Archiving Student Activism Toolkit

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Introduction

This resource seeks to compile information on documenting, collecting, and providing access to student activism collections in archives, however it is not exhaustive. Feedback and suggestions are welcome, please contact Valencia Johnson at vj2@princeton.edu with the subject line "Activism Toolkit."

Building Relationships Between Archivists and Activists

This section seeks to familiarize both activists and archivists with positive communication and practice around donations of student activist materials. It does not cover all aspects of acquisition and donor work, but seeks to introduce readers to concepts and practices which are particularly relevant to the given context. The goal of this section is to help encourage successful donor relationships between archivists and student activists.

For Activists

Getting Started

It is never too early to contact an archivist and consider the long term preservation of your history. Even if you are unsure about donating your materials or do not intend to do so right away, archivists can provide you with advice about guarding your materials from loss. You can contact multiple archives in order to find the best repository for your material, and archivists should be helpful in discussing this subject.

As a donor of materials, you have a right to ask any questions you need to fully understand how your materials will be collected, preserved, and shared. Some of our recommended questions are below. If the activism itself or the materials reflect the work of a group of people, you will want to discuss the answers you receive with the other collaborators.

Questions to ask the archivist

Start with a general question about how the archives works with activist donors and materials. Hopefully they will touch on the questions below, but if not, these are some suggested questions:
- Could you describe the collecting focus of your repository, and how my materials will compliment them?
- Can I/we have a tour of your facility and meet other staff members?
- What student records/material do the archives currently collect?
- What types of documentation is the archives interested in? What content and format (analog or digital)?
- How will copyright, privacy, and restrictions be handled for this collection, and how do those impact me/us as the creator/s of this material?
- What access will I have over the materials once I donate them to the archives?
- What are your methods of preservation?

- How will your archive contextualize this material for researchers, and who decides how it will be arranged and described for potential users? [See Arrangement and Description section]
- What is the expected timeline and method for making these materials available?
- In what ways will researchers be able to access this collection?

Transfer Phase

If you are ready to move ahead with a donation, it is helpful to know what to expect. If you have not already discussed these with the archivist, you will need to address the following:

- Establish rules of ownership, permissions, privacy, and consent between activist partners and the archivist
- Examine, discuss, and sign a Deed of Gift, or a similar legal document
- Establish whether a single or an iterative donation works best for your needs
- Develop a plan for the transfer of both analog and digital materials

Resources

Society of American Archivists, n.d. "Donating Your Organization's Records to a Repository." https://www2.archivists.org/publications/brochures/donating-orgrecs.

Society of American Archivists, n.d. "A Guide to Deeds of Gift," Society of American Archivists." https://www2.archivists.org/publications/brochures/deeds-of-gift.

Wakimoto, Diana K., Christine Bruce, Helen Partridge, "Archivist as activist: lessons from three queer community archives in California," Archival Science, December 2013, vol. 13, issue 4, pp. 293-316: https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10502-013-9201-1.

For Archivists

The safety and wellbeing of the activists should be valued higher than the interest in documenting activism for posterity. Although collecting documentation can be helpful for future activists and the movements they support, documenting activists and their methods can potentially be dangerous or harmful and can affect people's personal and professional lives. Refer to Project STAND's S.A.V.E Methodology (Stop, Asses, View, Educate) for this work.

Be mindful that activism can be complicated (for example, multiple, changing, or diffused leadership models) and emotionally charged (even successful activism can involve trauma).Due to the complexity of activism, it is helpful to ask questions to deepen your understanding as needed to assist in documenting the event or movement. Refrain from making assumptions.

Consider your motivations for collecting the work of activists; people who do social justice work will care about your answer. **Beware of motivations or directives to improve the image of your institution**, especially if the activism was in response to your institution's (in)action. Activists at colleges and universities run the risk of having their work and success appropriated by the institution. Consider how both the archives and its users will use and contextualize that material. The archivist should consult with donors on whether all portions of the material can be made available to researchers. A good solution to donor concerns might be to specify a time period before certain portions of material may be opened to the public.

Be truly informed and transparent about your institution, the profession, and your local practices. Evaluate your institution's ability to collect and preserve the material properly, as well as to tend to donor needs surrounding privacy. Consider whether donation of this material to your institution incurs current or future risk to participants.

Bias and prejudice about social, political, and personal issues is always present in ourselves and our institutions. Being cognizant and educated about this can help us avoid discrimination in our practices. Never claim to be unbiased, which is impossible, but continue to learn how to apply equitable and inclusive practices (see resources below). Consider how implicit bias and racial dynamics affect the practices and environments of archives, and dismantle practices which are counter-productive to the communities you document and serve. If dismantling institutional biased practices is not possible, consider how to be flexible in order to best serve varying needs and concerns, such as granting an atypical restriction request in order to protect campus activists. Likewise, consider any negative effects that white supremacy, professionalization, and the siloing of material into academic institutions can have on personal and community narratives. These complex issues cannot be fully explored here, so we suggest checking out the resources on these subjects below.

If your institution has not yet considered participatory archiving or post-custodial archiving, consider whether these approaches fit the needs of the situation.

