



Marginalized Community Archives

Preserving History is not
Straightforward





Preserving history is not straightforward for small LGBTQ+ archives

Preserving history for posterity and in service of the community is not straightforward for marginalized community archives. While it may seem logical for all archives small or massive to shift to collections that are formatted and digitized for all to access, it is not always a practical priority for community archives such as my town's LGBTQ+ library and archives. I will not be providing a link to this library as many of the details shared were not approved for posting. These conversations are fresh and this facility is transitioning to new leadership and working on building relationships with larger government archives and I do not want to jeopardize their success.

“Insiders” and “outsiders”

Just the fact that I am hesitant about identifying their location is evidentiary of their precarious position in the greater community. Not all archivists are constantly looking over their shoulders, sweeping up glass after someone kicks in their front door, or confronting a combative visitor harassing volunteers and using homophobic slurs. Marginalized communities struggle with trusting those outside of their world and tend to harbor “the idea that things can only be understood by other insiders” which may “explain why there are information barriers between these two worlds” observed Chatman in her theory of the “impoverished life-world of outsiders” (1996). Grappling with the need to digitize their content and the need to maintain a sense of ownership of their history perfectly demonstrates the findings of Chatman nearly 30 years ago. Chatman explains that marginalized “insiders” are dealing with “the conflict of two needs: (1) resources of the “outsiders” and (2) remaining exclusive and apart to protect their autonomy and political control within the movement organization” (1996).



Perseverance in the face of adversity

Despite these challenges, the volunteers at this particular library/archives space soldier on, processing one small collection at a time. There are no paid employees; there is high volunteer turnover; and their facility is not able to house all of the treasured artifacts, documents, photographs, and ephemera these volunteers have lovingly stored and cared for as best they can. The volunteers at this archives and library space laughed when asked what their budget is, because they have no money, hence no budget. They subsist on donations, volunteers, passion, and a fierce determination to persevere and preserve.



“Radical Inclusion”

-Bicerra-Licha, 2017

Bicerra-Licha discusses the importance of trained professional archivists viewing community archivists from grass-roots facilities as equals, worthy of partnership. She cites the Society of American Archivists’ (SAA) 2017 forum which aimed to go “beyond good intentions to explore how archivists might partner with the public to repurpose the archive as a site of social transformation and radical inclusion” (Bicerra-Licha, 2017).

A hyperlinked archives community based on trust

Marginalized community archives who subsist on the help of untrained volunteers, donations, and a sheer will to survive, will need to rely on the assistance of larger institutions. As Biccerra-Licha details, “Post-custodial archives, as the moniker implies, seek to separate records management from physical custody. In this model, records creators retain custody of their records, and archivists provide some oversight into management of the records” (2017).

Trust between “insiders” and “outsiders” must be established and relationships should be built and maintained. After this groundwork is laid, decisions about preservation and digitization can be made. Long-lasting partnerships between marginalized community archives and larger archival institutions will enable both to serve the larger community as a whole when treasured pieces are accessible online and digitally safeguarded.

References

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