

Shared Notes: Digitization and archival violence

Saturday, May 28, 2022

9:00 - 10:15 am

St. Louis Union Station Hotel, Regency A&B

Open roundtable discussion 1: Digitization and archival violence (Led by Adri Kácsor and Megan McDonie (organizer))

Description

This panel proposes to investigate how the recent upsurge in digitization has impacted the embedded biases, inequalities, violence, and gaps of the analog “archival order” and, consequently, of scholarship at large. Has digitization managed to undo the racialized, gendered, class-, and ethnic-based biases produced by traditional archival practices and access to documents, or has it reproduced the same structural inequalities? How have teaching practices responded to the increasing digitization of archival documents, and how does it impact what students are being exposed to? Representing a variety of disciplines within the humanities and social sciences, the panel participants will critically examine to what extent their respective fields of specialization have realized the dream of democratization promised by digital technologies.

Agenda

Introduction

Discussion Questions and Topics

“Archival Violence,” Digitization, and the “Archival Order”

- What impact has digitization had on the structures and rules that organize archives and their collections? Has digitization become a tool of reproducing analog “archival orders” or has it managed to imagine new ways of organizing and presenting archival materials?
- How does digitization impact archival cataloging systems? Have efforts in digitization of materials paralleled a rethinking of the very discoverability of digital documents? How has digitization influenced practices of reparative descriptions, for instance?

Access

- How did your experience with digital archives compare to the physical archives?
- How has digitization changed research practices? What are the potential opportunities and limitations of digitizing archives, in terms of providing access, for instance?

- How does digitization impact the sources themselves? Are there sources now that are unavailable in person due to being digitized? Which disciplines and/or methods might suffer most from the lack of access to original materials?
- How does funding influence digitization?
- Have you encountered “bottom-up” initiatives among researchers that try to fight against the lack of institutional digitization, or against institutions’ gate-keeping practices that make access to documents difficult for researchers? Could digitization lead to increased collaborative and/or collective models of knowledge production?
- What are the lessons of the “microfilm revolution” that we should consider when thinking about digitization?

Outcomes: Digitization and Scholarship / Teaching

- Has digitization led to new types of imbalances in scholarship, e.g., in terms of sources that are being studied?
- Impacts of pandemic research on digital archives?

1

Resources

Berry, Dorothy. “The House Archives Built” (2021)

<https://www.uproot.space/features/the-house-archives-built>

Hao, Karen. “Artificial Intelligence: We read the paper that forced Timnit Gebru out of Google. Here’s what it says. The company’s star ethics researcher highlighted the risks of large language models, which are key to Google’s business.” (2020)

<https://www.technologyreview.com/2020/12/04/1013294/google-ai-ethics-research-paper-forced-out-timnit-gebru/>

Quiroa, Néstor. “Friar Francisco Ximénez and the Popol Vuh: From Religious Treatise to a Digital Sacred Book” *Ethnohistory* 64:2 (April 2017)

<https://read.dukeupress.edu/ethnohistory/article-abstract/64/2/241/26288/Friar-Francisco-Ximenez-and-the-Popol-Vuh-From?redirectedFrom=fulltext>

Saper, Craig. “Microfilm Lasts Half a Millennium”

<https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2018/07/microfilm-lasts-half-a-millennium/565643/>

Sellers-Garcia, Sylvia. *Distance and Documents at the Spanish Empire's Periphery*, Stanford University Press, 2013.

Villaespesa, Elena & Oonagh Murphy, "This is not an apple! Benefits and challenges of applying computer vision to museum collections" (2021)
<https://research.gold.ac.uk/id/eprint/30408/>

Notes

Notetaker: Francena Turner

In response to the presenter's example of differences in description based on the curator's proximity to the object/asset, a participant explored the ways archaeology may be resistant to change in terms of digital rendering of objects outside of purely data point driven methods. Physical objects are often "messier" than the texts produced about them. They also discussed how drawings might obscure differences in time between objects in a grave, for example. Digital publication may allow the visualization of deeper dimensions of data and excavation sites. Discussed the God Trick, removal of the human element behind decisions in favor of a decontextualized "objective voice."

A participant discussed how digitization has democratized access and curation, but points out a question of audience. Discussed crowdsourcing contemporary moments in digitized spaces (that don't exist physically as a collection).

A participant pointed out efforts to change the cataloging system in the Library of Congress. He and colleagues informed the LoC that their system was racist, sexist, classist and they changed it. Essentially, we are always changing and improving the way we catalog and produce metadata on objects in archives, but the old ways are important to understand historically.

The previous participant offers that until we update the questions we ask, we will continue to reinscribe ineffective systems.

Presenter has show'd a slide that is a historically violent rendering of Roma people. She obscured the image to call attention to the archival violence. Points out that adding tags/descriptions can try to more accurately portray peoples.

Presenter points out that funding sources inform how decisions are made about digitizing.

Who feels welcome in the archive? Who feels welcome asking for material in the archive?

Participant discussed layers of archival control (gatekeeping). The ways things are cataloged isn't linear (isn't necessarily by data/era...sometimes it's by school of thought).

Participant discussed the ways that digitization removed more information than the physical archive due to the amount of computer space documents took up. Racist naming conventions took a lot of time and energy to change. Made more difficult by parts of those communities disagreeing on how they want to be named.

Participant indicated that it matters how people are using the items and information. CLIR could intervene and has intervened in bringing the archives to life via scholarship and public facing attention and use. Making the archives relevant.

If we don't think about archives as places for researchers, what might they be? WHO would be the primary stakeholders? How might they handle digitization in a way that is meaningful for them. Funded digitization projects have to "justify" their work by use of the digital archives.

Participant points out the privilege of being able to walk into an archive and conduct research.

Participant pointed out how not everything needs to be accessible to the entire world. Thinking about still living peoples' experiences being made completely public.

Participant discussed their experiences with contacting potential oral history participants who had no knowledge that they were accessible digitally via old student newspapers. Participant also discussed the IRA debacle where Oral histories collected at Boston College that were to be withheld from public purview for a certain amount of time were released under government order to the Irish government.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-27238797>

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/05/02/how-an-oral-history-project-got-the-head-of-sinn-fein-arrested/>

Participant discussed issues of access and knowledge of how to use digital archives is important—digital literacy.

Participant talked about how digitization is a powerful tool that allows the everyday person to also create, preserve, and display knowledge outside institutions. “Empower people to be their own historians.” Gave an example of an organic historian of Chicago.

Pros and cons of community impact of digitization.

Participants discuss social media in the age of a lack of digital literacy and understanding of how to vet sources.

Questions around how potential oral history participants who may have regret for earlier behaviors or choices in published accounts like students newspapers might not be archival violence as they knew the thing was published in print. This was different from the IRA thing where things were purposely NOT published but held in the oral only.

Digitizing is not the end of the thing. Digitized things are fragile and also require preservation. This becomes an issue of funding and environmental impact.

Participant talks about how digitizing has to improve. We still need the digital things because we aren't sure of what comes next as we are in the early stages of digitization.

Social media use for anti-disinformation tutorials.