Participatory method
As the name states, this method places decisions about acquisitions, access, and description into the hands of content creators. An example of the participatory method is the Plateau Peoples' Web Portal: https://plateauportal.libraries.wsu.edu/about. The Plateau Peoples' Web Portal is an online community archive of Columbia Plateau Tribes' cultural materials hosted by Washington State University's Center for Digital Scholarship and Curation (CDSC) and reciprocally managed by the CDSC and eight Columbia Plateau Tribes. The Portal is intended

to facilitate the "digital return" of materials from non-native institutions to the Native communities where they originated.

The participating Tribes select materials from search results offered by partner institutions, and the materials are then digitized and added to the Portal. The Tribes can then make decisions about whether materials should be public or limited to registered users within the community. One of the features of Mukurtu CMS, the system upon which the Portal is built, is the ability to have multiple kinds of knowledge about an item to exist alongside each other. Once the Tribes have made access decisions, they can then add these cultural narratives to the materials, which exist parallel to the institutional catalog record. This process allows the Tribes to reclaim their cultural heritage and situates community knowledge as an essential part of the record.[1]

While most archives working with activists are not repatriating material, the level of active participation and understanding of archival work is a method worthy of exploration.

Post-custodial model
As the name implies, is where the archives advises on the preservation and maintenance of the collection but the physical collection is still under the custody of the creator, with the archives providing access to digital surrogates. Digital materials present their own set of challenges in preservation, but they also offer opportunities to bypass problematic aspects of mainstream archiving such as sole custody, ownership, and authority.

Questions to address with the donor

- Ask the contact person whether they have informed their group that the material will be archived and establish permissions to archive documentation that covers the activity of groups of people.
- Ask what is most important to them about the event/movement and what documentation might exist on those aspects. Consider sharing the selection of materials (appraisal) with the donor or community.
- Ask if the donors have any special requirements about how the materials can be utilized now and in the future.
- Discuss the various models and modes of ownership and intellectual property, and their implications.
- Create a plan outlining how you will make the materials available and visible to the communities which would benefit the most.

Resources:

Bercerra-Licha, Sofia. 2017. "Participatory and Post-custodial Community Practice," *Educause Review*. October 23, 2017.

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[1] This section was written by Will Clements, archivist at Washington State University. Thank you Will!

https://er.educause.edu/articles/2017/10/participatory-and-post-custodial-archives-as-community-practice.

Caswell, Michelle. 20017. "Teaching to Dismantle White Supremacy in Archives." *The Library Quarterly* 87 no. 3, July 2017. https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/full/10.1086/692299?mobileUi=0.

Drake, Jarrett. Various posts about archives at Medium.com. https://medium.com/@jmddrake.

Goetz, Joseph, et al. American Library Association: ACRL Instruction Section Research & Scholarship Committee. 2017. "Five Things You Should Read About Critical Librarianship" https://acrl.ala.org/IS/wp-content/uploads/20170602_research_5Things.pdf.

Project STAND, n.d. "S.A.V.E. Methodology." https://standarchives.com/s-a-v-e-methodology/.

Simmons University: COCIS Media Lab. 2018. *DERAIL: Diversity, Equity, Race, Accessibility and Identity in LIS*. Various videos on their Youtube channel. https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLfL9EJxja-h40NG5GnFLwzEosVvW-cI23.

Winn, Sam. 2017. "The Hubris of Neutrality in Archives." https://medium.com/on-archivy/the-hubris-of-neutrality-in-archives-8df6b523fe9f. Medium.com, April 24, 2017.

Intellectual Property

Intellectual property is defined as the creative works generated by a person or organization. These works, by default, are protected by copyright law. Copyright can become especially complex when involving multiple, or unknown, creators. Gaining physical ownership of materials doesn't automatically transfer the ownership of copyright without a formal agreement. Additionally, a donor can only grant permission/transfer the copyright that they own. Again, this is particularly murky with multiple, or unknown, creators.

Libraries and Archives are protected by two clauses of the U. S. Copyright law:
- Section 107: Fair Use outlines how intellectual property can be reused for educational/transformative use.
- Section 108 specifically addresses protections for libraries and archives in providing access to copyrighted work.

Intellectual property/copyright can be transferred or licensed to an archives in the Deed of Gift/Gift-in-kind paperwork. At this point of transfer of ownership, it can be helpful to discuss who

may own the copyright of the materials and also discuss whether transferring copyright or licensing the rights to the archives would be desired.

Transferring copyright to the archives
Advantages: this enables the archives to digitize and use the materials in any way they see fit, this streamlines the process for researchers to use the collection by enabling copyright permissions to go through the archives.
Disadvantages: if the creator(s) wish to continue to develop their intellectual property, they would technically need the archives to license the work back to them, and copyright would be credited to the archives.

Granting a non-exclusive license to the archives while keeping your copyright
Advantages: this would enable the archives to fully do what they would like to do, to the extent agreed upon while the copyright holder retains full control.
Disadvantage: copyright extends beyond the life of the creator by 70 years. After the creator has deceased, the copyright automatically extends to heirs, but the process for people wishing to to locate and get permission from all heirs becomes much more challenging.

