


INTERNET AND DIGITAL ARCHIVE: PRACTICES, PECULIARITIES AND CHALLENGES

K. Gedgaudaitė, Lecturer of English Language
Mykolas Romeris University, Lithuania

This article sets out the peculiarities of digital archive practices, mainly focusing on the Internet as an archive and the ways it is used to create a “popular” archive.

Keywords: popular archive, Internet, digital technology.

Conference participant

 <http://dx.doi.org/10.18007/gisap:hp.v0i6.1055>

Traditionally archives have been seen as a place to store knowledge under the curatorship of a figure of greater or lesser authority [see 1, 2, and 3 for discussion]. Digital technologies, however, transformed the notion of the archive, freeing some of its materials from spatial constraints and strict curatorship, as well as enabling the creation of a sort of “popular” archive alongside the a more traditional one. Today anyone having the internet connection can engage in archiving by writing a blog, uploading pictures or music and sharing them with other users. This way archiving is turned into an interactive process; users can modify the content of the material or add their comments and share their opinions. The aim of this article is to examine the features of such digitally created archives and to assess their role in the process of archiving.

Wikipedia is probably the best example to show how an online archive can become interactive. On the page of Wikipedia every user has a right to add an article, correct or enrich an article of another user with more details, delete inappropriate information, thus creating the online encyclopaedia of the world’s knowledge. Although this project has been treated quite sceptically in the beginning (“fully democratic open-source networks inevitably get corrupted by loonies” [4, p. 186]), it has gained some authority now and it is rapidly expanding, adding more and more articles in different languages every day. Another interesting example of interactive archive is Facebook. With the help of Facebook a kind of personal archive is created, adding one’s personal information, photos, status updates, favourites, list of contacts. User’s friends can post a comment that other users can see and comment upon, and thus a dialog with and about the archival material is created.

Whether there is complete lack of authority in the online archive is however a questionable issue. Surely, one is given more freedom in how to arrange the archival material, what to put there and what to exclude. However, there is still a design imposed on its content. For example, on Facebook there is a home page one is directed to once logged in, where one can see the news feed with the most recent updates from friends, the names of the friends appearing in blue and hyperlinked to their profiles, the message/status updates printed in black. Other people can comment or like the message, their message appears on a blue background, etc. The design as it is now has not always been like that. For example the ability to comment on someone’s status or message is a relatively new feature. Once it has been introduced, however, the users of Facebook could not opt out of this feature, hence their interactions could only take a form that has been provided by the website. Garde-Hansen [5] quotes Althusser to describe this illusive freedom: “we are ‘asked to follow pre-programmed, objectively existing associations’ and ‘to mistake the structure of somebody else’s mind for our own’” [6, p. 114]. Furthermore, Garde-Hansen also argues how social networks such as Facebook completely alter the way we perceive reality – for example, by hyperlinking different events our linear understanding of time and narrative is alerted. One could also add that the instantaneity with which the material is uploaded gives Facebook more of an ephemeral rather than archival function; it almost feels like an experience does not count unless it is uploaded onto Facebook. Finally, the uploaded material is directly controlled by the website owners once it is online. Once you are a member of Facebook even if you decide to opt out they still keep all the personal details on their archive, which is increasingly worrying.

Hence Facebook presents a particularly interesting case where one seems to be given freedom but at the same time is put under surveillance, where everyone can obtain a private space to document their past but at the same time all this past gets instantaneously publicized.

Facebook and Wikipedia are only two examples of how digital technologies enable the occurrence of a sort of “popular archive”, where everyone is involved in the production of its content. Lynch describes a popular archive found on the internet as a place of “mass visitation, reproduction and dissemination” [7, pp. 75-76]. Many are engaged into some sort of archiving of the everyday activities: be it a blog, reflection on the news, a comment on friend’s Facebook status or simple daily routines managed with the help of an online agenda. In brief, it seems that what has traditionally been considered as a part of our private lives now enters a public domain.

Our desire to document everything is facilitated by the rapid development of technologies and easy access to them. Almost anyone now has some kind of light and portable camera or recording equipment – hence there is no reason not to document one or another event. This has filled internet with lots of amateur production, blurring the distinction between the amateur and professional, and for some, such as Keen [4], “killing our culture”.

While detested by some, amateur stuff became desirable by others. eBay is a website that has amateur almost at the heart of its philosophy. As Hills [8] states in the article on cartes de visite sold on eBay, the website propagates amateur historians (giving the description of the photographs for sale) and amateur photographers (one could even find a guide there on how to make a good amateur photograph). Hence eBay can be regarded as a counter-

archive: what was considered unworthy of Victorian National Archive is now rediscovered and displayed online. The cartes de visite example also demonstrates how material artefacts now enter a digital space – everything gets recorded. Another, and perhaps the most thrilling example of this desire to archive everything, is the MyLifeBits[9] project discussed by van House & Churchill [10]. The aim of this project is to document all the information about Gordon Bell with the help of modern technologies: his online correspondence, phone calls, instant messages, books he read, music he listened to, websites he visited, everything he sees, everywhere he goes. Every mundane detail gets saved in the virtual space.

