Abstract: Documenting in the fast-paced, digital age requires 21st century archivists to embrace their role as historical editors and to practice diligent, proactive measures in documenting all aspects of society for cultural heritage/memory. Because of the glut of information and its ephemeral nature, archivist as objective curator is no longer an option. Archivists need to act more like journalists – seek out “the story” and document the events, objectively and ethically before the corresponding material is lost.

The “Activist Archivist” in the Digital Age

In the words of Terry Cook: “We [archivists] are deciding what is remembered and what is forgotten, who in society is visible and who remains invisible, who has a voice and who does not…” (Blouin and Rosenberg 2006, 169). As if the task of preserving cultural heritage isn’t daunting enough, the ubiquity of the internet and the growing popularity of Web 2.0 applications are creating innumerable challenges for 21st century archivists. Instead of handwritten diaries, there are blogs. Instead of photographic prints, there are digital photographs uploaded to Flkr and Facebook. Instead of home movies or footage of historical events captured on film or tape, there are ever-changing digital video files and YouTube. Technology has changed the way in which people document their personal lives, social events and other culturally relevant material. The chances of such items surviving long enough to be archived are slim. Obsolescence is a major threat to modern documentation preservation. In the digital age, all things are fleeting.
Thus, documenting cultural memory in the fast-paced, digital age requires 21st century archivists to embrace their role as historical editors and to employ diligent, proactive appraisal practices. Because of the glut of information and its ephemeral nature, archivist as objective curator is no longer an option; archivists cannot passively wait for items to come to them. Instead, they must to be proactive and act more like journalists – seek out “the story” and document the events, objectively and ethically, before the corresponding material is lost.

In short, the bygone concept of the “activist archivist” needs to be taken back off the shelf, given a good dusting and reconfigured to meet appraisal demands of the new century.

20th Century “Activist Archivist”

During a 1970 Society of American Archivists’ meeting, historian Howard Zinn made the bold assertion that an archivist’s neutrality was artificial; that archives catered toward the white elite and neglected minorities. In his words:

“…the collection of records, papers, and memoirs, as well as oral history, is biased towards the important and powerful people of the society, tending to ignore the impotent and obscure: we learn most about the rich, not the poor; the successful, not the failures; the old, not the young; the politically active, not the politically alienated; men, not women; white, not black; free people rather than prisoners; civilians rather than soldiers; officers rather than enlisted men. Someone writing about Strom Thurmond will have no problem with material. But what if someone wants to write about the blind black jazz pianist, Art Tatum?” (Zinn 1977).

In addition, Zinn claimed that, due to wealth and power, the government, businesses and the military dominated archives. While it is important that government, corporate and military records are readily available to the public for evidence, democratic and accountability purposes, they by no means construct a thorough or accurate representation of any society. For a society to be genuine for posterity, great effort must be taken to ensure that all facets of a culture are well
documented. Zinn proposed that archivists take it upon themselves to “compile a whole new world of documentary material, about the lives, desires, needs of ordinary people” (Zinn 1977). From this suggestion, the idea of an “activist archivist” began to develop.

Former SAA president Gerald Ham further developed Zinn’s prototype of the activist archivist, suggesting in his Archival Edge article that archivists serve as “historical reporters” and document events of his or her own time by creating oral histories and photographs and conducting survey data “of lower echelon leaders and of the activities and attitudes of ordinary men and women” and collect ephemeral information before it is lost, disorganized or destroyed (Ham 1975, 9-10).

By the 1980s, the idea of a proactive archivist developed into a new “documentation strategy” model, originated by Larry Hackman and Helen (Slotkin) Samuels, and later solidified by Hackman and Joan Warnow-Blewett. In Hackman and Warnow-Blewett’s 1987 article The Documentation Strategy Process: a Model and a Case Study, documentation strategy was given a definition:

A documentation strategy is a plan to assure the adequate documentation of an ongoing issue, activity, function, or subject. The strategy is ordinarily designed, promoted, and in part implemented by an ongoing mechanism involving archival documentation creators, records administrators, archivists, users, other experts, and beneficiaries and other interested parties. The documentation strategy is carried out through the mutual efforts of many institutions and individuals influencing the creation and management of records and the retention and archival accessioning of some of them. The strategy is regularly refined in response to changing conditions as reflected in available information, expertise, and opinions. Strategies may be developed at levels ranging from worldwide and nationwide to statewide and communitywide (Abraham 1991, 48).

