Archivists as Peers in Digital Public History

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In the last 25 years we have seen the web enable new digital means for historians to reach broader publics and audiences. Over that same period of time, archives and archivists have been exploring and engaging with related strands of digital transformation. In one strand, similar focus on community work through digital means has emerged in both areas. While historians have been developing a community of practice around public history, archivists and archives have similarly been reframing their work as more user-centered and more closely engaged with communities and their records. A body of archival work and scholarship has emerged around the function of community archives that presents significant possibilities for further connections with the practices of history and historians. In a second strand, strategies for understanding and preserving digital cultural heritage have also taken shape. While historians have begun exploring using tools to produce new forms of digital scholarship, archivists and archives have been working to both develop methods to care for and make available digital material. Archivists have established tools, workflows, vocabulary and infrastructure for digital archives, and they have also managed the digitization of collections to expand access.

At the intersection of these two developments, we see a significant convergence between the needs and practices of public historians and archivists. Historians' new forms of scholarship increasingly function as forms of knowledge infrastructure. Archivists work on systems for enabling access to collections are themselves anchored in longstanding commitments to infrastructure for enabling the use of records. At this convergence, there is a significant opportunity for historians to begin to connect more with archivists as peers, as experts in questions of the structure and order of sources and records.¹

In this essay we explore the ways that archives, archivists, and archival practice are evolving around both analog and digital activities that are highly relevant for those interested in working in digital public history.²

Archives: Digital and Analog Hybrids

When archivists and historians use the term "digital archive" they often mean different and overlapping things, which can be a source of tension and confusion. Much of this comes from the very flexible nature of the concept of an "archive." The popular email application Gmail has a button next to each message called "archive" that moves a message from your inbox

¹ For a longer view of the tensions between historians and archivists generally, see Francis X. Blouin and William G. Rosenberg, *Processing the Past* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2011); Terry Cook, "What Is Past Is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas Since 1898, and the Future Paradigm Shift," *Archivaria* 43 (1997): 17-63, at <https://archivaria.ca/index.php/archivaria/article/view/12175/13184>; Richard Cox, "Archivists and Historians: A View from the United States," *Archivaria* 19 (1984-85): 185-190, at <https://archivaria.ca/index.php/archivaria/article/view/11143/12080>; Tom Nesmith, "What's History Got to Do with It? Reconsidering the Place of Historical Knowledge in Archival Work," *Archivaria* 57 (2004): 1-27, at <https://archivaria.ca/index.php/archivaria/article/view/12450/13553>; Terry Cook, "The Archive(s) Is a Foreign Country: Historians, Archivists, and the Changing Landscape," *American Archivist* 74 (2011): 600-632, at <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.74.2.xm04573740262424>.

² This essay synthesizes and extends aspects of work previously published as Owens, Archives as a Service: From Archivist as Producer & Provider to Archivist as Facilitator and Enabler. In *Archival Values: Essays in Honor of Mark Greene*. Society of American Archivists, Washington, DC and as the Multimodal Access chapter in *The Theory and Craft of Digital Preservation: An Introduction*. Johns Hopkins University Press. Baltimore, MD.

to your archive. In popular vernacular, the concept of an archive can be any kind of set of content that has been moved from active use. Noting this casual usage, particularly in the realm of digital work, Margaret Hedstrom observed that “archivists have literally lost control over the definition of *archive*.”³ It is important to define specific uses and understandings around the work of archives in order to improve and deepen collaborative work between archivists and historians.

In this context, it makes sense that when public historians made their way to the web it made sense to talk about publishing and sharing digitized primary sources as “digital archives.” Indeed, when historians at the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media launched the Omeka platform for publishing sources the default name the collection of all the digitized items in a given site was “My Archive.”