Explore Creative Commons licenses or releasing it to the public domain
Archivists can assist donors in exploring Creative Commons licenses according to the comfort of the donor. The least restrictive option is to release the content to the public domain.

Not granting copyright or license, only granting ownership of physical materials.
Disadvantage is that both the institution and future researchers will have more concerns about complying with Fair Use and will impede the collection from being digitized and allow for evolving methods of discovery and access. These materials most frequently are accessible only within the reading room.

Other options include establishing a date when the copyright transfers to the repository, such as X years from the date of donation (preferable), or at the time of the donor's death.

Please note that found objects, including protest signs and fliers - to the extent that content is copyrightable - is automatically copyrighted by the maker, even if the maker is unknown, without any need for publishing a copyright symbol or registering with the U. S. Copyright Office. Photographs, videos, and sound recordings fall into a murky area of copyright involving the person creating the photograph/recording and also involve of the copyright of the contents, such as artists, performers, and composers, etc.

Some institutions do provide digital access to materials that they don't explicitly have permission from IP owners after conducting a risk assessment and publishing the digital object with a disclaimer that copyright owners are unknown and may comply with takedown requests.

Resources:

"Well-intentioned Practice for Putting Digitized Collections of Unpublished Materials Online"
https://www.oclc.org/content/dam/research/activities/rights/practice.pdf
For more information on copyright, please consult Peter Hirtle's Copyright Term and the Public Domain in the United States.

Privacy and Access Restrictions

As described earlier, student activism collections may need to be sensitively stewarded because of potential political risks of participants as they advance in their careers, and potentially have public relations challenges for archives when documenting events critical of their institution. It can be helpful to hold discussion with the activists/donor(s) and your institution's legal council to learn if there may be potential risks to collecting and providing access (including global digital access) to their materials.

Additionally, it's important *where* you decide to donate your archives. The success of the partnership depends on how well both the institution aligns with your values and expectations and how well your materials align with the institutions' collecting and institutional priority. The choice of whether it goes to public or private or independent non-academic archives is significant. Public institutions by nature are usually committed to providing as open possible access. In fact, there have been recent court cases which question whether collections with donor-imposed access restrictions at public institutions are available by FOIA request.[2] Private institutions are able to establish their own access restrictions and have less external accountability. Independent non-academically affiliated archives may have the least amount of restriction because they would not be required to comply with FERPA,[3] and, if private, FOIA, however, they may also have the least external monetary or infrastructure support.

Consider the audience of the materials. Are they internal documents of the activist organization, or were they created with the intent of general public viewing? Do the creators have the opportunity to give consent to open the records? When acquiring born-digital records and social media material, are they published originally behind a login or in a closed group? Having an idea of the original intent of consumption can help archivists be respectful stewards to student activist collections. For photographs of protestors, consider also whether the event was public,

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[2] Freedom of Information Act protects a citizen's right to federal records, and many states also have public records laws which apply to publicly-funded universities and other entities. FOIA defines a public record as "writing prepared, owned, used, in the possession of, or retained by a public body in the performance of an official function, from the time it is created." For more information on FOIA: https://www.foia.gov/about.html For more information on state public record laws: http://www.foiadvocates.com/records.html

[3] Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act is a federal law protecting the privacy of student education records. For more information on FERPA: https://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpco/ferpa/index.html

on public lands, or in a private setting. The more private the intended audience was, the more caution needs to be for providing access - consider providing reading room only access to these materials.

With emerging technology, individual privacy will be much more at risk. It may be relatively easy to perform facial recognition of photographs, and providing access to born-digital collections may open up the collection to digital forensic discoveries including passwords, bank accounts, web browsing history, and other aspects that would need to be addressed as part of responsible stewardship of the collection.

As described earlier activism materials may be emotionally charged and graphic. Consider adding trigger warnings in a finding aid or as a click through for online content.

Digital Preservation and Social Media

Preservation is intended for inactive records or records you are not actively updating and using. There are preservation actions activists can take to safeguard their material from accidental loss. If you are thinking of donating your material to an archive, an archivist can be a good resource to help you figure out what can be donated and what is best left in your personal archive. Below are general digital preservation standards for activists and archivists to consider.

General Digital Preservation Standards

File Appraisal (figuring out what you have)

- **This step is best performed by the donor/activist.** Archivists can provide guidance based on general appraisal standards or share resources to help creators understand what records have most value to them/their mission/their goals. This will be especially useful if pursuing a post-custodial model of stewardship.
- Just as with paper records, decide what needs to be kept, and weed the rest. The less you endeavor to preserve long-term, the more likely you will know exactly what you have, what it needs to function, and how to best preserve it and make it accessible.
- **For the activist's personal archive**: Evaluate your records. What is essential to your daily needs/functions? What purposes do your records serve? Do they need to be kept forever? For 5 years? For 1 year?
- Prioritize. Not every record/file needs the same treatment. A video file that records an essential encounter or event should be given more attention and care than a text file saved for research/personal education purposes.

