Coming Out

Moving LGBT Archives from Private to Public Spaces

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Abstract

Many LGBT archives were initially founded in private residences as a means to protect collective memories from fears of seizure, destruction, or misrepresentation. In the wake of the successes for LGBT rights in the past decades, many have sought to shift their holdings into public spaces. These moves into public space, such as physical moves or the digitization of materials, are often accompanied by a tension between increased visibility of these communities and a loss of control of their materials. By looking at the challenges faced by the B.C. Gay and Lesbian Archives, the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives (CLGA), and the Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA), this paper will explore whether the same understanding of archival access can be applied to digitized and brick-and-mortar archives when moving repositories to a more public position.

Keywords: LGBT archives, digitization, community archives, public space, archival access

The development of archival thought has revealed that traditional archival institutions are not neutral repositories of information, but rather have ideological power structures embedded within them: these structures serve to empower certain groups while silencing others. Archives have then sought to reposition themselves around providing context to voices of the past (Cook, 1997, p. 49). Community archives act as tools that provide a voice to the silenced; as communities experience these silences in varying ways, they are uniquely equipped to challenge the ways they are represented in traditional institutions of memory (Flinn, 2011, p. 151). For the LGBT community, the spaces these archives occupy become a significant tool in creating empowering narratives. Much as in the personal experience of coming out, moving from private to public spaces holds a special significance for LGBT archives and history. As both closeted and out individuals confront the challenges of occupying public and private spaces, LGBT community archives represent a similar experience in occupying spaces
associated with the private – like personal residences – and in moving to spaces that are more public – like public offices or the digital landscape (Cooper, 2015, p. 262; McKinney, 2015, p. 117).

The decision to move LGBT community archives from a private residence into positions that are more public poses challenges similar to those of digitizing the materials of the archives of this community, although both processes serve the goal of increased community visibility. This essay will explore these challenges by looking at the goals of visibility of the LGBT community and its archives, the challenge of shifting from private to public spaces, and whether the same understanding of archival access can be applied to both digitized and brick-and-mortar archives. It will specifically look at the challenges faced by the B.C. Gay and Lesbian Archives, the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives (CLGA), and the Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA), as all three of these archives began in private residences and had to wrestle with the decisions of whether to shift into public spaces.

Andrew Flinn (2011) points out that community archives seek to substantiate the community’s own memories and heritage, especially when the institutional record has left out or misrepresented this memory (p. 151). LGBT community archives often position themselves against formal archival institutions, as representations of LGBT people within these institutions have historically amounted to their symbolic annihilation. This term describes the way mainstream institutions, including archives, misrepresent or underrepresent marginalized communities, leading to their disempowerment (Caswell et al., 2016, p. 57). Records of LGBT community members in a formal capacity existed as documentation of criminal or “deviant” behaviour, contributing to the stigmatization of same-sex relationships (Barriault, 2009, p. 97). In the case of politically-motivated community archives, the archives’ purpose is to address and refute the lack of representation in the traditional archive and to provide inclusion for the silenced group (Flinn, 2011, p. 152). LGBT community archives can be understood as inherently political, as they challenge biases, absences and misrepresentations of LGBT people in mainstream archives, and their very existence signals a reproach for the traditional institutions that have misrepresented them (Flinn, 2011, pp. 155-156; Chenier, 2015, p. 129; Wakimoto et al., 2013, p. 297). The goal of these archives is to produce and to make visible bodies of knowledge through the archival record that challenge traditional notions of sexuality and gender. The Lesbian Herstory Archives, for example, ran a campaign for more donations of photographs “so [their] future sisters will be able to see [them]” (McKinney, 2015, p. 116). Similarly, the CLGA “aspires to be a significant resource and catalyst for those who strive for a future world where lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people are accepted, valued, and celebrated” (CLGA, 2016). The goal of group visibility challenges the understandings of the community imposed from outside of it, provides education about the group, and presents an opportunity to access it for those negotiating their place within it. Community archives are better positioned to challenge these concerns and allow for representational belonging, as their construction as an archive by the community and for the community removes concerns of symbolic annihilation, accessibility barriers inherent with institutional storage, and, to a degree, concerns about privacy (Caswell et al., 2016, p. 57; Cooper, 2016, p. 262). LGBT community archives position users...
who are members of the community to access evidentiary records of their past, becoming significant for empowering and educating them (Chenier, 2015, p. 130).

