The Digital Archives and Marginalized Communities Project: Building Anti-violence Archives

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Abstract

The Digital Archives and Marginalized Communities Project (DAMC) is a research collaboration that uses digital information systems to highlight and interrogate the complex and related topics of colonialism in Canada, violence against indigenous women and girls, and sex work. This paper explores how the project's interdisciplinary theoretical framework and methodology influence the development of digital archives that embed community ontologies and epistemologies into their overall design, organization, and record appraisal and description, while also meeting broader project anti-violence and social justice objectives.

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1   Introduction

The Digital Archives and Marginalized Communities Project (DAMC) is a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) funded collaboration that uses digital information systems to highlight and interrogate the complex and related topics of colonialism in Canada, violence against indigenous women and girls, and sex work. The project is in the early stages of development; this paper therefore explores how the project's interdisciplinary theoretical framework and methodology influence the development of digital information systems that embed community ontologies and epistemologies into their overall design, organization, and record appraisal and description, while also meeting broader project anti-violence and social justice objectives.

We are developing three separate but related digital databases/archives using a participatory design process with stakeholder groups. Working titles for the archives are the Missing Women Database (MWD), Sex Work Database (SWD), and Post-Apology Residential School Database (PARSD). The archives will house related academic research, print and visual media, on and offline activism, commemorative initiatives, and image collections. As our relationships with the communities involved with these collections develop, so do the collections themselves.

The project aims to investigate how communities can adopt digital information platforms and systems which are reflective of community derived epistemologies, ontologies, and social justice objectives. Our overarching objectives are: to create and mobilize—via multiple forms of digital media—knowledge that contests and re-envisions conceptions of violence against certain people as normal; to build bridges and dialogue between academic and non-academic stakeholders using on and offline tools such as knowledge sharing, new social media, online and 'real world' conference participation, and the opportunity to curate digital exhibits together; and to create community-based archives that preserve community-identified cultural heritage.

Individual objectives for the archives vary according to the interests of the groups involved. Ongoing consultations continue to refine the objectives for each initiative. Currently, MWD and SWD exist to

preserve the voices and work of missing and murdered women's advocates as well as those of politicized sex workers, to mobilize this knowledge by facilitating communication and resource-sharing to expand and enhance the work of these often quite divided groups, and thus to encourage much-needed critical engagement and information literacy skills concerning murdered and missing women and sex work.

Current objectives for PARSD include the collection of Indigenous and non-Indigenous media representations of and related academic, activist and/or community-level initiatives undertaken since the Canadian government's official apology for Indian Residential Schools on June 11th, 2008. Other goals currently include the examination of PARSD records to find links and track intergenerational effects of residential schools, the filling of a gap in the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission's mandate by making PARSD records available to them; and the encouragement of further critical engagement, healing, decolonization and reconciliation.

2   Context

To date, there are almost 600 confirmed missing and/or violently murdered Indigenous women across Canada (Amnesty International, 2009; NWAC, 2011). Some of these women are/were sex workers, and even the briefest consideration of North America's colonial history (and present) provides many reasons why Indigenous women are over-represented in inner-city populations of women involved in outdoor sex work (Anderson, 2000; Razack, 2002; Smith, 2005). In this research project, the Missing Women Database forms a thematic bridge between the Sex Work Database and Post-Apology Residential School Database. Foregrounding this link brings into focus a myriad of connections between colonialism past and present, and the experiences of many contemporary Indigenous women and girls. Intergenerational effects of Indian residential school violence are known to substantially impoverish and disenfranchise Indigenous women and girls (Bombay, Matheson &Anisman, 2011; Deerchild, 2005; Anderson, 2000). Attempting to escape such a fate, many women and girls move from rural northern communities into southern urban contexts where, without adequate resources or cultural supports, many end up populating the poorest levels of the street-involved sex trade (Jacobs & Williams, 2008; Peach & Ladner, 2010). Despite political differences, therefore, the interests of those who would record and address Indian residential school violence, advocates for missing and murdered Indigenous women, and anti-violence sex worker activists interlock. Researchers and activists—including us—identify the ongoing violation and degradation of Indigenous women and girls as one of the most devastatingly obvious and far-reaching effects of colonization in Canada.

