Digital Memory: Historiographic Practice and Curated Digital Archives

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[Slide 2] Land Acknowledgement for C&W 2019:

We collectively acknowledge that Michigan State University occupies the ancestral, traditional, and contemporary Lands of the Anishinaabeg—Three Fires Confederacy of Ojibwe, Odawa, and Potawatomi peoples. In particular, the University resides on Land ceded in the 1819 Treaty of Saginaw. We recognize, support, and advocate for the sovereignty of Michigan's twelve federally-recognized Indian nations, for historic Indigenous communities in Michigan, for Indigenous individuals and communities who live here now, and for those who were forcibly removed from their Homelands. By offering this Land Acknowledgement, we affirm Indigenous sovereignty and will work to hold Michigan State University more accountable to the needs of American Indian and Indigenous peoples.

[Slide 3] I open this presentation with two problems, each of which represent the extremes in the spectrum of conversation concerning digital archival practice and the internet. The first concerns a website many of us consider part of our formative years on the internet: MySpace.

[Slide 4] On March 18th in 2019, breaking news reported that former social media giant MySpace had experienced a massive data loss during a server migration. The company issued an apology and specified that "any photos, videos, and audio files you uploaded more than three years ago may no longer be available on or from MySpace" and revealed that data corruption during the migration resulted in the loss of everything uploaded between 2003 and 2015 (Doctorow 2019). While the social media site was mostly defunct, users who were on the site in its prime still made

use of the website as an archive of their experiences during those years, a way to return to a sometimes cringeworthy but often pleasantly nostalgic piece of their digital history. This highlights a significant detail about digital data loss in the event of hardware failure: that the internet is ultimately fragile and its contents are ephemeral. While the lost data impacts many who used MySpace to jumpstart their careers, those most profoundly affected are the people who used MySpace in their youth as a space for digital identity discovery. MySpace was a significant space for queer people, people of color, and teenage girls, and was one of the first places online where they had agency over their own data (Gollihue 2019). The total loss of twelve years of digital history, and the teen years of a generation of internet users, thus effectively erases a decade of people's lives in a digital space.

[Slide 5] The second problem is, effectively, the opposite of the MySpace problem, which is what happens when the internet preserves the past in a way that damages the present. While there are many instances of digital memory being used in this way, the example I use here is one from last year, which I call the James Gunn Problem. James Gunn, director of Guardians of the Galaxy, came under fire in July of 2018 as a collection of tweets containing offensive statements were presented to the public (Gonzalez and Lowry 2018). Facing criticism, Disney fired Gunn from the upcoming *Guardians of the Galaxy 3* project, not wanting to associate themselves with comments that referenced, among other things, pedophilia, molestation, and misogyny (Gonzalez and Lowry 2018). The tweets in question, however, were made between 2008 and 2011, and outcry at the time led to his making public apologies for his off-colour humour (Lodge 2018), allowing him to move on and continue his successful directing career. Information concerning who dug up the tweets came to light a week after the initial controversy, when it was revealed

that the driving force behind dredging up the tweets was alt-right blogger Mike Cernovich, known for spreading mendacious rumours and conspiracy theories against outspoken leftist public figures (Patrick 2018). Speculation concerning Gunn's being targeted by the alt right arose after his public anti-Trump stance, and Disney ultimately reinstated Gunn to the *Guardians of the Galaxy 3* project. One troubling aspect of this has been alt-right whistleblowers dredging up information on the vast expanse of the internet to smear public figures with outspoken leftist views, Gunn being a high profile example. The other is the notion that the internet's persistent memory means that anyone with a grudge can unearth any kind of information, however old, to stir up the rumor mill and paint a person, public figure or otherwise, in a negative light.

[Slide 6] So, we have two extreme examples of the digital archive in action, the latter being what happens when a seemingly infinite and unforgettable record of deeds and words are used against a person with the hope of ruining their life, and the former being the inherent fragility of that infinite record. As the vast expanse of digital storage capacity comes into conversation with the notion of preserving data, scholars have begun to explore the possibility that they could, in fact, have the space and means to collect and preserve *everything* that exists in the infinite virtual warehouse of the digital sphere. Many archivists, in expanding their reach to consider the recovery of figures and texts not featured in traditional collections of historical documents, have turned to the internet as a source for distributing and collecting artifacts, creating a platform for those artifacts to be more readily experienced, interpreted, and studied. The capacity and possibility of digital spaces for archival practices is not embraced by all, however, as scholars draw attention to the negative side of online repositories of information storing every particle of data streamed into virtual space. Questions of the necessity of

humankind's ability to forget posed by Viktor Mayer-Schonberger in his book *Delete* conflict almost directly with the infinite capacity of computers for storing and retrieving data, where he notes that such perfect recall hampers humanity's ability to live firmly in the present. The notion of forgetting, however, brings to light in turn the trouble with leaving facets of history, both physical and digital, in the dark, preventing the voices of the oppressed and disenfranchised from being illuminated and shared.

