Exploring Description: Archives and the Multiverse, Now and in the Future

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Abstract

Increased online access to standardized finding aids and more flexible technology means that archival repositories are able to include new approaches to description, encouraging participation from outside the information professions and embracing archival multiverse sensibilities and archives 2.0 technologies. In this way, repositories are making accessible a more encompassing representation of the materials in their holdings. Library and Archives Canada’s “Project Naming” reaches out to communities to actively solicit detail and context to enrich their descriptions. It also finds ways to incorporate this information within the structure of archival description standards. Content management software, such as Murkurtu, enables communities to create their own archival spaces.

Keywords

archival description, participatory archives, reconciliation
The information held by archives may be discovered in a variety of ways, depending on the type of repository describing them. For example, public (state) archives, private collections, community archives and, increasingly, online archives often challenge traditional notions of what an archive should be and do. Each type of repository may be indicative of, or lean towards, one or more of the four archival paradigms: evidence, memory, identity, and community (Cook, 2013). Likewise, the descriptive practices of those repositories, and their resulting finding aids, may vary, despite important work that has been done to standardize archival description both within Canada and internationally. A constant in archival theory since the post-modern turn is as follows: “Nothing is neutral. Nothing is impartial. Nothing is objective” (Cook, 2000, p. 7). Archival description—standards notwithstanding—is no exception, and we find ourselves at a point where it is possible for a description created in accordance with the Rules of Archival Description (RAD), to be augmented by additional content of all kinds: from a link to the finding aid of another archival repository to a user-generated tag, audio clip of an oral history, or information gleaned from a Facebook post. Archival description is potentially the richer for it.

This essay will explore some of the ways in which archives are using new approaches to description (such as the ones suggested above), encouraging participation from outside information professions and embracing archival multiverse sensibilities and archives 2.0 technologies. These approaches aim to make accessible a richer, more encompassing, and hopefully equalizing representation of what has been described as the “horribly lopsided archival record that amplifies the voices of the powerful and further silences the marginalised” (Caswell & Mallick, 2014, p. 79). Moreover, this paper will examine some of the work that traditional repositories are doing to correct their descriptions and enhance their collections—for example, Library and Archives Canada’s Project Naming and The National Archive’s Discovery. It will discuss the challenges to traditional archival thinking that these options present, as well as noting the benefits. In addition to the efforts of traditional repositories, this essay will briefly look at some online archives that offer a different approach to heritage materials, such as the Mukurtu ‘Wumpurrarini-kari’ archive and the Plateau Peoples’ Web Portal. It will also consider the possibilities for the future of description in an environment where information technology is advancing at an exponential rate.

The award-winning Project Naming, hosted by Library and Archives Canada (LAC) and celebrating its fifteenth anniversary in 2017, started as a grassroots attempt to engage Indigenous youth with their history and create dialogue with elders in their communities (Library and Archives Canada, 2017). At its inception, it resembled the controlled, face-to-face “methodology for systematically capturing and incorporating the comments and contributions of individuals outside the profession as to the accuracy, completeness and attractiveness of archival catalogues and finding aids”, as described by Jon Newman (2012) in his “Revisiting Archive
Collections” (p. 58). Murray Angus and Morley Hanson, instructors at Nunavut Sivuniksavut Training Program (a Nunavut-based college in Ottawa), worked with LAC to provide students returning home to remote communities on Christmas break with copies of some of the Canadian government’s many photographs of unidentified individuals from the North. Beth Greenhorn, Senior Project Manager at LAC, leads the project and described how the students would return after Christmas, bringing her a spreadsheet of identifications as well as stories of photographs being brought to life as individuals were identified (community members spoke of being happy to see them again). Interaction through the photographs led to storytelling and conversations about family, community history, and traditional cultural practices (B. Greenhorn, personal communication, March 29, 2018). The project thus appears to synthesize participatory archives and archival multiverse sensibilities in what has been described, by Kirsten Thorpe (2017), as “Taking Knowledge Back Home.” As Thorpe says of her work with Indigenous Australians: “I have been driven by an urge to connect archives with communities so that records can be revitalised and re-contextualised. The concept of breathing life back into records resonates deeply with me” (2017, p. 15).

