

50 Word Statement

As archival institutions struggle to remain independent and operational amidst a lack of funding and resources, the labor of preserving public memory becomes an excess expenditure, often undertaken by volunteers. I will assess the mission, role, and logistical organization of volunteer-run archives in developing sustainable labor practices and future models.

A Collective Capacity: Labor and Sustainability in Volunteer-Run Archives

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This paper builds off of the research and work of Bergis Jules and the *Architecting Sustainable Futures* project, which explores funding and organizational models for small, community-based archival organizations. I narrow the focus of this capacity-building project on the models and practices of volunteer-run archives. I survey the organizational structure of the Interference Archive, a volunteer-run community archive in Brooklyn, NY that collects activist and social movement ephemera. In recognizing the paucity of resources available for these institutions, this paper presents recommendations and guidelines, upon which various volunteer-run archives can develop sustainable models and practices that cohere to the capacity and needs of each institution.

Introduction

Within the capacity-building project of community archive organizing, there is a need for focus on building sustainable infrastructures for small, volunteer-run archives. Volunteer-run archives present an organizational model where the traditional, professional practices of archiving are largely undertaken by community-members, “amateur experts,” and other un-paid participants. Within this essay, I will contextualize the state of volunteerism in the archival field, particularly in small, volunteer-run archival organizations. As a case study, I will survey the organizational structure of the Interference Archive, a volunteer-run community archive in Brooklyn, NY that collects activist and social movement ephemera. In recognizing the paucity of resources available for these institutions, this paper presents recommendations and guidelines, upon which various volunteer-run archives can develop sustainable models and practices that cohere to the capacity and needs of each institution.

Volunteer-Run Archives

Throughout this paper I make reference to volunteer-run archives, defining them as archival institutions that are organized, operated, and built wholly through volunteered, unpaid labor. Where the oft-used term “community-based archives” might apply to a large set of archival institutions operating with similar priorities and practices, I use “volunteer-run archives,” here, as a means of narrowing in on the particularities of archives using this organizational model. While this also entails the caveat that not all volunteer-run archives operate as, nor would consider themselves to be, community-based archives, there is a significant overlap in guiding ethos and methodologies, as well as in positioning outside of mainstream memory institutions.

It is equally important, in my view, to reject a linear framework of institutional growth, which may suggest that volunteer-run archives merely haven't yet established themselves to a point of maturity. The coupling of sustainability and institutional growth neglects the important ways that an archive's organizational strategies are formed around and by particular communities' ontologies and epistemologies, and thus their incumbent political ideologies.¹ As Yusef Omowale suggests in his piece "We Already Are," where marginalized communities have always had to ground their archival practices in opposition to the dominant norms of the archival profession, the very notion of sustainability necessitates a refusal of "inclusion and recognition," and instead entails "demanding redistribution."² The challenge of sustainability concerns not only the archive's operational capacity, but also their autonomy and ability to realistically plan for the next stage of their life-cycle, whatever form it may take.³ Some volunteer-run archives may formally attain non-profit status, and thus commit to forming bylaws and governance structures, where others may opt to maintain more informal, localized forms of governance. Occasionally labelled as "DIY archives"⁴ or "participatory heritage" projects,⁵ there is concern that volunteer-run archives are situated precariously, with volatile sources of funding and labor. While it is true that community support may be unstable and in flux with the

¹ Shilton, Katie, and Ramesh Srinivasan. "Participatory Appraisal and Arrangement for Multicultural Archival Collections." *Archivaria* 63, no. 0 (2007): 87–101.

Shilton and Srinivasan use the concept of *community ontologies* to reveal how archival, organizational practices of appraisal, arrangement, and description are specific and contingent upon the documentary practices of their originating communities. I extend this specificity to the practices of administrative organization that an archive employs, in its labor structures as much as its archival workflows.

² Omowale, Yusef. "We Already Are." Medium, September 3, 2018. <https://medium.com/community-archives/we-already-are-52438b863e31>.

³ Flinn, Andrew. "Archival Activism: Independent and Community-Led Archives, Radical Public History and the Heritage Professions." *InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies* 7, no. 2 (May 31, 2011).

⁴ Baker, Sarah. *Community Custodians of Popular Music's Past: A DIY Approach to Heritage*. Routledge, 2017.