[Slide 7] The major question therefore, is who decides? If we're going to discuss and consider the necessity of forgetting and the option of impermanence, we also have to discuss who has the power to make decisions concerning what is forgotten and what is preserved. In a world where digital information is both permanent and fragile, how do we reconcile forgetting with ensuring marginalized voices aren't erased?

[Slide 8] These are big questions, of course, but my work here serves as an initial inquiry into how we can go about answering them. I'll be considering an ethical middle ground between forgetting digitized memories and preserving a totality of information using discussions of feminist historiography in archival practice and rhetorical scholarship. Methods used by physical archives can provide insight into methods that can be used for digital and digitized collections, and can help us consider what physical and digital archives can learn from each other regarding these big ethical questions as they work to preserve the agency of digital users and minority voices.

[Slide 9] The capacity computers have for storage and preservation opens up new possibilities for information preservation and curation. The virtual storehouse can collect every bit and byte of data in the virtual sphere, and this brings to light pressing concerns about what

this data can - and should - do. In his book *Delete* (2009), Viktor Mayer-Schonberger interrogates issues associated with virtual information storage, addressing a major concern of the 21st Century: privacy. In addressing the dangers of mass surveillance, tracking, and the totality of data preservation, Mayer-Schonberger turns to the question of human memory, framing his discussion of panopticon-esque data preservation around the role and essential act of forgetting to human consciousness. Perfect memory, he argues, prevents humans from living truly in the present, a fundamental capacity they need to act. Forgetting functions on the societal as well as the individual level, allowing humans to evolve over time, learn from past experiences, and adjust our behavior without being plagued by our mistakes, and Mayer-Schonberger's ultimate argument in his work is that remembering and forgetting as mental actions have shifted with the age of the digital, and not addressing this shift could cause "grave consequences" for both individuals and society (p. 17). His ultimate proposal is creating expiration dates for digital information, allowing us to see and respect the true finiteness of memory in the era of infinite, seemingly-permanent recollection.

[Slide 10] While Mayer-Schonberger's premise is founded in very real contemporary concerns with privacy, data ownership, and autonomy, his assertion that data and information needs an expiration date is troubling from the point of view of both archival practice and the nature of diverse history and experience. While he provides some nuance to his argument and proposed solution, including opt-in/opt-out functionality of a digital expiration date (p. 112) his points ultimately present a homogenized view of digital space, suggesting a blanket solution for web memory that fails to fully engage with the complexity of the internet, which Wenger, White, and Smith (2009) refer to as a tool for communication, collaboration, and communities of

practice (p. 21). While personal data autonomy is fairly straightforward - as a person on the internet, I should have control over the images and writings I post as an individual - a lot of interaction on social media and in similar community spaces complicates this matter as our actions online function as conversations with other people. The nature of virtual space, therefore, necessitates questions beyond the initial inquiry Mayer-Schonberger makes about the importance of forgetting, and while he notes that his suggested solution is not perfect (p. 119), it is his ultimate framing device of the necessity of forgetting that is the issue. It is not enough to revisit our human right to forget, but to consider what exactly is being forgotten, and by whom.

[Slide 11] As issues of data ownership remain controversial and contested, the question of forgetting and deleting comes into conversation with archival methodologies that have been asking such questions for millennia: what is worth preserving and what is worth forgetting? Who decides what is worth keeping and worth deleting? How do we determine what should and shouldn't be saved? Archival practice has evolved and shifted over the course of history, not only in terms of how archives are housed and collections are curated but in terms of what is retrieved and considered worthy of preservation. The base definition of an archive referred to by Gaillet (2010) as "a repository holding documents or other material, usually those of historical and/or rare value" (p. 30), has shifted as more scholars have made moves towards combining archival practices with feminist methods of historiography. In rhetoric and composition, this involves the reframing of archival practice to seek new methods of curation and cultivation of special collections. Using Burke's dramatistic pentad, Cheryl Glenn and Jessica Enoch (2009) analyze historiographic methods in order to expand and open up new possibilities for the histories of rhetoric and composition that will be uncovered in the future (p. 322). Revising

research practices and rewriting histories is necessary and important because it allows scholars to highlight and uncover the practices of underrepresented groups in their seeking of historical agency, especially as researchers deliberately seek to investigate the contributions of women and other marginalized groups in the field (p. 322-324). These methodologies include rethinking both methods of archiving and historiography and rethinking what actually constitutes primary and archival material, allowing new perspectives and voices to be highlighted (p. 325). One facet of this involves researchers devoting space in their manuscripts to outline their standpoint and interestedness in the project, defining their relation to the research area and declaring multiple identities, embracing and expressing the ways they make sense of lived and researched experience (p. 331-332). The researcher becomes part of the project, functioning as a filter and a lens, something Gaillet (2010) notes as essential in archival practices where information must be cataloged and placed into context (p. 37).

