PANEL A: POLITICS, PRIVACY, AND ETHICS IN DIGITAL COLLECTIONS

Chair/Moderator: Elizabeth Duclos-Orsello, Ph.D., Chair, Dept. of Interdisciplinary Studies, Salem State University

Panelists:
Eben English, Digital Repository Services Manager, Boston Public Library
Jane Kelly, Records and Accessioning Archivist, Digital Collections & Archives, Tufts University
Elizabeth Watts Pope, Curator of Books and Digitized Collections, American Antiquarian Society

Digital Commonwealth 2020 Conference
April 7, 2020
THE ETHICS OF DIGITIZING SENSITIVE CONTENT

Eben English
Boston Public Library

Warning: This presentation contains images showing graphic depictions of violence and racial stereotypes
The Northam affair (2019)

- Photo allegedly depicting Virginia governor in blackface discovered in 1984 yearbook
- Widespread existence of similar photos in yearbooks from many institutions
- College administrators ordering review from libraries and archives
- Takedown requests issued and retracted

Explicit content

- Nudity
- Explicit sexual imagery
- Graphic violence

Dead man in alley, Boston Public Library
<https://ark.digitalcommonwealth.org/ark:/50959/sj139s762>
Offensive / objectionable content

- Racist imagery
- Hate speech
- Stereotypes
- “Discriminatory” content: negative depictions based on race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, national origin, ethnicity, religion, disability, etc.
Problematic content

- Questionable provenance
- Consent absent or unclear
- Culturally insensitive
- False or misleading

Pawnee Carved Wood Man, Milner Library, Illinois State University
<http://digital.library.illinoisstate.edu/cdm/ref/collection/p15990coll19/id/205>
Why do we need an ethical approach?

- Content has consequences
- Potential for harm is real
- Online dissemination raises the stakes

“... the presentation of such materials makes immediately available materials of textual and visual violence which, particularly when shorn of contextualization and analysis, perpetuate the very systems we aspire to replace.”

– Peterson Brink, Mary Ellen Ducey, and Elizabeth Lorang, “The Case of the Awgwan: Considering Ethics of Digitization and Access for Archives” The Reading Room 1 (2016)
What are our responsibilities?

- How does this apply to selection, description, dissemination?

- Need an approach that:
  - actively solicits input from communities affected
  - is informed by an awareness of race, gender, class
  - acknowledges history of colonialism, oppression, violence, inequality
  - grounded in social justice principles: antiracism, feminism, inclusivity, consent
  - contextualizes the item within these frames of reference
What is context?

- Accompanying information that explains:
  - provenance
  - purpose
  - audience
  - authenticity
  - social, political, economic, artistic origins

“From one angle, the intellectual history of the archival profession is the history of thinking about the nature of contextual knowledge about records.”

– Tom Nesmith “Reopening Archives: Bringing New Contextualities into Archival Theory and Practice” Archivaria 60 (Fall 2005)
AKA information literacy

- Competency Standard Three: The information literate student evaluates information and its sources critically and incorporates selected information into his or her knowledge base and value system.
  - 3.2.a. Examines and compares information from various sources in order to evaluate reliability, validity, accuracy, authority, timeliness, and point of view or bias
  - 3.2.c. Recognizes prejudice, deception, or manipulation
  - 3.2.d. Recognizes the cultural, physical, or other context within which the information was created and understands the impact of context on interpreting the information

--Objectives for Information Literacy Instruction: A Model Statement for Academic Librarians

<http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/objectivesinformation>
Repository-level statements:

SCRC Statement on Potentially Harmful Language in Archival Description and Cataloging

If you encounter language in SCRC finding aids, catalog records, digitized collections, blog posts, exhibitions, or elsewhere that you find offensive or harmful, or if you have questions about the statement’s history or about how it affects your research, please email us at scrc@temple.edu or call the SCRC reference desk at 215-204-6496.

When processing (arranging, organizing, and describing) archival collections, and cataloging rare books, SCRC staff make choices about what language to use when describing not just the books, papers, and records, but the people and organizations who created or who are represented in them. We recognize that many of our materials are created by multiply-oppressed or multiply-privileged groups of people, and we believe it is our responsibility not to stop at the information source, but to go so far as to ensure that the materials we offer to the world will not be harmful or offensive. However, many of our finding aids (descriptions and inventories of collections) and library catalog records, which were created decades or even centuries ago, may still include harmful language. SCRC is dedicated to reviewing and updating our descriptive language, but with hundreds of finding aids and thousands of library catalog records, this is ongoing and will take time.