  Tools that can help with appraisal:
  DROID: A file format identification tool that will help you know what kinds of files you

have, how old they are, when they were last edited, whether or not you have zip files, or whether you have incorrect file extensions. DROID can create a handy file directory printing with some of this information, and which can also serve as a file inventory. From there, you can decide what files to keep, whether or not they should be renamed or reorganized, and whether you have duplicate content.

Know Your Data

- **Filename conventions**: Be consistent and clear. Use names that provide as much information as possible in a concise way (ex. first_police_encounter_20190812.mp4), one that would provide someone in the future with no other knowledge of the file some understanding. If this seems like it may be difficult, create a readme.txt file that explains the file naming convention and organization, and store it with the files.
- **Create good metadata**: Especially when it comes to AV files, embedding good metadata is crucial. Much of this information is automatically generated by the recording software, but you can improve on what's already there. EXIFTool is perfect for this -- and there are plenty of YouTube videos that instruct users on how to do this. For other files, make use of tools like DROID or Karen's Directory Printer to generate file directories.
- **Organization of files**: The easiest files to preserve are the ones you can actually locate. Try to keep files organized in a clear system that makes sense to you and to someone who hasn't seen your content before. Date folders, keep folder structures simple, declutter your desktop. Try not to have loose files floating around your hard drive, even if that means they are the only file in a folder. Generate file directories once a year and appraise what you have, delete what you don't need.

	Tools that can help with file metadata and identification:
	DROID
	EXIFTool
	Karen's Directory Printer
	NARA File Analyzer and Metadata Harvester
	Activists' Guide to Archiving Video

Storage Locations

This section is designed to consider what resources activists may have to preserve their own content. This outlines the ideal conditions for storage but you have to find a method that works best for you. Preservation is an active part of maintaining your records. For archivists who have access to more resources and who may be primary stewards of content, we recommend consulting the NDSA Storage Infrastructure Survey results from 2011 and 2013 for thoughts on what types of storage may be best for preserving digital content. New results will be released for the most recent survey, implemented in 2019, by the end of the year.

- Choose at least TWO separate storage locations and keep at least one copy of your content in each. It is best if these locations are geographically distant -- to prevent against data loss in the event of a natural disaster. A good solution is to keep files in a local server or drive and in a cloud storage solution that you trust.[4] If the cloud does not work for you (sustainability, security concerns, cost) then an external drive kept in a safe place away from your local storage is the next best thing.
- **Storage is not set and forget.** All storage should be checked at least once a year for functionality and data integrity. Media should be replaced every five years or so.
- Optical media like CDs and DVDs are not ideal for storage. Many computers lack the appropriate disk drives, and these forms of media degrade quickly when not commercially produced.
- Consider the security to your local storage: who has access? Who can change/add/delete files? Is the local storage backed up anywhere? How often? These factors can affect the authenticity and integrity of your content.

Ongoing Maintenance for Archivists

- **File authenticity and integrity**: Digital preservation is only worth performing if one can prove that the files stored are authentic -- and considering that digital files can potentially change with no real interaction, this can be a concern of digital archives practitioners. **Checksum values** are the best current way to check whether or not a file has changed. A checksum value is an alphanumeric code that corresponds to a specific file or folder. If even one bit of that content changes, the checksum value will not be the same the next time it is generated. NARA File Analyzer can generate checksums as part of its suite of tools. md5 is a basic command line utility for on-demand checksum values. And Bagger generates a checksum for the entirety of the bag, which may be useful for long-term storage authenticity checks. Checksums should be validated at least once per year and is a good step to take when checking for file functionality each year.
- **Format migration**: Over time, files may become inaccessible due to software upgrades or software disappearance. It is best to migrate records, if necessary, before this occurs. Open-source formats or ubiquitous formats whose source codes have been made available are most stable. See the LoC's Sustainability of Digital Formats resource to learn more about the best file formats for long-term preservation.

Tools and resources for maintenance and long-term preservation:
Digitally Endangered Species
md5
NARA File Analyzer and Metadata Harvester

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[4] If security is a top concern for your group, make sure to do your research before uploading your records into a cloud service. Each service has their own terms of use. For bigger companies like Google, you can find articles explaining in user-friendly language what their terms and conditions actually mean.

Other useful resources:
https://guides.library.newschool.edu/c.php?g=274537&p=1830515
https://www.docnow.io/
https://library.witness.org/product-category/guide/

Social Media

Social media has changed the way we communicate. There is an ephemeral nature to social media that sometimes we discount it as something we can preserve. While it is hard to capture the feel and communal aspects of some platforms there are ways to preserve the messages. **However, social media platforms are not designed for digital preservation.** More often than not, the data you upload to social media is compressed and of lower quality than the original record. Also, the data you get back from social media platforms are hard to use without ingesting it back into the platform.

Alexandra Dolan Mescal, Digital Archiving Consultant and User Experience Designer for DocNow, created this zine to help people archive their social media. Most platforms allow users to download their profile and message history in either a JSON file (JavaScript Object Notation file format that can be open using a text editor) or an HTML file (Hypertext Markup Language file that can be open in a web browser). Below are common platforms used in organizing with instructions to archive your data.

