

Arrangement and Description in Two Dissenting Archives

Nina Whittaker

A version of this paper won the 2017 Library and Information Association of New Zealand Aotearoa David Wylie Prize, a prize awarded to the student in the School of Information Studies at Victoria University of Wellington judged to have completed the best piece of written work on an aspect of Library and Information Studies.

Introduction

“Archives at once express and are instruments of prevailing relations of power”, archival theorist Verne Harris once stated.¹ If these prevailing relations provide inadequate documentation of violence against marginalised groups, it is necessary to find an alternative route to accountability – an alternative or *dissenting* archive.

The People’s Archive of Police Violence and the Syrian Archive can both be understood as dissenting archives: archives that seek to create accountable records for violence that has either refused, or failed, to be captured by an orthodox archive. They emerge as the active recording of an institutional failure, and this context becomes important to their meaning as an archive.²

Of equal importance to dissenting archives is how they present themselves to their target audiences. Using a host of archival standards and methodologies from the community to transnational level, these archives seek to establish archival credibility and legitimacy whilst maintaining trust within their core communities.

This article will briefly review six features of these two online archives: stated purpose, targeted user group, navigation and findability, interpretability, standards, and reliability. The term “finding aid” is understood here as the entire website and how it presents records, as well as the records themselves.

A People's Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland

Stated Purpose

The People's Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland was founded in 2015 through a collaboration of archivists from the Society of American Archivists (SAA) and citizen activist leaders in Cleveland, Ohio. Its creation was galvanised by the killing of twelve-year old Tamir Rice by a police officer, and the further acquittal of two police officers who fired 137 shots into a car, killing two people.³ Its purpose is twofold: to document police violence in Cleveland, which has reached “epidemic levels”, and to acknowledge the failure of state record-keeping systems to accurately capture this violence without distortion.⁴

Targeted User Group

As a finding aid that was created to make testimonials and artefacts pertaining to police violence available to the public, the site relies on a simple and intuitive design. The host Omeka was carefully chosen for the site, as it had previously hosted similar types of material, and moreover could provide easy access to Dublin Core metadata management.⁵ In an effort to make the finding aid accessible to those affected by police violence in Cleveland, archivists performed multiple user interviews with Cleveland organisers and communities to gain a clear understanding of the content, audience, and functionality of the site.

Navigability and Findability

As a site dedicated to community members more than professional researchers or archivists, the primary search bar has a simple keyword search function. However, it is possible to do a more complex boolean search, in which you can access and retrieve items based on Dublin Core descriptive fields for metadata, identification numbers, collections, or tags.⁶ Results are presented in a clear tile interface showing the title and blurb of each item, each with an image attached as an access point.

Interpretability

The records themselves work hard to appeal to the wider community, whilst still maintaining traditional standards of archival integrity. The collection level, creator and date are displayed clearly at the top of the record. The brief blurb is often sourced from a related community oral history, and the “add a comment” segment at the bottom of the record adds to the openness of the record, giving those who might know more a chance to add information. There is also a button to “show archival

record”, which reveals standardised Dublin Core metadata fields. By hiding this metadata behind a secondary selection process, the People’s Archive prioritises inclusivity for the community over the demonstrated achievement of archival standards. Interested researchers therefore have the option to find more information, whilst browsers are not confronted with “jargon” that is overwhelmingly associated with a bureaucracy whose violence precipitated the archive’s creation.

Standards

The People’s Archive website makes its founding and organising principles clear and accessible. Dublin Core metadata standards are woven into the architecture of the site. The archive also clearly states on its “Principles” page that it is primarily informed by the anti-oppression principles compiled by the Center for Story-based Strategy, and by Michelle Caswell’s influential piece, *Towards a Survivor-Centered Approach to Human Rights Archives: Lessons from Community Based Archives*.⁷ The site was created with extensive advice from lawyers to protect the identities of contributors and minimise the risk of defamation lawsuits.⁸ The terms and conditions are thus made prominent and obvious for potential contributors.

Reliability

An interesting feature of this archive is that it explicitly acknowledges that privacy is more important than the archival emphasis on provenance:

...[Their] approach diverged sharply from that of a traditional archival project in that this effort wanted to collect as little donor information as possible. While the archivists and organizers understood that this anonymity could pose a risk to the perceived truth value of the records collected, all parties involved agreed that the benefit of protecting vulnerable populations outweighed this perceived risk.⁹

This reflects a growing critique within the archival field that the traditional requirements for accuracy and reliability of records, particularly via provenance, may be inappropriate in situations that evolve beyond prevailing societal power structures.¹⁰

The Syrian Archive

Stated Purpose

The Syrian Archive was created by a collaboration of human rights activists within Syria and around the world, with the aim of creating

an active database of war crimes and human rights violations from the Syrian conflict.¹¹ It aggregates information from different organisations and uses a standardised set of categories and metadata to catalogue violations committed by all sides in accordance with international standards. Although primarily aimed at preserving accountability for crimes committed, the Syrian Archive also hopes to contribute to post-conflict reconciliation by providing a record of humanitarian action and other events that took place during the war.