⁵ Roued-Cunliffe, Henriette, and Andrea Copeland, eds. *Participatory heritage*. Facet Publishing, 2017.

changing dynamics of any population. Hinging long-term sustainability solely on community engagement and patronage can be a risky endeavor, yet it is still a valuable strategy for small institutions to pursue. This method of grassroots funding and staffing effectively ties the institution to the communities whom it is accountable to, rather than involving the tangential priorities of third-party funders. Despite this, there is still a need to build structures of support that can sustain both the institution, its independent status, and its participating communities.⁶

Volunteerism in the Archive

Volunteers are a vital resource used by archival institutions of all sizes, presenting a rotating labor force that is often justified by the proliferation of processing backlogs, as well as staff and budget cuts.⁷ Amidst the economic reality that archives face, archivists must make challenging decisions in determining the level of volunteer participation and their own operational capacity of taking on volunteers. As noted by Kevin B. Leonard, while volunteer labor can aid in reducing processing workloads and backlogs, it merely transfers the costs and labor towards the training and supervision of volunteers.⁸ While the cost-benefit analysis of using volunteers is different for every archival institution, the use of volunteer labor is an issue that concerns the archival profession as a whole. Within the context of neoliberalism, where logic of scarcity is embedded into the functional models and processes of archives, volunteerism can be justly critiqued for normalizing unpaid

⁶ Sheffield, Rebecka Taves. "Archival optimism, or, how to sustain a community archives." *Community Archives, Community Spaces: Heritage, Memory and Identity* (2019): 8.

⁷ Frevert, Rhonda Huber. 1997. "Archives Volunteers: Worth the Effort?" *Archival Issues* 22 (2): 148.

⁸ Leonard, Kevin B. 2012. "Volunteers in Archives: Free Labor, But Not Without Cost." *Journal of Library Administration* 52 (3–4): 313–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2012.684529>.

positions.⁹ Marika Cifor and Jamie A. Lee challenge these models as professional norms, stating that therein the “archival profession opens itself just to those in the privileged financial situation to be able to undertake such labors thereby replicating problematic inequalities in the profession.”¹⁰ The pervasive use of short-term contract and uncompensated labor has led professional organizations like the Society of American Archivists to take measures against its further entrenchment.¹¹

Arising both in response to and in parallel with present critiques of institutional norms and practices, community archives have restructured discourses surrounding the collaborative practice of archiving.¹² In contrast to the extractive model of volunteer labor, community and volunteer-run archives present alternative archival models where “shared expertise, dynamism, and bottom-up approaches” are guiding values of their principle organization.¹³ These spaces reconstitute modes of archival participation, such that volunteers are understood to be active participants in the record-making process, and may even be the initial creators themselves. Though still affected by the contemporary dynamics of the archival profession writ large, archives oriented around volunteer support occupy a unique perspective on how archival labor is accumulated and organized. The participatory methods employed in these repositories create new incentives for involvement, as shown in a study conducted by Flinn and Stevens, where volunteers and

⁹ Wildenhaus, Karly. “Wages for Intern Work: Denormalizing Unpaid Positions in Archives and Libraries.” *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies*. 4. <https://journals.litwinbooks.com/index.php/jclis/article/view/88>.

¹⁰ Cifor, Marika, Lee, Jamie A. “Towards an Archival Critique: Opening Possibilities for Addressing Neoliberalism in the Archival Field.” *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies*. 13. <http://libraryjuicepress.com/journals/index.php/jclis/article/view/10>.

¹¹ “Only Paid Internships to Be Posted to the SAA Career Center.” *Society of American Archivists*. <https://www2.archivists.org/news/2019/only-paid-internships-to-be-posted-to-the-saa-career-center>.

¹² Cook, Terry. 2013. “Evidence, Memory, Identity, and Community: Four Shifting Archival Paradigms.” *Archival Science* 13 (2): 113. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-012-9180-7>.

¹³ Roued-Cunliffe.

participants in grassroots archives were motivated by a number of factors, including political organizing, community coherence, and self-determination.¹⁴ As spaces often centered around the preservation of marginalized communities and their attendant materials and histories, there is a need to re-evaluate traditional standards in an effort to respond to the transformation of archival space, practices, and labor in these institutions.¹⁵ It is vital for these archival organizations and their volunteer laborers to build sustainable models, such that their work can extend into the future.