WhatsApp is a secure encrypted messaging platform. WhatsApp does not retain messages on their servers aside from messages waiting to be delivered. This means that you can only download messages stored on your device and any deleted messages cannot be recovered. Another consideration to downloading your WhatsApp data is the loss of encryption once the data is outside of the platform. The WhatsApp websites has directions to create backups to Google Drive, iCloud, and OneDrive. They also have instructions for exporting your data and receiving it through email as a zipped .txt attachment.

How to get your WhatsApp messages from your phone:

Android: https://faq.whatsapp.com/en/android/23756533/?category=5245251

Apple OS: https://faq.whatsapp.com/en/iphone/20888066/?category=5245251#email

Windows Phone: https://faq.whatsapp.com/en/wp/22548236/?category=5245251

Twitter, the microblog site that has amplified many activist movements. Getting your data from Twitter is complicated. The team at DocNow has developed tools and documentation for activists and archivist to preserve Twitter data. They used Github, a version control platform for software. It is open source and available to anyone. DocNow also have a Slack channel, a twitter, and a Medium to connect their community of users to one another.

Facebook. You can download your profile and any page where you are an administrator. For your profile, go into Settings > Your Facebook Information > Download Your Information. The site will ask for your password to download the file. You will receive an email notifying you that your information has been requested and once your information is ready to view. Your file will be in the Available Files tab on the Download Your Information page for a few days before it is no longer available for download. The file will be compressed and contain multiple JSON files.

Help						
l files						
Name	Type	Compressed size	Password ...	Size	Ratio	Date modified
about_you	File folder					6/25/2019 10:43 AM
ads	File folder					6/25/2019 10:43 AM
apps_and_websites	File folder					6/25/2019 10:43 AM
calls_and_messages	File folder					6/25/2019 10:43 AM
comments	File folder					6/25/2019 10:43 AM
events	File folder					6/25/2019 10:43 AM
files	File folder					6/25/2019 10:43 AM
following_and_followers	File folder					6/25/2019 10:43 AM
friends	File folder					6/25/2019 10:43 AM
groups	File folder					6/25/2019 10:43 AM
likes_and_reactions	File folder					6/25/2019 10:43 AM
location	File folder					6/25/2019 10:43 AM
marketplace	File folder					6/25/2019 10:43 AM
messages	File folder					6/25/2019 10:43 AM
other_activity	File folder					6/25/2019 10:43 AM
pages	File folder					6/25/2019 10:43 AM
payment_history	File folder					6/25/2019 10:43 AM
photos_and_videos	File folder					6/25/2019 10:43 AM
posts	File folder					6/25/2019 10:43 AM
profile_information	File folder					6/25/2019 10:43 AM
saved_items_and_collections	File folder					6/25/2019 10:43 AM
search_history	File folder					6/25/2019 10:43 AM
security_and_login_information	File folder					6/25/2019 10:43 AM
stories	File folder					6/25/2019 10:43 AM
your_places	File folder					6/25/2019 10:43 AM

To download a group page, navigate to Download Your Page Information and follow the prompts.

Download Your Page Information

You can download a copy of your Facebook Page information at any time. You can download a complete copy, or you can select only the types of information and date ranges you want. You can choose to receive your information in an HTML format that is easy to view, or a JSON format, which could allow another service to more easily import it.

Downloading your information is a password-protected process that only you will have access to. Once your copy has been created, it will be available for download for a few days. We recommend downloading your file from a desktop computer. If you choose to download your file from a mobile device, you will need a Wi-Fi connection.

Request Copy   Available Copies

Date Range: All of my data ▾   Format: HTML ▾   Media Quality: Medium ▾   [Create File]

Your Information ⓘ   Deselect All

Posts
Posts you've shared on your Facebook Page, posts that are hidden from your timeline, and polls you have created   ☑

Photos and Videos
Photos and videos that you've uploaded and shared on your Page   ☑

Events
A list of the events you've created for your Page   ☑

Page Profile Information
Your Page's name, website address, categories, contact info, location info and Page admins   ☑

Other Page Activity
Activity associated with your Page   ☑

Page Settings
Current settings for your Page   ☑

Instagram's (the photo sharing app) process for downloading your data is similar to Facebook's process. Navigate to Settings > Security > Download Data. You will be required to enter your password. Your data emailed to you as a JSON file. Instagram notes that it may take them up to 48 hours to email your data, for more information and instructions for downloading from a desktop click here.

Web archiving

There are two main platforms most archives use to preserve websites: Archive-It and Webrecorder. Archive-It is a paid subscription based service that allows users to input specific urls and expand the scope of the capture to include external links. Archive-It is offered through the Internet Archive, the same company that created the Wayback Machine for archiving web

pages. Archive-It captures website by using crawlers, an automated way to capture data. This allows subscribers to capture many sites at a time without using a lot of hands on time. Some visual content, like streamed videos and scrolling background picture may not render in the archived web page. Also, depending on the scope of your crawl externally linked content will be excluded. [Webrecorder](#) offers free accounts with a data limit. Webrecorder records a person navigating the website and is commonly used when crawlers fail to render a site properly.