For the youth and elders, it was immediately a success, helping Indigenous youth to understand the social history and shared experiences of colonialism that have created their communities—not only by identification of the photographs but also by analysis of the contents, asking how and why the federal government took these photographs. “In a sense, when we help identify the pictures, we are reclaiming our heritage,” said Deborah Webster, an early participant in the project, from Baker Lake, Nunavut (Library and Archives Canada, 2017). It was also a success for LAC whose initial digitization project of 500 photographs from the Richard Harrington fonds quickly saw a 75 percent identification rate (B. Greenhorn, personal communication, March 29, 2018). In terms of description, Greenhorn was sceptical at first, not knowing how well it would work and how reliable the new information would be. To avoid leading of any kind, copies of the photographs were sent out with only the file number and the name of the community. In some cases, the photographer had labelled the original photos with a phonetic spelling (anglicized), but this was not revealed at the identification stage. Greenhorn found that the responses that came back were very close to those supplied titles and would often be corroborated by other sources. It became clear that the information was accurate (B. Greenhorn, personal communication, March 29, 2018). Her scepticism gradually abated, and now she cannot think of even twenty examples of disagreement over the years (B. Greenhorn, personal communication, March 29, 2018). The project is still going strong, though is now predominantly active on Facebook and Twitter, rather than face-to-face.

Greenhorn estimates that less than 3 percent of their material has been digitized so far and updating descriptions with the new information generated is a full-time job in itself.
(B. Greenhorn, personal communication, March 29, 2018). LAC has made room for the new information in their online descriptions by adding the name (or names, for spelling variations and name changes) to the Title element in square brackets. Under the Additional Information element, space is made for further details of, for example, family history, living descendants, even information about the jewellery worn by the subject. Where applicable, it is noted that this information was gathered by Project Naming. These are all searchable fields, thus enhancing the accessibility of the information in these online finding aids. The enriched context provided in the online finding aid brings untold value to these materials: when examined onsite, they are simply one of many in a box of often unmarked government photographs; when viewed in conjunction with their description, they are transformed.

Greenhorn admits that working on Project Naming has made her rethink description, by highlighting the ways in which it has historically privileged western information systems over Indigenous ways of knowledge. This serves as a reminder of the “historical standpoint of the archivist, [which] is an unavoidable factor in … arrangement and description” (Meehan, 2009, p. 73). Greenhorn’s belief that reconciliation and understanding our colonial past is something for which all Canadians need to take responsibility is demonstrated in ongoing attempts to handle description of material with sensitivity and inclusivity. One way in which archivists at LAC are trying to do this is by carefully considering the question of how to represent Canadian versus traditional place names appropriately. For example, how best to represent Iqaluit, known for a time as Frobisher Bay, in the archival description. Another question is how to handle outdated, offensive language in titles, which they manage by placing this information in a separate “signatures and inscriptions” field, so that the historical context is preserved but not immediately visible. There are also ongoing, wider strategies for decolonizing archival description, spaces, and collection practices at LAC (Library and Archives Canada Forum, 2017). Planned projects include a digitization initiative for collections such as the Arctic diaries and photos of Rosemary Gilliat, which “will be available for the public to help transcribe, tag and describe in our new and upcoming tool Co-Lab” (Kendall, 2018). Perhaps most importantly, Project Naming represents a way of sharing and a step towards ‘giving back’ to those from whom so much has been taken. Copies of the photographs are often sent from LAC to those who have identified family members. Greenhorn has been moved to receive, in turn, photos of the family holding those once anonymous records, happily remembering (B. Greenhorn, personal communication, March 29, 2018). One is reminded of Caswell & Mallick’s “emotional encounters with the archive” (2014, p. 82) and, in this instance, it feels like a reciprocal process, which is surely a step in the right direction.

The U.K. National Archives’ (TNA) online catalogue Discovery also uses participatory activities, such as tagging and transcription, to enhance the browsing and searching experience.
for users. It is an example of the type of user-community described by Glenn Dingwall (2017), as “crowdsourcing additional metadata and enabling tag content to enhance discoverability” (p. 148). Tags enable access by helping the user find a catalogue entry again, or by helping other researchers find it; they also work to “modernise historical terms, expand a brief catalogue description by adding keywords to identify material found in a document, standardise terms, and bring related entries together” (The National Archives, 2018). The site states that TNA is unable to add additional metadata beyond date and location to catalogue entries and therefore, enlists the help of users to do so by tagging. It notes, however, that this these tags are not checked for accuracy and users are encouraged to seek verification before acting on the information. (The opportunity to report any inaccuracies or inappropriate tags is provided.) This indicates that while TNA encourages crowdsourced additional material to rest beside the existing descriptions, it is not incorporated into them. Moreover, it is not managed or mediated by archivists, unlike the information added to descriptions by Project Naming. Whether the newly added material is added to official descriptions or not, the benefits of participatory projects such as these—both for the archives and the communities they seek to reach—are undeniable. They result in positive cultural engagement and force archives to stay relevant. This kind of outreach can have additional bonuses, such as building trust relationships with potential donors of previously unattainable archival materials, as well as expanding archivists’ understanding of the materials they are attempting to describe (Newman, 2012, p. 68).

