Community Archives in the Digital Era: A Case from the LGBT Community

Abstract: This project looks at the challenges of establishing a digital community archives. A case that will be explored is the community archives at Front Runners New York, a LGBT running club. The archive documents this small slice of the New York City LGBT community, capturing the impact of the AIDS epidemic and the community’s struggle for wide acceptance in the 1980s and 1990s, and more recent triumphs in the 2010s such as the success of the marriage equality movement. This project finds that establishing and maintaining a community digital archive necessitates navigating a complex set of technological and social issues, including ownership and copyright, methods for capturing records, digitization and born-digital record keeping, social media and web archiving, and digital preservation. Using an action-research approach, this paper discusses the solutions developed to address these issues, as well as those that remain unresolved.

Keywords: Community archives, LGBT archives, Born-digital records, Digital preservation, Digitization

1 Introduction

The last decade has seen a growing interest in community archives (Bastian and Alexander). Flinn and Stevens define “community archives” as being comprised of “the (often) grassroots activities of creating and collecting, processing and curating, preserving and making accessible collections relating to a particular community or specified subject” (p. 5). Caswell, Cifor, and Ramirez note that community archives “can materialize around ethnic, racial or religious identities, general and sexual orientation, economic status, and physical locations” (p. 61). This project explores a specific community archives, and asks the following questions:

What issues arise in community archives with the transition from analog to digital records? What ways can a community respond to these challenges?

The literature on community archives most often addresses handling traditional archives, such as accessioning boxes of paper records or the digitization of such records. Although some literature alludes to possibilities brought on by Web 2.0 technologies, there is no extensive discussion of the ways that community archives can shift their practices to acquiring born-digital materials (Gilliland). As intellectual and creative productions are increasingly created digitally, often without analog equivalents such as printouts, the move away from digitization and toward born-digital record-keeping is increasingly necessary if an archive is to document contemporary activity. Born-digital documentation can include photographs, written works, and videos, as well as web archives, emails including newsletters, and activity from social media accounts. This project explores a community archive that has begun to address the challenges of born-digital documentation. However, before these issues are discussed, background on the archival context will be explored, followed by a description of the methodology used for studying these issues.

2 Background Context

I will explore the archives of Front Runners New York (FRNY), the LGBT running club of New York. The name traces its root back to the mid-twentieth century when LGBT clubs required coded names so that if member identities were discovered, they would not be automatically “outed” and face significant social repercussions. Notable “coded” clubs in the United States include the Mattachine Society—composed mostly of men—and the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB) group, which was a lesbian club. In the case of Mattachine, the name was from a French secret fraternity of unmarried men; for DOB, “Bilitis” refers to a fictional lesbian from the poems the “Songs of Bilitis” (Bronski; Gallo).

The use of coded names for gay clubs continued into the 1970s when a gay running club in San Francisco was created and eventually named FrontRunners. The name
referred to the title of Patricia Nell Warren’s 1974 book *The Front Runner*, which is a story of a gay runner and his gay coach. The name would have some resonance with gay people as the book became quite popular (e.g., it was a *New York Times* bestseller), but not be so overt as to deter members who may not be out or entirely out. In October 1979, Malcolm Robinson asked the San Francisco group if he could use the name for a club he was creating in New York. As they did not control the name, they agreed and he placed an ad in the *New York Running News* to see if any lesbians and gay men were interested in forming a running club. According to former President Steve Gerben, about a dozen people responded and the club has existed ever since (Gerben).

The archive documents this small slice of the New York City LGBT community, capturing the impact of the AIDS epidemic and the community’s struggle for increasing acceptance in the 1980s and 1990s, to more recent triumphs in the 2010s such as the success of the marriage equality movement. The archive includes newsletters, photographs, programs from the annual “LGBT Pride Run” in Central Park, membership directories, oral histories, and other series of records.1 In January 2014, a long-time member and former president asked me to participate in establishing an archives of the club. I agreed to participate, being interested in helping him archive this small part of the NYC LGBT community of which I had been a member for many years and giving community archiving a try. We agreed that the important documentation worth preserving was not minutiae such as individual running times, but rather the larger social function of the club such as providing the means for gays and lesbians to meet each other outside a bar or club.