Oral History

This section provides guidance in conducting oral history interviews with activists or members of marginalized communities. It is not meant to be a comprehensive guide to conducting oral history interviews. Other manuals such as "Doing Oral History" by Donald A. Ritchie should be consulted for that. Although this section does touch upon some basic oral history methods, emphasis is placed on providing information that is specific to the above mentioned groups.

Defining an Oral History Project

All oral history projects must have a clear purpose statement which defines the overall scope and purpose of the interviews. A copy of this statement should be given to each interviewee before the interview starts and should be attached to the final product of each interview. There are two main reasons for this.
1) This statement provides important context that will be helpful to future researchers.
2) Interviewees should understand that the interview is being conducted to preserve history as a primary goal and to advance their activist position as a secondary goal. Understanding this distinction can have a profound effect on what the interviewee talks about.

Legal Issues

Interviewees retain copyright for anything they said during an interview for 70 years after they die. If a repository or a researcher publishes excerpts of an interview beyond what is deemed "fair use" without a contract that stipulates such use, the interviewee may sue for copyright infringement. Therefore, it is imperative that the interviewee sign a deed of gift or a release form (hereafter referred to as "release form") at the time of the interview or before the interview is made available to the public. Ideally, the release form should transfer copyright to the interviewer, the repository, the public domain, or a Creative Commons license. Interviewees may request that their interview be closed for a period of time, but this practice should be discouraged and only used if the interviewee insists on it. The interviewer should also sign the release form, agreeing to the stipulations contained in it. The release form should be created through consultation with your institution's legal counsel. Some sample release forms can be found at The American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress
https://www.loc.gov/folklife/edresources/edcenter_files/samplereleaseforms.pdf

If an interviewee makes extremely negative statements against someone living, something that is not publicly known or published about the individual, the interviewer or the repository holding the interview may be sued for libel or defamation in addition to or apart from the interviewee who made the statement. The interview should be restricted until after the possibly defamed individual has died since the dead cannot sue for defamation. Any potential legal concerns, such as libel or defamation, should be directed toward your legal counsel.

Preparing for the Interview

Doing your homework ahead of time is time consuming but one of the most important parts of conducting an oral history interview. Knowing about the interviewee and what they have done, plus knowing the subject material, not only informs you on what questions to ask, but is also helpful to build rapport when conducting the interview. When interviewing activists or members of a marginalized community, trust can make the difference between a successful and an unsuccessful interview. As with any oral history interview, the first step in gaining trust is through communicating the purpose and scope of the interview to the interviewee. This can be done by providing them with a copy of your purpose statement but also briefly talking about it. Second, demonstrating your knowledge shows that you have invested time and energy into learning about them and the topic. Doing your homework is also helpful in preparing your questions. When preparing interview questions, it is always better to have too many than not enough. Depending on the brevity of the answers provided, or lack of, you can decide which questions to ask as the interview proceeds. Construct broad, open-ended questions that allow the interviewee to tell a narrative and talk about what they feel is important. Each broad question should have a series of possible follow-up questions that you will choose to ask based on their answer to your question.

Differences between race, gender, ethnicity or age between the interviewer and interviewee may influence the answers given to questions. The potential roadblock of demographic differences can be mitigated by finding commonality and helping the interviewee feel more comfortable with you. This can be done by telling the interviewee a little about yourself and your background and focusing on areas of commonality before the interview begins. This will help them develop a better feel for who you are. It is also helpful to have fully researched the topic, being familiar with names, dates, and other important events. Illustrating your shared knowledge and interest in the topic can go a long way in cutting across demographic differences.

Questioning flow

Since gaining trust is so important, it is best to not jump right in with pointed questions about their activist activities. Always start with warm-up questions that allow them to provide some background information about themselves and some organizations in which they were involved. This not only adds historical context, but it helps the interviewee become more comfortable,

relaxed and make them more open to providing forthright answers later. This helps with developing the necessary rapport needed for a meaningful conversation.

Using open ended questions also allows the interviewee to talk about what they think is important. You can use follow-up questions to fill in the gaps or to steer the interview in other directions. The framing of questions is important as well. Do not ask loaded questions and avoid asking questions that are designed to fill in holes to your research. Interviewees may pick up on that and give you an answer that they think you want to hear.

Questions should encourage the interviewee to provide alternative narratives that challenge collective memory. They should understand that this is their story and they are free to challenge existing accounts reported. That being said, it is crucial to respect any topical boundaries that the interviewee may have. These boundaries may have been established before the interview started, or they may arise during the interview. Do not pressure an interviewee to answer a question, but also try to discourage their requests to turn off the recording device so they can speak off the record. Not much is gained by speaking off the record. It is best to encourage them to say what they are comfortable saying. Often times, after they have had time to talk more and think, they may decide to revisit a topic and talk about it in a way that they were not comfortable with earlier.

