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Fostering Collaboration Between Research Libraries and Community Archives to Preserve the 'Network of Mutuality'

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Abstract – Despite the potential for mutually beneficial partnerships, collaboration between research libraries and community archives in digital preservation remained limited. This paper explores four key barriers to collaboration: paternalistic attitudes toward community archives, the role of memberships, collection development policies, and incompatible digital preservation workflows. Examining real-world examples, we demonstrate how these barriers hinder joint efforts to secure long-term accessibility of digital materials. The paper concludes by proposing actionable strategies to dismantle these barriers and pave the way for a more inclusive and robust digital preservation ecosystem; an ecosystem that fosters collaboration between institutions of all sizes and empowers communities to safeguard their digital heritage.

Keywords – [community archives](#), [research libraries](#), [collaboration](#), [barriers](#)

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Introduction

The importance of community archives and their collections is evident. Keynote speeches at iPRES 2022 by Tamar Evangelestia-Dougherty [1] and at iPRES 2023 by Sherry Williams [2] and Ricardo Punzalan [3] have made clear that community archives serve an important role in securing an accurate historical record that reflects the lived experiences of its community and that they are severely underresourced to achieve this goal. The Shift Collective, in a project report funded by the National Historical Publications & Records Commissions on community archives, documents the struggle these organizations face when tackling digital preservation [4]. Research libraries are well-positioned to partner with community archives, helping them to 'start 2 preserve,' but too often encounter barriers, sometimes self-imposed. This article explores four common barriers to collaboration on digital preservation between research libraries and community archives: paternalism, stiff membership requirements, collection development policies, and incompatible workflows.¹ The authors present strategies to overcome these barriers, including prioritizing constructing empathetic and reciprocal relationships, restructuring memberships, training as outreach, collaborative collection development, and involving community archives and members in developing digital preservation systems. Research libraries must move beyond discussing the importance of community archives and start changing their practices and approaches if they are seriously committed to preserving these important collections.

Why Research Libraries Should Collaborate With Community Archives on Digital Preservation

Collaboration between research libraries and community archives is essential for fostering local engagement and trust, preserving diverse narratives, and enriching scholarly discourse. The opportunity cost of neglecting such collaborations is perpetuating historical biases, the marginalization of voices, and limited access to diverse perspectives excluded from the preserved record. With active engagement with community archives, research libraries can avoid overlooking invaluable primary sources and narratives that contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of local histories and cultural identities. Moreover, failure to collaborate undermines efforts to bridge the gap between academic scholarship and community-based knowledge production. Establishing robust partnerships between research libraries and community archives opens up possibilities such as cooperative collection building, shared preservation storage, collective strategizing, and collaborative digital preservation strategies which will enrich the available resources. Furthermore, fostering collaboration can create opportunities to build trust within local communities, nurture meaningful engagement, and create inclusive knowledge ecosystems that result in a more accurate and comprehensive preserved record. The following sections will delve into the barriers preventing such collaborations and propose strategies to overcome them, aiming to facilitate genuine engagement, mutual enrichment, and the preservation of diverse voices and experiences.

Key Barriers to Collaboration

Collection Development Policies

Recent scholarship in archival theory has undergone a transformative shift, prompting a departure from traditional practices and emphasizing the need for reflection and critique. Historically, archival frameworks have operated under the assumption of objectivity and neutrality. However, scholars increasingly acknowledge the inherent biases embedded in collecting, preserving, and interpreting records [5]. The consequences of past archival practices have highlighted the need for reparative work. This work aims to address the historical exclusion of underrepresented communities and rectify the inadequate or biased representation often found in existing collections [6]. By acknowledging the power imbalances inherent in the preservation process, we recognize that digital preservation is not a value-neutral endeavor. Instead, it is deeply intertwined with questions of representation, equity, and social justice.

This critical reflection coincides with a rise in community archives, often originating as a direct response to the exclusion of underrepresented communities from historical narrative [7], [8]. These community archives are far from neutral repositories. Frequently, they are deeply intertwined with political activism and social justice movements and offer powerful counter narratives to traditional historical accounts in the preserved record. As Mattock and Betinne emphasize, understanding the inherently political nature of these archives requires collaborators and partners to engage with the specific historical context surrounding their establishment [9]. A

prime example is The Digital Archives and Marginalized Communities Project (DAMC), which adopts a participatory archiving approach ensuring that collection development and record appraisal are driven by priorities established in conjunction with community partners [10].

