"I Have Friends Everywhere":[1] A Field Guide for Community Archive Activists

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Second Verse, Same As The First

On May 6, 1933, the Institute of Sex Research in Berlin was attacked by the Deutsche Studentenschaft, a general organization of student committees across all German universities that had become dominated by the National Socialist German Students' League. This was not a covert affair carried out in the middle of the night. The student mob was accompanied by a brass band, the leader of the group gave a public speech as the Institute was being looted, and students sang the "Horst-Wessel-Lied," an anthem of the Nazi party. They were joined later in the day by Hitler's own personal paramilitary group, the Sturmabteilung (SA). Following four days of ransacking, the Institute's library and archives were destroyed in a book burning at the Opernplatz. Tens of thousands of books, journals, and images were destroyed.

The institute was a marvel of the early twentieth-century movement for LGBTQ+ research and rights and a key cultural player in Weimar Germany. In the fourteen years it operated, it pioneered research and treatment for gender and sexual minorities (Tracey 2023). In addition to being a symbolic act meant to help eradicate deviance from Nazi-approved ideology around gender performance, the burning of its research was a monumental blow to the LGBTQ+ movement that would take decades to recover from.

Shortly after being sworn into office for his second term as president of the United States, Donald Trump began a similar campaign of information warfare and erasure in the federal government. While it lacked the accompaniment of a brass ensemble, this too was not a covert affair. This assault has been accompanied with social media posts, executive orders, and press conferences (Trump 2025). Research studies focused on the LGBTQ+ community have been scrubbed from government websites and archives (Jingnan 2025, Smith 2025). References to the transgender community have been erased from the Stonewall National Monument (Kim 2025). Grant funding for programs or studies that center the queer community have been clawed back, and the parameters to qualify for future funding have been restricted as to further cement the erasure of the queer and trans community (Pananjady 2025, Reberkenny 2025). Much ink has already been spilled comparing the actions of the MAGA regime to Nazi Germany, and rightly so. At the time of this writing, the authors see no reason to believe more comparisons will not be made.

A Rallying Cry for Community Archive Activists

The purpose of this paper is to highlight a key difference between the assault of the Institute of Sex Research and our current moment—namely, the ability for both information

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professionals and the general public to quickly access, distribute, and preserve information. With the internet at our fingertips, we can all become archive activists. We, the authors, understand that many readers will already be familiar with the tools and processes we lay out. While we hold information professionals with the highest respect, we also know the reality of the current moment is that many of them are drowning in a storm of book bans, loss of resourcing, increased public scrutiny, and surveilled speech. The main audience for this essay is our allies among the general public. We are in no way providing an exhaustive list of archival procedures, but this primer on best practices is a good place to start and, we hope, something that is easily shareable.

Traditional wisdom in archiving has been to assess your collecting capacity, make judgment calls about what objects (digital or otherwise) fit your organization's mission or vision, and save what fits those relatively narrow parameters. Cheap and/or plentiful storage does not mean indiscriminate storage. In physical collections, that means consolidating spaces to store as much relevant material as possible. Conventional wisdom also extends to digital collections—you have more space to play but still need to exercise discretion when appraising materials for long-term storage.

Part of this looks like assessing the overall value of the material. Consider the following scenario: if you have newspaper clippings in your physical collection, what is the value of keeping the clipping in your possession if there is a central repository from the publisher? What about access through the digital archives of your State Archives? A newspaper clipping, even stabilized and housed correctly in a museum's collections, quickly becomes brittle and, at some point, illegible due to the degradation of the media through inherent vice. What can everyday archive activists do in this scenario? Collections professionals short on resources can download a scanned copy from the archives for reference and note the rights requirements (for reference, publication, or exhibition later) and who to contact to receive permission.[2]

What do we do when central repositories begin falling to fascist oversight and erasure? As individual practitioners and small collectives, it's difficult to fully rely on institutions as we see collections disappear in front of us with "404 Not Found" and the call for revisionist history from the top. For many, we need to become our own custodians of information.

This paper provides some of the down-and-dirty practices of collecting digital materials. With these basic skills, you can rally your community to come together as memory collectives. Not to be alarmist, but work together to spread out the knowledge as far as possible so each can operate as an independent node with multiple redundancies, just in case.

A Crash Course in Archive Activism

One resource that is a good place to start on personal archiving is the Library of Congress' blog post "Your Personal Archiving Project: Where Do You Start?" by Mike Ashenfelder (Ashenfelder 2016). It's like a crash course in archival thinking, with examples for analog collections, but it can be distilled into a couple key points that are excellent to keep in mind.