This cavalier notion of an archive can often rankle archivists who can read this use of the term as a dismissal of their professional knowledge and a lack of understanding of the nature of their institutions. Archives are institutions, not websites.⁴ More specifically, an institution that manages archives is generally referred to as an archives, and an archival collection is called an archive.⁵ In this context archives are institutions that take shape in myriad ways wherein archivists work with the communities they serve to acquire, arrange, describe, manage, and make available records to users now and in the future. The essential focus here is to ensure that conversations about archives are always conversations about more than “the stuff.” Archives cannot be understood without an understanding of their history and creation, organizational structure, and the expertise and labor of archivists and their record creators.⁶

Beyond the notion of archives as institutions, there is also something particularly significant about the structure and relationships that exist between items in an archival collection. Specifically, archival collections are generally understood to be the results of the accrual of records through the process of an individual or an organization’s management and use of documents in support of its ongoing work. As a result, when archivists work to process and make available records they do that work in accordance with the idea that the characteristics of the items in an archive, their structure and interrelationship, and the history and contexts of their creation, accrual, and ownership are critical aspects of a collection’s meaning and intellectual significance.⁷ In archival collections, the context of the items and their relationships to each other tell as much if not more than any of the individual items. The whole is greater than the parts and the whole is only evident as a result of the accrual of records and their management as whole archives.

We often contrast archival collections with “artificial collections.” In this case, when highly curated collections of digitized resources are presented online in thematic interpretive presentations and referred to as archives they cut against many traditional concepts that animate

³ Margaret Hedstrom, “Understanding Electronic Incunabula: A Framework for Research on Electronic Records,” *American Archivist* 54 (1991): 334-354, at <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.54.3.125253r60389r011>.

⁴ For an extensive exploration of issues with usage of “digital archive” see Kate Theimer, “Archives in Context and Archives as Context,” *Journal of Digital Humanities* 1 (2012), at <http://journalofdigitalhumanities.org/1-2/archives-in-context-and-as-context-by-kate-theimer/>.

⁵ <https://www2.archivists.org/glossary/terms/a/archive>

⁶ Michelle Caswell, “‘The Archive’ Is Not an Archives: On Acknowledging the Intellectual Contributions of Archival Studies,” *Reconstruction* 16 (2016), available at <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7bn4v1fk>; and Michelle Caswell, Ricardo Punzalan, and T-Kay Sangwand, “Critical Archival Studies: An Introduction,” *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1 (2017), at <https://doi.org/10.24242/jclis.v1i2.50>.

⁷ A concise overview of these principles is offered in Luciana Duranti, “The Concept of Appraisal and Archival Theory,” *American Archivist* 57 (1994): 328-344; <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.57.2.pu548273j5j1p816>.

archival thinking. Nonetheless, the “collecting tradition” has had a long history in the United States, with notable activity amongst community organizations (often state historical societies) and scholars to pull together or reconstruct bodies of records that support local narratives.⁸ For example, the nineteenth-century *American Archives* series of Peter Force gathered and reprinted documents that demonstrated the history of the American Revolution, which have recently been transformed into a digital edition.⁹ One constant in these two traditions of archival practice is the attention to primary sources, as well as an emphasis on provenance, the practice of recording the source and chain of custody of records, another key principle of archival work.¹⁰ To this end, historians will generally do well to work toward somewhat more nuanced notions of what to call collections of digital resources and consider the multiple genealogies of this work.

With this noted, archivists have developed significant lines of archival thinking and tools for working with born digital materials. For one, as archives become more and more focused on public engagement with records, many are moving to bulk digitization of archival collections present the content online in ways that enable the presentation of whole sets of historical records that can be read against each other in their original context and structure.

At the same time, archivists have been dealing with significant amounts of born-digital records in collections. The “paperless office” appears to be an unlikely reality, and as a result current and future archives will be increasingly diverse collections with significant analog materials, as well as increasingly large sets of digital records. Collections of personal papers now often come with floppy disks and hard drives and archivists have established practices and workflows for making copies of that content that can then be made available to researchers alongside the analog content of personal papers collections. Ongoing initiatives like the BitCurator software platform, which adapts digital forensics tools for use by archivists in an effort to demonstrate provenance and chain of custody for electronic materials, are advancing significant progress in supporting workflows for accessioning born digital content into archives.¹¹

The main point from this line of inquiry for public historians is to make sure that we remember that the archive concept has different, often highly specific, meanings in different contexts. Understanding these differences in language, areas of domain expertise, and professional identity on all sides, is critical for building partnerships between historians and archivists going forward. Beyond that, archives are working to enable access and use of archival collections to connect with users in ways that are likely to enable significant potential partnerships with historians.

