

Unofficial Policies of Care: Photographs and Social Media within Canadian Archives

Megan Moore (they/she)

MISt Graduate McGill University 2024

megan.moore@mail.mcgill.ca

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Summary of Findings

- I. The relationships archive workers build with users through social media can lead to the enrichment of contextual information related to photographic records held within their collections
- II. The interviewed archive workers aim to demonstrate the importance of archives and to provoke critical engagement by sharing photographic records on social media
- III. The places of work of the interviewed participants did not have policies on social media aside from copyright permissions and the archive workers expressed that flexible guidelines could help them complete their work
- IV. Despite the lack of official social media policies the interviewed archive workers demonstrated how care can function as an unofficial guiding principle for sharing photographic records on social media

Key Issues

- a. Photographic records present unique ethical challenges because photographs are often used as a tool of oppression (Caswell, 2014; Imada, 2017; Punzalan, 2014; Sutherland, 2018)
- b. There are ethical implications within broad practices of digitization and dissemination of historical photographs (Agostinho, 2019; Hamer, 2018)
- c. Many archives share photographic records on social media as a facet of their outreach initiatives (Duff et al., 2013; Liew, 2022)
- d. There is little research on the social media sharing policies of institutional repositories related to photographic records

Research Questions

1. What are the digitised photograph sharing practices of archive workers?
2. What are the decision-making processes influencing which photographs are being shared?
3. What principles and/or policies guide the archive workers within their sharing practices?

Methods

In the Summer of 2023, I conducted semi-structured interviews with six archive workers with experience at various institutional repositories across Canada. These interviews focused on the photograph sharing habits of archive workers on social media (some platforms considered were Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and Flickr). Questions prompted discussion on the process of sharing archival photographs online and the decision-making processes involved.

Affective Responsibilities

In their research on feminist ethics and radical empathy within archives Caswell & Cifor (2016) examine four affective responsibilities that emerge in the relationships between:

This research reveals how Caswell & Cifor's affective responsibilities also emerge within the outreach initiatives of repositories on social media through how...

1. The archive worker and record creator

Participants demonstrated a deep understanding of the perspectives left out of or privileged within the photographs within their collections and carefully consider the circumstances of a photograph's creation prior to sharing it on social media.

A participant describes how they noticed the absence of credit given to a donor's wife within the records they were processing

2. The archive worker and people represented within the records

Participants offered descriptions of their thought processes as they choose which images to share, putting themselves within the shoes of the people depicted within the photographs prior to sharing on social media.

A participant describes how they would feel if a photograph of themselves taken at a social gathering ended up on social media decades later without their knowledge

3. The archive worker and user or patron of the archive

Participants illustrated how they think extensively about what subjects users might be interested in, what material is suited for their research needs, which local context will resonate with people as well as what not to share because it could be inappropriate or upsetting to viewers.

A participant describes how they direct users to more appropriate repositories when their collections do not adequately meet the user's requests

4. The archive worker and the larger communities represented within the archive

Participants demonstrated their deep consideration of the communities which came through in how they described conversations with community members sparked by shared photographs. Participants also highlighted how sharing on social media could build trust with their communities though collaboration.

Multiple participants described how they are open to community input and demonstrate awareness of how their respective communities engage online



Collective Considerations

1. Some participants identified that sharing on social media can be more challenging when working individually thus workers may benefit from added support from colleagues.
2. Approaching social media responsibilities collectively within an organization could assist in sharing the emotional labour that comes with the work.
3. Flexible policies could exist as running documents and be frequently reassessed ensuring they are up to date as technology changes.

Implications & Invisibilisation

This research illustrates the vast webs of care maintained by archive workers who share on social media. This care consists of constant reflections that encompass everything from understanding local contexts, to ensuring potentially triggering records are not shared online, to thinking about what may cause conflict in the comments or in simply figuring out what users might find interesting. However, the lack of policies or guidelines around this facet of labour can render it invisible. While the foresight demonstrated by the participants seems to mitigate the possibility of sharing potentially harmful material on social media the lack of consistent guidelines could lead to errors resulting in the proliferation of sensitive records and/or incomplete, inaccurate information on social media.

References

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- Sutherland, Tonia. 2017. "Making a Killing: On Race, Ritual, and (Re)Membering in Digital Culture." *Preservation, Digital*

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Key Issues	Research Questions	Methods
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2. The archive worker and people represented within the records
3. The archive worker and user or patron of the archive
4. The archive worker and the larger communities represented within the archive

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