

A Contingency Collection Policy for the Digital Library in Periods of Social Unrest, Political Movements, and Natural Disasters

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How can librarians and archivists effectively carry out the traditional responsibility of collecting, organizing, preserving, and providing information in the turbulent environment of the coming decade? It is clear that our traditional ways of operating are being transformed. The continuing excellence of libraries and archives will depend on our ability to control the flood of publications and records and to cope with the demands of the emerging information society. To meet this challenge, libraries are using collection management as a more systematic approach to shaping library collections.²

These words were written by Jutta Reed-Scott over three decades ago. The changes that she spoke of when describing this *flood of publications and records* revolutionizing archives in the mid-1980s are almost laughable when compared to the tidal wave of digital media we are faced with today. Collection policies serve to create focus of structure in an archive or library's collection activity. When properly tied to the institution's mission, they can help set collection goals that are appropriate for the organized growth of a collection.

In this paper, I will examine one project where its founding institution looked beyond their history of passively waiting for archival material, generally related to dead white men, to be acquired through donation from family members. Instead the project's team went out into the community to collect primary sources from a traditionally underrepresented population during a period of social revolution: The Ferguson Project.³ Although preceded by projects like The Hurricane Digital Memory Bank, The September 11 Digital Archive, and Our Marathon (a tribute to the lives lost in the bombing at the Boston Marathon in 2013), the Ferguson Project was revolutionary in its fulfillment of the need to document unrest in a period that will forever change racial politics and how the citizens of the world react to violence against minorities. Next, I will examine the idea of development and use of a contingency collection policy to be used in the event of Social Unrest, Political Movements, and Natural Disasters. Finally, I offer a sample contingency collection policy that I have crafted for a hypothetical digital library which is offered as an example of what such a policy might look like.

Documenting Ferguson

At this point, the story of Michael Brown's death on August 9, 2014 has been retold too many times to count. Brown, an 18-year-old African American man was fatally shot following a struggle with Officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri, a municipality outside of Saint Louis with an approximate population of 21,000. Several witnesses came forward to assert that Brown was in the process of surrendering when Wilson fired the fatal shots. Some witnesses asserted that Brown had his hands up in the air, gesturing submission when he was shot. Later, "Hands up, don't shoot" would become a rallying cry for protesters. Immediately following the shooting, protests erupted in Ferguson. These protests – some peaceful, some involving violence, vandalism and looting – continued for over a week in Ferguson. On August 10 what began as peaceful candlelight vigil led to the arrival of approximately 150 local officers in riot gear, some armed with military-grade weaponry. A group of civilians reacted by confronting the police and vandalizing or looting local businesses.

Almost immediately after the shooting, Twitter erupted with the story of Michael Brown's death. According to the PEW Research Center, on August 14, the peak day of Twitter stories about Michael Brown's killing, there were more than 3.6 million tweets about the events taking place around his death in Ferguson.⁴ While these events were still unfolding, staff of the Washington University of Saint Louis Libraries and university faculty, led by university librarian Jeffrey Trzeciak, fashioned a plan to collect and preserve local, national and international materials covering Brown's death. This material covered memorials, community reactions and citizen protests. These efforts developed into a living archive known as Documenting Ferguson.

This project was a new endeavor for Washington University Libraries in that for the first time, the libraries were archiving events as they took place.⁵ A team was formed from subject librarians, staff from library administration and Special Collections, Washington University's Center for Diversity and Inclusion, the Scholarly Publishing Department, and one faculty member. One of their first tasks was to create a website where visitors could upload digital media. Ease of community submissions was enhanced with the creation of a form in Omeka, the Washington University Library's content management system for online digital collections. This allowed multiple image or media files to be submitted at once. The form also included minimal accompanying metadata and an agreement to the project's terms and conditions.⁶ Next, a process for archiving social media was set up using Omeka and the Internet Archive's tool Archive-It. For long-term stability of the data, it was also stored on the Libraries' Fedora servers to preserve the metadata and manage digital content. Essentially, Omeka was used as the public interface and Fedora served as the data access layer for preservation and future coding activities.⁷