Interference Archive: A Case in Organized Volunteerism

In the summer of 2019, I visited the Interference Archive (IA) in Brooklyn, a small, volunteer-run archive that collects activist and social movement ephemera in hopes of keeping those materials active within the communities organizing around them. The archive's organization parallels its "preservation through activation" ethos, which differs from a traditional paradigm of preservation through conservation.¹⁶ Notions of sustainability at IA might not resemble those of a typical cultural heritage site – posing itself as a "counter-institution" in more than name – however, their funding and labor models are built according to their mission, scale, and institutional values.¹⁷ Here, volunteering organizers describe their organizational strategy:

¹⁴ Flinn, Andrew, and Mary Stevens. 2009. "It Is Noh Mistri, Wi Mekin Histri.' Telling Our Own Story: Independent and Community Archives in the UK, Challenging and Subverting the Mainstream." In *Community Archives*, edited by Jeannette A. Bastian and Ben Alexander, 1st ed., 3–28. Facet. <https://doi.org/10.29085/9781856049047.003>.

¹⁵ Caswell, Michelle, Joyce Gabiola, Jimmy Zavala, Gracen Brilmyer, and Marika Cifor. 2018. "Imagining Transformative Spaces: The Personal–Political Sites of Community Archives." *Archival Science* 18 (1): 73–93. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-018-9286-7>.

¹⁶ "How New York's Interference Archive Keeps Activist Design History Alive." 2018. *Eye on Design* (blog). February 16, 2018. <https://eyeondesign.aiga.org/new-yorks-interference-archive-preserves-activist-design-history-by-activating-it/>.

¹⁷ Gordon, Bonnie, Jen Hoyer and Maggie Schreiner. 2018. "Sustainability at Interference Archive." Medium. August 6, 2018. <https://medium.com/community-archives/sustainability-at-interference-archive-4c33ebed69d8>.

“We aim to operate along similar lines to the organizational structures of many of the social movements represented in our collection: these are largely nonhierarchical, consensus-based groups from the political left. Initially run by a core collective, IA’s volunteer community has evolved into a network of working groups that each focus on different projects or tasks. These include the Admin, Cataloging, Audio, Born Digital, Education, and Fundraising working groups, as well as ad hoc groups that come together to develop exhibitions. All labor at Interference Archive is volunteer and commitments vary depending on an individual’s desire and availability. Operating on volunteer energy necessitates careful budgeting of labor. At IA we choose to focus our labor in ways that serve experiential access.”¹⁸

Notably, the use of distinct working groups to structure volunteer labor according to archival projects and tasks underpins IA’s distributed organization. Whereas in traditional archives a single archivist may manage several different workflows or must manage the delegation of tasks from top-down, IA operates by diffusing labor across many volunteers, though still within the boundaries defined by their working groups. Critics may prudently pose the issue of accountability and oversight with a volunteer-run system, as Flinn identifies that participatory archives are consistently critiqued for an “attack on professionalism, standards, and scholarship.”¹⁹ Volunteer-run archives are key sites to observe changing professional dynamics, inhabiting a space of “heterogenous participation,” where multiple levels of archival knowledge and expertise co-exist, and must work dynamically to produce a cohesive vision.²⁰ Rather than view this as a liability

¹⁸ Gordon, Bonnie, Lani Hanna, Jen Hoyer, and Vero Ordaz. 2016. “Archives, Education, and Access: Learning at Interference Archive.” *Radical Teacher* 105 (0): 56. <https://doi.org/10.5195/rt.2016.273>.

¹⁹ Flinn, Andrew. 2010. “An Attack on Professionalism and Scholarship? Democratising Archives and the Production of Knowledge.” *Ariadne*, no. 62. <http://www.ariadne.ac.uk/issue/62/flinn/>.

Flinn pulls this quote from a review he received regarding his ongoing research project, in studying the impact of community archival practices on the professional archival field.

²⁰ Konzack, Lars. “Viking re-enactment.” In *Participatory Heritage*. pp. 37-46. Facet Publishing. 2017.

for the field as a whole, it can be a valuable strategy for a singular, independent institution to accept non-traditional perspectives. Where volunteer participation opens up access to a plurality of knowledges, it also allows for the wider proliferation of archival literacy and professional practices, where skills are shared on the basis of “horizontal mentorship.”²¹ IA operates on the understanding that open access and community use are their highest priorities, above the traditional values of provenance and authenticity.²² Central to this description is the emphasis on reflecting the organizational structures of the social movements that the archive hopes to preserve *more than* just their ephemera. Preserving the institution’s core values and ethics is a high priority for IA, as well as many other volunteer-run archives. This commitment to building independent structures can be both an asset and a challenge to long-term sustainability.