However, it is important to contextualize these initiatives within broader social dynamics. The notion of “representational belonging” emerges, wherein community members actively reclaim their narratives and challenge the hegemony of traditional memory institutions and mainstream media [11]. Caswell et al. illustrate how community archives like the South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA) foster feelings of inclusion, counter symbolic annihilation, and promote a platform for community members to encounter multifaceted representations of themselves in the preserved record [11]. It becomes an act of inclusivity, ensuring that the diverse experiences and perspectives of individuals from varied backgrounds, identities, ethnicities, and socioeconomic realities are not only gained but actively cultivated.

Community archives contain a rich wealth of materials crucial for comprehensively capturing digital cultural heritage [12]. The absence of their records within institutions does not absolve us of the responsibility associated with the historical exclusion of their experiences and perspectives. Our collection policies contributed to a broader system that still permeates archival institutions today. This acknowledgment necessitates active engagement with these communities, understanding their perspectives, and working collaboratively to ensure a more inclusive future and diverse historical digital record.

Paternalistic Attitudes

Research libraries, often at major universities, are built on centuries of practice. While these practices have changed over time, their long history, codification, wide implementation, and the development of graduate programs to promulgate them, convey the expertise needed to be a librarian, archivist, or information professional. However, this expertise can also engender paternalistic attitudes that bias individuals toward existing organizational approaches and practices. Divergent approaches can be viewed with skepticism or dismissed. Stanlick, DeMartino, and Welch discuss the concept of “epistemic asymmetry,” a tension that develops “between legitimate interests and unwarranted privilege” when experts value their knowledge over others and “take on an ethical burden to do what they believe to be best for those they serve” [13].

Caswell and Cifor describe how these attitudes manifest in libraries as a “legalistic, right-based framework, to delineate the role of records, archives, and archivists in both the violation of human rights and in holding individuals and governments accountable.” By focusing on legal accountability, the rights of others involved in the co-creation of the records, such as the subjects themselves, are often ignored or overlooked, resulting in missed opportunities to transform archives into “affective, user-oriented, community-centered services space[s]” and removes agency from individuals in how they are represented in the preserved digital record [14].

Vally and Motala discuss how “most academics are unaware, and even dismissive of, the considerable amount of ‘non-formal’ and unaccredited educational research and practice taking place in such communities” [15]. In

another article, Vally later states that academics can assume that “service”, often a job requirement, refers to the transfer of knowledge from the university to the community “instead of seeing community engagement as mutually beneficial to universities and communities alike” [16].

Paternalistic attitudes can also lead to performative activity. Dorothy Berry, in her essay, “The House that Archives Built”, describes how paternalistic approaches to digitizing Black collections in the wake of racial tensions in the Summer of 2020, ostensibly to increase Black representation in digital collections, resulting in digital objects without full descriptions or metadata to guide discovery. Descriptive metadata is essential to digital preservation so future users can interpret and understand the content. These originating analog collections may also represent broken promises and eroded trust when Black families donate materials that are never fully processed. Berry also criticizes long-standing archival practices for impeding community use of archives, echoing Caswell and Cifor, describing how rote adherence to existing practices like original order and collective description can have unintended consequences for discovering content related to underrepresented communities [7].

Membership Requirements

Some community archives may face challenges meeting requirements to participate in collaborative projects and consortia, often designed with research libraries in mind. These challenges can be financial, technical, or content-related. According to the 2019 Storage Infrastructure Survey, conducted by the National Digital Stewardship Alliance (NDSA), 22% of respondents indicated that the cost of participation was the deciding factor in not participating in a distributed storage cooperative [8]. The NDSA, comprised of member organizations of various sizes, includes many research libraries; if ostensibly well-resourced research libraries cannot afford membership fees, it’s an impossible ask for community archives. In the 2014 white paper from Digital POWRR on digital preservation solutions for small organizations, the authors indicate that many commercial tools and services were priced out of reach.

Similarly, using open-source tools or community-based solutions generally requires specialized training and an ongoing investment of time by staff, which these organizations struggle to provide [17]. The American Association for State and Local History conducted a census in 2022 and found that 80% of their 14,000+ members were “very small” or “very very small organizations,” with 63% reporting income less than \$50,000 [18]. Even a \$5,000 annual membership fee (ignoring storage fees) can be an insurmountable barrier for many organizations.

Some digital preservation organizations have sought to establish equity-based membership models, like the MetaArchive Cooperative [19], this is a difficult task because there are several ways to analyze equity, some easier to measure than others. It can also be difficult for larger organizations to pay more simply because they are larger. They typically have larger operating expenses and may not be willing to pay to underwrite preserving content from smaller organizations.