Archives are Becoming More Publicly Engaged and Participatory

⁸ Overviews of this strand of American archival history are offered in Luke Gilliland-Swetland, “The Provenance of a Profession: The Permanence of the Public Archives and Historical Manuscripts Traditions in American Archival History,” *American Archivist* 54 (1991): 160-175, at <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.54.2.w42580v137053675>; and Randall C. Jimerson, *Archives Power: Memory, Accountability, and Social Justice* (Society of American Archivists, 2009).

⁹ Peter Force, compiler, *American Archives: Documents of the American Revolutionary Period, 1774-1776*, ed. Allan Kulikoff et al., at <http://amarch.lib.niu.edu/about>.

¹⁰ A recent review of the provenance concept and its applications by archivists is offered by Jennifer Douglas, “Origins: Evolving Ideas about the Principle of Provenance,” in *Currents of Archival Thinking*, ed. Terry Eastwood and Heather MacNeil (ABC-Clio, 2010): 23-44. See also David A. Bearman and Richard H. Lytle, “The Power of the Principle of Provenance,” *Archivaria* 21 (1985-86): 14-27, at <https://archivaria.ca/index.php/archivaria/article/view/11231/12170>.

¹¹ bitcurator.net

Archives have been increasingly working to reframe how their users see them. Archivists have been increasingly focused on reframing their practices, and perceptions of their practices as passive or “dusty” institutions, toward being actively engaged in enabling use and establishing participatory relationships around records.¹²

One key area of engagement is to increase public access to archives and to encourage broader involvement in the processing of archival records. Following on notable work by Katie Shilton and Isto Huvila, Kate Theimer has defined a participatory archive one in which “people other than archives professionals contribute knowledge or resources, resulting in increased understanding about archival materials, usually in an online environment.”¹³ An example of such work is the “citizen archivist” campaign by the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), a project to make available scanned records for public tagging and transcription.¹⁴ This initiative is in support of NARA’s strategic goal in its 2018-2022 strategic plan to “make access happen.”¹⁵ Likewise, the Australian Trove project provides a public access portal for digitized records as well as a platform for community input to correct auto-generated transcriptions, create lists, and tag items.¹⁶ The result of this increasing turn toward public engagement is that archivists’ work increasingly looks like work that public historians are engaging in. The possibilities for partnerships here are indeed significant. As archivists increasingly work to make archival collections available online there are significant opportunities for historians to develop new dynamic interpretive layers that help a wide range of user communities engage with and understand these materials.

The move to engage with users and communities and leverage digital platforms is not limited to large institutions. In fact, one of the key insights of the growing body of work in “community archives” is the validation and empowerment of communities to be the appropriate arbiters and stewards of their own records, rather than external organizations.¹⁷ Some of the most exciting opportunities in these areas have been occurring at the intersection of local community based archiving efforts and digital tools. In founding the South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA), Samip Mallick and Michelle Caswell were motivated by their finding that “only a few museums ever had organized exhibitions on South Asian Americans and no archival repository was systematically collecting materials related to South Asian American history.” SAADA works closely with South Asian American community members to identify, gather, appraise, and digitize materials for online presentation. It follows a “post-custodial” model in which the archives as an organization do not hold physical custody of the archive, rather

¹² See, for example, Terry Cook, “Evidence, memory, identity, and community: four shifting archival paradigms,” *Archival Science* 13 (2013): 95-120, at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-012-9180-7>.