Additionally, when processing new collections we will continually re-evaluate language provided by creators or former owners of the collection; either because it provides important context about the materials or because it is a way to make the collections available for research use in perpetuity. In book cataloging, it is a common practice for efficiency to re-use catalog records created by other libraries.

Effective Date: JUNE 26, 2019

More search tools

Many of our research tools are not yet available online. Researchers who visit the Friends Historical Library in person will have access to card catalogs, unpublished genealogical indices, typed written inventories, and other research tools, as well as the expertise of our staff.

The words we choose

Occasionally, you may come across language in our finding aids, catalog records, digitized collections, blog posts, exhibitions, or elsewhere that you find offensive or harmful. Please let us know by emailing friends@swarthmore.edu or calling 610-328-8496, Temple University’s Special Collections Resource Center has written an excellent explanation for why these terms sometimes appear in archival description.
Context: Examples

Collection-level statements:

University of Nebraska Yearbooks

The Archives & Special Collections at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries presents the complete run of the University’s yearbooks. Beginning in 1884, the University annually produced a book commemorating its academic, athletic, activity, club, faculty, students, and staff. These yearbooks, offered in their entirety online, provide a distinctive and rich glimpse into the history of the University of Nebraska from the late nineteenth century until the early 1970s (with a few late exceptions, regular production of the yearbooks ceased in 1972). The original print yearbooks digitized for presentation here are part of the Archives & Special Collections, University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries.

The display of the yearbooks is powered by the Internet Archive's open-source BookReader software (see http://archive.org/details/BookReader). Documentation for developers can be found at http://openlibrary.org/dev/docs/bookreader.

If you have any questions or comments regarding this digital display of the University of Nebraska Yearbooks, please contact Archives & Special Collections at archives@unl.edu.

Archives & Special Collections historical records:

Materials and records in the Archives & Special Collections are historical in nature. They may contain stereotypes, such as those related to race, ethnicity, and gender, and other language and imagery that are inappropriate by today’s standards. Materials and records are retained in order to fully represent the historical record and are presented in their original format, without context, for research in person or through online access. The materials and records are made accessible without enforcing any historical viewpoints. Archives & Special Collections is guided by their mission and by the core values of the Society of American Archivists.

Digital Commonwealth

19th Century American Trade Cards

Boston Public Library

Color lithographed Victorian-era trade cards were a key late 19th century advertising vehicle for national manufacturers and local businesses. These miniature postcards, about the size of a postcard, were handed out as souvenirs at major expositions during the late Victorian period. They were distributed at stores, placed on sale counters free for the taking, and ceaselessly by “drummers” who walked the streets looking for customers.

The Print Department of the Boston Public Library is home to almost 4,000 of these Victorian advertising trade cards. The cards in our collection advertise medicines, clothes and shoes, foods, cosmetics and perfumes, farm equipment, household appliances, and cooking products.

Several items feature advertisements for Boston businesses as well as products still being manufactured, such as Quaker Oats and Heinz Ketchup.

Warning: Website visitors should be warned that several of the words, descriptions, and images in some of these trade cards are considered racially offensive by today’s standards. The materials are presented in order to give an accurate historical picture of the advertising industry.

Context: Examples

Item-level statements:

<https://digitalcommons.hollins.edu/spinster/29/>
<https://d.lib.ncsu.edu/collections/catalog/0002030>

Please note that some historical materials may contain offensive content.
Providing context in digital collections

- Should accompany content as closely as possible
- Take responsibility
- Give context and rationale
- Provide a pathway to further learning
- Connect to mission and values
- Users should be able to provide feedback or request removal
- Link to relevant policies and procedures
Further reading


A PROJECT AT THE SCHLESINGER LIBRARY

#metoo Digital Media Collection

Jane Kelly
Records and Accessioning Archivist
Digital Collections and Archives
Tufts University
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Are we justified in creating digital collections of materials that may never have been intended for preservation or widespread dissemination?

How do we make ethical decisions about what to include in our collections?
Contextual approach to privacy

What do content creators believe about their right to privacy on the web?

How does their personal context shape their understanding and expectations of privacy and anonymity?

“Privacy as Contextual Integrity,” Helen Nissenbaum, Washington Law Review, 2004
“A Contextual Approach to Privacy Online,” Helen Nissenbaum, Dedalus, 2011
Can we reasonably evaluate the number, depth, and breadth of connections that users have on the web to inform our collecting decisions?

Context, Technology, & Useful Description

How much context do we need to provide to make this content make sense in the future?

Would we need to capture a huge portion of a website that is unrelated to #metoo in order to understand something about one single blog post?