As expressed within the definition, documentation strategy involves “archival documentation creators,” working in conjunction with experts in other fields and the collaboration of institutions. For the most part, it takes the “archival edge” that Ham spoke of and domesticated
the idea into cautious, structured theory. The “activist archivist” shifted from being an individual state of mind and approach to a communal stratagem.

The documentation strategy model was implemented in only one well-known scenario, a case study conducted by Richard Cox in New York State from 1986-1988. Although the entire state of New York was too much of a challenge to take on, several institutions collaborated to better document the western region of the state. The “Western New York Project” comprised archivists, local historians and historical societies, librarians, researchers, as well as a director of a regional service agency. The group met six times over the course of a year to evaluate and plan documentation of the region, although a documentation plan was never established. Although several enlightening benefits came out of the case study, such as raising awareness of the need for more thoughtful documentation and the utility of exercising communication among institutions, the effort as a whole was ultimately considered a failure (Cox 1989). The main causes of the unfruitful outcome were the amount of time and effort the process required and the difficulty in obtaining resources to carry out such a procedure. According to Cox, “For it to move from a trendy phrase in the 1980s to an important process in the 1990s, the documentation strategy requires further testing, evaluation, and discussion” (Cox 1989, 200). However, there were no other major attempts to test documentation strategy further.

In short, documentation strategy was difficult to implement in a time when those involved had to meet in person to collaborate and carry out a documentation plan. To do so indeed drained resources and required significant time and effort outside of the participants’ daily responsibilities. It is no surprise that the documentation strategy trend lost steam in the pre-digital era and gradually sunk, taking the ambitious concept of the activist archive down with it.
“Activist Archivist” in the 21st Century

According to Conway, “nearly all new information is created digitally, communicated digitally, used in a digital environment, and stored in digital systems, sometimes ‘for posterity.’” As technology devices become increasingly feature rich, usable, and affordable, the proportion of information that makes its way to paper or film is declining, along with the proportion of paper that warrants long-term preservation” (2010, 62). 21st century archivists are suffocating within an infinite galaxy of information, with new “born digital” information being created every second. It goes without saying that a Jenkinsonian or Shellenbergian “custodial” role is no longer feasible in the digital age. So much cultural heritage information is being created at such a phenomenal rate that archivists can no longer take a passive, or even a semi-active, approach to appraisal. If archivists wish to accurately and thoroughly document cultural memory for future generations in today’s ephemeral environment, they have no choice but to enact an indefatigable, proactive approach; in short, they must actualize Zinn’s “activist archivist.”

Not only is the media format of potential archival information changing, but so are the content and the sources of information available for cultural memory preservation. In the age of the internet, anyone from any race, ethnicity, religion, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, etc. has the freedom to document themselves in cyberspace. As Caron and Brown state:

“…the diversity and multiplicity of contemporary information generators, producers, sources, and containers provide unprecedented access to sources and voices either previously untapped or heretofore unheard of or unacknowledged, and permit the development of more representative and inclusive public memory across all social sectors. At the same time, the choices are practically unlimited, and the choosing becomes incrementally far more difficult and complicated than it was in the pre-digital era, especially within the epistemological sense of memory context” (2011, 13).
The diversity of cultural heritage data in addition to the amount of information creates an
overwhelming challenge for archivists. The challenge must be met both at the communal level
and at the individual level. Caron and Brown address:

“…archives need to fundamentally reconsider and rethink institutional vision and
purpose, and coincidentally, that archivists need to re-examine their professional
ethos and objectives. In particular, we need to establish new value propositions
around the construction and constitution of public memory, and we need to do this
on a collaborative basis with those beyond the traditional memory institution
domains” (2011, 16-17).