It is worth noting that the LGBT community has been engaged in archiving efforts for several decades. Kirste notes that “LGBT archives came into being through the remarkable efforts of queer people who took action to safeguard queer cultural heritage from being ignored, misrepresented, censored, lost and destroyed” (p. 135). Examples of LGBT archives include the Lesbian Herstory Archives in Brooklyn, New York, which has operated for over 40 years, and the LGBT Community Center National History Archive in New York, which was founded in 1990.2 LGBT archives often function with few if any paid staff as well as volunteers.

3 Methodology

Here I take an action research approach, in which the researcher acts as a participant in a community of activity with the aim of solving problems that emerge, and developing solutions and best practices along the way. According to Denscombe, the “research should not only be used to gain a better understanding of the problems which arise in everyday practice, but actually set out to alter things—to do so as part and parcel of the research process rather than tag it on as an afterthought which follows the conclusion of the research” (p. 126). Action research has been adopted most thoroughly in the education community, where teachers and educational researchers work together to improve educational practice, student outcomes, and learner motivation.

Through an action-research approach, the archives team and I engage in problem-solving as they encounter issues and develop solutions. During this process, we keep documentation, such as notes, photographs, emails, minutes from meetings, and work products (computer code, collected materials, and built-out web presences), which we examined in assembling the research findings presented here. This paper discusses some of the problems and solutions encountered from 2014 to 2016.

A note on the term “archives team” is necessary. While some members of the team are fairly stable and consistent (anywhere from two to three persons), others are not, dropping in on the team to see if they are interested in taking part in activities, and maybe participating in one or two activities before moving on. Thus, at times there may be nearly eight volunteers involved, while at other times far fewer. The former club president who recruited me to be involved in the project—the unofficial leader of the group—would actively recruit other members to volunteer in the archive project. I would routinely offer the “archival perspective”—prefacing bits of advice with statements like, “this is how an archivist would handle this”—and taking on the vast majority of technical tasks, such as setting up and maintaining the online components. Thus, this project will address community archiving in the digital era more from the perspective of my work on the project as opposed to other possible perspectives, which can include the group leader, long-standing and incidental archive volunteers, club members, creators or donors, general members of the LGBT community, as well as other potential end users. As a researcher in the archival field, I was particu-


larly interested in developing reusable solutions, such as open-source software, that could be reused as needed as well as possibly proving useful to other archival projects. Thus, while developing solutions for this project, I considered applicability to other born-digital archive projects.

4 Findings: Issues and Solutions

4.1 Digitizing Textual Records

The newly formed archive team embarked on two digitization projects. The first involved the club’s paper archive, which has been stored in a file cabinet in the basement gym of Rutgers Church near Central Park where members of the club run. The paper archive had about 2 linear feet, mostly newsletters, from the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s that were unorganized (e.g., there were not any meaningful relationships in the existing organization). The archives team orchestrated a “sorting” event at which participants used a large conference table to sort records into folders by year. A dozen members participated, and an image of the event is shown in Figure 1. Employing this “crowdsourcing” strategy allowed us to sort all the records in about an hour, which would have taken a lone person a day or more. Using the computer lab next door, members entered metadata about their particular folder into a Google spreadsheet, noting newsletters that were missing and would need to be located in the personal collections of long-standing members. Providing this metadata in the shared spreadsheet made it possible for us to create an accurate inventory of the paper archive, and prepare it for digitization.

Archivists working in a community archives setting may sometimes have to do things in ways not typical in a normal archive, doing things instead in ways a community would proceed. For example, I advocated that items be organized first by series (e.g., Newsletters, Membership Directories, etc.), then chronologically, rather than simply chronologically (e.g., filing all items in a folder with a year). I tried to explain that one reason archivists typically avoid filing by year is that if one cannot decipher what year a record was produced, then how does one file the record? However, team members argued that the types of records were well dated so this would not be an issue. They were right: no paper records were ambiguously dated. However, being able to set aside archival practices in favor of a community’s commonsense organizational approach is necessary for smooth collaboration and for respecting the community’s insights.

