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David Beel, Claire Wallace, Gemma Webster & Hai Nguyen

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# The Geographies of Community History Digital Archives in Rural Scotland

DAVID BEEL , CLAIRE WALLACE, GEMMA WEBSTER AND HAI NGUYEN 

RCUK Digital Economy Hub, University of Aberdeen, King's College, Aberdeen, UK

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**ABSTRACT** *The CURIOS (Cultural Repositories and Information Systems) project has been working with community heritage groups to co-produce sustainable solutions for the production of heritage archives in digital form. This process has produced an opportunity for fascinating geographical research into the ways in which community heritage groups produce history from their own perspective. This paper will therefore begin to open up these ongoing processes to consider, through case study examples, the ways in which the production of digital archives alters the geography of community heritage production. A number of community heritage groups have been converting their 'analogue' collections into 'digital' forms and the paper will argue how this significantly alters the positionality of the archive. This will be shown by detailing the ways in which the processes of collection and preservation, conducted by community volunteers, take place. The paper will then move to consider the ways in which this historical material, representative of place, is presented back to a wider audience. In doing this, it will discuss the rationales and processes involved in these practices and how this relates to broader themes of research within geography. Whether for historical research or for theoretical positioning, geographers have, on a number of levels, engaged with archives. Yet, the digital archive has seen little attention especially in terms of thinking through the ways in which digital mediums alter perceptions of space and place.*

**KEY WORDS:** archives, digital heritage, community, value, rescue archaeology

## 1. Introduction

The following paper is a theoretical and reflexive positioning piece in relation to the production of community-based history and digital archives centred in rural Scotland, drawing upon experiences of working with two community archive organisations: Portsoy in Aberdeenshire (which consists of two independent groups – Portsoy Past and Present (PPP) and Portsoy Salmon Bothy (PSB)) and the *Comainn Eachdraidh* (historical societies, (CE)) based in the Western Isles (in which 10 out of 20 active CE participate). It has been developed through the RCUK (Research Council UK) Digital Economy project CURIOS (Cultural Repositories and Information Systems), which is based within the dot.rural hub at the University of Aberdeen (see Tait *et al.* 2013 for further details).

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*Correspondence Address:* David Beel, RCUK Digital Economy Hub, University of Aberdeen, King's College, Aberdeen, UK. Email: [d.e.beel@abdn.ac.uk](mailto:d.e.beel@abdn.ac.uk)

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The paper wishes to place the project and, more broadly, this nascent area of research upon digital archives, within the context of geographical research on archives. The project is interdisciplinary in nature, but its work creates a number of interesting questions that relate to key themes within geography, particularly in relation to the roles community archives have and the ways in which they are represented in digital forms. Here, the two are intrinsically linked in a relational sense: from the lived world experience of archive production at the local level, through to the virtual spaces of online representation at a global scale. It is in this process of figuration and reconfiguration that this paper will begin to highlight, as Latour and Hermant (2006) suggest through the production of digital materials, that there is both something gained as well as lost from these processes. Central to these processes are notions of (cultural) value in terms of how communities decide what should be kept and what should not (Creswell 2011), what gets digitised and how volunteers negotiate this at the community level.

The paper is split into the following sections. Firstly, some context will be given in order to ground the project with references to the research case studies. Secondly, the paper will open up a discussion surrounding the ways in which historical, social and cultural geographers have engaged with archives in both a physical and theoretical sense and how, ultimately, this can be brought together to develop a more nuanced geographical understanding of digital archives. This section will then split to consider the ways in which the work of community history groups can be viewed as a form ‘rescue archaeology’ before considering the ways in which the (re)ordering of archives for digitisation changes the relationship between people, place and archive.