First, when approaching any project, consider it as a big collection. That is more manageable, rather than feeling like you're facing a daunting number of individual records. Start deciding on categories of media to refine your collection that items will most likely fit into: data, articles, images, etc. There isn't a right or wrong answer, and the easiest thing to do is to identify groups that already exist. But the key at this point is going to be *consistency*. After this initial sorting scheme, use folders to refine a little further, perhaps by source—any other

ways to keep those files separated into their piles. Again, the key will be a decipherable internal logic and *consistency*.

With those key points for reflection, turn to digital preservation. If you don't want to invest in a physical hard drive, set up an extra Google Drive by creating a new Gmail account. This is a relatively safe option since it's mass market, fairly reliable, and stable so far. With one of these, get 15GB cloud storage, which is a good amount of storage to start. You can scan and store a couple hundred photos, articles, or tables on this amount of storage—even high-res images. If you're more interested in using a physical hard drive, there are plenty of good, high capacity options for external hard drives that are compatible with a variety of hardware and software combinations. An electronics store will be your best bet in finding a compatible device that works for your situation. If you can, you might want to get two or three to have multiple storage vessels to validate authentic files (a process described later in the paper).

Inventories and Cataloging

In whatever storage media you are using, establish folders that correspond to your categories, and create a Word document to be your recordkeeping document to save in the storage as your notes. You can use this running notes document as the basis for a finding aid. A finding aid is a technical archival document that acts like it sounds: written by archivists, its purpose is to describe a collection and provide some rationale around it. It describes the history of the collection and the arrangement of the materials, and it is intended to help an unfamiliar user navigate the contents of the collection and identify anything relevant to their interests.

It's more than just an inventory, however. It describes the top-level details, including the scope and contents, the dates, the creator, perhaps the language, the source of the materials, and the arrangement. All of this is organized into groupings—these can be material types (photos, documents, maps, etc.), dates you downloaded items, dates of creation, or other topics. The finding aid should function as a wayfinding document, so *consistency* is key to make it most useful. Combine the finding aid with an inventory document (such as an Excel spreadsheet), and you have the foundations of a solid recordkeeping practice.

The inventory document is where you're going to detail the individual objects: naming and labeling them, documenting how large they are, describing them, creating keywords or identifying people in photos or articles, adding dates, etc. You can change the title of a downloaded file to correspond to the inventory number you assign (applying an internal logic). While you're working on the object level, think about updating the running notes document; it's like the context or a narrative document to keep track of your thoughts, progress, and some additional things that might not fit into one of these technical documents.

One way to describe your records on this document is using a common vocabulary for each entry and some basic headers like Creator, Title, Date, Subject, Size. Alternatively, many to use an organizational schema called *Dublin Core* when thinking about what kind of information to describe (Dublin Core 2025). *Dublin Core* is also one of the archives field's standards and is also very approachable for somebody new to describing records. Using *Dublin Core* identifiers for reference will help you identify some of the key pieces to help describe your records; this is metadata. These metadata terms from *Dublin Core* can be thought of as buckets—the terms become the column headers in your inventory document, and you fill these buckets with information: the who, when, and what. If you're putting multiple things into the description, separate terms or phrases with commas. For instance, you can have multiple

"Subject" or "Creator" values and your "Description" can be a longer-form explanation. The "Description" can also hold lots of keywords, so you can put those in as well.

Voight-Kampff,[3] but For Digital Files

Another best practice is to make a column for a checksum. A checksum is a unique identifier assigned by an algorithm that each file has based on its digital DNA—it's basically a digital asset's fingerprint. So long as you use the same algorithm (MD5, sha1, or myriad others) this is a valuable piece of information to tell you the file you have saved and are describing is authentic and unchanged since the last time you checked it (or when you downloaded it). There are lots of free resources and industry standards for these algorithms, so they are resilient and reliable. A checksum validation process can look like:

- Pulling your digital file from its original source and uploading it into an online checker.[4] This first reading will give you your baseline checksum value.
- If you're feeling like a true preservationist, download a second copy of the data or record and store that in a completely different hard drive. That can be your preservation copy (just be sure to check that one every so often, too).
- Periodically upload a copy of these files from your storage devices into the same algorithm; if the checksum value has changed, it means your file has been altered (new text or data has been added or something has been deleted) or the file has become corrupted and it's no longer reliable.

If your checksum comes back incorrect, you no longer use that tested version of your file. Copy an authentic file from another of your other storage areas, like your preservation copy, and put it into storage. This is why best practice is to have multiple storage media like a cloud drive or multiple external hard drives. Check them against each other every so often to make sure they're all returning the same authenticated checksum that you saved in your inventory sheet when you downloaded the file initially. Doing this makes it less likely that something catastrophic will happen to the same file in separate storage media. And, if all of them have changed in one fell swoop, saving these files isn't going to be on your mind because we're in a societal collapse due to an EMP, solar flare, or something similar. There will be bigger things to worry about.