To digitize, we decided that we would employ a local digitization company where the records could be easily dropped off and picked up without the fear of records’ getting lost in the mail. As each monthly newsletter was printed on different color paper, creating a somewhat rainbow effect suggestive of the iconic LGBT rainbow, it was decided that all the materials would be digitized in color to retain this effect. A member and I picked up the records one evening, dropped them off at the digitization company, and picked them up the next week with the digitized copies on a hard drive. The scans included OCR data with the PDF/A files. This was useful when we imported the newsletters into the archives’ newly established Omeka site that has a “PDF Text” plugin, thus making the OCR text searchable. 3

4.2 Digitizing Photographs

Whereas the text-based digitization project was successful in making available these textual records, the second digitization project was more challenging. A collection of about 25 envelopes with about 800 photographs was sent in for digitization before the archives project began in 2014, returning DVDs of digitized images. However, it was never clear whom the creator of the photographs was or if they were from the same creator. As items could be easily dropped into a filing cabinet in the church basement, and as there was no procedure for accessioning records before

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2014, the provenance of the photographs was unknown. There was little metadata for the photos, such as an envelope label. Going through the groups of photos, I was eventually able to establish the events and dates for groups of photos based on signage in the photos or what was printed on shirts of the people in the pictures.

Photographs in this collection document events like the annual NYC Pride March. As the club is part of the larger NYC LGBT community, the documentation provides clues into what that community was like at that time. For example, the photograph in Figure 2—one of my favorites—shows the Gay Pride March of 1984 with gay New Yorkers marching among onlookers, with some interested in the march and others simply hurrying to their destination. The photo gives a glimpse into 1984 gay New York: affectionate, sexually charged, with a hint of rebelliousness and defiance.

**Figure 2:** Unknown photographer, “Gay Pride March 1984, Fifth Avenue, New York City,” FRNY History and Archives, available at: http://www.frny.org/omeka/items/show/1483.

Although the digitization and import into Omeka were straightforward, the assignment of metadata using the community’s knowledge turned out to be more difficult. The community was most interested in getting people in the photographs tagged by name. Based on the success of the earlier event, we made another attempt at crowdsourcing metadata creation through a “tagging” event. Before the event, I had developed a guide to creating in Omeka metadata for the photos. We hoped that during the event, participants would learn to do the tagging, and do some in their free time at home. We held the event in a computer lab; I instructed participants how to do the tagging and handed out an instruction sheet that I had developed.

Creating metadata in Omeka turned out to be tedious and un-engaging to participants. Community members wanted to engage in photo tagging similar to what is done on Facebook, where one can click on a face and tag someone by just typing in the first few characters of his name. Further, if the person is a friend, he will get notified, creating a circle of connection. Since Facebook has such widespread adoption, and was easy to use by the less technically savvy members, we decided to explore the possibility of using Facebook as a crowdsourced metadata-creation platform. The notion was that once the tagging was complete, the metadata could be exported via the Facebook API and re-synced with the records in Omeka.

At a club board meeting we discussed the plan to use Facebook as a tagging platform; serious reservations were expressed. There was concern that some members did not want to be findable, especially on Facebook, because of fears of being “outed” and the related social repercussions. Despite some people’s belief that this should not be an issue in New York City in 2016, this example indicated that long-standing fears of ostracism for being gay persisted as well as the need to preserve individual privacy. To allay these legitimate fears, we decided (and the board agreed) that photos could be tagged on Facebook via a “secret group” that was invite-only. To accomplish this, all of the Facebook photos were exported from Omeka into this “secret group.”

Despite the appeal of using Facebook as a crowdsourced metadata-creation platform, it turned out to be problematic for a number of reasons. First, Facebook provided no way to connect the photos uploaded into Facebook with those in Omeka. We hoped that Facebook would retain the original file names somewhere in its metadata accessible via the API, but this is not the case. The original filenames were seemingly discarded. Second, the photos maintained by Facebook are significantly reduced versions of the originals, thus making Facebook itself an unsuitable “post-custodial” replacement for Omeka. The digitized image shown in Figure 2 has an original size of 6 MB and is 3410 x 2048 pixels, but the largest size available via the Facebook API is 2048 x 1335 pixels at 344 KB, indicating that the photograph has been shrunk in size and highly compressed to create a very small file size. Zooming in on the photo indicates the loss of original detail that Facebook forgoes for quick transmission and storage. It is unclear if Facebook retains the original photos or discards them.