According to archival volunteers and organizers, IA is supported primarily by “sustainers,” who donate monthly sums from \$10 to \$50, in addition to one-time contributions from visitors, small grants, and partnering institutions.²³ This crowd-sourced funding model was inspired by the struggles of one of their founding members, Dara Greenwald, who while undergoing cancer treatment was supported by a recurring health fund set up by friends. After her untimely passing, many of those same contributors diverted funds to supporting her life’s work, manifested in IA. As shown in a healthcare system that forces individualized rather than collective care, the marks of austerity are too

²¹ Gordon et al. 2018

²² Gordon et al. 2016.

While this claim may seem rather heretical to a traditional archival perspective, it is evidence of the pluralizing efforts of the community-based archival movement and critical scholarship on dominant Western archival paradigms.

²³ Gordon et al. 2018.

revealed in an archival ecosystem that prioritizes funding individual, short-term projects rather than community projects. Mainstream funding structures, which are often tied to a “product-driven focus and resource intensive evaluation processes,”²⁴ produce the priorities of collecting institutions and therefore enable the archival inequality that leaves small, independent archives adrift.²⁵ The sustainer model employed by IA demonstrates how community commitment is central to their operations, where traditional forms of revenue generation like grant-writing requires more intensive labor than a volunteer-based system can handle.²⁶ Though IA does receive funding from grants and institutional partnerships, a significant portion of their budget is developed from sustainer donations and the leasing of a coworking space.²⁷ Because IA’s voluntary archival practices are beholden to their communities’ active use of materials, leveraging community support, monetary and otherwise, is integral to building a system of accountability. The models presented here offer a specific view into how volunteer labor can be organized and sustained in the service of archival preservation, as defined by the terms of an archive’s participating communities.

Recommendations and Conclusions

Informed by the work being done by Interference Archive and the *Architecting Sustainable Future* project coordinated by Bergis Jules, the following section reviews the

²⁴ Flinn. 2011.

²⁵ Cifor.

²⁶ Jules, Bergis. 2019. “Architecting Sustainable Futures: Exploring Funding Models in Community-Based Archives.” *Shift Design*. 9. <https://architectingsustainablefutures.org/key-finding>.

²⁷ Hoyer, Jen. “2018 at Interference Archive: The Perspective from Our Bank Account.” April 2, 2019. <http://interferencearchive.org/2018-at-interference-archive-the-perspective-from-our-bank-account/>. This blog post details IA’s income and expenses for 2018, listing that \$30,000 arrived from donations, in comparison to \$12,000 from the coworking space, and over \$26,000 in small grants funneled towards programming and operational costs.

recommendations and considerations for volunteer-run archives laid out in **Appendix A**. As learned from IA, the organizational structure of volunteer labor and funding will affect the archival practices performed by participants. In designing these models to ensure sustainability, volunteer-run archives will need to continually re-assess how participants facilitate and interact with the archive. This entails creating documentation and systems in which archival workflows are instantiated, as well as a basis for how administrative decisions are to be made.

As institutions reliant on grassroots support, volunteer-run archives are necessarily founded on internal trust and consensus. Rebecka Taves Sheffield suggests that there is an essential “archival optimism” that undergirds the building and maintenance of a community-based archive; where the effort of preservation concerns the active community’s preservation, first and foremost, sustainability may mean that archives should “focus less on the product of archival work and more on collective practices.”²⁸ A collective approach may also include external collaboration. For instance, building mutual aid networks has been explored by the *Community Archives Collaborative*, which is a partnership between community archives, including the Interference Archive, Densho, SAADA, and Texas After Violence Project.²⁹ Building horizontal networks between

²⁸ Sheffield.

Sheffield builds her notion of *archival optimism* off of Lauren Berlant’s *cruel optimism*, where the justifiable effort of establishing community representation itself reifies the limited structures of community. Her argument affirms that communal archival practices should be situated in the present, in developing methods to sustain the community *itself* through material support as a means of developing sustainable stewardship.