Archivists have long recognized that documenting society thoroughly is too much for a
single archivist or even an institution to take on alone; hence the formation of the documentation
strategy in the 1980s. As previously discussed, alliance in the pre-digital era was too unwieldy
to conduct over large distances and in time-consuming face-to-face interactions for inter-
institutional and interdisciplinary collaborations to work. However, in the digital age, where
collaboration can occur via email and digital archives can be built within a cyber network by
several different institutions, documentation strategy is no longer an exhausting tactic. Instead,
documentation strategy is practically a must in terms of providing a means for fulfilling
manpower requirements to document the plethora of born-digital information. It is a matter of
restructuring the way archives function in the digital age and in a manner that could include
participation from other experts outside of the archives field as well as users.

Anderson and Allen’s model of an “archival commons” brings documentation strategy
into the digital era, creating an interactive archival network for professionals and users. An
archival commons model is defined as “…a space where cultural professionals, researchers, and
interested members of the general public could contribute narrative and links among objects of
interest held by archives, libraries, and/or museums and systematically reflect those activities
within the primary repository itself (Anderson & Allen 2009, 383). The most striking feature of the “archival commons” is its capacity for boundless collaboration. Within a structured environment, everyday people could assist archivists in documentation and do their part to “fill in the gaps” (Ham 1975) of important cultural heritage information that a single archivist might miss or not have the resources to fill solitarily. The most unsettling feature of the “archival commons” model is that it uproots traditional archival principles and practices held so dear, such as provenance, original order and trustworthiness. However, these concepts need to be reconceptualized in order to fit into the digital era of cultural heritage documentation.

In the case of provenance, the practice of “tagging,” or non-professional application of metadata, which has become omnipresent in recent years on sites like Flikr and LibraryThing, can be utilized as a means of documenting who created what item and who has used the item since. Overtime, Anderson and Allen purport, patterns will emerge, creating a sort of “provenance-tracking” mechanism, and that “what appeared to be chaotic or capricious contributions by users will begin to obtain a structure of knowledgeability if not overt intentionality” (2009, 393). Furthermore, as Lee states, “Tags have the potential to be more accurate representations of an item’s ‘ofness’ or ‘aboutness’ than more formal descriptions, because they have been applied voluntarily by people who are often very close to the items in question” (Lee 2011 , 209). Tagging systems are already in place and have proved effective and beneficial in organizing information on the internet for users. It seems a viable option for archives to consider within a structured environment. If the main mission of provenance is to retain who created an object and within what context, metadata can be assigned digitally to track that information and subsequent user utilization, or what Anderson and Allen refer to as “communal provenance.”
Christopher A. Lee provides another perspective on provenance in the Web 2.0 era, suggesting – like Allen and Anderson – that archivists will need to employ new appraisal strategies to document provenance. When appraising blog entries, for example, archivists can apply information gathering methods to capture profile information of blog participants who generate entries, send emails to probable authors to confirm authorship (and authenticity), search the web for similar content that might have come from the same source, etc. As Lee states:

“Such collecting strategies would result in collections that reflect many more voices than traditional collecting…This need not violate the archival notion that collections should provide provenance and other contextual information. New forms of archival description could provide information about the authors, sources and various other aspects of the provenance of items. A relatively wide and shallow selection of personal content from the web could also advance the sort or ‘insight into the lives and experiences of broad cross-sections of society’ that many social historians seek” (2011, 229).

These sorts of methods are especially useful in an “archival commons” scenario in which information on participants and their contributions will need to be thoroughly documented.