## 2. Setting the Scene

The work of voluntary community heritage groups across the UK represents a unique set of dialogues that are being negotiated between discourses of space, place and history (Flinn 2011). The production and presentation of everyday place-based histories, that have been articulated, represent a form of social memory for communities that seek to engage their past, to help make sense of the present, in order to project into the future. Community history production is bound within the practice of producing archives; archives that collect a wide range of materials related to the people, spaces and places of that community. For some geographers, the practices of collection and the nature of these materials may seem ‘conservative’, benign or overly apolitical but, for the communities themselves, they represent the opportunity to articulate their own account of history from their own perspective (Robertson 2012). Flinn (2007) notes this, suggesting that such practices ‘are the grassroots activities’ where ‘control and ownership of the project is essential’ to those community heritage groups. As such, groups do not want to be subsumed into national archives, which they do not control, which are not sensitive to their needs, and which are juxtaposed ideologically to the production of their own ‘place history’. They represent a response to the prescriptive approach of national heritage by contesting mainstream archives (Mason & Baveystock 2009). Hence, it is the ongoing activity of community history production and the practices involved in this process that is the essential aspect of these groups and their archives:

[T]he defining characteristic of a community archive is not its physical location, inside or outside of formal repositories, but rather the active and ongoing involvement

in the source community in documenting and making accessible their history on their own terms. (Stevens *et al.* 2010, p. 68, original emphasis)

What Stevens *et al.* (2010) define has been reflected in the project's case studies, which are both based in 'rural' Scotland. In working with CE groups in the Western Isles and heritage groups in Portsoy (on the Moray Firth, Aberdeenshire), a similar pattern of motivation to activities has developed. In each organisation, practices of historical collection have developed from more politically motivated attempts to preserve collections, against what have been perceived as external threats to their own 'cultural repertoires'. The groups were selected due to their locations and approaches to community heritage. In terms of location, they have been loosely defined as 'rural', which conveys their distance from major urban centres and related accessibility to such locations. In terms of their approach to community heritage, they are volunteer-led and their wish to create digital content has driven them to develop a working relationship with the CURIOS project. Importantly, both groups are at very different stages of digitising materials. The CE had already developed an online digital archive that had fallen into abeyance, whereas the Portsoy groups were starting from virtually nothing in a digital archive form.

Nora (1996) notes that these activities represent a number of 'ontological angsts' as to why such community activities take place. As the 'modern' world supposedly changes at an ever-increasing pace and history 'accelerates', there has been a growing sense that the traditional methods of collecting, preserving and passing on both tangible and intangible notions of history and heritage have been failing. Hence, there is recognition that the archive becomes the very place that is needed to 'check' this advancement, becoming a space in which memories and traditions can be held (Nora 1996). Such archives represent a social remembering (see Halbwachs 1992) by communities, whereby they abstract (dis)order and piece together aspects of a collective past. In mining their respective histories, the two community history groups involved in CURIOS follow similar patterns and practices in terms of what they deem valuable (Creswell 2011) for collection. For the most part, these collections start with genealogical relationships and then spawn out from there covering a whole myriad of paraphernalia that has a relationship to where the group is based.

Digitisation is thus seen as the next step in dealing with the 'ontological angsts' which Nora (1996) recognises, but the process of digitisation is one which alters the place-based assertions surrounding traditional community archives. In 'analogue' form, they exist like 'silos' of local knowledge whereby you have to be in-place to add to them or view them. The move from the material to the digital, however, changes the very geography of the material, opening up collections in different ways. Kitchin and Dodge (2011) highlight, in a variety of different settings, how digital technologies change the notion of geography through the influence of 'code' on the everyday. It is this process of change, in the context of digital archives, which this paper wishes to think through.

To date, a variety of academic work has been produced that considers how these relationships change. This has been considered across a variety of disciplines, including geography. For example, Offen (2013, p. 9) neatly summarises the positioning of historical geography and its own progress with regard to the use of digital technologies:

Historical geography should be ready to take advantage of the possibilities that digital media provide ... The question for me is do we let the masters of digital technologies and the forces pushing them usurp or define historical geography going forward, or

do we bring our own traditions and digital imaginations to the table better to shape the scope and direction of things to come?