Although community archives alleviate concerns about community access and representation, they often create new concerns for access and availability for use because of their physical location. Systemic barriers LGBT communities face within institutional settings, including but not limited to the traditional archive, have resulted in much of the information relevant to LGBT communities being archived in personal homes (Cooper, 2016, p. 262). Cooper (2016) argues that “position[ing] alternative spaces and activities, such as domestic spaces, as ‘archival’ [can] create opportunities to articulate the significance of lives that have otherwise only been documented to reinforce state control or they are entirely undocumented in mainstream institutions” (p. 268). In this understanding, private homes can create a space that counters the concerns of marginalization imposed by institutional spaces (Cooper, 2016, p. 277). Andrew Flinn (2011) writes that the physical location of an archive is less important than the materials chosen for preservation and the value placed on them (p. 162). While Flinn framed his argument in terms of accepting a broader understanding of an archive as a repository that can exist outside of formal institutions – challenging Sir Hilary Jenkinson’s conception of an archive – this argument overlooks the importance of physical place for the LGBT community. Due to the private nature of sexual and gender diversity, this positioning of public LGBT archives in private homes interplays with important political implications of personal and public knowledge. Chenier (2015) reminds us that “the personal is political,” and the way we conceptualize sexuality as a private matter has been used to deny women and LGBT individuals basic citizenship rights in the past (p. 134). The positioning of a public archival space within a private residence exemplifies the idea of the personal as political. This theme is pushed further with archives such as The B.C. Gay and Lesbian Archives, which exists in a spare bedroom (bed and all), further signifying the political importance of the ties between private and public spaces (Cooper, 2016, p. 284).

Cooper’s (2016) ethnographic study of the B.C. Gay and Lesbian Archives addresses concerns about the position of archives within private residences. Among these are concerns about preservation, limitations to future expansions, promotion of the holdings, and the discomfort for users entering a private home for research. While the B.C. Gay and Lesbian Archives have practices in place to counter these concerns (such as bringing records to those users who feel uncomfortable with doing research in a private residence), the act of transferring archives from private residences to public settings is one that increases accessibility to the archives. Moving an archive into the public sphere can increase access to the archives in a multitude of ways, including increasing the capacity of the holdings, expansion of volunteers or staff, more physical space for community involvement, and increased flexibility for researchers to access the archives. Additionally, the B.C. Gay and Lesbian Archives is run by an older, white, gay man, which is a single viewpoint in an incredibly diverse community (Cooper, 2016, p. 265). A larger operation allows for more members of different parts of the community to contribute different perspectives on the value of various archival materials. This single archivist, paired with a
residential positioning, could inform a donor’s decision about submitting materials to the repository (Cooper, 2016, p. 276). For instance, potential donors may not perceive the B.C. Gay and Lesbian Archives as a serious archive due to its positioning within a private residence (Cooper, 2016, p. 272). Other donors, such as a member of the Vancouver Lesbian Collection who refused to donate records to a man, may be uncomfortable with a lack of diverse input into the management of the archives and may chose to deposit their records elsewhere or to destroy them instead (Cooper, 2016, p. 276).

