

Becoming a Co-archivist. ReDoing Archival Practices for Democratising the Access to and Participation in Archives

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Abstract: This paper presents the second phase of the project Co-archiving Flight Documentation, aimed at exploring and prototyping co-archiving practices for involving underrepresented voices in sharing stories of our times from their point of view. The prototypes developed can be iterated and put in use, but may also potentially contribute to challenging the role of the archivist. What parallels can be drawn between the practices of a co-designer and an archivist interested in becoming a co-archivist? Building on outcomes from previous design interventions within the co-archiving research theme, we will run a co-design process involving practitioners and newcomers. Since the design process is not yet completed, we cannot present any concrete prototypes. This paper suggests imaginative ways of ReDoing by applying co-design approaches in other disciplines, and contributes to the discussion of how co-designers can step into other domains and be part of developing practices and approaches in other fields.

Keywords: Co-archiving, flight documentation, co-design, newcomers, archives

1. From archival appraisal to co-archiving facilitation

This paper presents the second phase of the research project Co-archiving Flight Documentation exploring collaborative (co-)archiving practices for involving marginalised communities in contributing to our common archives – and in the end, in writing our history. By Flight Documentation we refer to the documentation of the emergent refugee situation, its global and local effects, and the life situations of people who are on the run from terrible conditions in their home countries. The project is part of Living Archives, which is an interdisciplinary research project at School of Arts and Communication (K3), Malmö University

exploring archives and archiving practices in a digitized society from a range of perspectives¹.

Derrida argues that “[t]here is no political power without control of the archive, if not memory. Effective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation” (1995, p. 4). The aim of our project is to explore and prototype co-archiving practices for involving underrepresented voices in sharing the stories of our times from their point of view. How do we give voice to the unheard? How do we create conditions for accessing records of human existence beyond traditional methods? How can we support archivists that strive to seriously engage the subjects (the “archived”) in the shaping of archives?

Within the field of archival studies there is an on-going debate addressing the underrepresentation of marginalised communities in archives, and how we can possibly provide the future with a representative record of human experience in our time (e.g. Johnston, 2010; Warren, 2016). Instead of continuing to document the “well-documented” archival professionals are encouraged to assume a more inclusive approach and open up the archiving process by inviting more people to contribute to our archives (Dunbar, 2006; Warren, 2016). The belief is that such approach would counteract bias in the documentation of culture and result in more representative archives. Despite serious attempts at addressing the shortcomings of our common archives there seems to be little change achieved over the past decades (Johnston, 2010; Warren, 2016).

The prototypes developed as part of this research project are co-archiving practices that can be iterated and put into use, but may potentially also contribute to challenge the role of the archivist. What parallels can be drawn between the practices of a co-designer and an archivist interested in becoming a co-archivist?

Thus, this paper specifically addresses the conference theme “how and with whom do we REDO?” by elaborating on how archival and documentation practices at public archives, cultural institutions, and museums could assume a co-archival facilitation approach by applying methods and practices used within the co-design community. How can co-design approaches contribute to the ReDoing of archival practices by encouraging archivists to assume a collaborative approach in solving the complex challenge of democratising the access to, and participation in archives?

1.2 Six co-archiving practices

As mentioned, this paper presents the second phase of a larger project that among other things has resulted in six prototyped co-archiving practices: *Eat a Memory*, *Plant your History*, *The Memory Game*, *Soil Memories*, *Mosaic of Malmö*, and *Designing an archiving practice using comedy*. All of these projects are designed to invite underrepresented communities to collect, store and share their memories and cultural heritages.

We will not go into detail on these prototypes since they have thoroughly been described in previous papers (e.g. Nilsson, 2016; Nilsson and Barton, in press; Nilsson, 2015, Nilsson and Wiman, 2015). In brief, we argue that the co-archiving practices prototyped assume an inclusive and a democratic approach since they allow for the involvement of many senses (working with food, soil, scents, poetry, comedy). Since many of the practices are independent of language ability, cultural heritage sources may be shared with or without using words. These prototypes

¹ For more information about Living Archives, see: livingarchives.mah.se

can also be seen as intimate kinds of archiving practices generating archive material on intangible cultural heritage in a concrete way, but without losing immaterial and sometimes poetic nature.



Figure 1. Documentation from Eat a Memory gatherings, Memory gaming and Plant your history (CC:BY-NC).

Initially our attention was directed towards marginalised urban communities and neighbourhoods (Nilsson, 2015; Nilsson and Wiman, 2015). As a reaction to the current world situation, and the large number of people that have recently sought asylum in Sweden, 162 877 people in 2015 (The Migration Agency, 2015), the focus has shifted towards asylum seeking newcomers (Nilsson, 2016; Nilsson and Barton, in press). This is also our focus in the second phase of the project.

2. Research approach

Our research approach is design research, often driven by a critical agenda, exploring alternatives and operating by interventions in existing cultural settings and characterized by the following aims:

- “*Prototyping* and design are part of the research activities
- Research involves *real-world settings and people*
- The research process is *iterative*
- Design research produces *design knowledge* intended for designers and practitioners”. (Harvard Maare, 2015, p. 41)

The research process is guided by principles and methods from the field of participatory design that implies active involvement of the people designed for in the design work (Simonsen and Robertson, 2013). This *direct* involvement of the users is one of the central principles of participatory design. Instead of designing *for* the users, the designers and/or researchers co-design *with* the users in a process of joint decision-making, mutual learning and co-creation (Sanders and Stappers, 2015).