While lots of information is uploaded online deliberately, even more enters the databases without our concern. Van House & Churchill give only few examples such as RFID chips in transit passes, toll passes that collect information about our travel patterns, CCTV cameras that track our every movement. Without being aware of it, we became a “trackable society”.

As seen from the above discussion, online archives increasingly become individuated, but they also have a capacity to unite collective attempts for some purpose. Gane & Beer [11] give an example of countless medical support websites that unite patients suffering from certain state such as cancer or diabetes. Another example of that sort is discussed by Appadurai [12]. He talks about the experiences of migrants, who are able to establish their identity through modelling their experience based on the experiences of others (available through mediums such as blogs) and communicating with each other and with their home country through emails, Skype, or other cyberspaces. Internet thus becomes a repository of “possible lives”, where everyone is able to seek advice or consolation and to share experience. In more extreme cases, where a community cannot find space in “the real world”, it comes to exist and develop in virtual space. Appadurai gives an example of the Eelam project, organized by the Tamil population of Sri Lanka, where the lives and spaces that cannot be performed in the everyday word are enacted.

Digital media provided us with

capabilities to store information greater than ever before. Hence the question of what to store and what to omit, which is central to archive as a physical space, now becomes irrelevant. We store whatever we can because we can. The problem that arises now is how to orient oneself in such a jungle of information. The hierarchical system, when the material in an archive was given an accession number based on the date of its arrival to the archive, becomes no longer adequate. Other widely used methods such as hypertext, social tagging or search retrieval systems, are not quite adequate either because they are too time consuming to implement properly or produce the results of “haystack where we thought to find only needle, or needles when we are looking for haystack” [13, p. 173]. Moreover, the danger arises that the relevant information might exist but we might not know about it.

The truth is that because of such vast amounts of information, a lot of data in personal archives remains never viewed [see 14], a lot more in state archives becomes inaccessible due to inability to keep up with the rapid technological advancement – data recorded by older technologies cannot be accessed by the modern ones and there is no time to transfer all of it. Hence, the issue of curatorship cannot be avoided on personal or the state level.

Moreover, power and authority also come into play more than one might think. Although freed from the state control, virtual archives are now in the hands of big corporations (just like Facebook discussed above, for example). It is their decision which information is made available and which is purged, so if one uses a particular website to store information one day he or she might find all the information irretrievably lost just because the website closed down. The speed with which information appears and disappears online is almost instantaneous, and it is often difficult to keep up. Moreover, while there are many free websites there are others for which one gets charged. For instance, the access a student might or might not have to journal articles, would depend on whether the University has enough resources to pay for that journal subscription. Another example of how budget might influence availability is that

of search engines. In many cases website owners have to pay in order to appear at the beginning of the searched items list, thus one might not know about the availability of a particular useful material just because it would be in the bottom of the search list as it was not paid for.

Yet another pressing issue in the discussion of online archives is the question of ownership. While teachers and lecturers are fighting with their student essays that are copied and pasted, court cases are being filed in relation to the issue of who is allowed to use our personal data [10, p. 305]. The question of ownership becomes especially complicated when we consider hyperlinks: “At the core of Hypertext is the idea of linkages between documents – if a right to intellectual property is extended to a link in a hypertext, then the system as a whole is under threat” [15, p. 10].

Finally, perhaps the most central problem related to the question of the virtual archive is the one of forgetting. This problem is well summarized by van House and Churchill: “Sometimes forgetting is desirable and useful. But the new memory technologies and institutional structures can make some kinds of forgetting impossible, or at least uncertain. Forgetting may be impossible when the record is outside of one’s own control; when there are duplicates; or when the data are invisible, such as traces that allow recovery software and forensic computer science to restore files that are missing or ‘deleted’” [10, p. 306]. One might not know, but there is a project of the Internet Archive [16] which archives each internet page. More strikingly, Library of Congress has recently undertaken to create Twitter archive [17], hence while many regard Twitter posts ephemeral they might in fact be retrieved anytime. So as we can see, the liberal atmosphere of the internet allowing to say whatever one wants might not be so liberating after all.

Digital technologies not only provide us with huge storage capabilities, but also radically reorganize the archive functions. While traditional archives reflect a hierarchical structure of knowledge, viewing it as a storeroom from which knowledge can be retrieved, Internet establishes linkages between different types of knowledge from which new knowledge can emerge. Ernst [18] offers us a great discussion on how this




is achieved. He argues that in the age of digitalization archive is transformed from spatial into temporal medium. In addition to simple data storing it also systematises it, establishing connections between different data entries. If it bears any resemblance to human memory at all, it is on the neurological level. Any hierarchy implied in previous storage methods disappears and “permanent data transfer” becomes key operation. Even more fascinating is the fact that archive is freed from any kind of meta-data: a particular image can lead us to similar images, melody to similar melody. This often generates unexpected results. Archive becomes a metaphor in a literal sense.