The question of mediation and verification of user-generated content is complex, as illustrated by Joy Palmer (2009), who states that “while Web 2.0 tools offer great potential for leveraging this type of hidden knowledge, such moves also highlight the degree to which the ‘user’ vs. ‘archival authority’ dichotomy is a problematic one.” Jon Newman (2012) describes archival description as “an extremely sophisticated form of metadata,” (p. 59) representing—or at least attempting to represent—a record’s context, provenance and structure. He suggests that this sophistication may be the reason why description is “one area of practice where users still remain at arm’s length” (p. 59). This assertion was made as recent as 2012, despite theorists (acknowledged by Newman) having called (for some years) for space to be made for the voices traditionally shut out or silenced by archives (Duff & Harris, 2002). It may be considered to keep users at arms-length or indeed privilege one type of description over another. At the same time, the allowance of parallel information to co-exist with, and be linked to, the traditional finding aid begins the process of making space for those voices, whilst still keeping in place a standardized form of description—that helps users by enabling access across repositories. This is the approach taken in the European Holocaust Research Infrastructure project where, “by bringing together and inter-linking all available descriptions pertaining to one collection, we offer researchers a variety of perspectives… enable access to sources via different pathways and, at the same time,
raise researchers’ awareness about the subjectivity of the finding aids they use” (Links, Speck & Vanden Daelen, 2016, p. 35). In the experimental Polar Bear Expedition Finding Aid (Krause & Yakel, 2007), “user profiles and comments introduce the voices of users into the formerly closed finding aid environment without compromising the authoritative quality of the finding aid” (p. 310).

It has been shown by Project Naming and other participatory archive experiments, such as the Polar Bear Expedition Finding Aid, that new information can be incorporated into descriptions; however, it should be noted that a considerable challenge for archivists (whether the new information is incorporated into the finding aid or, alternatively, hosted as a parallel text) is that of having the time to mediate, verify, and then include the often-abundant new information crowdsourced online. As noted by Petra Links et al. (2016), “new, especially digital, technologies have necessitated archivists to learn how to operate in a context defined by overabundance rather than scarcity of information” (p. 26). The archivist’s mediating role is particularly important in this environment of abundance. Also, the incorporation of added contextual information should be done transparently and with the open acknowledgement that when it comes to description, “finding aids present but one viewpoint on a collection” (Light & Hyry, 2002, p. 217). This is a viewpoint that will increasingly, it is hoped, be made clearly identifiable to users through strategies such as colophons, footnotes and conditional language (Light & Hyry, 2002, p. 90).

This essay has concentrated on description as a facilitator of access to records for historical, cultural, and social inquiry. However, the question of the archivist as mediator or authority draws attention to another important use of archival records. As Terry Cook (2013) points out, “Archives have traditionally been about acquiring, describing, and preserving documents as evidence, protecting their impartiality through the archivists’ self-conscious stance of neutrality and objectivity” (p. 97). While subsequent paradigms of archival thought could be seen to undermine that theory (evidence being the first paradigm, dominating discourse up until the 1930s), Cook nonetheless notes that evidence “continues to the present as an important archival concern” (p. 117). Therefore, archivists need to keep in mind that there are many reasons why a user might be looking at descriptions and remember that description also has an important role to play in protecting authenticity (MacNeil, 2005, p. 266).