A second submission route was created when the team collaborated with staff at Archive-It, a subscription-based web-archiving service. They chose Archive-It because most of the content they were interested in was web-based blog entries, social media posts or online news clips. One of the services Archive-It provided was the collection of daily tweets. There were so many relative postings on Twitter that the team at Washington University simply could not keep up with them.⁸ Bergis Jules – who worked with Meredith Evans, former associate university librarian at Washington University – later recounted in an interview just how powerful the activity on Twitter was: "We saw that the Twitter conversations would correct [and] change the narrative of whatever the mass media was trying to push."⁹ This issue is linked to one of the

stated goals of Documenting Ferguson which is “to provide a space to tell an alternative narrative other than what is being presented by the mainstream media regarding the community’s response to what happened in Ferguson.”¹⁰

The simple act of gathering materials from people with no Washington University affiliation was yet another way that Documenting Ferguson was a unique project for the university’s archives. Because of this the project grew from roots of collaboration with the public.¹¹ The university had no way of telling what the public would upload to their collection; therefore, they took a great risk by soliciting contributions from the public. It is because of the team’s willingness to step outside of the box of their traditional collecting policies that we are left with a living archive of the events surrounding civil unrest in Ferguson following the 2014 killing of Michael Brown.

The Living Archive

In my research, I found it more challenging to define a “living archive” than to find examples. Writing in 2014, librarian Tamara Rhodes attempted to trace the evolution of the term.

A search throughout newspaper databases yields references to the term ‘living archive’ when describing an archive of specialty plants, an individual who has an abundance of knowledge of various past events, or reviving forgotten plays that capture the social issues of their times. In these forms, ‘living’ takes on a more literal sense as it refers to the actual subject or to the liveliness of the medium.¹²

Rhodes calls our attention to a 1996 *Library Journal* article in which the author, Boyd R. Collins tells us that looking beyond the fluff populating much of internet-based content, the web itself was gaining the “purpose as a place of historical memory.”¹³

Drawing from the work of Rhodes and Collins, for this paper I define a “living archive” as an internet-accessible collection of multi-media resources arranged to tell a story, usually including input or contribution (in the form of comments or the resources themselves) from users and community members outside of the archive.

Furthermore, I assert that the “living archive” differs from the “community archive” because while a significant number of contributions come from the community, the project was governed and initiated by professional librarians and educators, instead of being formed from a grass-roots community group.

Like many projects within the “living archive” and “community archive” category, the Documenting Ferguson project falls into what Kate Theimer writing for *The American Archivist* described as an Archives 2.0 in 2011. An Archives 2.0 was identified as a transparent, open, user centered archive, where the public is invited to contribute to an innovative database through popular software applications including trending social networking sites.¹⁴

A Contingency Collection Policy

I urge digital archives in universities, cultural institutions and public libraries to develop a collection plan specially designed for social unrest, revolution or disasters. This contingency plan would be a separate set of guidelines to add to their traditional collection policy, or a separate collection plan altogether. The reasons for this are 1) these situations require swift movement

and decision making, 2) this policy would help support the archives' social responsibility to their community, 3) this approach would capture information about more diverse subcultures in the local area, thus enhancing racial and class diversity within the collection by focusing on every day people, instead of just prominent figures, and 4) such a policy would bring a focus on current events to archives.