Is that going to take up a ton of data and staff time?
Empowerment through Empathy

Does our work empower individuals and communities?

How can we advocate for changing practices to ensure that this is possible?
Select Bibliography

**Privacy as Contextual Integrity**  
Helen Nissenbaum  

**A Moral Perspective on South–North Web Archiving**  
Peter Lor and Johannes J. Britz  
Journal of Information Science, v. 30, iss. 6, p. 540-549, 2004

**A Social Networks Theory of Privacy**  
Lior Strahilevitz  
University of Chicago Law Review, v. 72, iss. 3, p. 919-988, 2005

**A Contextual Approach to Privacy Online**  
Helen Nissenbaum  
Deadalus, v. 140, iss. 4, p. 32-48, 2011

**Ethical Considerations in Web 2.0 Archives**  
Antoinette E. Baker  
School of Information Student Research Journal, v. 1, iss. 1, July 2011

**The Privacy Implications of Digital Preservation: Social Media Archives and the Social Networks Theory of Privacy**  
Jasmine E. McNealy  

**From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in Archives**  
Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor  
Archivaria, v. 81, p. 23-42, Spring 2016

**Ethical Considerations for Archiving Social Media Content Generated by Contemporary Social Movements: Challenges, Opportunities, and Recommendations**  
Bergis Jules, Ed Summers, Dr. Vernon Mitchell, Jr., April 2018
Thank you to the past and present members of the #metoo Digital Media Collection project team!

• Pablo Morales Henry
  Senior Developer and Archivist for Born-Digital Materials, Schlesinger Library, Harvard University

• Amanda Strauss
  Associate University Librarian for Special Collections
  John Hay Library, Brown University

• Jennifer Weintraub
  Head of Digital Collections and Services, Schlesinger Library, Harvard University

Visit our project website: 
https://www.schlesinger-metooproject-radcliffe.org/

Visit our Archive-It collection: 
https://archive-it.org/collections/10866

Contact the project team: 
schlesinger_metoo@radcliffe.harvard.edu
HOW CAN WE MAKE OUR DIGITAL PROJECTS MORE HUMANE, HUMBLE, & HONEST?

Elizabeth Watts Pope
Curator of Books and Digitized Collections
American Antiquarian Society
Black Self-Publishing

Black self publishing

A Collaborative Research Project from the American Antiquarian Society

Black Self-Publishing is an ongoing collaborative research project based on a working list of books that are known to have been or may have been self-published by people of African descent who resided in North America and either were born before 1851 or published before 1876. Your help, ideas, corrections, insight, and comments are essential to this work of community scholarship. Please consider contributing your knowledge.

Site creator:
Sadie Van Vranken, AAS Intern

Black Self-Publishing, American Antiquarian Society
<https://www.americanantiquarian.org/blackpublishing>
Indigenous Initiatives at AAS

• Kim Toney, Director and Head of Readers’ Services

• Also Omohundro Institute’s Lapidus Digitization Grant, “Reclaiming Cultural Heritage: Digitizing Early Nipmuc History from Early American Documents”
Ideas for Creating Digital Projects that are Humane, Humble, & Honest
Ideas for Creating Digital Projects that are Humane, Humble, & Honest

- Seek Advice & Incorporate Feedback Continually
Ideas for Creating Digital Projects that are Humane, Humble, & Honest

• Seek Advice & Incorporate Feedback Continually
• Examine Blind Spots
Ideas for Creating Digital Projects that are Humane, Humble, & Honest

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• Be Wary of Assumptions in Metadata

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Ideas for Creating Digital Projects that are Humane, Humble, & Honest

- Seek Advice & Incorporate Feedback Continually
- Examine Blind Spots
- Respect the Original Context
- Be Wary of Assumptions in Metadata
- Work in Stages
Ideas for Creating Digital Projects that are Humane, Humble, & Honest

• Seek Advice & Incorporate Feedback Continually
• Examine Blind Spots
• Respect the Original Context
• Be Wary of Assumptions in Metadata
• Work in Stages
• Honor the Work of Others
Colored Conventions Project Principles

• ...enact collective organizing principles and values...
• ... affirms Black women’s centrality...
• ... highlight and center Black lives...
• ... honor the work members bring to the project through equitable compensation, acknowledgement, and attribution.
• ... affirm the role of Black people as data creators...
Jemez Principles for Democratic Organizing

- Be Inclusive
- Emphasize Bottom-Up Organizing
- Let People Speak for Themselves
- Work Together in Solidarity and Mutuality
- Build Just Relationships Among Ourselves
- Commitment to Self-Transformation
THANK YOU!

Elizabeth Watts Pope

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