[Slide 12] This filtration and declaration of identity provides one method of creating a nuanced and contextual record of history, and contributes to archival practice that investigates histories that are often otherwise overlooked. The different methods of archival research and presentation all serve a similar purpose: to uncover and interpret the views of those traditionally left out of history. By seeking the aspects of archival history that may not immediately be obvious, as well as acknowledging and disclosing researcher identity and positionality, archival scholars have made strides forward in historiographic practice, seeking new ways to shape archival spaces and refine collections concerning the experiences of minority groups. This work, as varied and complex as it is, serves to change and redefine the notion of an archive, with an eye

towards the essential nature of critical and nuanced curation that maintains a conversation between the researcher and the creators and subjects of that archive.

[Slide 13] The capacity of digital storage is more expansive than any physical archival collection, and this means that discussions of digital material involves the question of how to go about examining, processing, and interpreting such vast swaths of information. The practice of feminist archival curation, however, provides some insight into ways these physical practices can be adopted to begin to parse the realm of digital data. After all, much of the issues surrounding digitized information storage and interpretation are just grander scale questions that have already been on the minds of archival scholars for years. Alexis Ramsey (2010) notes this in her unpacking of assumptions about archives, namely the idea that "once inside, the researcher can access all their holdings or that all their holdings are available for public use" (p. 79). The reality of archival research is that even digital collections often function as storage or repositories for unprocessed data, and this results in the notion of three distinct kinds of archives - the hidden, the partially hidden or partially processed, and the visible (p. 79). Ramsey notes the importance of processing and making visible these physical archives, as the hidden and unprocessed collections are constantly at risk of being lost, stolen, or otherwise damaged, something that makes them more difficult to recover and protect if they are undocumented or under documented (p. 81). Echoes of this issue appear in digital spaces as well, where digital researchers, trying to wade through pages and pages of digital data, are hampered by defunct websites, outdated software, and issues of digital security. While the scope is different, the problems are similar, and both require the attention of archivists in order to be processed and curated, whether the subject is a special collection of printed documents or a database of saved websites.

[Slide 14] In terms of practicality, there are a number of key principles surrounding the shaping of archival spaces that are used in work with physical archival collections. These principles, outlined by Katherine Tirabassi (2010), serve not only as useful guidelines for physical archives, but a blueprint for potentially curating digital archives that are accessible and functional for researchers. The principles - selectivity, cross-referencing, categorization, and closure - have the potential to help archivists as they navigate the complex issue of curating and preserving digital content (p. 171). An archive is only usable if the archivist is selective about what appears and what is omitted in that archive. While Tirabassi speaks to the issue of physical space (p. 172), the issue of digital space should not be overlooked in considering what should be selected to be contained in an archive, as the infinite space of the virtual does not mean archivists should attempt to fill every corner of that space. Likewise, the information in an archive cannot and should not exist in a vacuum - it needs to be cross-referenced for contextual clues, particularly if it is missing significant information such as the author (p. 172). Archivists need to be aware of the context of the information they select, cross-referencing it as needed to place it in the appropriate framework for usability and accessibility. This is further aided by categorization, where aids of accessibility are created and implemented to make information navigable (p. 175). In a virtual space, this categorization is essential as the archives would not be limited by space in the same way that physical archives are. Not only are these categorization necessary, they shed light on the practices of the community and archivists that created that collection, what they prioritize or connect together, and what those archivists value or view as important (p. 175). Finally, a principle of closure is required in a traditional archive to keep the information within a manageable scope. The search for leads and cross-references needs to end in order for the

archive to be functional, especially if the researcher "lives close" to the archive or is particularly

invested in the work they are conducting (p. 176).

[Slide 15] As an archive lacks function without the active hand of someone creating these

systems of navigation and storage, the issue of curation is central to the shaping of archives that

are more than just data and information repositories. Curating content also becomes relevant in

discussions of digital practice, particularly social media, where Davis (2016) notes that users of

online content and websites, faced with an abundance of information, must enact their own

judgement to curate their own individual internet experience (p. 770). Scholarship on individual

curatorial practices, stemming from the more personalized forms of archiving, indicates that

humanity's tendency towards collecting and sharing inclines them towards having a strong

awareness of how they present their own identities (p. 772). Just as curation matters in the

collecting of physical archives, curation is a key aspect of digital interaction, with users choosing

what content to consume and to display. Curation, rather than a method, functions therefore as a

process of discerning information that is both worth engaging with and keeping (p. 780). The

suggestion that this process can be used to map out how people navigate the massive expanse of

digitally mediated content, becomes relevant in the discussion of archiving digital works, where

an element of determining what is or is not worth preserving rests, ultimately with the individual

(p. 780). At an individual level, curatorial practices assist users in navigating digital spaces, in

the same way that, on a less localized scale, curation helps archivists navigate and catalog data

for use and study.