The digital library's contingency policy for collecting during social protests or disasters should contain documentation on the following issues:

- Who will be on the team and what are their responsibilities?
- Will the collection policy repeat those of the standard policy or will local events call for an expansion of original collecting areas?
- Is there a method for communicating with other digital archives in the community to avoid redundancies or pull together resources for collecting during newsworthy events? If not, why not create one now?
- Will the mission and goals of the contingency collection plan be different from the standard collection policy?
- What does the archival team consider a major local historical event? Are there benchmarks for a minimal number of tweets or social media posts required? How big or how numerous must the protests be before the events surrounding them are monitored for inclusion?
- How will the team intake artifacts? Will there be input from the public? If so, why not create the form now?
- What types of artifacts will you accept? If you include social media, which platforms are you prepared to support?
- What types of data are most vulnerable without your intervention? How much server space can quickly be delegated to these artifacts? If a commercial cloud server is employed, what is the exit strategy should the agency supporting the host suddenly go out of business?
- Is the current content management system flexible enough to support these activities? If not should other avenues for digital asset management be explored?
- What are the rights and privacy issues associated with these artifacts? How will the rights and privacy of contributors be protected?
- What are the minimum amount of metadata that is acceptable to the team?

All these issues should be addressed and documented ahead of time. Before writing the policy, digital librarians should consider consulting a collection policy tool like Tufts Policy Development Tool found at <http://sites.tufts.edu/dca/records-management/records-policies/guidelines-and-tools-for-managing-and-developing-policies/so-you-want-to-write-a-policy/>.

Unfortunately Washington University's digital archives collection policy is not available online, but some good examples of collection policies for digital libraries are. The Collection Management Policy Special and Digital Collections Department for the University of South Florida Tampa Library can be found at <http://www.lib.usf.edu/special-collections/wp-content/uploads/sites/14/2013/08/Updated-CD-policy-7-15-2013.pdf>. A second thorough and well written collection policy available on the web is on the University of North Texas (UNT)

website at <http://www.library.unt.edu/policies/collection-development/collection-development-policy-unt-libraries-digital-collections>. I am using the University of North Texas' Collection Management Policy as the building blocks of a sample contingency or emergency collection development policy for their digital library. I chose this library because their existing collection policy for the library's digital collection is concise and clearly written, and their layout is ideal. Using the starting point of Tufts Collection Development Tool, the policy might look like the following:

Contingency Plan for [Hypothetical Digital Library] Collection Policy for Periods of Civil Unrest, Political Movement or Natural Disasters

Policy Mission and Purpose

The following [hypothetical digital library] policy addresses, what step should be followed and what conditions should be considered in the event of periods of civil unrest, political movements or national disasters in our local area. It is designed to complement existing collection policies at [this library], but add a level of preparedness in the event of a historical occurrence that calls for immediate action in terms of data capturing, appraisal, organization activities, and preservation.

Policy Statement

Inclusion

All citizens of our community, despite economic class or racial background, shall be covered by the institution's collection policy during periods of civil unrest, political movements or natural disasters. We at [hypothetical digital library] are aware of the dangers of creating "archival silences" and our ethical responsibility to archive the experience of underrepresented groups in our community.

Collection Focus

Using a network of local and state-wide archives, [hypothetical digital library] will remain abreast of the collection activities of other archives in our area. The intent of this practice will be to help our team choose which newsworthy events or trending topics are most in need of our team's attention and actions. Special attention will be given to web-based materials not intended for long-term access and preservation via the web. Collection will focus on digital files themselves, and not web links which are notoriously transient. Because of the need for long-term storage, space shall be allotted on [hypothetical digital library] servers for unexpected collecting activities. If necessary, hosted storage options will be explored in terms of availability and cost.

Collection Activities

In addition to team members vigilantly keeping an eye open for local trends and activities that are archival worthy, the public will be solicited for materials via a form on our institutional website. The form will contain previously agreed-on required fields for minimal prerequisite metadata fields. This form will also contain policy on rights of use, and the identities of community contributors will be kept anonymous as much as is possible. The artifacts contributed by the community will be collected and minimally cataloged by the team as time permits. If

necessary a “collect now, weed later” philosophy will be put into effect if the related event is an agreed upon area of focus for the collection.

Policy Distribution

This policy will be posted on the institutional website and made accessible through a link on the page titled Collection Development Policy for [hypothetical digital library].