In addition to financial obligations, technical requirements are also barriers to digitally preserving community archives, often run by volunteers and retired persons. Sometimes, the underlying technology a digital preservation community uses is the barrier. The LOCKSS system from Stanford is commonly pitched as an easy-to-use and affordable approach to preservation storage. However, LOCKSS was initially designed to harvest electronic journal content from publishers; early design decisions around this use case have made it challenging for broader cultural heritage organizations to adopt. Combining this with trends towards cloud infrastructure and away from on-premises data centers, hosting and managing servers is often outside of the skillset of a community archive, even if it's affordable.

Some digital repositories will also have substantial content requirements that can be unfeasible for community archives. Even for research-oriented organizations like the Data Curation Network, fast-evolving data-sharing requirements are challenging [20]. Memory organizations in the European Union have done great work to organize and develop shared standards through the E-ARK program. Together they have established a specification for Submission Information Packages that anyone can use to participate in the shared programs. However, the specification requires that files be organized into a precise structure and accompanied by XML metadata conforming to specific requirements. Creating content packages that conform to this standard, from scratch, is challenging for even a seasoned technologist [21] and almost impossible for community archives.

Incompatible Digital Preservation Workflows

Digital preservation presents significant challenges, not just for community archives, but for institutions of all types. Common barriers include restricted resources, insufficient internal buy-in, and cumbersome workflows and procedures [22], [23]. These obstacles transcend specific institutional categories, raising the question of prioritization: which challenges demand the most urgent attention? Which is more critical: securing additional funding, building internal advocacy, or streamlining existing workflows? Importantly, these considerations apply universally to all digital preservation programs, regardless of the institution's type or size.

Community archives, operating with even more limited resources than larger institutions, encounter the same critical hurdles. They may even collaborate with research libraries to leverage expertise and resources, as evidenced by Santamaria-Wheeler et al. which found that: in over three-quarters (78%) of cases, the financial responsibility for collaborative digital preservation initiatives rests solely on the library [24]. This unequal distribution of resources highlights the need for a more sustainable and equitable approach to digital preservation that benefits the entire community.

Compounding these challenges is digital exclusion, as explored by Holcombe-James [23]. This issue encompasses limitations in access, affordability, and proficiency with digital technologies, which can significantly hinder the discoverability of collections and jeopardize the long-term viability of their digital preservation efforts. As Hurley notes, financial constraints often prevent community archives from adopting complex technical systems requiring ongoing support [25]. This necessitates a flexible approach that caters to

the specific needs and resources of these institutions, ensuring their inclusion in the digital preservation landscape.

While successful community archives exist, the current narrative often prioritizes those with pre-existing resources, potentially perpetuating an "echo chamber" effect. As the Matthew Effect posits, initial success can lead to further advantages, creating a cycle where some archives gain visibility and resources while others struggle to be heard, resulting in critical gaps in the preserved record. This raises the question: how can we cultivate a more equitable landscape where the successes of archives like the South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA) do not overshadow the potential and contributions of less visible repositories?

Strategies for Bridging the Divide

Diversifying Collection Development Policies

As Mattock and Benti suggest, community archives should be seen as the primary stewards of their history, not merely partners in a broader archival system [9]. While collaboration with established institutions can be beneficial, it should occur on equal footing, with community archives retaining autonomy and their leaders recognized as professional colleagues. This new understanding emphasizes community-driven collecting practices and prioritizes acquiring and preserving materials identified and valued directly by the community. This could involve collaborative selection processes and revised appraisal criteria incorporating community-specific values and perspectives. For example, research libraries could intentionally choose not to collect materials curated by a community archive.

Additionally, increased visibility for local collections can be achieved through joint exhibitions and research projects. These partnerships foster knowledge exchange and create opportunities to represent diverse community narratives through public engagement. A good example of this approach was the exhibit "Community Archives: Preserving Black Baltimore" in April 2022, at John Hopkins University Sheridan Libraries. The exhibit showcased unique materials from community archives and highlighted the crucial role community partners play in preserving and sharing local history [26]. Collaborations like this help to build relationships and trust, serving as a foundation for other work such as collaborative digital preservation.

Building on prioritizing community control and collaboration, a crucial step is to hold space for your community. This means actively listening to them through methods like engaging in listening sessions with new partners. These sessions should explore not only why certain activities aren't currently undertaken but also their thoughts on digital preservation and their aspirations for telling their stories beyond their organization. As a relevant example, "Virtual Belonging: Evaluating the Emotional Impact of Digital Record Generation in Community Archives" is a collaborative project spearheaded by the Texas After Violence Project (TAVP) and the South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA), in partnership with the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) [27]. Over three years, researchers delved into the role of record creators within community

archives. Their findings revealed that records possess a validating essence for their creators. Additionally, they observed a symbiotic relationship between identity formation and record creation, particularly when individuals are empowered with autonomy and agency to represent themselves authentically [28].