Targeted User Group

Unlike the community-focused People's Archive, the Syrian Archive is explicitly laid out for human rights researchers and archivists. The interface is tailored more towards delivering technical information to the user than on ease of navigation and access. The website pages on methodology and metadata schema are highly detailed and use technical language associated with expertise in human rights documentation. Importantly, the finding aid and website are both bilingual (Arabic/English), showing a concrete commitment to local organisations, contributors and researchers, as well as Western/English-speaking organisations.

Navigability and Findability

The Syrian Archive website is intuitive to move around, provided the researcher has a base level of knowledge about the conflict. The search functions embedded in the website are depressingly specific, allowing the researcher to search by type of violation (plunder, hostage-taking, torture), type of weapon used (sarin gas, incendiary, drone), locations, and dates.¹² There is also a map interface which can be used to find violations based on geographic area.

Interpretability

Results can be presented in list form, or on a topographical map of Syria, to show geographic trends over time. The metadata fields for each record are comprehensive, with reference numbers, chain of custody notes, and other crucial archival information. However, the actual completion of these fields is often sparse, reflecting the realities of the collection process. The Syrian Archive is committed to representing all sides of a highly multi-sided conflict, and there is a wide range of provenance from different groups operating across Syria. The archive's goal of preserving accountability means that documenting each violation where possible, rather than documenting sample violations in high detail, takes priority.

Standards

The Syrian Archive has devoted significant resources towards making its operating standards transparent to maintain the credibility of its records. It uses the Electronic Discovery Reference Model as developed by the Duke University School of Law to guide identification, collection, secure preservation, processing, verification, analysis, review, and publication of its archives.¹³ The Archive has a list of credible sources and contributors, and created its metadata scheme in consultation with the International Criminal Court, the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights, various Syrian activist organisations, and worldwide archival institutions.¹⁴ The Archive uses Littlefork Software, an open source human rights investigation software, for its finding aid.

Reliability

Given the emphasis on transparency and credibility, the Syrian Archive has a clear process for collecting, geolocating, cross-referencing and otherwise verifying, cataloguing, and publishing their holdings. The metadata schema used are described in the methodology section of the website. Unfortunately, it is difficult to ascertain the authenticity and reliability of each individual record, as many have a number of blank fields. However, as Millar states, “archives, and the management of them, is defined as much by cultural and social realities as by professional dictates”.¹⁵ In the context of civil war, these realities may override professional archival dictates of reliability through full record metadata, asserting their own archival agency through non-conventional means.

Refuting Recommendations

Both the People’s Archive and the Syrian Archive are examples of dissenting voices that assert their right to societal memory and accountability beyond the boundaries of traditional archival institutions. They are deeply embedded in the realities and social contexts which they represent, and result from a close collaboration between local actors, activists, and archivists. They represent the recent, critical shift from archives as “truth” to archives as “story”¹⁶ – indeed, within a critical framework for archival practice, “archivists, then, should come to terms with the reality of storytelling in their descriptive work”.¹⁷ As Duff and Harris state, “a liberatory descriptive standard would not seek to hide the movements of its construction. In particular, it would not obscure the dimensions of power which it reflects and expresses.”¹⁸

There is a categorical difficulty in using institutional archival

frameworks to critique an archive built on institutional failure and distrust. A marginalised community alert to the failure of a bureaucracy to protect its memory finds itself unavoidably independent and critical. However, it is these dissenting archives' fierce independence and commitment to marginalised memory that becomes their strength, and a crucial point of engagement. Meeting dissenting archives here – in the playing field of independent memory – is to harness their power and push forward archival integrity in human rights documentation.

Where archivists at a distance could once use archival theory to critique the authenticity and reliability of records, we are now asked to be hospitable to these dissenting voices, their stories and methodologies. In return and in contrast, perhaps, our customary and orthodox archives will begin to reveal new stories of their own.