Responsible Offices

The [hypothetical digital library] Digital Curation Department, consisting of the unit’s Supervisor and Repository Librarian, will be responsible for managing the Collection Policy during Periods of civil unrest or natural disasters. A committee will be formed from our institution’s archival units and will be assembled ahead of time and trained to assist in times of great need.

Revisions

[Hypothetical digital library] reserves the right to change or revise this policy at any time. The policy is designed to be flexible and updated frequently as technological and social needs warrant. This policy is on an annual renewal cycle, but may be changed as needed. Proposed changes will normally be developed by the policy managers with appropriate stakeholders. The review entities have sole authority to approve changes to this policy.

Approval Date

Date of the policy approval and subsequent approval(s) coming from a policy review process.

Conclusion

Digital archives, like most divisions of library science, are constantly changing and evolving. The field in general is finally embracing the idea that we need to be democratic in terms of whose history we collect. We have incorporated digital artifacts, and even embraced the influence of social media over contemporary society. I believe we have learned enough from the concept of “living archives” that we must begin to plan for the inevitable: social unrest, grassroots political movements, and natural disasters.

It is time to ingest and use the lessons learned through projects like The Hurricane Digital Memory Bank, The September 11 Digital Archive, Our Marathon, and Documenting Ferguson, and plan for the future. Preparing ahead of time will help launch efforts more quickly; and the ability to get our boots on the ground, so to speak, may save precious documentation that will serve to educate future generations. If we are going to begin the discussion of preparing for such events, we might as well document our plans for how they will be handled. According to Reed-Scott, “Planning is an essential function in collection management. The drafting of a written collection development policy is an important first step in this planning process.”¹⁵ Therefore, I recommend that digital archives develop a written collection policy for archiving periods of civil unrest, political movements, and natural disasters.

Endnotes

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² Jutta Reed-Scott, "Collections Management Strategies for Archivists," *American Archivist* 47, no. 1 (Winter 1984): 24.

³ Meredith R. Evans, Shannon Davis, Jennifer Kirmer, and Sonya Rooney, "Documenting Ferguson: Collecting Current Events in Archives," in *New Directions for Special Collections: An Anthology of Practice*, edited by Lynne M. Thomas and Beth M. Whittaker, 93-102. (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Libraries Limited, 2017), 98.

⁴ Paul Hitlin and Nancy Vogt, "Cable, Twitter Picked Up Ferguson Story at a Similar Clip," PEW Research Center. August 20, 2014, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/08/20/cable-twitter-picked-up-ferguson-story-at-a-similar-clip/>

⁵ Evans, "Documenting Ferguson: Collecting Current Events in Archives," 94.

⁶ Ibid, 95.

⁷ Makiba, J. Foster and Meredith R. Evans, "Libraries Creating Sustainable Services During Community Crisis: Documenting Ferguson," *Library Management* 37, no. 6/7 (2016): 356.

⁸ Evans, "Documenting Ferguson: Collecting Current Events in Archives," 95.

⁹ Lisa Peet. "Documenting the Now Builds Social Media Archives," *Library Journal*, May 2, 2016. http://lj.libraryjournal.com/2016/05/academic-libraries/documenting-the-now-builds-social-media-archive/#_

¹⁰ Foster, "Libraries Creating Sustainable Services During Community Crisis: Documenting Ferguson," 357.

¹¹ Evans, "Documenting Ferguson: Collecting Current Events in Archives," 98.

¹² Tamara Rhodes, "A Living, Breathing Revolution: How Libraries Can Use 'Living Archives' to Support, Engage, and Document Social Movements," *International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions*, 40, no. 1 (2014): 6.

¹³ Boyd R. Collins, "Webwatch," *Library Journal*, 121, no. 10 (1996): 37.

¹⁴ Kate Theimer, "What is the Meaning of Archives 2.0?" *The American Archivist*, 74, 1 (Spring/Summer 2011): 61-63.

¹⁵ Reed-Scott, "Collection Management Strategies for Archivists." 10.