[Slide 16] The importance of curation in any archival practice lies in the selectivity

principle noted by Tirabassi and applies to archives both physical and digital, but this principle

brings with it heavy questions about the ethical implications of that selectivity. Despite the infinite capacity of digital space, the information available in virtual realms is not as permanent as it often seems, with data facing as much risk of erasure as any physical archive. Digital media are "degenerative, forgetful, erasable" not only through their presence in an ephemeral and minimally regulated virtual space, but in their content (Chun 2008 p. 192). Even as we consider the need to remember how to forget, we have to attend to what, and who, traditionally gets forgotten. The artifacts that are more likely to disappear tend to be associated with marginalized groups and figures, particularly women and people of colour, as they are often marked rhetorically as "inconsequential" and therefore escape the notice of historians (De Hertogh 2018). The efforts used to preserve and recover these disappearing archives, appearing through practices of feminist historiography of physical information, are also being enacted in digital spaces. Methodologies such as feminist rhetorical iteration build upon digital mapping scholarship and situating digital archives through Graban's notion of "locatability" and how texts relate and circulate towards and around each other (De Hertogh 2018). This reorientation of archival scholarship in the digital still carries principles of physical archival practice, with an eye towards building up and attending to the voices of those frequently forgotten and erased in traditional archival practice. Any archival practice in a digital space needs to attend to these principles, especially as the patterns of archival erasure - of women, of people of colour, of marginalized groups of every kind - have the potential to be magnified in a virtual sphere. Digital archives, though functioning in different spaces than physical archives, can still be treated in a similar fashion to physical archival and curatorial practice, attending to the importance of curation, categorization, and usability while also considering the ethical implications of

determining what is included in an archive and what is left out. Considerations of the archival

turn in the realm of the physical are playing out in similar patterns in the realm of the virtual, but

the biggest difference is the scale, where the scope of digital data vastly surpasses that of

physical media. Treatment of digital content, while needing to account for the quantity, can still

benefit from the adoption of principles of physical archival curation and selection as new

practices for preserving digital material arise and develop.

[Slide 17] The practices being used in the archival turn to engage with, preserve, and

curate the historiography of marginalized groups provides an important object lesson in how to

deal with digital media as questions of permanence - and impermanence - of virtual data become

more prevalent. Archival practice, concerned with preservation of historical information, has

brought to light the importance of remembering the human element in collecting and selecting

information, especially as smaller caches of information concerning the experiences of

marginalized groups are unearthed and presented for investigation and scholarship.

[Slide 18] Returning to Mayer-Schonberger's notion of forgetting, the issue of memory in

digital spaces echoes the issue of memory in physical spaces: humanity, in all its flawed

capacity, has a selective memory. Reliance on memory, though admirable, is as flawed a

principle as the notion that virtual spaces are truly permanent, with digital repositories of

experiences, such as Myspace, being erased, deactivated, and dismantled as the internet changes

shape. Questions of who determines what is and is not worth keeping bring to light the need to

interrogate the inherent privilege of forgetting, because being able to set the past aside,

ultimately, is a privilege, one afforded to people who have access to an abundance of history

about their role as the majority group. The argument that digital spaces need to learn to forget

inherently supposes that every user of digital content is in the same position - that James Gunn-esque position of being betrayed and hampered by their memories - and will therefore benefit from the option of forgetting. Again, Mayer-Schonberger's premise is not without merit, and his individualistic solution of expiration dates has its applications, but the premise of forgetting strongly privileges the idea that memory is immutable and not subject to interpretation.

There is no clear-cut solution for the question of virtual archival practice, especially when considering notions of individual use and privacy. The digital's capacity to preserve information presents historians and archivists with an exciting way forward in enacting principles of feminist historiography and the sharing of marginalized narratives and artifacts, but also presents us with an idea of the past that is set in stone, set in a digital form that cannot be removed. As data becomes a commodity to be bought and sold among corporations and governments, attention should be directed less towards forgetting and more towards accountability, seeking more ethical practice for the question of who controls information, data, and history. In a time with an abundance of information, the need for archival practice is all the more essential, where notions of curation, contextualization, and critical interpretation are necessary to both interpret existing archives and to create new ones that are usable and treating the content of those archives with due ethical diligence. As we seek to preserve digital spaces, listening to the voices of the marginalized is even more essential as humanity tries to remember to forget, without being fully cognizant of what, and indeed who, they could be forgetting.

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