Given that Facebook does not have a built-in way to export photographs or photo metadata, I developed a tool that allows Facebook users to export photo metadata and download images for Facebook groups they manage and pages that they like. Although Facebook’s API notes that metadata on tagged users should be accessible via the API,
I found that this was true only for photos on Facebook pages rather than in Facebook groups. It is unclear why this limitation exists, but it is a third reason that the plan to use Facebook as a platform for crowdsourcing photo metadata was seriously hampered.

4.3 Electronic Records and the Digital Dark Age

The digital dark age, as it relates to archives, is the concept that with the shift to electronic records, there will be gaps in the archival records because archives will be unable to capture or preserve the electronic records from that period. The notion of “digital dark age” first appeared in 1997 in a paper at the IFLA conference, which noted that vast quantities of digital information had already been lost as a result of technical obsolescence among other factors (Kuny). In looking at the club’s records, I saw that this would certainly be the case, as paper-based newsletters ended in 2004 and were replaced with email newsletters that were not as well preserved as the paper ones. To avoid furthering the digital dark age in the club’s archives, the archives team looked to capture electronic newsletters and fill the voids where possible.

To capture and preserve electronic newsletters, a team member noted that all the newsletters were kept in Constant Contact, a cloud-based newsletter tool that the club had been using since 2007. However, since Constant Contact allowed only a limited amount of disk space for images used in the newsletter, someone had been removing old images to make room for new ones. This caused old newsletters, when pulled up from the Constant Contact database or from members’ e-mail accounts, to be rendered with no images, such as the newsletter shown in Figure 3. Recognizing how this practice was irrevocably damaging the club’s records, this member was able to secure additional disk space so that old newsletters did not have to be damaged to allow future newsletters to be sent. Thus, while cloud-based tools like Constant Contact are useful for sending and managing large electronic newsletters, this experience does highlight that such tools are not necessarily designed to encourage long-term preservation.

Through aggressive effort by the archives team, newsletters from 2007 to today have been captured and preserved, though some of the older newsletters are missing images. This involved creating an open-source script that exchanged data with the Constant Contact API and will create PDF copies of the newsletter. The PDF contains a graphic version of the newsletter, preserving its look, followed by a JSON data export, which includes the text of the newsletter as well as other metadata maintained by Constant Contact. These newsletters were then loading into Omeka by year, and are thus searchable like all the older paper-based ones.

This example illustrates that the digital dark age is a real phenomenon in community archives, which especially get manifested in the early to mid-2000s where groups transitioned to email records over paper-based records. It also emphasizes that records like email newsletters can be captured, yet require some technical know-how, such as writing a script to export from a cloud service. Limitations of cloud services, such as only allowing a limited amount of disk space, can endanger archival records as people clear them out to make room for active records.

5 Ownership, Copyright, and Donation of Born-digital Records

One of the first things that the archives team developed was a means for people to donate records. This involved creating a donor form, transferring the property and its copyright to the archive. There are two ways that people can donate: by using the web-based contribution module

on the Omeka site (powered by the Contribution plugin\(^7\)), or by sending a donation to fnnydonate@fnny.org. When an email is sent to that address, an auto-reply is sent with the donor form asking that the user write back with a “yes” if they agree to the stipulations on the donor form (see Figure 4). If a donor has a large amount to donate that will not easily fit in an email, the team helps him donate with the club’s Dropbox.com account, which allows large files to be uploaded.

![Donor Agreement](image)

**Figure 4:** Donor form that is automatically sent to donors via email.

Unfortunately, this donor process, while still in place, has been somewhat problematic. With physical material, such as the donation of an envelope of developed 35mm photographs with the original camera negatives, considering this as the donation of an envelope of developed 35mm photographs was developed, as described in the previous section, there was also a need to create metadata for such records. While being able to assign descriptions to collections is easy to do, assigning item- or photograph-level

In several cases, I found myself explaining to donors why we were asking for copyright, and explaining how their photographs were copyright protected for their life plus seventy years, and that control of their photographs would pass on to their estate after their death. I explained that the value of the archive would diminish if, say, un-gay-friendly estates retracted the copyright of materials at some unknown date in the future. Further, I explained that donation would not inhibit personal uses of their donated photos, such as using them on Facebook. This explanation was satisfactory for some members, but not quite for others. One member, a lawyer, said that the archive should move away from transferring copyright but should seek a perpetual license. Thus, donor forms that aim to transfer ownership and copyright of digital material can be difficult for donors to understand and accept. When considering digital materials, the archival community may need to rethink donor forms, creating ones in which are new legal arrangements that do not mandate (but only suggest) copyright transfers. One option may be to move away from a donation model, but rather ask that creators assign Creative Commons licenses to their creations. These licenses would give downstream users rights to use their works in specific ways (e.g., ability to copy materials for non-commercial purposes).