Choosing an Interviewer

Who is involved in the interview process can drastically influence the interview outcome. Interviewers may be insiders or outsiders to a community. Both have their advantages and disadvantages. Insiders to a community may have more insider knowledge about a topic and may be presumed to be more credible and trustworthy to those they interview. Conversely, they may be too close to a topic and assume that what what they already know is common knowledge and fail to ask important follow-up or clarification questions. Outsiders, on the other hand, may have less preconceived notions about what they will discover and can come to the interview with a fresh perspective of a topic, which could add value to the interview process. However, outsiders may be viewed by interviewees as transient without any real interest in the community or commitment to the project. Even if inaccurate, this perception could affect how the interviewees react, making them cautious and guarded. If an oral history project has more than one person is responsible for conducting interviews, the interviewer should be selected based on who would be best suited for each particular interviewee.

Technology
Technology used for oral history projects is always changing and oral historians must adjust to this new technology. These changes may require changes to workflows. For example, digital audio recorders have advantages over tape recorders, such as eliminating the need to digitize the audio later. However, the project's workflow needs to incorporate a digital preservation plan whereby audio is transferred to a digital preservation system as soon as possible after the interview. Equipment used should be of the highest quality within your given budget. Your cell

phone, or more sophisticated recording equipment such as a Zoom recorder are options. Whether using tape or digital, audio or video, it is important that there is enough recording time available. Although you may want to break an interview up into different sessions, you want to be prepared for sessions that may go longer than expected. You should record the interview in an environment that is as free of extraneous noise as possible. This can be mitigated ahead of time by talking with the interviewee about the importance of creating a quiet environment for the interview. The placement of the recording device's microphone should be close to the interviewee and interviewer and a test should be conducted before the interview begins to assure that both parties can be heard clearly. You can use the StoryCorps mobile phone app on your cell phone. The advantages to using the StoryCorps app is that you can add and upload the interview and metadata directly from your phone into their repository, but it requires you to agree with all terms of their app for copyright and access. You can also keep your recording private, saving it to your device to share with whomever you choose. For accessibility compliance and researcher ease of use, oral histories should be transcribed within a reasonable amount of time. Equipment created specifically for transcription should be used. For analog tapes, there are special playback devices with foot pedals that control the tape. Digital files can be transcribed in a similar way in which a foot pedal would work in conjunction software that plays back the audio.

Resources:

Neuenschwander, John A., "A Guide to Oral History and the Law," Oxford University Press, 2009

Quinlan, Mary Kay, Nancy MacKay, and Barbara W. Sommer, Community Oral History Toolkit, Volume 1: Introduction to Community Oral History.

Ritchie, Donald A. 1995. Doing Oral History. Twayne's Oral History Series, No. 15. New York: Twayne.

Arrangement and Description

Arrangement and description are two of the most central aspects of archival processing, and have a significant impact on how materials are discovered, contextualized, and interpreted by patrons. These areas are highly impacted by personal biases of the archivist, the institution, and the predominant culture. These issues have consequences in each of the areas covered below.

Theory and practice

Provenance

A foundational theory of Western archives is the concept of *provenance*, which determines what constitutes how a collection is named and contextualized. While the intent of provenance is to document the context of how records were created and maintained, traditional archival practices in this area can be problematic. For example,if a faculty member collects student activism materials from campus and donates these materials after years of using them for his own research, it is likely that the collection will be named for the faculty member and that the faculty member's name and biography will appear first in a finding aid. This implies a hierarchical relationship which can obscure the fact that the faculty member had little involvement in the movement.

Original order and imposed arrangement

The arrangement of the collection may be based on the concept of original order (maintaining it or restoring it to the order in which it was kept) or by the archivist imposing an arrangement with the intent of facilitating researcher use of the collection. Arrangement created by the archivist relies on an often subjective interpretation of the material and on theoretical concepts about what constitutes proper order, for example, alphabetical, chronological, and hierarchical orders. Decisions on order and arrangement impact how a user finds and uses the material, and according to some critics, is equivalent to the archivist creating the narrative of the collection.

Finding aids

Finding aids are the standard format of archival description. Traditionally, finding aids are hierarchical, with description from the collection-level implicit throughout the subsequent series, files, and items. The goal of a finding aid is to preserve and provide context for the archival collection, both in how it arrived in the archives, how it was created, maintained, and how the parts relate to the whole.   Archival description choices can highly influence perception of a collection in problematic ways. Archival practice asks that a collection be arranged and described along a hierarchical model, which implies specific relationships between materials that may not be accurate.

Part of the task of the archivist is to choose how detailed a collection description will be. This choice can vary between a savvy way to efficiently describe large collections at aggregate levels, or a choice to enhance access terms for collections which need more granular levels of description. Part of the challenge of describing archival collections is that it is rarely possible to describe everything at an item level, meaning that the archivist has a very subjective task of devising groupings for describing at the aggregate levels. This can make it easier to

approximately find relevant materials, but also not completely identify all relevant items by a keyword search. Archivists can zoom their descriptive "microscope" in or out, which can be helpful when balancing privacy issues with useful description for discovery. For example, an archivist may choose to describe correspondence at a series level to avoid listing actual names.