These archives that document private moments then face the challenges of legitimizing themselves as archives, and of maintaining the comfort of the user. As they gained legitimacy, community support, and expanded in size of operation, some of these archives sought to transition their physical holdings from a private residence to a public space. This was the case with the archive originally known as the Canadian Gay Liberation Movement Archives (now the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives), which moved its public holdings from its founder’s private residence to a space it shared with The Body Politic, a magazine that served as its record-creating partner (Barriault, 2009, p. 100). Beyond that, this move signified a goal of political activism, as its organizers hoped to give the community increased access to its archives (Barriault, 2009, p. 101). The Lesbian Herstory Archives in New York experienced a similar move from the founder’s private residence to a public display during the 1990s when it faced pressure from an increase in users and the political rejection of “closets” and “shadowed lives” (Smith-Cruz et al., 2016, p. 223). However, moving these archives out of private homes created its own set of challenges for security, as evidenced by the police raid on the CLGA in the 1970s. The police confiscated materials, threatening the community’s control over their archives as well as the provenance and the integrity of its records (Barriault, 2009, pp. 102-103). In moving the archives out of the home and into the public, the CLGA lost control over their archival repositories. The loss of control from moving into the public does not only occur within the context of seized material; donor contribution may change as the archive moves into a more public space. In the case of the LHA, early donors did not sign deeds regarding the use of their materials. At the time of their donations, neither the archivist nor the donors could have foreseen the expansion of the archive into the public (Smith-Cruz et al., 2016, p. 224). In addition, the archives that have transitioned from a private to a public space did so on the presumption that there was a possibility, politically, to turn private knowledge into something for public consumption (Cooper, 2016, p. 269).

In the same way that moving LGBT archives out of private homes and into public spaces creates opportunities for expanding access and challenges in control over materials, digitization of LGBT archives poses similar issues for creating new publics. The LGBT community is particularly suited for digitization as it is a community not rooted in a single physical geographic space. Digitization allows the archives to disseminate information and engage with its community on a broader scale (Flinn, 2010, p. 42). It can provide access to remote users located far from local LGBT ‘villages’ in urban centres where most of this information is kept, safety for those users who are not out, and an earlier point of access for questioning members who are still learning how to navigate their community. As Cooper writes,
having this information available is more important than where it is located (Cooper, 2016, p. 269). The optimism of digitization for community archives is reflected in Elise Chenier’s (2015) claim that “digital technology allows oral historians to engage new publics and contribute to the democratization of knowledge and cultural resources” (p. 133). Online structures can allow community engagement with online resources through tagging or commenting on descriptions, allowing those browsing to exert intellectual control over the materials they encounter (Hurley, 2016, p. 145; McKinney, 2015, p. 124). Digitization is also highly valuable as it translates directly to increased access, which in turn generates new forms of political discourse (Chenier, 2015, p. 137). Among these discourses is a new way of challenging heteronormative categorizations that structural databases require (such as pairing male and female), as these interactions open up discussion of online representations of sexuality. McKinney (2015) suggests that “digitization responds to a desire for access that is as much about sorting and sense making as it is about offering scans through an online interface” (p. 117-118). In these ways, digitization of LGBT archival material can create new spaces for LGBT people that transcend geographic boundaries, and empower LGBT individuals in new ways through enabling increased interaction with the archives and thus enabling increased control over their stories.

With the digitization of LGBT archives, just as with moving physical archives from private homes into public spaces, concerns regarding a loss of control emerge. While many of these concerns run parallel to one another, it is important to recognize that brick-and-mortar archives operate under different realities, attitudes, rules, and ethical concerns than digital archives. Participatory online structures can often result in orthodoxy and conformity through a vocal set of users that dominate the discussions, which for LGBT communities can result in intracommunity politics or identity policing (Flinn, 2010, p. 46). In these ways, the power structures of the physical world can enter the digital and act as a barrier to truly democratic archival access. The democratizing power of the digital space is limited without terms set by the archives (Hurley, 2016, p. 131).