Offen's comment gets at the crux of the issues that all communities have with the implementation of such technologies and the (micro-) politics in terms of how such things can be negotiated. Thus there has been a variety of work that looks at the positioning of digital archives in terms of creating new possibilities and new perspectives on geography. This can be viewed as democratising the 'doing of history' (see Bolick 2006) as more people (potentially) have access to writing and documenting history, people who potential might not be 'in place' with regard to the physical archive. Furthermore, it can also be considered in terms of how it builds cross-generational links through 'digital storytelling' (see Iseke & Moore 2011) or with regard to highlighting already existing but unseen relationships with collections (see Driver & Jones 2009 ([hiddenhistories.rgs.org](http://hiddenhistories.rgs.org)); Tolia-Kelly 2012). Despite these potential positives, it is also essential to think through the difficulties and tensions that come with digital technologies and have a strong bearing upon the practices of community heritage groups. The need to maintain digital technologies creates a variety of new demands and risks for such groups, which includes, but is not limited to maintaining technology, training and related costs, as well as questions around the ownership of such materials, especially when data can be so easily transferred (see Marshall *et al.* 2006; Higgins 2011; Offen 2013).

### 3. The Archive, Geography and Digitisation

The following section will move to consider some of the ways that geographers have engaged with archives. Firstly, it will situate the position of the 'archive' in geography and highlight why it has become a significant space within the work of geographers. Secondly, it will move to think through the arguments that have developed with reference to the material physical archives. In following these studies and the issues that are raised, it will use this as a starting point to discuss the ways in which the discourses around physical archives resonate into the construction of digital repositories.

A prominent influence upon geographers in this ongoing discussion surrounding archives has been the work of Derrida (1995) who, in his paper *Archive Fever*, places the archive as 'both a place and a reflection of social and institutional authority' (Withers 2002, p. 304). Derrida traces the etymology of the word archive back to the Ancient Greeks where the term *arkheion* was used to describe residence at which a places magistrate would store and control access to all the municipal documents (1995, pp. 1–4). Derrida has had a strong influence upon geographical thought in relation to the archive due, as Withers highlights, to his work on archives aligning itself with geographic thinking; 'issues of place, of power, of political and classificatory authority are thus central to an understanding of what an archive is as both topological site and nomological space' (Withers 2002, p. 304). Hence the archive is a space of geographical interest from which power can be derived, or as Lynch states "situate spaces of 'archontic power'" (1999, p. 67). What becomes key to comprehend here is that the archive is not an ambivalent space that exists outside of societal shaping discourses, but is a product of such shaping. As Derrida argues, the archive is a site of action, whereby knowledge is created through the movement of 'material and people in and out the archive' (Withers 2002, p. 304). Therefore, as Lynch (1999) neatly demonstrates, archives are constructed, shaped, produced and

manipulated by those who choose to create them. Whether they function as part of the state apparatus, an academic wanting to protect their *oeuvre*, a professional archivist, or a community heritage group wishing to preserve a sense of their history, they all undergo a process of selection whereby some items will be seen to have value, whereas others will not. Such decisions directly influence what can be said with ‘authority’ from an archive and thus what histories can be articulated. As Derrida argues, and also suggested by Foucault (1972), the construction of the archive gives power and credence to what has happened and potentially how it will be interpreted in the future.

To see how such theoretical discussions have relevance to that of community heritage, a number of geographical enquiries (Kurtz 2009) into the production of less formal archives have taken place that highlight this relationship between the practices of collection and the production of archives. As Benjamin observed, ‘collecting is a form of practical memory’ (1986, p. 206), and this is an interesting starting point to think about the role of community archives and heritage. This also has consequential questions for thinking about the digitising of community archives, and the way in which data are placed and connected with other data. Digital technologies offer a whole range of new and interesting possibilities in which questions of value and categorisation come to the fore, while at the same time offering other possibilities to re-address and remake such processes. The following discussion will be used to follow trends in the practical ways of creating archives in order to think through how these ideas and concepts will then transfer into digital collections.