²⁹ Caswell, Michelle, and Bergis Jules. “Community Archives Collaborative.” South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA), October 30, 2019. <https://www.saada.org/project/community-archives-collaborative>. These partnering institutions met for three days in 2019 to develop strategies for peer-to-peer mentoring, pooling resources, and skill-sharing across institutions.

independent archives, is a valuable strategy for developing resilience amongst small institutions vying for limited resources.

Volunteer-run archives may want to partner with larger academic institutions under certain conditions, where their values and operating organization are not undermined.³⁰ Partnerships with larger academic archives and professional organizations not only legitimate the mission and practices of the archive in the eyes of external funders, but also offer a valuable transmission of skills and practices that may be applied and appropriated. Although volunteer-run archives are tasked with the labor of justifying their work in opposition to the wider deprofessionalization of the field, it is still important that volunteers employ ethical practices and work with knowledge of professional standards. As Andrew Flinn reflects the evolving dynamic between the professional and the volunteer, he states:

“it may be that in an era of cuts and reduced resources there will be an ever-increasing role for volunteers in preserving and disseminating archives and heritage at a local grassroots level, but these volunteers and the collections they care for will benefit from frameworks of support and guidance from skilled heritage professionals.”³¹

There are many reasons these partnerships can be mutually beneficial for both academic institutions and volunteer-run archives, but all involved parties should establish equitable terms on which to base communications and decisions.³² Addressing the disparity of power and resource, it is reliant on academic partners to build trust between the archive and its communities of participants.

³⁰ Jules. 2019.

³¹ Flinn. 2011.

³² Jules. 2019.

In working towards building a sustainable future for both the institution and its communities of volunteers and users, volunteer-run archives must continually re-negotiate the value(s) of their archival practices. While sustaining the use of volunteer labor should not come at the expense of archival practices, similarly, maintenance of the archive should not come at the expense of its volunteers and participants. The project of capacity-building within volunteer-run archives might require that the organization has the ability to change and adapt to new conditions. Amidst the ongoing COVID-19 crisis, archives and their communities are being forced to make decisions that will affect their long-term sustainability, especially when exposed to the aftermath of economic downturn and bolstered austerity measures.³³ Ensuring the sustainability of the archival profession as a whole means preserving the full-breadth of contemporary archival practices, including those of volunteer-run archives. Beyond any single institution or community, this requires a larger shift in the redistribution of resources. Pending this systemic overhaul, volunteer-run archives, in conjunction with other independent, cultural heritage sites, should focus on building sustainable fundraising strategies, engaging opportunities of collective support, and developing archival practices that not only invite community support, but that reflexively support the community. As volunteer-run archives operate with the guided mission of protecting and preserving their materials and histories, there is also a need to protect their communities—such that capacity-building efforts should be aimed not only at institutional growth but sustaining archival workers, including volunteers.

³³ Jules, Bergis. "Supporting Community-Based Archives Through the Covid-19 Crisis." Medium, April 4, 2020. <https://medium.com/community-archives/supporting-community-based-archives-through-the-covid-19-crisis-394fb672b37a>.

Appendix A: List of Recommendations for Volunteer-Run Archives

Organization and Labor:

- ❖ Develop organizational structures and policies to guide volunteer participation, with open and transparent documentation
- ❖ Define the terms on which administrative decisions are made, ensuring that the mode of consensus does not breach internal organizational trust
- ❖ Design archival workflows that engage horizontal mentorship, integrating and leveraging volunteer expertise with co-existing professional practices

Fundraising and Partnerships:

- ❖ Cohere local fundraising support around the issue of sustainability, with the option for regular, scheduled donations where possible
- ❖ Build mutual aid networks and coordinate resource and skill-sharing opportunities between independent archives
- ❖ Assess opportunities for grants, in-kind donations, or partnerships with academic and larger cultural heritage institutions, such that contractual obligations and partnerships are founded on mutual trust and do not compromise institutional values, nor over-extend the archive's labor capacity

Project-Building and Community:

- ❖ Evaluate community impact using multiple and varied methods of assessment
- ❖ Advocate for a growing understanding of archival knowledges and preservation practices, which treats community-specific practices with respect and adopts professional practices with ethical awareness
- ❖ Operate towards building capacity for broader community inclusion and support

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