¹³ Kate Theimer, “Exploring the Participatory Archives,” *Archives Next*, at <http://archivesnext.com/?p=2319>. See Isto Huvila, “Participatory Archive: Towards Decentralised Curation, Radical User Orientation, and Broader Contextualisation of Records Management,” *Archival Science* 8 (2008), at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-008-9071-0>; and Katie Shilton and Ramesh Srinivasan, “Participatory Appraisal and Arrangement for Multicultural Archival Collections,” *Archivaria* 63 (2007): 87-101; at <https://archivaria.ca/index.php/archivaria/article/view/13129>.

¹⁴ As of July 2018, the Citizen Archivist portal is available at <https://www.archives.gov/citizen-archivist>.

¹⁵ National Archives and Records Administration, *Strategic Plan*, <https://www.archives.gov/about/plans-reports/strategic-plan/strategic-plan-2018-2022>

¹⁶ National Library of Australia, *Trove*, at <https://trove.nla.gov.au/>.

¹⁷ See, for example, Andrew Flinn, Mary Stevens, and Elizabeth Shepherd, “Whose memories, whose archives? Independent community archives, autonomy and the mainstream,” *Archival Science* 9 (2009): 71-86, at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-009-9105-2>; and Jeannette A. Bastian, “Play Mas: Carnival in the Archives and the Archives in Carnival: Records and Community Identity in the US Virgin Islands,” *Archival Science* 9 (2009): 113-125, at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-009-9101-6>.

SAADA “borrows” records from their owners for digitization, returns the originals, then will “digitize them, archivally describe them in a culturally appropriate manner, link them to related materials in the archives, and make them freely accessible online to anyone in the world with an internet connection.” Although collected, the project follows archival principles and gains value as new items that conform to its mission enter the collection; the principle of provenance, moreover, is also followed, though the source of the materials may in this case be considered to stem from the idea of the group, who shares an ethnicity and particular social experiences, as the source.¹⁸ Caswell and Mallick, who bring subject matter knowledge as well as archival and digital preservation expertise to the project, describe the project as a “digital participatory microhistory project,” which follows archival principles to collect and preserve access to culturally significant materials according to their collecting policy.¹⁹

The People’s Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland illustrates another significant potential that exists for this intersection between community based archiving efforts and ideally the advancement of a more critical and directly publicly engaged form of digital public history. Created in 2015, the People’s Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland is a local community created and managed online archive built using the Omeka platform. It’s designed to be participatory in that it provides a means for community members to submit and tell their stories. The site is explicitly anchored in notions of participation, perspective and power and work on anti-oppression and the function that the creation and curation of community archives can have around belonging and community development.

Jarrett Drake, one of the key archivist facilitators in the development of this archive, has described one of the key aspects of this work as a move toward a new kind of trust between archivists and communities. This trust is particularly critical with communities facing oppression, largely at the hands of the very powers that sustain the institutions that establish and maintain most archives. In Drake’s words, archives must “build trust with the people, communities, and organizations around whose lives the movement is centered, a trust they should pursue not under the guise of collection development but under the practice of allyship.”²⁰ While the example of A People’s Archive of Police Violence is recent, it builds on work to liberate archives from their emphasis on and benefit to recording the memory of society’s rich and powerful. Further, any appeal to the work of the archivist as technical or neutral in that work obfuscates the extent to which our institutions are aligned and complicit with wealth, power and privilege.²¹

In working on participatory and liberatory archives, archivists not only better serve those communities, but they also gain the opportunity to understand and represent records as the community understands them. Michelle Caswell and others suggest that by opening up the process of producing the archive, by making the production of an archive participatory, archives can serve communities by helping to create a sense of belonging.²²

¹⁸ On the idea of “ethnicity as provenance,” see Joel Wurl, “Ethnicity as Provenance: In Search of Values and Principles for Documenting the Immigrant Experience,” *Archival Issues* 29 (2005): 65-76.

¹⁹ Michelle Caswell, “Seeing Yourself in History Community Archives and the Fight Against Symbolic Annihilation,” *The Public Historian* 36(4) (2014): 26-37, at <http://doi.org/10.1525/tph.2014.36.4.26>.