Endnotes

1. Verne Harris in Cunningham, A. Chapter 2: Archival Institutions. In *Archives; recordkeeping in society*. Wagga Wagga: Centre for Information Studies, Charles Sturt University, 22.
2. "David Bearman goes further to suggest that archivists and archival systems also affect their evidential value. "The fact of processing, exhibiting, citing, publishing and otherwise managing records become significant to their meaning as records;" Duff, W. & Harris, V. (2002). Stories and names: Archival description as narrating records and constructing meanings. *Archival Science* 2(3), 271.
3. Williams, S. & Drake, J. (2017). Power to the People: Documenting Police Violence in Cleveland. *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1(2). 10.
4. A People's Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland. (2017). Purpose. Retrieved 16 October, 2017, from <http://www.archivingpoliceviolence.org/purpose>.
5. Williams & Drake (2017), 14.
6. A People's Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland. (2017). Search Items. Retrieved 16 October, 2017, from <http://www.archivingpoliceviolence.org/items/search>.
7. A People's Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland. (2017). Principles. Retrieved 3 March 2019, <http://www.archivingpoliceviolence.org/principles>. Michelle Caswell, *Archival Science* 14: 3-4 (2014): 307-322.
8. Williams & Drake (2017), 13.
9. Williams & Drake (2017), 13.
10. "We insist upon the centrality of provenance and context entities such as agents and mandates. The often-heard debate from newcomers to archives, particularly those from other information disciplines, is that this emphasis is inappropriate." Reed, B. (2014). *Reinventing Access*. *Archives and Manuscripts* 42(2).
11. The Syrian Archive (2017). About. Retrieved 16 October, 2017, from <https://syrianarchive.org/p/page/about/>.
12. The Syrian Archive (2017). Violation Database. Retrieved 16 October, 2017, from <https://syrianarchive.org/database/>.
13. The Syrian Archive (2017). Methodology. Retrieved 16 October, 2017, from https://syrianarchive.org/p/page/methodology_digital_evidence_workflow/.
14. Ibid.
15. Millar, L. (2010). Chapter 2: Provenance, original order and respect des fonds. In *Archives: principles and practices*. London: Facet. 113.
16. Cook, T. (2011). We are what we keep; we keep what we are; Archival Appraisal past, present and future. *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 32(2), 179.
17. Duff, W. & Harris, V. (2002). Stories and names: Archival description as narrating records and constructing meanings. *Archival Science* 2(3), 276.
18. Duff, W. & Harris, V. (2002). Stories and names: Archival description as narrating records and constructing meanings. *Archival Science* 2(3), 284.

Bibliography

- A People's Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland. (2017). Collections. Retrieved 16 October, 2017, from <http://www.archivingpoliceviolence.org/collections/browse>.
- A People's Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland. (2017). Home. Retrieved 16 October, 2017, from <http://www.archivingpoliceviolence.org/>.
- A People's Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland. (2017). Principles. Retrieved 16 October, 2017, from <http://www.archivingpoliceviolence.org/principles>.
- A People's Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland. (2017). Purpose. Retrieved 16 October, 2017, from <http://www.archivingpoliceviolence.org/purpose>.
- A People's Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland. (2017). Search Items. Retrieved 16 October, 2017, from <http://www.archivingpoliceviolence.org/items/search>.
- Cook, T. (1997). What is past is prologue: a history of archival ideas since 1898, and the future paradigm shift. *Archivaria* 43, 17-63. doi:10.1080/1361453.2015.1009126
- Cook, T. (2011). We are what we keep; we keep what we are: Archival Appraisal past, present and future. *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 32(2), 173-189.
- Cunningham, A. Chapter 2: Archival Institutions. In *Archives; recordkeeping in society* (pp.21-50). Wagga Wagga : Centre for Information Studies, Charles Sturt University.
- Duff, W. & Harris, V. (2002). Stories and names: Archival description as narrating records and constructing meanings. *Archival Science* 2(3), 263-285.
- Evans, J., McKemmish, S., & Rolan, G. (2017). Critical Archiving and Recordkeeping Research and Practice in the Continuum. *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1(2).
- Gilliland, A. (2017). A Matter of Life or Death: A Critical Examination of the Role of Records and Archives in Supporting the Agency of the Forcibly Displaced. *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1(2).
- McKemmish, S. (2005). Chapter 1: Traces: Document, record, archive, archives. In *Archives; recordkeeping in society* (pp.1-20). Wagga Wagga: Centre for Information Studies, Charles Sturt University.
- Millar, L. (2010). Chapter 2: Provenance, original order and respect des fonds. In *Archives: principles and practices* (pp.97-114). London : Facet.
- Reed, B. (2014). Reinventing Access. *Archives and Manuscripts* 42(2), 123-132.
- Sutherland, T. (2017). Archival Amnesty: In Search of Black American Transitional and Restorative Justice. *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1(2).
- The Syrian Archive. (2017). About. Retrieved 16 October, 2017, from <https://syrianarchive.org/p/page/about/>.
- The Syrian Archive. (2017). Home Page. Retrieved 16 October, 2017, from <https://syrianarchive.org/>.
- The Syrian Archive. (2017). Methodology. Retrieved 16 October, 2017, from https://syrianarchive.org/p/page/methodology_digital_evidence_workflow/.
- The Syrian Archive. (2017). Syrian Archive Metadata Schema. Retrieved 16 October, 2017, from https://syrianarchive.org/p/page/metadata_schema/.
- The Syrian Archive. (2017). Violation Database. Retrieved 16 October, 2017, from <https://syrianarchive.org/database/>.
- Williams, S. & Drake, J. (2017). Power to the People: Documenting Police Violence in Cleveland. *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies*, 1(2).