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Personal Digital Archiving Conference, New York University, April 24-26, 2015
Melissa Gasparotto

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Personal Digital Archiving Conference, New York University, April 24-26, 2015

Melissa Gasparotto

Several key themes emerged during the sixth annual Personal Digital Archiving Conference, held at New York University from April 24-26, 2015 (Personal Digital Archiving, 2015). The “accidental digital archivist” made a regular appearance, as information professionals discussed the challenges of assuming new roles for which they may not have been initially prepared, as well as “accidental archives”, digital and analog collections that acquired meaning in the aggregate over time, usually outside institutional settings. Populist versus institutional recordkeeping and the role of community in self-documentation was debated at length, along with the legal, professional and ethical responsibilities surrounding digital collecting and preservation. The topics under discussion have truly, as noted by the Library of Congress’s Michael Ashenfelder, “outgrown the scope of the conference” itself, a comment underscored by record attendance of approximately 175 information professionals, archivists and academics, activists and artists.

Writer/Producer Don Perry’s keynote highlighted the power of photographs to connect communities across time and the importance of sustained outreach to ensure preservation of the digital family albums we create every day with ubiquitous tools, such as our phones. Perry’s work on the documentary *Through a Lens Darkly, Black Photographers and the Emergence of Black People*, and the project Digital Diaspora Family Reunion: 1World1Family Roadshow, bring digital archiving practices to broad

audiences in a way that builds community now and into the future (Digital Diaspora Family Reunion LLC, 2015).

Many presentations documented other successful outreach and engagement practices, but among the most notable was Wendy Hagenmaier’s talk “The Case of the Puzzling Personal Digital Archive: PDA as an Opportunity for Collaborative Advocacy and Murder Mystery Intrigue”. Hagenmaier outlined the development and outcomes of a scenario-based personal digital archive forensic activity, co-created by Georgia Tech and the Society of Georgia Archivists. The workshop invited participants to reconstruct historical details from a personal digital archive left on a USB drive. It represents the kind of intensely engaged work that digital archivists are involved in when bringing the complex issues associated with born-digital personal materials to a larger audience in an accessible way.

Artwork preservation was another key area of interest this year, and panelists recognized that collaboration between archivists and artists themselves was essential for success. Rhizome’s Dragaan Espenschied discussed the challenges of capturing and recreating an authentic experience in digitally archived artworks and games, touching on issues from preserving the current look of emojis to user comments on interactive online installations (Rhizome, 2015). Other presenters re-contextualized less traditional thematic Web sites as archives in their own right. In their panel, “Does BitTorrent + Private Trackers = The New Film Archive?”

Justin Mckinney, Mark Simon Haydn and Ashley Blewer argued that not only do sites such as BitTorrent constitute thematic media collections around which community grows but also that the technology underlying those collections, decentralized hosting and peer-to-peer sharing via BitTorrent protocols, may be an option for ensuring the stability of other digital archives in the future. As noted by one conference attendee during the Q&A, torrents may only be a viable solution for very popular media, as the technology works best when multiple sources for the same file are available; nonetheless, these kinds of presentations highlight the creative thinking explored by archival technologists in search of greater stability for the current and future digital human record.

Although a number of librarian presenters on the panel “The Professional is Personal: Reflections on Personal Digital Archiving Day on the College Campus” mentioned that they tried to promote personal digital archiving without using fear of loss as a motivator, the scope and depth of digital materials already lost to history and the amount of the human record that we are currently failing to collect and preserve at all should give us pause. Wendy Hagenmaier’s second presentation, on archiving data from wearable technology, was an especially pointed reminder that libraries and archives may not always have in place a mechanism to facilitate the capture and preservation of contemporary digital media sources, such as quantified self data. Librarians and archivists will want to keep their eyes peeled for future

work from this talented and thoughtful early career digital archivist; her contributions deepened the conversation while giving practitioners key tools and concepts for work going forward.

