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DH and the Digital Archive



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Survey Question: [What is the role of the digital humanities in the future of the archive? \(/question/what-role-digital-humanities-future-archive/\)](/question/what-role-digital-humanities-future-archive/)

I'll start off by disclosing that I am *not* an archivist; my perspective is informed by the time I've spent in archives as a researcher, and the work that I've been doing recently on digital historiography. In a way, I'm an outsider looking in. That being said, historians are introduced to and respect deeply the elements of archival theory that make their work possible, including provenance, authority, and context. I'm also aware that digital technologies have profoundly impacted the way that historians search for, perform, and disseminate research. In particular, historians are increasingly expecting, on one hand, to find primary sources on the web, and on the other, are encouraged, by funding bodies and institutions, to make material available online. This, in turn, has placed added pressure on archivists to allocate increased resources to improving catalogues and item descriptions, and provide full-text documents or high-resolution images whenever possible. The relationship is reciprocal. Practicing digital humanists have taken it upon themselves to develop curated online repositories using a variety of platforms to meet this demand and to support open access initiatives. While this practice is generally positive, I believe that considering an online repository as tantamount to an archive — gestured by our use of the “digital” qualifier — requires some critical attention.

In the most recent edition of the [Debates in the Digital Humanities](http://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/debates/text/88) (<http://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/debates/text/88>) (available online), Jentery Sayers published a thought provoking piece titled “[Dropping the Digital.](http://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/debates/text/88)” (<http://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/debates/text/88>). In short, Sayers “ruins” the digital humanities through *ruination*, a technique whereby a text is manipulated and subsequently compared to the original text to identify differences and confirm or refute previous assumptions. Sayers “drops the digital” from a corpus, and combs through the product in order “to examine how its absence shapes meaning and interpretation.” Ultimately, Sayers’ essay encourages us to be reflexive about how and why we append “digital” in qualifying research. The way I see it, a comparable act of uncritical qualification is occurring on the web with the recent explosion of so-called “digital archives.”

The proliferation of low-barrier of entry and low cost digital repository and content management systems, like Omeka and DSpace, has led to the creation of hundreds (if not thousands) of online repositories housing digital artifacts. Artifacts are digital copies of analog materials, or repositories of borne digital documents, or both. Importantly, *non-archivists* often create these repositories, they are open access, and are sometimes referred to as “digital archives.” The final point requires attention. How does “dropping the digital” from “digital archives” inform our understanding of these online repositories? How are they different from the “physical” archive that we are so familiar with?

Perhaps this is all just a natural shift in what the word “archive” means to people, prompted by digital methodologies and tools. However, I’m in agreement with Kate Theimer as she [argues](http://journalofdigitalhumanities.org/1-2/archives-in-context-and-as-context-by-kate-theimer/) (<http://journalofdigitalhumanities.org/1-2/archives-in-context-and-as-context-by-kate-theimer/>) that the colloquial use of the term “archive” to denote simply “a purposeful collection of surrogates” is problematic due to “the potential for a loss of understanding and appreciation of the historical context that archives preserve in their collections, and the unique role that archives play as custodians of materials in this context.” Indeed, the act of archiving is not simply an arrangement of curated artifacts; materials undergo a strict process of appraisal according to principles of provenance, among others. And while archival institutions are not

without criticism*, I think it's important that we remind ourselves of what we're overlooking when we co-opt the term "archive", a term laden with symbolic meaning, for our digital repositories. Without a doubt, the digitization work that we undertake in cooperation with institutional libraries and community organizations is significant and worthwhile; however, the very act of attempting to create a "digital archive" is deeply informed by a value system embedded in Western ways of knowing. Ultimately, the creation of digital collections will continue, as it is a trend fueled mainly by principles of accessibility and is therefore commendable and much needed. However, humanities scholars that are turning to and creating these digital resources must think critically about why and how they are created, and how they might affect new scholarship and knowledge.

* See, for example, Wood, Stacy, et al. "Mobilizing records: Re-framing archival description to support human rights." *Archival Science* 14 (2014): 397-419.

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