Descriptive language

Descriptive standards do not keep up with the complexity of our language and how people identify themselves in the world. This can be seen in the list of accepted subject terms for the [Library of Congress Subject Headings](#) (LCSH), which are terms used worldwide. Historical terminology can be harmful, and it is helpful to remember that LCSH were established by a white- and cis-gendered- dominant society. Legacy descriptions may or may not have adhered to standards of the time, but may include terminology which is still painful and harmful about African-Americans, gay people, people with disabilities, and others. For example "[illegal aliens](#)" is a Library of Congress Subject Heading however most media has moved away from using this term and similar terms to describe people.[5] Decisions about including historic terminology involve considerations to help with user discovery of linked historic terms, or terms which appear in the actual item, but it is a good idea to offer additional culturally-aware terminologies, and to provide a disclaimer about historic terminologies. You can also submit suggestions to LCSH by [submitting a proposal](#) through The Subject Authority Cooperative Program (SACO).

Cultural Competency

All archival work is improved with knowledge and awareness of non-dominant cultures, and with description this is especially the case. Some suggestions are:
- Respect pronouns such as she/her/hers; he/him/his; them/their (singular and plural); ze/zir, etc. Please normalize asking for clarification on pronouns as a gesture of respect, as opposed to accidentally mislabeling someone.
- Respect how people describe themselves. Avoid colonialist labels - descriptions applied to communities without understanding or respecting their community. By using their terminology, this enables appropriate representation and the ability for their communities to find their records in their language.
- Be aware of terms are only appropriate for self-description. For example, "Queer" has historically been a slur but, in some contexts, has been reclaimed by some people as a positive identifying label.
- Some languages are inherently gendered. Be aware of evolving ways language is adapting to be more inclusive.

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[5] The Associated Press updated their guidelines in regards to this issue in 2013. For more information please visit, https://blog.ap.org/announcements/illegal-immigrant-no-more.

- ○ Examples:
  - ■ Chicanx, to avoid needing to specify Chicano (male) vs Chicana (female).
  - ■ Using the singular "them" as opposed to defaulting to male pronouns.
- (Capital B) Black can be a term of empowerment to represent unity across the African diaspora. Remember the Black community is not a monolith and terms of self-identification have changed and will continue to change over time.
- Although people first phrasing with disability is most widely used (eg. people with disability), some communities particularly with the Deaf and Austic communities prefer identify-first language (eg. autistic person). Note that Deaf is not the same as hard of hearing, and blind is not the same as low vision. Avoid using the words "handicapped," or "impaired," it is a *disability*.

Recommendations for descriptive practice

There are ways in which these problems can be mitigated, though it is difficult in many cases to completely remove the influence of the dominant culture's values and biases.

Primarily, solutions center on working with the members of the community being described. This is done in order to draw on their subject expertise and also to provide an opportunity for people to self-describe. This increases accuracy in description, but it also ensures that members of that community are more likely to be able to find these resources. One example might be to ask if a contact of the donor or a representative member can write the biographical or historical note for the finding aid, or to choose the verbiage for series or file descriptions. Or, this can be done through a crowdsourcing project which allows community members to describe images, translate texts, or tag items with keywords.

If those opportunities are not possible, contact individuals, departments, or organizations that can help. Most college campuses now have staff who work on diversity and inclusion efforts. There are also many organizations, some with archival missions, who may be able to provide advice, such as the [One Archives at the University of Southern California](https://one.usc.edu) (LGBTQ). As per the rules for responsible everyday interaction, do not corner or pressure a perceived member of a community to assist you in this task unless they have independently volunteered for this role.

A best practice is to be transparent about decisions made and sources consulted. Document the origin of descriptive terms and narrations by listing this information in the public finding aid.

Resources:

Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia's Anti-Racist Description Working Group. "Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia: Anti-Racist Description Resources." October 2019. https://archivesforblacklives.files.wordpress.com/2019/10/ardr_final.pdf.

Bailey, Jefferson 2013. "Disrespect des Fonds: Rethinking Arrangement and Description in Born-Digital Archives." Archive Journal, June 2013. http://www.archivejournal.net/essays/disrespect-des-fonds-rethinking-arrangement-and-description-in-born-digital-archives/

Bennet, Janett M. 2015. "The SAGE Encyclopedia of Intercultural Competence." http://sk.sagepub.com/reference/the-sage-encyclopedia-of-intercultural-competence.

Drake, Jarrett M. 2016. "RadTech Meets RadArch: Towards A New Principle for Archives and Archival Description." Medium.com, April 6 2016. https://medium.com/on-archivy/radtech-meets-radarch-towards-a-new-principle-for-archives-and-archival-description-568f133e4325.

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Gay and Lesbian Advocates and Defenders (GLAAD). n.d. "GLAAD Media Reference Guide: Terms to Avoid." https://www.glaad.org/reference/offensive.

Lyons, Bertram. 2009. "Writing Archives / Crafting Order : A critique on the longstanding archival practices of arrangement and description." Graduate paper, University of Kansas. https://www.academia.edu/201257/Writing_Archives_Crafting_Order_A_critique_on_the_longstanding_archival_practices_of_arrangement_and_description.

Sakurai, Shige. 2017. "Resources on Personal Pronouns." https://www.mypronouns.org/.

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Temple University Libraries. 2018. "SCRC Statement on Potentially Harmful Language in Archival Description and Cataloging." https://library.temple.edu/policies/14.