Donors also engage differently with digital archives than they do with physical ones. While pre-internet era donors consented to provide their materials to an archive, these donors did not provide informed consent for posting these materials online. The sensitivity to privacy concerns is significant for any archival community, as evidenced in the case of the Belfast Trials, which showed that a threat to third-party privacy could be a matter of life or death (George, 2013, p. 50). The same fears apply to LGBT donors, whose livelihoods could be impacted by openness about their identity, especially in an online setting that is accessible by anyone and where material is more subject to be removed or accessed away from its context (Chenier, 2015, p. 130). Furthermore, McKinney (2015) points out challenges with the archivist providing context in the first place in cases where there is an absence of information about a subject’s relationship to their sexuality (p. 121). For these reasons, Hurley (2016) argues that archives need to embrace online spaces by setting the terms under which trustworthy digital records can be preserved and can continue to represent the communities to whom they matter (p. 138). Furthermore, Chenier (2015) writes that “the ways in which people are ‘out’ can often be inconsistent
and variable according to shifting contexts and individuals, [and so] lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) material raises special concerns” (p. 134). This understanding of the public/private divide on the individual level suggests challenges in assuming donations for archives implicitly shares the same allowances for brick-and-mortar archiving and digital archiving. In a sense, they are inherently different since the digital (at least in the context of the Internet and cloud computing) seems to defy place, or at least abstract it, and therefore requires archives to define how users and donors interact with material within this space (Hurley, 2016, p. 141). The nature of an individual donor’s relationship to online access is tenuous, as demonstrated by the Sophia Smith Collection. This collection posted lesbian oral history on its website with the permission of the narrators, but later removed it as those who had consented to the digitization of this material grew uncomfortable with its online presence; this remains the case even when donors are familiar with the Internet and its structure (Chenier, 2015, pp. 135-136). In many cases, donors want the opportunity to know the context and accessibility of their contributions, although this poses a challenge to many community archives which do not have the labour resources to continually address these concerns (Chenier, 2015, p. 136).

Alongside donor issues, the politics of deselection are important to consider when choosing which materials to digitize. Unlike physically moving an LGBT archive out of a private residence and into a public space, digitization enables archivists to make appraisal decisions. McKinney (2015) argues that deselection “has political implications for the evolution of LGBT archival collections, particularly in terms of the scope of an archive’s online ‘holdings’ in relation to its collection mandate” (p. 119). The 1970s women’s and gay liberation movements showed that by classifying sex as private, its political dimensions are denied. This concern resurfaces in the choice of what materials should be digitized and thereby made available to the greatest number of people (Chenier, 2015, p. 134). Furthermore, digitization projects often exclude pornographic archival material from their scope, which has political value in challenging and deconstructing traditional archival narratives (McKinney, 2015, p. 119). These appraisal choices parallel the position of material that has historically been most at risk from seizure in police raids when LGBT archives moved from private to public spaces. For instance, “obscene, indecent, immoral or scurrilous” material was the stated reason behind the seizures from the CLGA in 1977 (Barriault, 2009, p. 102). For this reason, pornography’s deselection can act to dilute the power of the community’s archives to challenge heteronormative portrayals of sexuality. Chenier (2015) argues that the individual’s rights to privacy should override the political goal of challenging oppressive social structures, a value that is engrained in processes for collecting oral histories (p. 134). She argues, “one cannot empower a community by disempowering the individual” (Chenier, 2015, p. 138).

The challenges and benefits of digitization for LGBT community archives are not unlike those of physically shifting the archives from private residences into public spaces. Both processes allow for greater community involvement, empowerment, and engagement. They accomplish the goal of increased visibility for the LGBT community, leading to a greater capacity for the benefits that community archiving provides, such as increased social capital, health and well-being, and a sense of
place and belonging (Flinn, 2011, p. 154). The shift into visibility accomplished by a physical move or by digitization also parallel each other in the challenges of creating new publics for the LGBT community. Such challenges include loss of control over the materials, threats to provenance and original order, threats to context, and the protection of donors. It also extends to challenges not covered in this paper, such as financial resources required to make such moves and preservation concerns. In these similarities, the difference between physical and digital archives is emphasized, but for the LGBT community, the same mix of anxieties and solace that accompanies moving from a private to public space extends to digitization. Although some archives, such as the B.C. Gay and Lesbian Archives, take a stance not to digitize their material or to move the established archives out of a private residence, the LGBT community has begun to expect such practices (Cooper, 2016, p. 279). Still, the decision to remain within a private residence and the decision not to digitize material can be empowering in its own way, providing control over the material while fostering community trust and engagement.

References


