
Active Archives: New Modes of Interaction with Online Archives

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This poster presentation will introduce our Active Archives Initiative, through which we aim to develop new, dynamic ways of representing, researching, and learning about the past through digital archives. From a traditional library studies perspective, most online archives are mere digital repositories, lacking the institutional and hierarchical nature of a traditional archive. Driven by a growing number of available online resources, digital technologies and tools that foster social interaction and collaboration, and open metadata, web standards and APIs, the notion of an archive continues to shift and expand.

Yet rethinking the definition of an archive is not merely a result of the digitization of existing cultural knowledge or the advent of born-digital repositories. Walter Benjamin, for example, thought of his Arcades Project — a dynamically re-organizable archive of quotes, sources, and references, developed long before the advent of modern digital technology — as something that could not leverage its full potential by being bound into a book. More recently, Wolfgang Ernst in *Digital Memory and the Archive* (2013, 81) challenges the notion of a closed archive by pointing to the fact that “new archives are successively generated according to current needs ... the object-oriented archive thus takes shape cumulatively, entailing a shift from read-only paradigms to a generative, participative form of archival reading.” Laermans and Gielen

(2007), moreover, observe “a quasi-bifurcation in the ways the digital archive is observed and evaluated by traditional archivists and other archive specialists”, relating to the “differences between old and new media.” As these examples serve to show, not merely archives in practice, but the *idea* of an archive in theory, is constantly being redefined depending on shifting needs, audiences, and available content.

Ernst’s notion of a generative, participative mode of archival reading is central to the approach we introduce here. The core purpose of our Active Archives initiative is to empower users to engage in ‘story-making’, by discovering, interpreting and re-organizing archived materials to construct new representations of the past. In some cases, indeed, users might have their own material to contribute, which we intend to also enable. This we propose drawing together data and documents from multiple sources to enable multiple groups of users to reassemble these materials, and in so doing, challenge existing narratives and reimagine others. In many cases, the materials being used are only available in photocopy quality at best: the archive we envisage therefore allows the opportunity for the reinterpretation of valuable but incomplete resources. Our goal is to make these archives easy to understand and enjoyable to use, and to design them with a wide range of prospective users in mind, from professional scholars to high school students.

We have selected two existing projects as prototypes for this initiative. The US-Iran Relations project, a collaboration with MIT’s Center for International Studies and the partners in the US and abroad, collects and digitizes governmental documents and testimonies by policymakers relating to the diplomatic relationship between the United States and Iran during the past several decades. Our second project, the Blacks in American Medicine archive, combines tens of thousands of biographical records of African American physicians with countless primary documents associated with these practitioners to create a comprehensive archive of all black physicians within the United States from 1860 to 1980. These projects leverage interactive tools such as dynamic timelines combined with customizable faceted browsers and innovative collection and story-making tools, allowing previously untold narratives and unseen connections to emerge. This will enable, as Ernst describes, “the digital archive shift to regeneration, (co-)produced by online users for their own needs” (2013, 95) while simultaneously becoming a source of dynamic media memory.

As the nature of digital scholarship changes, we need to enable archives to change as well. As we continue to develop our Active Archives Initiative, we're putting particular emphasis on the idea that our archival content is not only accessible but, more importantly, that it is intuitive and useful to diverse audiences. To that end, we hope to create fully realized, open and collaborative spaces that foster not only the proliferation of untold stories but also the ability to interact with these slices of the past in new and innovative ways. Presenting our work at DH2017 will also allow us to gather useful feedback from other practitioners in the field of Digital Humanities looking to similarly shake up the staid notion of an archive. As such, our poster presentation will offer both technical details, such as screenshots of the prototype in action, as well as clear description of the functionality and responses to our user testing.

Bibliography

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