

# The Role of Archives in a Digital Society: Now Is What Matters



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How could or should the role of the archives be *different* in a digital society? I will focus on two answers to that question – two activities that I think archives should make primary considerations to best meet the needs of our digital society.

First, building on the title of my talk, archives should be aggressively documenting “the now.” We all know that digital is ephemeral by its very nature. That’s well understood, and I think the processes for capturing and preserving formally created organizational electronic records is also well understood in our archives and records community.

But the digital equivalent of personal papers is another matter. For these we have the fragility of the digital, but also the problem that creators/custodians don’t always think of their material as having lasting value – and here I’m thinking primarily about community or grassroots groups, individuals, and others carrying out largely unofficial activities. And, of course, that’s nothing new. But in the past, non-digital letters, diaries, etc. could be stored in attics, neglected, and still survive. That is not necessarily true of things like blogs, Twitter and Facebook accounts, and materials shared through tools like Instagram, Vine, Flickr, and Tumblr – the tools most people use today to document their daily lives.

Some archives are collecting materials created on social media platforms like these, but I suspect that this often happens in response to a tragedy or a one-time event, such as an anniversary or the Olympics. But it needs to happen systematically and broadly – with archives identifying and collecting materials that document how people live their lives *now*. To serve a digital society, archives should be actively documenting “the now.” There won’t be a second chance, in many cases, to capture this documentation. Either we do it, or it’s lost. Or the function is done by others, reinforcing the idea that archives aren’t relevant to the present.

We need to make collection of the digital a primary focus, but in addition to capturing such materials, archives need to educate people about how to preserve their own digital material. I believe a key aspect of the role of

archives in a digital society is to make people understand their own role in documenting that society. For this, we can build on the clear interest people have in documenting themselves, evident in the widespread use of social media tools.

My second idea about the changed role of archives for a digital society involves reframing our mission. Often when we talk about the mission or purpose of archives, it's all about the materials – to acquire, to preserve, to provide access to materials. Instead, I think the way we frame our mission should focus on people.

And so my second recommendation is that archives need to actively help and engage with people *now* – helping people who don't know they need help and engaging people who don't yet know they want to engage. We need to think of our mission as being: *To add value to people's lives by increasing their understanding and appreciation of the past.*

In this model, archives are a platform for learning, in which the collections are secondary to the learning. This role has much in common with the way libraries are seeking to reshape their mission – that is, not being focused on books but on providing information and being centres for learning and community. This re-imagined mission would mean emphasizing the value of archivists as experts both on archival matters and on the content and context of their collections, combined with a greater focus on interactions with the public.

One essential aspect of this re-imagined mission would be to educate and inform people about the importance of understanding the context of information – a fundamental skill in a digital society. Archivists understand context. Most people don't, especially when it comes to digital information. This is related to the larger need for digital literacy. People need to know how to identify the source and assess the context of the digital information they are viewing.

This vision of the role for archives in a digital society reflects our society's faster pace and its appetite for digital information. Archives need to move more quickly to capture ephemeral content that reflects the present day, and to be more aggressive in helping and engaging with people *now*, moving the focus of the mission of archives to helping people build understanding and appreciation of history, and of understanding the context of information in the digital age.

What would make this vision truly provocative would be a corresponding radical realignment of our resources to focus on “the now,” shifting the allocation of resources from our own internal processes to outreach and education activities. These changes would make us relevant and useful *now*, utilizing and building on our skills and knowledge as well as our collections. The focus would be on sharing archival knowledge and the value of what we know, not just what we have.

Abraham Maslow's famous hierarchy of needs traditionally peaks in "self-actualization," but scholars have noted that in later writings he articulated a yet higher level of human need: the need for self-transcendence, or furthering a cause beyond the self. Archives can help people connect with something larger than themselves – the collections that document history and the history those documents reflect.<sup>1</sup> And this, I think, is the key to the role of archives in a digital society: educate and connect with people *now*.

1 Mark E. Koltko-Rivera, "Rediscovering the Later Version of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs: Self-Transcendence and Opportunities for Theory, Research, and Unification," *Review of General Psychology* 10, no. 4 (December 2006): 302–17.