

Chapter 18

Interaction and Expertise in an Appalachian Music Archive

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ABSTRACT

In the world of archives, Web 2.0 means more than wider and easier access to digital surrogates of archival objects. Newly developing Web 2.0 applications provide multiple possibilities for contextualizing archival objects through the contributions of many users, rather than a few established experts, marking a shift in archival practice and the role of the expert archivist. For many archival objects with origins in collaborative and popular cultural traditions, a context for online access that invites collaboration and challenges the authority of the expert is particularly conducive to helping users make sense of the archival objects. While this may lead to tensions between innovation and tradition in archival practice, user-contributed knowledge and multiple interpretations of documents can be incorporated as a complement to institutional records, rather than a replacement for traditional methods of description and classification. The purpose of this chapter is to describe recent developments in interactive and collaborative online archives that challenge and enhance traditional ideas about archival expertise. For one Appalachian folk song collection in particular, a community of expertise, ownership, and collaboration may help to keep unique recordings in continued use as part of a living, and still-evolving, musical tradition.

INTRODUCTION

The nature and goals of archives are in flux. Technology is changing how the user finds information about historical documents and how the user interacts with the archival object itself. The traditionally distinct goals of archives, museums,

and libraries are converging as Web 2.0 applications lead to the possibility, and even expectation, of universal, open, and easy access to cultural and historical objects.

Archivists are beginning to experiment with the possibilities afforded by Web 2.0, incorporating user interaction and contribution into websites displaying archival materials, while also trying to retain longstanding principles of archival prac-

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tice. One manifestation of the tension between innovation and tradition in the archive is the question of authority and expertise. As archives become open to user contribution in organizing, describing, and making sense of historical documents, established experts are no longer the sole interpreters and designators of context and meaning. Though user-contributed knowledge may present a challenge to the expertise of the archivist and the authority of the institutional record, cultural memory institutions may include multiple interpretations of archival documents to complement and enhance traditional methods of archival practice. In this chapter, after discussing recent studies and experiments in participatory and interactive archives as well as a particular lacuna in the area of archives of music, I will explain how a reconfiguration of archival tradition in the Web 2.0 environment may serve to provide better access for diverse audiences, incorporating different kinds of expertise to highlight different facets and meanings of objects in the archive. By examining in particular a collection of Appalachian folk song recordings, I will show that music archives are a particularly interesting and appropriate arena in which to challenge traditional notions of the archive and archival practice and to explore new ways of serving diverse users in the Web 2.0 environment, in this case fostering a community of appreciation, knowledge, and expertise around a collection of objects with historical, cultural, and artistic value.

Web 2.0 and the Memory Institution

Records are always in the process of being made ... “their” stories are never ending... and the stories of those who are conventionally called records creators, records managers, archivists, users and so on are (shifting, intermingling) parts of bigger stories understandable only in the ever-changing broader contexts of society. (Duff & Harris, 2002, p. 265)

While archives, museums, and libraries are often grouped together as information organizations or memory institutions, they have traditionally fulfilled different societal functions, evidenced by differing practices of organization and documentation. Libraries, traditionally, are primarily concerned with providing access to individual objects, while museums strive to educate by transmitting historical narratives about periods in art and history. The goal of an archive is to reveal collections of objects or documents as evidence of human activity, such as the functioning of an organization or the course of an individual’s life, carefully arranged and described by the archivist for use by researchers.

Technology has brought the goals and challenges of these distinct memory institutions closer together. In the Web 2.0 environment, the focus has shifted toward providing universal access to documents and objects of all kinds, in all kinds of institutions. Rare and fragile archival material in digital form can circulate as widely as a library e-book, leaving behind the constraints of its carefully curated context as well as its vulnerability to damage. At the same time, however, Given and McTavish (2010) write, “Not everyone favors this shift to the digital landscape ... [some argue] that the materiality of collections is being lost as information is homogenized and simplified for public consumption” (p. 9). Digital objects can easily be extracted from curated context and become filtered by a user’s search constraints. For the archivist, providing contextual information that is permanently attached to objects or their digital surrogates, to be consumed along with the object, is a new challenge; so too is the goal of guiding the public toward original archival objects, when much of the information to be gleaned from them can just as (or more) easily be consumed in a pre-digested form somewhere on the Internet. Decontextualization and oversimplification of archive and museum collections is a threat as user filtering separates digital materials from their institutionally assigned meanings and contexts and

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