### *3.1. Collecting as ‘Rescue Archaeology’*

Cresswell (2011) examined archival sites in Chicago, Illinois, relating to the historic Maxwell Street Market, which was demolished in the 1980s. The study reveals how Maxwell became a site of political struggle, which after its closure, resulted in the production of multiple archival sites, each ‘gleaning’ a range of ‘things’ from the former market site. The collections examined included an ‘official’ collection in the Chicago History Museum; an ‘archive of things’ collected by the local (re)activist group, the Maxwell Street Historic Preservation Coalition; and a personal collection by one of its more active members. Cresswell (2011, p. 2) argues that ‘things are at the heart of the process of constructing an archive of a place’ and that his study of the process of archiving is ‘informed by those who urge us to give due care and attention to the things people push to one side and ignore, the things that do not make it into official places of memory’.

Cresswell draws on Pearson and Shanks’ notion of ‘rescue archaeology’ to focus on the high cultural stakes at play in ‘linking seemingly worthless things to the endless narratives, the political aspirations and disappointments, which have accumulated around them’ (Cresswell 2011, p. 2 citing Pearson & Shanks 2001, p. 156). In doing so, he argues that the different representations of Maxwell Street Market reflect differences in the way people gather and attach value to ‘things’ – the art of collecting is, therefore, central to the act of valuing. He asserts:

This process of gathering, valuing and archive-making reflects the ability of those doing the collecting: their ability to give something value, ensure that this value is shared, and defend this value against counter charges of valuelessness or alternative values. (2011, p. 3)



Lorimer and MacDonald (2002) also aimed to enact this sense of rescue archaeology on the uninhabited Scottish island of Taransay following a BBC TV series based there. As they walked in the island, they began to piece together a sense of history to the island, which reflected both recent and distant changes in the land. This developed in part from their own memories of the TV series, noting the ways in which the camera had directed their vision, and, in part, from the remnant features they found in the landscape. Here, memory, object and landscape created a number of significant sites of discussion for the pair, allowing them to comprehend the importance of ‘material cultures and contexts’ to ‘things’ in order ‘rescue new realms of meaning from the fragmentary and ephemeral’ (Lorimer & MacDonald 2002, p. 102).

Returning to Creswell’s paper, he also chooses to show how different, more individualised, archives begin to question traditional forms of value in the archive. In highlighting what he denotes as ‘collections of documents and artefacts collected by experts and enthusiasts in, around and about Maxwell Street’ as the archive of place (that being Maxwell Street Market) and ‘to the place itself as a kind of living archive’ (2011, p. 3), he suggests that there are also ‘alternative archives’, particularly the Coalition Archive, which represent ‘non-sanctioned places of excluded or marginalised memory’ (2011, p. 3) (see Papailias 2005; Burton 2006). Here, Creswell cites value as important to ‘what gets included’, but articulates how it is more complicated than just values such as transience, durability, uniqueness, intrinsic quality, auratic value, aesthetic value, or functional utility. As Frow (2003, p. 35) suggests, things exist within different ‘regimes of values’ and Creswell (2011, p. 5) alludes to this by stating: ‘the archive is a particular kind of place where objects are valued, with its own regimes of value’. By comparing the archived collections of the Museum to the Coalition – the latter were, he says, ‘looking in a completely different kind of way with different notions of value’. Creswell concludes that if there is one principle that informs the collecting of things for this archive, ‘it is the connection between objects and the activities of the market’. Or as in these cases, it is the cultural repertoires, whereby the archive is a formal material repository and the cultural repertoire is the practice and reiterated transmission of knowledge through performance.