Original order, as important as it is in the archival sphere, is an idea that could become outdated in the next century. The internet is a place where the order of things constantly changes; where information is taken from one location within the Web and used in another place in a similar or totally new context. This suggests that original order, in its traditional sense, simply does not work well within the digital sphere. It works in a static environment where items (hard copies of manuscripts, documents, photographs, video, etc.) are physically stored, but not in a fluid environment that is constantly evolving. In order for archives to thrive in the twenty-first century, original order might need to be drastically rethought. Anderson and Allen argue that “While it can (and has been) argued that the original order or arrangement upon accession into an archives is worthy of preservation and is informative for providing contextual
understanding, it is only one vantage point into the materials in question. A single arrangement at a single point in time does not inherently allow or facilitate a continuing story of use or a narrative about the materials in question as a result of their subsequent use or incorporation into other systems or contexts” (2011, 390-91). They propose that users have the freedom to arrange items as they see fit for their specific needs and to document their utilized order in personalized finding aids that can be used by others for research or studied themselves as objects of cultural insight. They add, “The rearrangement of archival objects in a virtual and networked environment need not destroy original order, but rather provides users the ability to utilize contextual tools to provide their own perspective by applying their mind to the matter (Anderson and Allen 2011, 392). So while the concept of original order may never vanish or lose significance within archival theory, it might need to develop a flexibility that will enable it to survive in a digital era.

Lastly the issue of trustworthiness is a big one in archival practice. By allowing strangers, essentially, to contribute content to archives, there is the inevitable risk that users will contribute false or erroneous items and information. For this reason, moderation strategies will need to be in place. Guidelines for user contributions will need to be established and enforced and contributions will need to be reviewed by professionals.

Wikipedia is the standard prototype for communal knowledge sharing and editing; however, it has its flaws which exclude it from being considered a reliable source. For one, all content is user generated and never reviewed by editors. Users are the editors. Users work together to produce the most accurate information possible. While bias always enters the picture, it is gradually weeded out by repeated edification by multiple users. As Wikipedia founder Jimmy Wales has stated: “An article is neutral when people have stopped changing it”
(Weinberger 2007, 136). Understandably, this method of establishing authenticity is a bit too lax to ensure trustworthiness of information. However, the Wikipedia model does have one positive aspect: it creates a platform for users to work together as a community toward a common goal. Weinberger explains that “Wikipedia works as well as it does…because Wikipedia is to a large degree the product of a community, not just of disconnected individuals” (Weinberger 2007, 138). Wikipedia allows users to work together as a team to create information that otherwise might not be documented; and it allows that information to continually be pruned; to undergo a sort of informational Darwinism in which only the best information survives.

There are other models of user-generated content communities to consider other than the standard Wikipedia model – good, trustworthy models. For example, the Cornell Lab of Ornithology has established the Macaulay Library online archive. According to its website, “The Macaulay Library is the world's largest and oldest scientific archive of biodiversity audio and video recordings…” and the archive “grows through the efforts of dedicated recordists who share their recordings with the community. We encourage recordists around the world to contribute their recordings and data to what has become an irreplaceable resource” (Cornell Lab of Ornithology Macaulay Library 2011, in “About” section). Most importantly, contributors do not have to be professionals. As the website states, “Being a professional recordist is not a prerequisite for contributing. Our material comes from recordists of all backgrounds and occupations, from students to retirees, from ‘bird bums’ to researchers, dentists, consultants, and cinema photographers” (Cornell Lab of Ornithology Macaulay Library 2011, in “Building the Archive” section). Hence, anyone with a little bit of know-how can participate in building the archival collection.
The Macaulay Library archive has firm guidelines for user contributions and, most importantly, is directly involved in the training of recordists to ensure that ornithological audio and video contributions are as accurate as possible and of the highest possible quality. They offer workshops for recordists, and their website has information on good audio/video recording techniques, as well as audio equipment suggestions (Cornell Lab of Ornithology Macaulay Library 2011, in “Field Recording” section). In addition, there are instructions on the website on how contributors should cite their recordings. By being directly involved in user-generated content, the archives are increasing the authenticity of archival items, upping the standards and providing others with educational/research quality material.