Additional stand-out presentations that should not go unmentioned include Eira Tansey's "Large-scale archiving and the right to be forgotten", whose annotated bibliography on archival ethics regarding online privacy may be found in the notes below (Tansey, 2015), and the extraordinarily moving and thought-provoking "They Were Still Here: Archives and Online Grief Communities" by Jennifer Douglas, who reminded attendees that archivists must think about creating safe spaces within the archive. Some of the more useful case study presentations included Lauren Algee's "Community Archiving – The DC Punk Archive at DC Public Library", which documented the ongoing collaboration between community members and librarians in describing, contextualizing and making available the materials, Meredith Powers' "Crowdsourcing Culture: Instagram as Curation, Participation, and Documentation", which helpfully described a number of tools available to collect digital content and Todd Wemmer's "Photos die, unless we talk about them: methods and projects for recording audio related to family photographs", which was an impassioned case for audio as a way of adding depth and meaning to archives.

There is no space to cover these and other talks in more depth here, but fortunately, for all those who could not attend, most of the presentations were recorded and will be made available online at the conference Web site (and preserved by the Internet Archive, naturally). As might be expected, the event was well documented through Twitter, and a number of presenters tweeted links to their presentation slides for those who could not wait for the video. Even before the conference was over Martin Klein from UCLA Library, who presented on unique ways

of collecting and displaying traditional and social media-based news reporting in the SoLoGlo collection, had created a digital archive of tweets for two associated conference hashtags, #pda15 and #pda2015 (Klein, 2015). The tool used to create the collection harvests the embedded media and URLs from each tweet, making it a far more robust way of preserving social media into the future.

The variety of practices currently explored in the field and the resulting questions are a key takeaway from PDA 2015. Should digital archivists be involved with communities as they create digital objects, or does that interfere with the resulting materials in a way that violates archival codes of ethics? What is the responsibility of digital archivists harvesting aggregate publicly available materials? How do we accommodate privacy in a digital archive, and how much of the forensic work should be conducted by the archivists and how much left to the researcher? And most importantly, how do we communicate the value of saving personal digital materials to the widest possible audience?

Day 2's keynote, a back and forth between the Prelinger Archives' Rick Prelinger and NYU's Howard Besser, provided engaging context for these questions. Both presenters acknowledged ambivalence toward accidental or populist archives while simultaneously appreciating that the value of personal archives may rival that of more traditionally collected archives. Besser stressed that aggregating creates new meaning: the difference between collecting a single tweet versus thousands. Prelinger noted that we do not yet know how to appropriately address privacy issues in today's digital archives, arguing that individuals are not expressing enough concern over the disposition of their raw information, despite the threats posed to their privacy by large-scale data mining projects already underway. Because of the ease with which profiling may happen when our various

data streams are aggregated, how might we think about siloing such data in the archives and should we prevent interoperability in the name of privacy? Prelinger ultimately wondered what affects personal digital archiving will have on traditional archival workflows, asking, "Does PDA queer the archives?"

Lori Kendal's thoughtful closing talk, "Memory is a process, not an artifact", contextualized these and other complex issues discussed over the two days of talks, tying up the conference with the reminder that remembering can be a form of forgetting.

The quality, breadth and depth of the presentations and audience participation notwithstanding, one of the more memorable parts of this conference for me happened outside the panels entirely. Returning to the NYU Cantor Center after a break, two attendees could be overheard chatting with the building's security guard about safeguarding his own digital archive. How did he use digital media in his life? And had he thought about how to keep his important materials safe into the future? Archivists and librarians are indeed a community of practice. Although quite a number of presenters mentioned that they fail to practice what they preach and have not organized their own digital lives in the ways they teach to others, it would be hard to attend this conference and fail to do so in the future.

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FURTHER READING

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Melissa Gasparotto (melissa.gasparotto@gmail.com) is Area Studies Librarian at Library, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey, USA.