In following these lines of thought, the context of the CURIOS case studies fit well within these concepts of rescue and value. The historical communities produce their own archives, initially in physical form and then extended to the digital. The process is driven by a sense of needing to rescue a ‘past’ that would otherwise be lost. In doing this, the practice of collecting ‘things’ that others might see as ‘valueless’ is the very point at which they seem to have most value for those communities. This chimes greatly with the previously mentioned work of Nora; however, Nora’s work situated such activities on a national scale, but here it is local sense of place and history that is being rescued. These activities of collection are attempts to story the landscape by the people who dwell within it, ‘marking and claiming’ that landscape (Rose 2012, p. 757), often when such claims within the history of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland have been refuted (Mewett 1982; Hunter 1991). The digital archives therefore represent a further medium to continue this process of claiming, with genealogy and its relationship to land (who someone was, where they lived, and so forth) the focal point of the archives and the starting point to digitising these collections. Robertson (2009) also highlights these processes within the context of the Western Isles, where she sees such process as being core to the development of island identities, where history and heritage is process through which people are re-connected to place. Further to this, in both cases, the production of archives has also



driven the development of human, cultural and social capital in these locations by creating spaces for the community that move beyond just the process of archiving. These spaces ultimately aim to develop a sense of community being active in different places.

This can be shown in the decisions as to what should be collected and digitised when working with community history groups in Portsoy. Here, two primary historical groups exist within the town; the long-established PSB and the recently created PPP. Both groups have a strong interest in the history and future of Portsoy, but each adopts a slightly different perspective on what part of that history they wish to engage with and which audiences they wish to present this to. Their differences represent a series of micro-political differences between the groups and are related to ways in which the two groups are run and maintained. PSB's sense of value is placed in two primary areas of interest, the history surrounding the Bothy itself and the genealogical history of Portsoy. In doing this, it takes a much more 'formal' approach to the ways in which it constructs historical narratives, and holds Museum Galleries Scotland accreditation for its museum. Conversely, PPP is much more interested in the living memory of residents and attempts to find ways to engage them as a group in a far more 'informal' manner. Therefore, in processes of wanting to create digital content, PSB have been very active in developing collections that open up their genealogical collections, focusing upon developing a more social discussion about the town and the people who live(d) in it. Their collections are based around photos and everyday objects that belonged to people living in Portsoy. Both approaches are interesting because they attempt to mobilise the past to create different projections of the town, constructing different senses of place (Massey 1994) for the people living in, and visiting, Portsoy. Hence, there are parallel processes in place: PSB seems far more engaged with an audience from outside Portsoy, whereas PPP is much more concerned with the people currently living in the town. This greatly reflects the sense of value they place on the cultural objects they choose to collect, preserve and display as well as the sense of community which each is trying to foster and represent (Watson & Smith 2009).

### *3.2. (Re)ordering Archives*

Thus, valuing is central to the production of archives and is resonated in DeSilvey's (2007) account of archiving a Montanan homestead. Here, she takes us through the tumultuous decision-making process of trying to comprehend 'what has value?' and how to index that into an archival system:

Junk or Treasure? Waste or artefact? Matter of indeterminate value complicates judgements about conservation and curation, and calls into question the grounds on which these judgements are made. (DeSilvey, 2007, p. 878)

For DeSilvey (2007, p. 880), her attempts to place artefacts into some kind of order became a process of trying to 'stabilise the homestead's objects and fit them into a system that rendered them legible, and so available for scholarship and instruction'. This proved, in the end, an exceedingly difficult practice, as the whole variety of items collected often pushed at the boundaries of any classificatory system she could create, reflecting Perce's (1999) feeling that such structures just do not last. In encountering this problem, DeSilvey attempted to sidestep it by changing her emphasis on categorisation:

This rough sorting method presented problems, and often things that should have been in the print or archive boxes remained in the artefact boxes because I felt the association with related artefacts was more important than the consistency of categories I'd set, or because they seemed to straddle the boundaries between 'artefact' and 'document'. Mine was an inexact science. (2007, p. 883)