In short, the Macaulay Library online ornithological archive is an exceptional prototype for an “archival commons” for other 21st century archives to follow. It serves as an example to show that user-generated content can be moderated in such a way as to produce high-quality, trustworthy resources. It also serves as an example of how archivists can proactively work with the user base by directly educating users on how to generate quality contributions.

Therefore, there are a few measures at the communal level that can be taken to meet the challenges facing archives in the digital era. Although controversial, if new, reformulated practices based off classical archival practices can be effectively implemented like Allen and Anderson and Lee suggest then, in this sort of 21st century documentation strategy model, everyone can be an “activist archivist” working together to construct cultural memory for posterity. More can be documented for future generations and at a much more accelerated rate, which would lessen the amount of cultural heritage that might otherwise go unnoticed in an era of information surplus.

What is just as complex as the restructuring of archival constructs and practices at the
communal level is the change that needs to take place at the individual level of an archivist. As previously mentioned, “archivists need to re-examine their professional ethos and objectives” (Caron and Brown 2011, 16). Not only do networks of archivists and others need to be in place to adequately document the present for future generations, but archivists are going to have to embrace what it means to be an “activist archivist.” Foremost, archivists must understand that they determine what history is available for future generations, and that they cannot rely on others to do so.

Objectivity has dominated archival science and practice since the beginning; however, as Howard Zinn pointed out in 1970, it is not a beneficial or even honest form of objectivity when taken in context to cultural heritage archives. In the American custodial, Schellenberg era, objectivity is synonymous with “neutrality” or, more boldly, “passivity,” in which an archivist collects whatever is given to him or her, and by collecting everything they are objectively documenting society. This blind passivity is what Valerie Johnson referred to as “the mask of claimed objectivity” (Johnson 2007). However, it’s been proven that this sort of “objectivity” is ineffective and can lead to a bias, spotty representation of society. In short, this sort of objectivity/neutrality is, as Zinn stated, “fake” (1977). A revamped concept of objectivity is needed for modern archivists, a collective protocol to ensure fair, thorough documentation. A natural model for archivists to emulate is that of journalists, in which objectivity is the cornerstone of journalistic ethics.

The code of ethics for the Society of Professional Journalists, for example, contains several components which pertain to relaying information objectively to the public. According to SPJ, journalists should:
“Test the accuracy of information from all sources and exercise care to avoid inadvertent error. Deliberate distortion is never permissible.

Never distort the content of news photos or video. Image enhancement for technical clarity is always permissible. Label montages and photo illustrations.

Tell the story of the diversity and magnitude of the human experience boldly, even when it is unpopular to do so.

Tell the story of the diversity and magnitude of the human experience boldly, even when it is unpopular to do so.

Examine their own cultural values and avoid imposing those values on others.

Avoid stereotyping by race, gender, age, religion, ethnicity, geography, sexual orientation, disability, physical appearance or social status.

Support the open exchange of views, even views they find repugnant.

Give voice to the voiceless; official and unofficial sources of information can be equally valid.

Recognize a special obligation to ensure that the public's business is conducted in the open and that government records are open to inspection” (Society of Professional Journalists 1996)

Archivists can easily adopt and implement these ethical principles and practices into their appraisal processes. Essentially, both professionals are storytellers. Just as journalists deliver an unbiased, factual account of events in the present, archivists deliver an unbiased, factual account of an event to be studied in the future. Archivists are “historical reporters,” as Ham termed them. However, in order to implement these principles, archivists will have to make appraisal decisions on what events to document. This will involve subjectivity on the part of the archivist.