²⁰ Drake, J. M. (2016, June 27). Expanding #ArchivesForBlackLives to Traditional Archival Repositories. Retrieved December 4, 2016, from <https://medium.com/on-archivy/expanding-archivesforblacklives-to-traditional-archival-repositories-b88641e2daf6#.h1hobqzq3>

²¹ Zinn, H. (1977). Secrecy, archives, and the public interest. *The Midwestern Archivist*, 2(2), 14–26.

²² Michelle Caswell, Marika Cifor, and Mario H. Ramirez, “‘To Suddenly Discover Yourself Existing’: Uncovering the Impact of Community Archives,” *The American Archivist* 79 (2016): 56-81, at <https://doi.org/10.17723/0360->

As archives and archival practice continues to increase engaging with communities of users as participants and co-producers of archival work and practices, the potential alignment between the work of digital public history and archives becomes stronger. At the same time, the lines between the work of historians as interpreters and archivists as enablers of access blurs further. The future of mutual collaborations with each other are likely best going to be found in ways to further understand how archivists and historians can support and complement each other's work as the lines between scholarship and knowledge infrastructure continue to blur.

Blurring Lines between Scholarship and Knowledge Infrastructure

When scholars produce books and articles and archivists and librarians facilitate access to primary and secondary sources for the production of that scholarship the concept of archivist and librarian as providing this commodity service to the scholar works relatively well. Archives and libraries are and continue to function as society's "epistemic infrastructure."²³ Providing that kind of service, acting as a platform for scholarship, is a vital role. However, increasingly digital history projects are becoming hybrid forms, something between an interpretation of primary sources, and a mode of direct access to primary sources. At the same time, archivists are increasingly producing resources for a wide range of audiences that include significant interpretive components. That is, archivists are increasingly not relying on historians as their means to provide value and use to everyone from K-12 teachers and students, to community members, to genealogists.

Our contention is that the best way forward in these spaces is for archivists and historians to explore means for establishing deeper and more significant kinds of partnerships. As new forms of digital scholarship take on larger and varied roles in knowledge infrastructure than monographs or journal articles, it is increasingly necessary for historians to start treating archivists as peers and not service workers.²⁴ This builds on the observations of others working with large digital projects, who have noted that various types of expertise require acknowledgment, collaboration must be inclusive, and the concept of research should be capacious.²⁵ Archivists and librarians have developed both significant bodies of practice and scholarship on issues of organizing and structuring information resources and historians will do well to start directly engaging with that body of work. The expertise of the archivist and the librarian in the organization of knowledge and records is of core relevance to the design of digital scholarship. If we are going to have sustainable and interoperable forms of digital scholarship that is increasingly a hybrid form of knowledge infrastructure, it becomes critical to view the librarians and archivists less as service providers and more as partners and co-creators.

9081.79.1.56; and Caswell, M. (2016). Assessing the Use of Community Archives US IMLS RE-31-16-0117-16. Institute of Museum and Library Services. Retrieved December 4, 2016, from <https://www.imls.gov/grants/awarded/re-31-16-0117-16>.

²³ Margaret Hedstrom and John King, "Epistemic Infrastructure in the Rise of the Knowledge Economy," in B. Kahin and A. Wycoff, eds., *Advancing Knowledge in the Knowledge Economy* (MIT Press, 2005).

²⁴ Shirazi, R. (2014, July). *Reproducing the Academy: Librarians and the Question of Service in the Digital Humanities*. Presented at the American Library Association Annual Conference, Las Vegas. Retrieved April 16, 2016, from <http://roxanneshirazi.com/2014/07/15/reproducing-the-academy-librarians-and-the-question-of-service-in-the-digital-humanities/>

²⁵ These conclusions come from an analysis of projects funded under the "Digging Into Data" initiative by Christa Williford and Charles Henry, *One Culture: Computationally Intensive Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences* (Council on Library and Information Resources, 2012), at <https://www.clir.org/pubs/reports/pub151/>.