In addressing ownership and copyright concerns within community archiving, Cocciolo proposes rethinking donor forms through perpetual licenses or Creative Commons licenses to help address ownership and copyright concerns [29]. This shift from transferring copyright towards suggesting these alternative licensing mechanisms can help alleviate donor apprehensions and improve understanding. By reframing the approach to copyright, organizations can foster greater trust and collaboration while still ensuring the preservation and accessibility of materials.

Dismantling Paternalism

Dismantling paternalism requires honestly identifying its sources and contributors by interrogating white supremacy, privilege, and bureaucracy. Stanlick, DeMartino, and Welch recommend four strategies research libraries can employ for this analysis along with critical questions and insights for each.

1. *Name and challenge colonial, technocratic, or White supremacist conventions and privilege in our work and fields.*
2. *Address democratic versus technocratic engagement explicitly and adopt more democratic frames of engagement.*
3. *Adopt a mindset of appreciative inquiry, radical mutuality, and humility in our work to bring about epistemic justice.*
4. *Reimagining and reclaim[ing] structures we often accept without questions, such as assessment, scholarship, and data [13].*

These strategies align with others in the literature. When introducing their report “Knowledge, engagement and higher education contributing to social change”, the editors emphasized that everyone creates knowledge: it does not only occur at higher education institutions. They stress the importance of building relationships over time rather than focusing on specific projects. Previous project-based efforts may have had strong outcomes, but the people involved often change; this churn can engender mistrust within the collaborating community [30]. Research libraries should take the time to build positive relationships with underrepresented communities, to understand them better, and only then in collaboration, establish mutually beneficial projects and goals. Funding mechanisms for research libraries should evolve to prioritize relationship deliverables over content deliverables.

Caswell and Cifor propose a shift from a rights-based approach to one of radical empathy, based on a feminist ethic framework. They describe how four key archival relationships would change based on this shift.

1. *Archivist and the record creator: an empathetic relationship that spans time and honors the creator's intent.*

2. *Archivist and the subject of the records: empathy towards those to whom the records pertain instead of objectivity.*
3. *Archivist and the user: an empathetic understanding of the possible emotional responses to records and archives.*
4. *Archivist and the community: an empathetic understanding of how the use of records or archives can have lasting consequences on the community* [14].

Like Berry, Trish Luker challenges long-standing archival practices, this time provenance. The National Archives of Australia stewards records of various government agencies and their interaction with Indigenous peoples, including forced assimilation through education. The subjects of these records, the people themselves, have little rights to this material and often have to wade through bureaucratic practices that take time and result in receipt of redacted records. Luker, like Caswell and Cifor, stresses that empathy is required and that subjects of records should be able to exercise “self-determination in cultural and intellectual property management” [31].

In their critique of higher education and the co-creation of knowledge, Motala and Vally make several recommendations for mutual consideration between universities and communities [15]. These recommendations focus on relationship-building, reciprocity, and empathy. “In effect, this approach is not about ‘us’ bringing benefits to ‘them’, but about constructive, open, frank, and socially conscious engagements.” This echoes Kinnaman’s insights shared at the NDSA DigiPres 2023 session emphasized the concept of “translation” to bridge understanding gaps between preservationists and community stakeholders. For instance, technical jargon in preservation plans and Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) underwent “translations” during review with respective holding institutions to ensure a mutual and shared understanding of the services offered by Virginia Tech and the implications for the institution's materials [32]. This transparent effort aimed to foster meaningful engagement with communities.

While these ideas and recommendations don’t directly lead to digital preservation, they remove barriers and foster the productive relationships needed for community archives and research libraries to collaborate on digital preservation or other topics.

Rethinking Membership Requirements

Relaxing or re-structuring membership requirements can reduce barriers for community archives seeking long-term digital preservation of their collections. Instead of a one-size-fits-all approach to membership, fees may be assessed based on organization characteristics such as number of employees or annual budget while still offering the same benefits. Other options include tiered membership, wherein there are two or more membership levels with different benefits, or even a freemium model where community archives get limited free services before fees may be invoked. Sheri Jacobs offers several principles organizations may consider when establishing membership categories and dues structures in *Membership Essentials Recruitment*,

Retention, Roles, Responsibilities, and Resources, Second Edition: affordability, equity, simplicity, [values] alignment, and scalability [33].