A further difficulty relates to individual understanding of what is eligible for donation. Several cases occurred in which people attempted to donate pictures of themselves that others had taken, believing that since they were the subjects of the photograph and they had the file, they had some kind of ownership over it. For photography, the copyright owner is generally the person who took the picture, regardless of whose camera it was or who has the file. In cases like this, it was necessary to explain that the original photographer needs to donate the photo. In sum, the language around intellectual property and copyright are difficult for people unfamiliar with that language to understand, thus making donations challenging. It may be necessary for community archives to develop new means for accepting donations that have legal validity but means using a language that community members can understand and agree to.

### 5.1 Acquiring born-digital photographs

As the means to acquire born-digital materials such as photographs was developed, as described in the previous section, there was also a need to create metadata for such records. While being able to assign descriptions to collections is easy to do, assigning item- or photograph-level
metadata has been more difficult. One problem is that Omeka, while providing functionality for batch-loading photographs, has no means to bulk-assign Dublin Core metadata. Donated photographs, are often from one creator, are from one date, and have the same rights, so having a bulk-assignment of metadata feature is essential. A further issue is that Omeka, in its administrative back-end, creates small thumbnails of images, making it difficult to see who is featured in a picture should one want to assign metadata for a picture. To address this issue of small thumbnails and inability to bulk-assign metadata, I created an open-source tool called the “Omeka Quick Metadata Entry Webform”\(^8\) it shows all photographs in a collection, with options for modifying the Dublin Core title, description, date, creator, and rights metadata fields. It includes a link for each metadata field called “make all same as first,” which replicates the metadata on the first entry for all entries. It also includes large thumbnails so that people featured in a photograph can be recognized.

In sum, tools for addressing large quantities of similar materials, such as assigning the same metadata to digital photographs, are necessary. While tools such as Omeka have a great number of features for enabling a community archives, such as the many features discussed here, there are features such as bulk assignment of metadata that are missing. Fortunately, since systems such as Omeka are open source and relatively easily expanded upon, features that are essential for community archives such as this one can be developed.

### 5.2 Social Media and Web Archiving

Like many groups and organizations, the club has been using social media since the earlier part of this decade. However, members are aware that social media sites have a tendency to grow and then fade. For example, myspace.com, which was hugely popular in the previous decade, has now largely faded away and important features are inoperable. Like many groups and organizations, the club has been using social media since the earlier part of this decade. However, members are aware that social media sites have a tendency to grow and then fade. For example, myspace.com, which was hugely popular in the previous decade, has now largely faded away and important features are inoperable.

To capture the social media activity of the club, we employed an assortment of tools. For example, Facebook activity was initially captured via the Photograbber application to download the photo albums, and then the Facebook Timeline was captured when we scrolled back as far back as it would go to save the HTML page. All this data was collected and saved in a ZIP file in Omeka. While this continues to work for saving the Timeline, Facebook changed their API, rendering the Photograbber application inoperable. Photo albums are now downloaded using the tool that I created, described earlier.

Instagram content is downloaded using the open source tool downstagram.\(^11\) Although this tool captures photo metadata, it is unfortunately unable to capture videos in Instagram, which is a more recent addition to the site.

In 2015, the club decided to end its initiative to create member profiles, which are interviews of members and are rich sources of information on individual lives.\(^12\) Before they were taken offline, they were Web archived as PDF files using a tool called “Save as PDF.”\(^13\) More recently, Web archives of the frny.org website were created using the new tool Webrecorder.io, which requires one to visit every page of a website, and a WARC file is created.\(^14\) The WARC file can be viewed or played back with the Webarchive Player created by the same developer.\(^15\)

In sum, Web archiving requires adopting new tools, and the tools themselves have short shelf lives like the content on websites. However, as the Web has become the primary mechanism for sharing information and culture, and yet the content on the Web is highly ephemeral, it is necessary that it gets captured and preserved in a stable repository.