Terry Cook claims in Archival Science and Postmodernism: “archivists in the new century should accept rather than deny their own historicity, that is, their own participation in the historical process. They should reintegrate the subjective (the mind, the process, the function) with the objective (the matter, the recorded product, the information system) in their theoretical constructs” (2001, 16). Because of the bulk of information in the digital age, archivists have no choice but to practicesubjectivity in appraisal decisions, and especially in regard to documenting current events. As precarious as subjectivity sounds in the context of appraisal, it is not synonymous with bias or with partiality. It merely means that an archivist injects their own
intuition and experience in making an appraisal decision. According to Booms, “both archivists and historians in the age of historicism applied such self-evident standards of value to practical problems without any particular difficulty. For them, two requirements were sufficient to perform the task: *verstehen* [intuitive understanding] and experience” (1987, 84). He further explains “…*Verstehen* or ‘historical expertise’…entailed the ability to empathize with historical events. This provided justification for the famous and longstanding principle of *Fingerspitzengefühl* [subtle intuition] by which archivists – even up to the present day – have resolved and continue to resolve problems of archival appraisal, even if they were generally unwilling to admit it…” (85). *Verstehen* is strengthened by an archivist’s experience which serves as a foundation for making appraisal decisions.

If anything can possess historical value of some kind, then making a subjective decision to document a topic or event in accordance to one’s institutional mandate, based off of intuition and experience is not a particularly risky activity. If every cultural heritage archivist practiced this sort of subjective activism, there would be an increase in available information on everyday or minor events that might not otherwise be documented or be overshadowed in the documentation of more limelight historical events. Practicing this sort of subjectivity is one way for an archivist to “fill in the gaps,” as Ham suggested.

Thus, archivists need to find a balance between subjectively choosing what they think should be kept among the plethora of digital information and then objectively document that information. Again, the issue of trustworthiness comes to the forefront. There are procedures individual archivists should follow when carrying out subjective documentation decisions to ensure trustworthiness. Firstly, by formulating a more detailed, officialized code of ethics for objective practices, like those followed by journalists, archivists can feel assured that they are
factually and fairly documenting the present for posterity. If a strict ethical code were in place for archivists to follow during the appraisal processes, future users of the archived information can feel confident that the resources are trustworthy, just as a newspaper reader can feel confident that the information in the paper is accurate and trustworthy.

Secondly, in order to further demonstrate their trustworthiness, archivists should document their subjective appraisal decisions so that their decisions make sense to future archivists, scholars and users of that information. It also creates transparency of an archivist’s actions by documenting their selections and reasoning behind their selections. As Cox states:

“…archivists need to leave behind a detailed account of how they have determined what records are brought into the archives, including a documentary trail about what records have been destroyed. Given that the act of appraisal is the most important archival function in that it affects all other archival functions and shapes the documentary heritage, documenting the process is part of a fundamental means of archivists making themselves accountable to each other (in that they can share appraisal information), to researchers, and to society” (Cox 2002, 307).

By sharing the context and details of an appraisal decision, users can analyze the appraisal decision for themselves to determine whether they feel the resource itself, as well as the archivist’s judgment, is credible. By giving users this option, it also creates a sense of openness, which is necessary to build a relationship of trust.

Thus to meet documentation challenges at the individual level, a 21st century archivist is to balance a new type of objectivity – like that of journalists – with subjectivity based on their own intuition and experience, and, lastly, to document their subjective decisions in order to hold themselves accountable for appraisal decisions.
Conclusion

As Ham stated, if an archivist is “passive, uninformed, with a limited view of what constitutes the archival record, the collections that he acquires will never hold up a mirror for mankind. And if we are not holding up that mirror, if we are not helping people understand the world they live in, and if this is not what archives is all about, then I do not know what it is we are doing that is all that important” (1975, 13).

In order to “hold up a mirror” to today’s society, new archival strategies are required to document today’s fast-paced and mercurial digital culture. Archivists need to reassess what it means to be an archivist and determine, communally and individually, what practices are most effective in fulfilling their crucial roles as “historical reporters” within the current environment.

By refashioning the documentation strategy model into something more like Allen and Anderson’s “archival commons” and by reevaluating and rethinking core archival concepts like provenance, original order and practices like objectivity within the context of the digital age, archivists will more easily be able to thoroughly and accurately document cultural heritage in a more efficient way for future generations. They can embody Zinn’s “activist archivist” in the 21st century.
References