The above shows how DeSilvey began to reimagine and reinterpret a collection and to move beyond traditional archival relationships. As the archive refused to conform to her initial categorisations, she began to stretch and manipulate those self-imposed rules. To a certain extent, this personalised the archive to her own thinking, but in another, it created links of relatedness in the archive that would have been altogether lost without such choices being made, creating a more 'fluid' method of sorting. This reflects DeSilvey's point upon stressing the importance of the connectedness of objects, as well as starting to think through the ways in which digital technologies allow for new connections to be made.

In the co-production of digital archives for community groups, the CURIOS project has been using an Open Linked Data approach. This allows for the easier publishing of structured data for community groups (in website form) and allows for the collections to become more connected with other sources of data. In relation to the work of DeSilvey, this raises a series of interesting questions for the project with regard to how these very grounded physical archives of people and place then become altered by their interaction with other sources of information. For example, a really interesting discussion has been created around the ownership of digital records between the different CE groups involved within Hebridean Connections in the Western Isles.

Individual CE groups are independent entities; but the desire to digitise and publish records (digitally) from their collections has led to a need to collaborate. Yet, such collaboration requires the groups to relinquish some control over their digital records, for mainly practical reasons. This is due to individuals appearing in multiple CE archives, as there has been long history of migration around the islands. When the archives were separate and placed, this did not matter; you could have multiple records for one person in different archives; however, in a digital archive, you can only have one, and this creates or has the potential to create, tension. Moving the records to the digital breaks the previously defined boundaries of the physical archive, causing the CE groups to question and redefine who can contribute to their digital collections, as other groups require the 'right' to edit such records, especially when they have valid information regarding a person. The conversion to a digital form forces these issues surrounding value, trust, and 'truth' to the fore, what value do you put on the place-based nature of the archive? Who do you trust outside your immediate community to 'truthfully' and accurately edit records?

These questions therefore form part of the ongoing research with the different community history groups, using a variety of empirical research methods. This sits alongside and helps to develop further questions around how best to sensitively and effectively co-produce digital archives. This has led to a variety of semi-structured interviews being conducted with members to ascertain their needs and motivations to collecting historical materials. The project has also sought to deploy, where possible, ethnographic methodologies with each community group. This is to gain lived experiences as to how they choose to collect, organise and disseminate their materials in order to reflect back into the interviews and to better inform the computer science side of the project. This has

given the CURIOS team a strong grasp as to how each community involved attempts to organise its own sense of historical narrative in order to help them represent it in a more engaging fashion digitally.

#### 4. Concluding on Digitisation

Digital solutions have been sought as the latest attempt to address these ongoing concerns with regard to a community's ability to maintain and pass on cultural traditions to future generations. The process of rescuing, valuing and then abstracting parts of the past into archives is an ongoing practice into which digital methods are slowly being embedded. In doing this, new publication opportunities are created for community history groups, which allows their accounts of history to be circulated far beyond their place-based locations. This, however, has consequently and inevitably changed the ways in which those narratives are being produced. The digital archive, through its need for collaboration, creates a series of new power dynamics as well as micro-politics for community groups. This redefines the sense of geography that is expressed and further adds weight to Creswell's desire to take a broader interpretation of the archive – 'we have been slow to consider the utility of thinking of other kinds of collecting and other kinds of space as archival, including places themselves' (2011, p. 12). Extending upon the work of Creswell, to consider the archive more fully it 'further problematize(s) the notion of the archive as a rarefied and imperial space and allow(s) us to include more and become messier ourselves in our archival practice' (2011, p. 12). Through the process of digitisation and the availability of more accessible digital archives, this continued attempt to collect and contextualise the past from non-institutional positions becomes a more open possibility.

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#### ORCID

David Beel  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1146-229X>

Hai Nguyen  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9764-9716>

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