with an interest in the records, and those who would like to use the records. This requires working in partnership with all interested stakeholders and communities to understand what we should digitise while continuing to research and evaluate our preservation and storage standards and their environmental impacts.

Becoming responsible stewards is to become comfortable with giving up some of the power that comes with ownership. Thinking about access as a binary open or closed isn't helpful. This might mean digitising material for a specific community to use without making it openly accessible online for all. We can consider 'good enough' digitisation at lower resolution and with smaller file sizes if it is serving user needs to access, read, and use the content. Within my own work, one example has been experimenting with a controlled digital access model based on trust.[20] We can find new ways to provide access to archival records from controlled digital access and virtual reading rooms to digital repatriation.

Thinking back to my example of using archival materials across institutional and national boundaries to complete a research project, it was not one archive or one collection that allowed for the project's success but rather the web of archives from those in traditional archival institutions, to commercial services, to community digital archives. Doesn't this in a small way, point toward the post-custodial future F. Gerald Ham envisioned?[21] Our own research in the archives and about the archives, and the research of archival users ultimately must affect the kinds of decisions, we make about digitisation and access. As Michelle Light has stated, 'in a postcustodial approach, archivists are experts, but not the only experts in archival decision-making'.[22] We are still some time away from a post-custodial archival environment but considering the challenges to the archival project we face from building more reflective and diverse collections, to the impact of our work on a changing climate, to supporting memory, truth, and accountability in an increasingly polarised political world, the concept and value of responsible stewardship helps us navigate into the future.

Notes on contributor

Jessica Moran (she/her) is the Acting Chief Librarian at the Alexander Turnbull Library, Te Puna Mātauranga o Aotearoa National Library of New Zealand. Her substantive role is Associate Chief Librarian, Research Collections where she is responsible for managing curatorial, digital collections, digitisation projects, and archival processing for the Library. In the 11 years she's been at the Alexander Turnbull Library, she has worked as a digital archivist and head of Digital Collections Services, before becoming Associate Chief Librarian in 2021. She has worked to help other libraries and archives get started with managing born digital collections and ensuring that our diverse digital cultural heritage is preserved. Prior to moving to New Zealand in 2012, she worked in university, special, and government libraries and archives in California, including the California State Archives. Jessica has a Masters in History from San Francisco State University and in Library and Information Science from San Jose State University.

Notes

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13. Jessica Moran, Which Taonga First: Updating the Digitisation Selection Process at the Alexander Turnbull Library, OSF, October 2018, https://osf.io/ndvup/, accessed 17 November 2018.
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15. This kind of digitization requires significant investment, from research into selection for digitization, the detailed description required to digitize everything, to the infrastructure so people can easily search or read through an entire digitized collection. While I might want far more digitized, I know it doesn't come without a high price.
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