Archive Activism Quick Reference Guide

In the broadest terms, keep in mind these handful of points:

1. Back up additional copies of your records and files to one or two extra storage devices or cloud accounts.
    a. With external hardware, you could store them in different locations: a hard drive in your office, one at home, or just different closets in your house. But ensure all storage areas are secure and easily accessible.
2. Name and organize your files in a *consistent* and readily understandable manner.
    a. Use letters of the Latin alphabet when making alphanumeric IDs. Don't use spaces, punctuation, or symbols. Use hyphens or underscores instead of spaces where necessary.
    b. Don't overcomplicate your labeling system—you want somebody to be able to understand your system with no training, just in case.

3. Write basic metadata about your files and keep these in your inventory document: who, what, where, and when. Doing this when you download a file will help, but at the least jot down some information that you will be able to expand upon at a later date.
4. Save files in stable, non-proprietary formats like PDF, JPEG, or TIF.

Additional resources for community archiving, zine-making and archiving, and oral history preservation can be found in Appendix A.

Teach a Man to Fish

With some of those in-the-weeds details, one of the most important things to remember is a piece of timeless wisdom: keep it simple. Consider downloading webpages, articles, and data sets as stable PDFs and sheets with readily understandable identifiers, file names, tags, and consistent archival description. Do that rather than relying on third-party programs or overly technical tools. Often, home archivists and archive activists won't have all of the technical skills to fix technical issues from proprietary software. Support networks for a third-party software or program may also crumble in even a short period of time. That leaves the archivist with a legacy system and no means of supporting it.

Additionally, storage hardware has progressed to the point where we have massive, reliable external hard drives with a high degree of resiliency and compatibility. Massive storage capacity is cheaper than it has ever been. Good recordkeeping and massive storage capacity can outweigh finicky and unwieldy tech under most circumstances. Rely on that.

Digital preservation is about iteration: it is ongoing. So don't rest on thinking, "I made a backup copy. I'm done." Backing up data, images, and other electronic materials alone isn't digital preservation. Recordkeeping, description, and the regular checkup on it is also critical to the digital preservation process. There is also no universal strategy to save information. Everything depends on context and that can mean capacity, physical storage space, digital storage space, capabilities, goals, and aims. In most circumstances, these would be limiting factors. But in troubling times, with the indiscriminate erasure of data and their accompanying reports, it is necessary to be proactive and save. Sort out the duplicates later. Preservation is active. Nothing *has been* preserved, there are only objects *being* preserved. It is an ongoing, iterative process—never a one-and-done.

Conventional wisdom says you should be selective in your review and appraisal of materials, but in dire times, save the files that you have capacity for. Doing this while keeping in mind good archival practice requires description and management. On the other side of this particularly fraught moment in American history, we can come together to compare collections. We can then begin the process of offloading some redundant pieces or finding a more suitable home for the information. Until then, whenever that is, we have to keep as much material as we can as safe as possible.

Most importantly, we have to acknowledge that in the war of information, more is more: more copies, more collectives, more friends.

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Endnotes

1 *Andor* is one of the best *Star Wars* properties in recent memory. We will not be taking questions at this time.

2 That's how one of the authors of this essay worked within the archives of a small historic house museum that had limited physical space, little to no digital collection infrastructure at the start of his tenure, and limited capacity as a part-time employee managing a collection of over three thousand physical objects, a reference library over one thousand books, and tens of thousands of institutional and historical archival records in varying states of digital readiness and accessibility.

3 The Voight-Kampff machine is the fictional interrogation tool used to distinguish humans from replicants. We deeply regret that we can reference more than one sci-fi dystopia in this paper.

4 Despite there being an upload size limit, this is a good tool: https://defuse.ca/checksums.htm#checksums.

APPENDIX A. FURTHER READING AND RESOURCES

For those interested in exploring additional resources, we recommend the following resources, toolkits, etc.

Community Archiving Toolkits

Sharing Community History - Community Archives Collaborative
UCLA Community Archives Lab Toolkit
Community Archives Digital Preservation Toolkit - Digital Preservation Coalition
Community Archives Toolkit

Zine-Making and Archiving Resources

Memorial Archiving Zine - Invisible Histories
zinelibraries.info
How to Make a Zine - Library of Congress

Oral History Preservation Guides

How to Do Oral History - Smithsonian Institution Archives
Archiving Oral History: Manual of Best Practices - Oral History Association

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