



Future archives

Representation: Hearing voices in the (Counter-)Archive ?

Q&A session report

Webinar by Andrew Flinn, Reader in Archival Studies and Oral History at University College London (UCL) - 28th April 2022

In his presentation Andrew Flinn connects a number of themes and approaches to questions of representation in the archives and in the historical narratives that derive in part from those archives. In considering the contestation and counter-archival initiatives of the past Andrew Flinn draws on oral history practices, Sven Lindqvist's 'Dig Where You Stand', Stuart Hall's 'Constituting the Archive' and independent community-based archives and he examines what implications these and contemporary practices such as rogue archives and conflict documentation have for Future Archives in the digital world. Following Michelle Caswell's entreaty to make change in the present (not only or in addition to changing the future), Andrew Flinn swerves around the role of national archives and other state funded bodies, concentrating rather on the individuals and communities that take ownership of their own archival narratives and ensure the place of their own voices in the archives.

A thin line between government-funded archives and community archives

State Archives, such as in Belgium and the Netherlands, do pay attention to rather 'invisible' communities by acquiring and preserving private archives which often hold information about these different communities. Yet, for Andrew Flinn, it is necessary to take a critical look at the way state-funded archives interpret their *collecting mandate* and how it has evolved over time. Doing so, one can address the question of representation in the archive. It has led to vivid discussions in the last thirty of forty years. Someone like Gerald Ham for example says that archivists should hold up a mirror to society.

Despite the fact that a variety of public-funded archives around the world play a role in collecting and reflecting society in different ways, a lot of our archival thinking and practice is based on state archives and the management of government records. The pre-eminence of those public records has had an impact on how we think of archival practice and archival theory. A reorientation of that focus is necessary in order to include those initiatives that are happening elsewhere, outside and beyond the walls of government-funded archives. It is interesting to look at the reasons *why* these communities feel called upon to care for their archive on their own.



Yet, there does not have to be a clear separation between government-funded archives and community archives: there are various professionally trained archivists who in their spare time focus on opening up community-based archives, so knowledge and skills are shared. The [Community archives and Heritage Group](#) (CAHG) in the UK is a forum where views, skills and expertise is equitably shared among each other. Besides that the forum functions as a network where regular exchange of information between interested volunteers and professionals is possible. For example, via CAHG one can find comprehensive guidelines on digital preservation tailed to community archives.

Public or funded archives and community archives may preserve inherently unequal collections because they work in a different way: top-down versus bottom-up. One way to counter biased archives is for public archives to actively focus on more diverse perspectives, for example by means of oral history. However, Andrew Flinn points out that although biased archives might be 'corrected', it is more valuable to look for what has already been done by community archives and to work out ways to collaborate with them, which may result in 'collecting in context' or in (digital) linking of collections. The community archive as a counterpart rather than a counter archive.

A well-organized community archive

According to Andrew Flinn, one can speak of a well-organized community archive depending on the amount of materials that it has succeeded to collect and preserve, the amount of engagement it has in its community, the period of time it has existed or survived. One example of a successful community archive is the [Black Cultural Archives](#) (BCA) in London. It originated in the early 1980s, when African and Caribbean people struggled to find a positive representation of themselves in history and culture and decided to start their own archives. The BCA has evolved over forty years into a place consisting of different galleries, a professionalized archival space, a place for researchers and more.

Flinn notes that there is a great variety in what community archives collect. Some community archives are based on acquiring archival collections in a way a local archive might do, but most of the community archives emerge from a focus on salvaging materials or histories which they consider to be in danger of being lost. It urges them to actively start documenting the community, in which oral history - as a method- plays a vital role.

The majority of community archives collect and preserve in order to make research possible, by its community members and others. However, visibility is the key issue: some of the collections are not listed on the web, solely on their particular website, or on the platform of the CAGH.

How to reach out to communities

The research of Andrew Flinn focusses on grassroots initiatives, archives that come from within communities. Of course, sometimes the initiative for setting up an archive can depart from people from professional archives. Acknowledging it is a kind of simplification, Flinn points out that in the past the incentive of acting as a mirror of society, resulted in institutions actively collecting archives from communities. These institutions took the material into their repositories, arguing that it is the best place to ensure its preservation. Over the last twenty years there has been a shift to a so called



(post-) custodial archival model or practice where records creators continue to preserve and maintain archival records themselves. In the UK, this shift has surfaced because of the realization that archival institutions cannot acquire 'everything'. For a multitude of reasons it may be better that archives are kept in the context in which they were created, whether it is designated for individuals or for communities. The archivist can thus become advocate for the archiving and preservation in a broad sense, rather than selecting archives for mere acquisition - inevitably covering merely small traces of society.

One could argue that archival institutions have the task –or even obligation - of actively approaching communities and supporting them in their archival care, but this entails various challenges. How to approach communities as they might not be a united front or a homogenous group? What if the institution is understaffed? Andrew Flinn stresses that it is important to think about how to diversify the profession, about how to diversify the ways to reach out to communities. It is about moving outside the walls of the institution and talking with the communities.

Andrew Flinn points out that this relationship is based on trust. For different reasons there may be (an historical) distrust from the communities towards state-funded archives, as they are institutions of power. Collaboration often requires a complex and long process of establishing a kind of genuine commitment to equitable behaviour. Community archives contain a variety of skills and expertise, but they are always looking to deepen or broaden this knowledge. In order to reach this goal, they look at the funded 'professionalised' archives. Common interest can be an ideal 'meeting point' to start from.

Andrew Flinn recognizes these and other challenges, but adds that these shouldn't be an excuse to not think about how to work outside the walls of archival institutes and about ways to diversify working with communities.

Community archives outside the UK

Andrew Flinn states that it is not easy to see marked differences or similarities between community archives in UK and countries in Europe. It would be interesting to compare how community archives may function differently in Poland, Portugal or the UK. There is still a lot of work to be done in that regard. Andrew Flinn notes that more and more questions related to community archives have come to him in the past two years, from France and elsewhere. 'Community Archives, Community Spaces: Heritage, memory and Identity' (2020), compiled by Andrew Flinn, illustrates that the community archives movement has become an increasingly important area of research, recognition and appreciation by archivists, archival scholars and others worldwide. Besides that, much research still can be done on community archives, such as for example on the possible links between *lieu de mémoire* and community archives or communities and digital heritage.

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