It is undoubted that the idea of Internet is rather revolutionary, but whether it is successful in achieving its initial aim – this still remains questionable. It was already hinted above that while liberated from the state powers Internet now comes under corporate interests. Caygill [15] argues that from a rather innovative technology Internet became archival system of retrieval just like traditional archive, although this time serving commercial interests. He points out: “This is a perfect model for market transactions and “broadcasting information to a large audience”, to which the audience might respond with a click signifying a purchase, but it is far from “collective medium” envisaged by its creator” [15, p. 9]. Discussing Bill Gates’ archival project Jorinde Seijdel [19] exemplifies how public becomes a part of the entrepreneurship schemes. His company Corbis Corporation owns rights to more than 80 million images, some of which are very valuable and can be found only there, and the only way to see them is to pay money to Bill Gates. Seijdel calls such an archive a “necropolis of visual memory”, because if the only way to see the image is online or by paying huge amount of money, such images have no future.

In conclusion, virtual technologies seem to have greatly facilitated the storage of information but also brought their own challenges. With everyone being able to archive their lives, what once used to be private now becomes public, bringing certain repercussions: the cases of employers checking the profiles of their potential employees on Facebook or the university admissions officers monitoring


their candidates on student forums have now become more a rule than an exception. At the same time virtual space gave us more freedom to “invent” our identity by choosing who we want ourselves to be presented as. The dynamics between all these different modes of archiving in constructing our private (or what used to be private) life remains to be seen. For now it seems that due to the accessibility of archiving technologies, archive became almost an imperative in today’s society, turning more into a way of life rather than the storage of information – as if an experience does not count unless it is documented. And while cheap costs guarantee archiving possibilities for everyone, anyone who can afford more than that seems to nurture their “archive fever” by incorporating what once used to be public in their private collections and making profit out of it, as ambitions of Bill Gates have demonstrated. Whether all of this leads to better or worse results, also remains to be seen.

References:

1. Derrida, J. (1996). *Archive Fever: A Feudian Impression*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
2. Foucault, M. (1972). *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. London: Routledge.
3. Steedman, C. (2001). ‘Something She Called a Fever: Michelet, Derrida, and Dust’. *American Historical Review* 106(4): 4-19.  <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/2692943>
4. Keen, A. (2007). *The Cult of the Amateur: How Today’s Internet is Killing Our Culture and Assaulting Our Economy*. Boston and London: Nicholas Brealey.
5. Garde-Hansen, J. (2009). ‘MyMemories?: Personal Digital Archive Fever and Facebook’, in Garde-Hansen, J., Hoskins, A. & Reading, A. (eds) *Save as... digital memories*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.  <http://dx.doi.org/10.1057/9780230239418>
6. Althusser, L. (1971). *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
7. Lynch, M. (1999). ‘Archives in Formation: Privileged Spaces, Popular Archives, Paper Trails’. *History of the Human Sciences* 12(2): 65 – 87.  <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/09526959922120252>



8. Hills, K. (2006). ‘Auctioning the Authentic: eBay, Narrative Effect, and the Superfluity of Memory’ in Hills, K., Petit, M. & Epley, N. S. (eds.), *Everyday eBay: Culture, Collecting, and Desire*. New York and London: Routledge.

9. MyLifeBits project., Access mode: <http://research.microsoft.com/en-us/projects/mylifebits/>


10. Van House, N. & Churchill, E.F. (2008). ‘Technologies of Memory: Key Issues and Critical Perspectives’. *Memory Studies* 1(3): 295-310.  <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1750698008093795>

11. Gane, N. & Beer, D. (2008). *New Media: Key Concepts*. - Oxford and New York., Berg.

12. Appadurai, A. (2003). ‘Archive and Inspiration’, in J. Brouwer and A Mulder (eds.), *Information is Alive*. Rotterdam: V2/NAi.

13. Featherstone, M. (2000). *Archiving Cultures*. *British Journal of Sociology* 51 (1): 161-84.  <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/000713100358480>  <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-4446.2000.00161.x>

14. Churchill, E.F. (2002). ‘Online and Offline, Together and Apart: Sharing Memories with Digital Video’, in *Proceedings of American Anthropological Association*.

15. Caygill, H. (1999). ‘Meno and the Internet: Between Memory and the Archive’. *History of the Human Sciences* 12(2): 1-11.  <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/095269519901200201>

16. Internet Archive project, <http://www.archive.org/>

17. News from the Library of Congress., Access mode: <http://www.loc.gov/today/pr/2010/10-081.html>

18. Ernst, W. (2004). ‘The archive as metaphor’. (No)Memory: *Storing and Recalling in Contemporary Art and Culture*. Rotterdam: NAI.

19. Seijdel, J. (2004). ‘Cold Storage’, in (No)Memory: *Storing and Recalling in Contemporary Art and Culture*. Rotterdam: NAI.

Information about author:

1. Kristina Gedgaudaitė - MSt, Lecturer of English Language, Mykolas Romeris University; address: Lithuania, Vilnius city; E-mail: k.gedgaudait@gmail.com