Barriers relating to technical and content requirements for digital preservation will likely require combined solutions involving training and education programs as they are both rooted in labor. The Digital Repository of Ireland (DRI) discovered this after launching its community archives program in 2018. Recognizing that community archives may be priced out of their standard membership, a new Associate Membership level was developed with a 90% reduction in membership fee. However, despite the reduced financial burden, DRI was still unable to meet everyone's needs because of unmet technical or content requirements. In late 2021, DRI created a training program for community archives to help organizations meet these requirements. Efforts like these can skill up community archives with enough staff or volunteers willing to take the training. [34] Research libraries could partner with other organizations that specialize in training, such as Preserving digital Objects With Restricted Resources (Digital POWRR) [35] or the Digital Preservation Coalition [36] to offer regional workshops to many community archives at once.

DRI continues to evolve its outreach and offerings to community archives. Most recently, some community groups have been matched with full members who can guide the group and assist them in digitizing content, preparing metadata, clearing copyright, and meeting other technical or content requirements. This is crucial to solving the labor challenge with small community groups. [34] Research libraries are also uniquely situated to affect the labor shortage. Librarians and archivists at research libraries often need to perform service for promotion and tenure. If there was a coordinated effort to match practitioners with community archives and this labor was recognized as professional service, it could create a self-sustaining mechanism, contributing to more community archives being digitally preserved.

Developing Interoperable Digital Preservation Workflows

Heather and Corrado propose a shift in digital preservation, advocating for less emphasis on purely technical aspects and a greater focus on the necessary human elements: the usefulness and usability of content within systems [37]. This shift aligns with the need for more equitable partnerships, as it emphasizes collaboration and knowledge sharing between diverse stakeholders. Moving away from reliance on pre-existing technical expertise, which can often limit opportunities for community archivists, can foster mutually beneficial exchanges that can empower all involved parties.

While establishing comprehensive digital preservation workflows can be complex and resource-intensive, there has been advocacy for “good enough” digital preservation as a starting point [17]. This doesn't imply a disregard for best practices but acknowledges the limitations of smaller institutions and community archives. As Hurley suggests, cloud computing platforms like Box or Google Drive offer cost-effective and user-friendly alternatives for community archives to begin acquiring and preserving digital records [25]. These platforms address financial constraints and create valuable entry points for institutions to engage in digital preservation

despite limited resources. For example, Vassar College utilizes Dropbox, a widely recognized cloud storage platform, as one of its storage locations [38]. This approach allows institutions to start small and scale gradually as their digital preservation program develops. This strategy emphasizes that every step, no matter how small, contributes to the crucial goal of safeguarding digital objects.

Additionally, fostering collaborations between local institutions with established digital infrastructure and community archives can be highly beneficial. The Connecticut Digital Archive (CTDA) is a successful example of such a partnership. This program, hosted by the University of Connecticut Libraries in collaboration with the Connecticut State Library, provides long-term preservation services to non-profit Connecticut-based institutions, including community archives [39]. As mentioned above, the Digital Repository of Ireland offers a Community Archive Scheme that fosters collaborative training environments while balancing the need for community ownership of their data with long-term preservation [34].

Further Research

This paper collates several strategies in diverse disciplinary literature to foster collaboration around digital preservation between community archives and research libraries. Some of these strategies have been implemented while others are general recommendations or untested ideas. Additional work is needed to put these ideas into practice before detailed guidelines of step-by-step instructions for implementation can be created. The current landscape reveals few case studies highlighting successful collaborations between academic libraries and community archives in practice and scholarly documentation. This glaring gap underscores the critical need for additional exploration and documentation of such partnerships. Researchers and practitioners can extract insights and replicate effective strategies for meaningful partnerships by examining and documenting successful models. Drawing upon existing successful collaborations enriches the ongoing discourse and provides tangible examples to inform future initiatives.

Conclusion

While the collaboration between research libraries and community archives offers immense potential for enriching historical narratives and safeguarding diverse cultural heritage, significant challenges impede this partnership. Overcoming these challenges requires a multifaceted approach. Research libraries must dismantle paternalistic practices, embrace relationship-building, and acknowledge the expertise of community archivists. Additionally, flexible membership structures, inclusive collection development policies, and collaborative digital preservation efforts are essential for fostering equitable partnerships. By working together, research libraries and community archives can create a more inclusive and comprehensive historical record that reflects the richness and complexity of our society.

Footnotes

1. Another common barrier not discussed in this paper is organizational structures that inhibit collaboration between archivists and preservationists. Digital preservation can be in many places on an organizational chart and sometimes libraries erect false barriers that prevent collaboration. [↵](#)

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