3   Theoretical framework

The archival and social media-based elements of the project are undertaken with the understanding that colonial, classed, raced, and gendered systems of (dis)empowerment operate in both technological and academic contexts (Gonzalez & Rodiriguez, 2003; Brown & Strega, 2005; Wilson, 2008). Our research builds on the platform of digital divide literature (Warschauer, 2003), suggesting that access must mean "knowing how to use" as well as access to meaningful and representative content. More than this, our work strives to engage communities to digitally collect and preserve their cultural heritage in ways that are meaningful to them, and to engage in the process of creating the structure and relationships embedded within information systems that reflect their understandings and knowledge(s).

The collections in this project are part of a growing trend towards more mediated and contextualized digital archives. We embrace the conceptualization of the activist archives because it emphasizes that archives are constructed spaces where struggles over meaning making take place. An activist archives includes: a commitment to social justice that privileges marginalized perspectives and users; the building of collections focusing on under-represented and marginalized perspectives; and the privileging of particular community interests such that it is developed collaboratively (Lile, 2012). Archival studies research emphasizes the power and importance of creating permanent representations of the voices of

marginalized populations (Carter, 2006), as well as ways the documentary legacies of marginalized people can be used to counterbalance mainstream narratives in the struggle for justice (Harris, 2007, Jimerson, 2009).

This project brings together the research interests, political concerns, and community connections of researchers from three separate academic disciplines (Feminist Critical Inquiry, Political Science, and Information Studies). Our project draws into conversation Indigenous, feminist, critical race, and sex worker anti-violence theory and criticism. Such inter/cross-disciplinarity enables us to construct a more comprehensive framework through which to address ongoing violence against Indigenous and other racialized, poor, or sexually 'transgressive' women in Canada. As Dei, Hall & Rosenberg remind us, "Indigenous knowledges" may be understood as bodies of knowledge "associated with the long-term occupancy of a certain place" and built by groups cumulatively "through both historical and current experience" (qtd in Shahjahan, 2005, p.213). Central to our project is the understanding of such knowledges as, in Shahjahan's words, "a rich social depot, which can bring about social justice in a variety of cultural contexts" (2005, p.214).

4   Methodology

Described by Spinuzzi as a way to "understand knowledge by doing" (2005, p. 163), participatory design engages with stakeholders throughout a given project, from the articulation of project goals, to product planning, prototyping, and implementation. A participatory design approach has been successfully implemented to develop a number of Indigenous community-based digital information projects such as K-Net (Cracin, 2006) and Tribal Peace (Srinivasan, 2007). As well, this methodology has been extended by Shilton and Srinivasan to develop a participatory archiving model that facilitates the development of community articulated metadata designed to create participatory based archives that preserve community-identified cultural heritage in a way that "resonates with community understandings and knowledge" (2007, p.96). Following Srinivasan, we "probe into the possibilities for communities to serve as the content creators, interface designers, and, most importantly, information architects and ontology creators of their own systems" (2007, p.725). It is through this deep embedding of knowledge structures into the design of our digital systems that we begin to perceive how communities understand their worlds, how to build bridges between communities, and how to do the anti-violence research and activism at the centre of this project.

At present we are developing our own participatory strategy. We use a combination of participatory methods, including hiring community members to act as consultants over the lifespan of the project as well as conducting a series of "town hall" style community meetings held at key points during the project's implementation. We will travel to major cities across Canada several times over the course of the project to gain as broad an understanding of possible of stakeholder concerns. Community consultants for the project, identified through longstanding research relationships with project investigators, will be integral to recruiting community members.

5   Implications of Research

As we begin this work, we have come to recognize that taking into consideration the voices and wishes of stakeholder communities sometimes means violating the information professional's impulse to preserve. However, we have begun to consider the consequences of preserving and taking public even small sections of these collections. More specifically, it has become necessary for us to consider whether there is value in loss, change, or erasure of materials, especially in politically volatile contexts. For example, feminist communities in and outside the academy are not always safe spaces for sex workers. While some sex worker groups and individuals continue to speak out despite this subaltern status, others refrain from further public disclosure. Moreover, despite the essential legality of the exchange of sexual services for payment in Canada,

whore stigma and existing prostitution-related laws that criminalize all but the actual exchange make it relatively risky (even dangerous) for people to 'come out' publicly as sex workers. Some content producers may, therefore, choose not to have their materials preserved in SWD. More work needs to be done that recognizes the value, indeed strategic nature, of archival silence and erasure for marginalized communities (Carter, 2006). Like other archival theorists before us (Kaplan, 2000), we continue to think through the impacts that the preservation of particular records may have on community groups or individuals.