For understanding the interactions between the participants in the co-design workshops organised as part of our project, we turn to theories of design practices as reflective conversations (Schön, 1987) and as translational processes (Callon and Latour, 1981; Simeone, 2016). In a co-design situation, participants typically might meet for joint explorations through various design practices (sketching, prototyping, roleplaying, scenario building), and using various materials (visuals, collages, cultural probes, design games). Through these practices the participants are given space to articulate, translate and materialise their ideas, requirements, needs and interests into visual articulations (sketches, diagrams, interfaces, prototypes) or other forms of articulation using various media (visual, music, video, photography, performance, or stories). Such design practices can be viewed as a translational process for expressing meaning in different languages, materialising different possibilities, and providing a form of connection between the stakeholders (ibid.). The framing, and re-framing of the problems or challenges are not done solely by one stakeholder, but in a reflective conversation between the different stakeholders (Schön, 1987).

3. Research setting and case

3.1 Background: Co-archiving Flight Documentation

In September 2015, the three largest museums in southern Sweden, the Regional Museum in Kristianstad, Malmö Museums, Kulturen Museum, and the Department of Cultural Sciences, Lund University, initiated the project Flight Documentation aiming at documenting the emergent refugee situation in Sweden. Through this initiative, the museums have documented and shared some of the newcomers’ experiences and stories, as well as experiences and stories from the large number of volunteers and activists that engaged in welcoming the people arriving to the city of Malmö. The process of documenting and archiving within the project has up to now followed well-established methods and practices within the field of ethnology, such as participatory observations, interviews, video and audio recordings, and questionnaires. The documentation process has not only resulted in a large amount of archival material, but also in a series of new research questions dealing with methodological challenges regarding matters of inclusion and representation when documenting crisis situations (Nikolić, 2016). What are the roles of museums and other cultural institutions? How can we develop approaches, methods and practices for emergency museological ethnology characterised by an inclusive approach inviting people to directly share their experiences? Thereby avoiding seeing these experiences through the lens of the

“other”, that is, the person gathering the documentation, interviewing, filtering, selecting, and archiving.

Building on learning outcomes from previous design interventions within the co-archiving research theme, as well as the Flight Documentation project, we will run a design process involving both practitioners at cultural institutions as well as newcomers. The expected outcome of the process is a number of prototypes and design concepts of co-archiving practices for inviting newcomers to share and document their experiences.

3.2 The design process – two parallel tracks

As part of the project there are two parallel tracks running, both aimed at prototyping co-archiving practices for flight documentation focusing on newcomers. Since the practitioners at cultural institutions also play an important role, acting as gatekeepers to the archives, they are also crucial actors if we aim for more representative archives. Thus, the user groups/co-designers are:

- 1) newcomers that have recently arrived to Sweden,
- 2) archivists/researchers/practitioners interested in developing co-archival facilitation approaches.

Design process I

The first track involves five interaction design master students participating in a 10 weeks' course in Collaborative Media. Their design brief as part of the course is to design a collaborative media platform aimed at capturing newcomers' experiences. The concepts may be described as a distributed archiving system where the archivist is not the one collecting material or documenting experiences, but facilitating the sharing of histories. The master students will be responsible for planning and running the design process, including design workshops, building and evaluating prototypes. They will be supervised by teachers in the course as well as researchers from the Co-archiving project.

Design process II

The second track is planned and run by researchers from the Co-archiving project and involves four practitioners at cultural institutions, and four newcomers. The design process will consist of one research phase, followed by three co-design workshops yet to be planned in detail. The theme at the first workshop is “envisioning the archive” with a focus on meaningful content, issues of relevance, what, and what if? The theme on the second and third workshop is “doing the archive” with a focus on practices of accessing, capturing, documenting and how to create conditions for participation. At the workshops the participations will meet for joint exploration through a series of co-design exercises. In these processes of doing-and-thinking-together ideas and visions are articulated and materialised in form of prototypes. We expect to iterative the prototypes three times, and the final versions to be displayed and critiqued at a public seminar organised by Living Archives.

4. ReDoing by applying co-design approaches in other fields

The design processes described above are not completed as this paper is being composed. It is therefore not possible for us to present any analyses of co-design activities, concrete prototypes, or design proposals besides the prototypes

developed in the first phase of the project (see e.g. Nilsson, 2016; Nilsson and Barton, in press; Nilsson, 2015, Nilsson and Wiman, 2015). Nevertheless, we believe that this paper suggests imaginative ways of ReDoing by applying co-design approaches in other disciplines, and contributes to the discussion of how co-designers can step into other domains and be part of developing practices in these fields. We see this potentially as a useful way of dealing with extraordinary situations, such as the emergent refugee situation, where traditional or existing methods and practices do not seem sufficient. We expect that the forthcoming prototypes will come to represent concrete co-archiving practices and strategies that can be further iterated and eventually put into use. In addition to that, we aim to contribute to the archival discourse at large, and hope that the outcome of this project can be used as means for challenging roles and methodological approaches in the fields of ethnology, and museum and archival studies.

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