There also exist significant potential for public historians to begin to take the digital and digitized collections that archives are making available for use as the basis to produce expressive interfaces and novel forms of scholarly interpretation. One of the most powerful examples of the potential for this kind of collaboration is evident in The Real Face of White Australia Project. In the early twentieth century Australia established a series of immigration restrictions, called the White Australia Policy, that limited immigration of non-Europeans to the country. These racist policies weren't repealed until the middle of the twentieth century. The National Archives of Australia has extensive documentation of how and when these immigrant groups were controlled and oppressed. These materials were well described and digitized in bulk, which enabled the possibility for the creation of this project. Through the Invisible Australians project, historians Kate Bagnall and Tim Sherratt have set out to turn these documents of control into a means of surfacing the stories and narratives of the oppressed people they were created to control.²⁶ The primary output of this work is an interface that presents a wall of faces under the title "The Real Face of White Australia."²⁷ Users can click on any of the faces to see the document each face was extracted from, the bulk of which come from the National Archives of Australia's digitized online collections. Where looking at the documents themselves reinforces the narrative of dominance and control, extracting just the faces of those who were oppressed functions to surface their lives. This work offers considerable potential for modeling how cultural heritage institutions might further develop and cultivate relationships with their users to develop modes of access and use for their collections.

Sherratt and Bagnall's work has resulted in substantive engagement with these records and with an underappreciated aspect of the history of Australia. The work was possible because of the depth of subject-matter expertise that Bagnall brought to understanding the collection and the technical chops and ingenuity of Sherratt. It is worth underscoring that by making digital collections available online, cultural heritage institutions create the possibility for this kind of use and reuse. Given the significance of these possibilities, archives would be wise to more explicitly seek out and support uses and reuses of collections instead of simply waiting for potential users to do so on their own.

The Path Forward: Archivists and Public Historians as Digital Peers

In hindsight, the seemingly tidy separate spheres of the work of archivists and historians at the end of the 20th century will likely appear as an anomaly. The permeable membrane between the training and practices of archivists and historians in earlier periods can and should begin to remerge.

Our contention is that work like archival crowdsourcing, the South Asian American Digital Archive, the People's Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland, and the Real Face of White Australia exemplify bright possibilities and future directions for both archives and for digital public history. In these cases, archivists can work with public historians in seeking ways to make their practices more relevant and directly engaged in critical issues for society, while drawing on expertise in organizing, selecting, and making available sources. These examples blur lines between organizing and structuring information and enabling forms of interpretation and story telling. As David Bearman noted in an early essay responding to the digital challenges to archives, new modes of digital, multimodal access increase the potential for connections with archives, and the "The challenge is to make sense of the documentation - not to keep it. To

²⁶ See Bagnall, "Invisible Australians"; and Sherratt, "Real Face of White Australia."

²⁷ "The Real Face of White Australia," *Invisible Australians*, at <http://invisibleaustralians.org/faces/>

deliver it where it is needed - not to store it.”²⁸ Our discussion here shows a path forward for potential partnerships around common goals and objectives for archival and historical work.

With that noted, to make these kinds of partnerships more and more of the norm and not individual exceptions, both historians and archivists need to explicitly focus on how to further engage in collaborations. For archives, this likely means making more and more of their content available in ways that it can be used and identifying ways to create fellowships and support things like hackathons that open the doors wide and invite in historians in as co-producers of digital resources. For historians this increasingly means starting to go to archives and digital library conferences. Beyond that, it also means, turning to appreciate, respect, and read the literature and scholarship produced by archivists and librarians on the curation, management, design and organization of information. The future is bright for collaborations between archivists and public historians, but it’s going to take explicit and focused work to build partnerships and collaborations to make that future a reality.

²⁸ David Bearman, *Archival Methods* (Pittsburgh: Archives & Museum Informatics, 1989), available at http://www.archimuse.com/publishing/archival_methods/.