As suggested previously, the violence associated with whore stigma and colonialism intersect to produce terrible effects on Indigenous women. In the context of MWD, the organizational practices we undertake—such as record tagging and description—draw together advocate-produced missing women posters, commemorative initiatives for murdered women, and dominant news media representations of murdered and missing women. Such juxtapositions facilitate a deeper understanding of the colonial and misogynist ideologies that produce extreme violence against Indigenous women.

We use tags to bring together a variety of records that are disparate in format, content and tone. Hope Olson (1998) calls for "putting marginalized knowledge domains beside mainstream knowledge domains to create paradoxical spaces that are neither mainstream nor marginal but are both simultaneously or alternately". She argues that classification schemes are socially constructed spaces based on mainstream knowledge systems. As such, they create room for particular constructs and ideas while limiting or silencing alternative perspectives. Typical strategies of preservation and representation obscure and make invisible the constructed nature of representational categories and vocabularies. We want to foreground not only the socially constructed-ness of the categories we employ, but also the process of determining these categories.

In the SWD and MWD we create paradoxical spaces by applying specific terms to item records. Many of the tags deployed in this context are terms that make us uncomfortable. These are terms such as hooker and whore. We identify these terms as tags when the word appears in an item. Within sex work and murdered and missing women activist communities, these terms are occasionally used as reclamations. Outside of these communities, the terms are often used to sensationalize and marginalize. Retrieval using these tags puts contradictory items alongside each other creating a paradoxical space. This creates a political juxtaposition that we hope creates room for dialogue and action.

But there is more to take into consideration here. In the recent past, dominant Canadian news media's standard representations of missing and murdered Indigenous women—when they cover these cases at all — have been critiqued by feminists and Indigenous groups for representing violence against these persons as unremarkable. Dominant news media has also been condemned by feminists and Indigenous groups for invoking street-involvement, prostitution, and illegal drug addictions, even when the women in question were not involved in any of the above (Ferris, 2007, 2014; Jiwani & Young, 2006). Community-produced representations of the same women provide significantly more complex, nuanced, and mournful representations of beloved mothers, daughters, sisters, aunties, grandmothers, friends, lovers, community activists, scholars, and much-missed community members (NWAC, 2010). In that many community-produced representations appear to 'speak back' to dominant media accounts to cultivate public concern for loved ones, the drawing together of these disparate representations in MWD could be very useful for many audiences.

However, because dominant narratives are backed by more than 500 years of colonialism, patriarchy, and whore stigma, some advocates for missing and murdered women have asked that dominant media and community-produced representations not be placed alongside one another, even in this activist archives. Indeed, we have begun to consider whether, in instances like these, dominant representations should be archived at all. Meeting the needs of community members while maintaining larger project goals of information literacy, decolonization, and anti-violence work requires thoughtful consideration, and is an ongoing process. Determining how and in what context, perhaps even whether paradoxical spaces should be employed in MWD at all, is part of this process.

6   DAMC Implementation

We anticipate that it will take at least four years to research and design PARSD, and to complete baseline development and implementation of MWD and SWD. Access—public or otherwise—to materials in each archives will be determined by stakeholder groups. Media records in the archives will be public only if permissions are acquired, but will be privately accessible for research purposes. To date, we have established partnerships with activists and academics in cities across Canada. In consultation with all of these partners, we have developed permissions processes that provide options in terms of the public availability of anything groups or individuals choose to include in a given database. As noted above, we are also in the process of developing a participatory design process that engages community stakeholders in project development throughout the duration of the project. Material collection, organization, and description is an ongoing process and one that will be nuanced and transformed as the participatory process continues.

7   Conclusion

We have only begun to explore the implications for both anti-colonial feminist and Information Studies scholarship of engaging together in this multidisciplinary collaboration. Typically, we, in Information Studies, have thought of ourselves as only the architects, providing the structure through which particular pieces of information are accessed (Bates, 1999). More recent work has challenged this notion, suggesting that the lenses through which we see the world are necessarily built into the structure of information and classification systems (Bowker & Star, 2000). When we see our role as only that of categorizing knowledge, we exempt ourselves from the responsibility to engage with fundamental questions about the relationship between methodological frameworks, how and what meaning(s) are created in this process, and what the implications of the representations we create are for the communities with whom we work. The Digital Archives and Marginalized Communities Project is still in its infancy. At present, we have only begun to explore the implications for Information Studies of engaging in feminist anti-colonial and anti-violence work. It is clear, however, that there is much to be considered in this under-theorized area. The first years of collaboration on this interdisciplinary project have demonstrated to us that there is much we can learn from one another. There is much that we can and should do together; and our partnerships are far greater than the sum of their parts.

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