With the proliferation of online finding aids, it is less likely to be the case that “scholars from ex-colonial countries have to travel to the old imperial capitals to research information on their own national histories” (Featherstone, 2006, p. 292). The geographic distances that once precluded the possibility for remote, colonized, or dispersed peoples to connect to records about themselves no longer present such an impediment, since the traditional repository’s online finding aid provides access. Beyond this, software has been designed specifically to enable Indigenous peoples to create their own archival spaces, for ‘digital heritage’ items, rather
than ‘records’, which are often implicated as items of institutional bureaucracy (Gilliland, McKemmish & Lau, 2017, p. 17 footnote). Murkurtu content management software (CMS) “empowers communities, allowing them to choose how their content is shared. It also allows them to define how material is accessed by museums, libraries and public archives” (Murkurtu, n.d.) and provides a space for contribution and collaboration with built-in parameters to respect cultural protocols. This software has been used to great effect to create the Plateau Peoples’ Web Portal and the Mukurtu ‘Wumpurrarini-kari’ archive. The difference between these two archives showcases the software’s flexibility to be tailored to specific community needs. The archive is believed to be a safe place—a place of preservation—and the name Murkurtu is derived from that concept. The embedding of cultural protocols into the software is part of what makes it safe for users. For example, if the subject of a photograph is deceased, a warning message is shown before the image can be opened. The prospects offered by this platform seem to offer what Sue McKemmish has described as “the possibility of a decolonised Archive in a post-colonial Australia…transforming current practices and refiguring archival spaces to be representative of multiple voices and perspectives, thus unsettling the power imbalances embedded in the current records and archives landscape” (McKemmish, 2017, p. 125).

Digital heritage items can be linked with images and traditional knowledge, as well as with audiovisual material; these give communities the ability to use their own words, promoting language learning and preservation. However, the platforms also connect with regional and national archives (linking to original, physical archival copies) in a reciprocal curation framework that results in correction or enrichment of existing descriptions. The possibilities inherent in tools like Murkurtu, which enable layered narratives managed with cultural sensitivity, may align description more fully to Duff and Harris’ (2002) vision, whereby: “The power to describe is the power to make and remake records and to determine how they will be used and remade in the future. Each story we tell about our records, each description we compile, changes the meaning of the records and re-creates them” (p. 272).

While celebrating these achievements, archivists must continue to look forward in efforts to stay relevant, in description as in all aspects of archival practice. Exponential rates of change in technology, and their radical effect on how information is generated and used, suggests the need for adaptive behaviour in descriptive archivists of the twenty-first century and beyond. John Sheridan, Digital Director of TNA, suggests that the linear, hierarchical descriptive catalogue that remains prevalent is not what we archivists would design today if we were to try to invent a way to manage the complex, cross-connected knowledge and information creation and use that is a hallmark of this century; today’s information refuses to be divided neatly or catalogued (Sheridan, 2018). He exhorts archivists to resist the desire to retrofit order on chaos and to embrace uncertainty, getting comfortable with ‘maybes’ as well as definite facts and disrupting
practice in order to evolve with each generation of technology that creates records. This is especially relevant as we move beyond the use of computers simply as simulators of paper-based activities.

Sheridan’s approach is reminiscent of that of Shannon Faulkhead and Kirsten Thorpe (2017) whose work on archives and the multiverse led them to observe that, “one of the similarities that we found was the worldview that everything is interconnected. While many peoples have the same or similar view, many of the systems adopted by Western knowledge systems are aimed at keeping everything neat and tidy. There is a failure to recognise that it is often in the messiness that amazing things are to be found” (p. 9). There is a pleasing irony in the notion that traditional ways have potentially been assisted by the affordances of cutting-edge digital and technological advances, whereby “it has taken the transition into pervasive digital and networked recordkeeping to force more complexification and nuance into professional conceptualisations” (Gilliland, 2017, p. 56).

It is clear that archivists are no strangers to adaptive behaviour. As has been shown, government archival repositories are working to find ways to appropriately describe records that ‘belong’ to the state but are, however, about others whose voices have been silenced. Since institutions are attempting to open up their descriptions to the subjects of such records, it is a step towards the decolonization and cultural repatriation of archives—archives acknowledging their position in the archival multiverse. By working towards reciprocation in archival description (i.e. the voices, information, and experience of users), whether it runs parallel to or is included into existing descriptions, our descriptions are richer for it. This enriched contextual environment will serve to further inform arrangement and description of existing and new acquisitions. Exciting new technologies, such as the Murkurtu CMS, shows that it is possible to open up description, while retaining connection to standardized archival descriptions and finding aids that help protect and preserve the evidentiary value of archives’ primary sources.
REFERENCES


Library and Archives Canada Forum with University Partners: “Exploring Decolonization on the