### 5.3 Digital Preservation

Through digitization of analog texts and the acquisition of born-digital materials, the community archives of FRNY has over 6,000 items occupying 42 GB in its Omeka site at the current writing. This material requires digital preservation—the activities and planning that attempts to ensure that digital information of enduring value remains accessible and intellectually faithful to its original form over time. The team recognized that the best way to accomplish this is through creating multiple copies of the data. While there are many digital preservation practices

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that have been developed, one of the most salient practices is having multiple copies of data (O’Meara and Stratton). For example, the NDSA levels of digital preservation, which are simplified guidelines for engaging in digital preservation created by the National Digital Stewardship Alliance, recommends maintaining three copies of data. For this project, the first copy is the live data, which is hosted on a Dreamhost shared server where the club also maintains its website. This copy is re-synced about every two months on a hard drive stored in an office in Manhattan. There is also a dump of the Omeka database. The copy stored on the hard drive is automatically re-synced with a Dropbox.com professional account, thus providing three geographically dispersed copies of the data. Both the hard drive and Dropbox.com professional account are sourced from general club funding by making requests of the board.

Although this simple solution is far from perfect, the team and I believe that it is a “good enough” digital preservation solution that could ensure long-term access to this information. The notion of “good enough” digital preservation solutions, advocated by the team running the IMLS-funded POWRR project (Preserving [Digital] Objects With Restricted Resources), works well for a community archives project such as this one (Schumacher, Thomas, VandeCreek, et. al.). Whereas some digital preservation projects have made recommendations that are “challenging and complex” that can leave small cultural heritage institutions “feeling overwhelmed and under-resourced,” addressing basic issues like having multiple copies of the data are “small steps to prioritize and triage digital collections” (Ibid., p. 3, 5).

6 Conclusion

Establishing and maintaining a community archives today necessitates dealing with a complex set of technological and social issues. These include:

1) Digitization and crowd-sourced metadata—Crowd-sourcing of metadata creation can be successful; however, participants want engaging activities that feel meaningful, such as the circle of connection (e.g., being notified when they are tagged by someone) made possible through Facebook. Unfortunately, Facebook is a problematic platform for crowdsourcing metadata creation or using as a “post-custodial” archive because of difficulty in reliably exporting metadata from it and the reduction of image quality.

2) Privacy—In the LGBT community, issues of privacy continue to persist, such as fears of being “outed” through online social media.

3) Archival Practices—in community archives settings, archivists must sometimes set aside their practices and use those that make the most sense to the community.

4) Electronic records and the digital dark age—The digital dark age, or a period in which archives could not or did not capture electronic records, was a reality in this case. However, through aggressive and sustained efforts, capturing electronic records such as email newsletters is possible.

5) Ownership, Copyright and Donation of born-digital records—With born-digital records like photographs, legal language related to ownership and copyright can be confusing or not easy to accept in a community archives context. People want to retain the rights for personal uses, such as posting photographs to social media. Rethinking donor forms, such as the possibility of using perpetual licenses or Creative Commons licenses, may address this issue.

6) Acquiring born-digital photographs—Tools for addressing large quantities of similar materials, such as assigning identical metadata to batches of digital photographs, will be efficient for digital archiving.

7) Social media and archiving—New tools must be regularly adopted as the tools themselves have short shelf lives. However, capturing Web content is worth the effort as it has become the primary way information and culture are shared.

8) Digital preservation—Rather than attempting to strive for an elaborate digital preservation solution, adopting a “good enough” solution, such as maintaining three geographically dispersed copies of the data, works well in a community archives context.

Creating a community archives that is able to accommodate digitization and born-digital projects is possible. However, the technical work and overall labor are significantly more complex than they are in the paper-based world, involving work such as developing computer scripts, creating item-level metadata, replicating data for preservation, and adopting new tools to capture Web data. Despite these issues, with some perseverance, community archiving participants can overcome these challenges.

References


Bionotes

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