# 01. ARCHIVING ACTIVISM IN THE DIGITAL AGE: INTRODUCTION

### ANN RIGNEY AND DANIELE SALERNO

## Memory and activism

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| Fig. 1.1.: ‘So that this is not forgotten – Archive’ (courtesy of archivo15M – [Soc1edad 5ivil en M](http://goog_468404636)[ovimiento](http://archivosol15m.wordpress.com/)) |

At first sight, the phrase ‘So that this is not forgotten’ (in Spanish: ‘Para que esto no se olvide’) seems more appropriate to the hard marble of a war memorial than to a thin sticky note. But it is precisely that phrase in all its resonance which is used in the above image with reference to 15M, the Spanish anti-austerity movement that played out in the cities of Spain in the spring of 2011. More precisely, it is used with reference to the archive of 15M, which is presented as a bulwark against forgetting something that deserves to be remembered.

This amateurish composition of words and images now serves as the cover of the digital booklet that compiles the minutes of meetings held between 2011 and 2017 to create an archive documenting what happened in those eventful days of protests.[[1]](#footnote-1) The archive was first named ‘Acampada Sol’, after the occupation of the central square of Puerta del Sol in Madrid. Later on, the archive was renamed 15M, shorthand for 15 May, the day activists occupied the square setting up the encampment (also hashtagged and nicknamed as #*AcampaSol*).

The minutes of the first meeting describe how fourteen activists gathered on 31 May 2011, in a street located a bit apart from the very heart of the protests, to discuss how to transmit the legacy and narratives of the demonstrations to future generations. They argued for putting the question of memory on the movement's agenda by bringing ‘the idea of heritage to everyone in the *acampada* [campsite]’.[[2]](#footnote-2) They discussed how to collect material during the protest and protect it in case of police intervention. They started imagining how to digitize the physical material produced by the movement, debating about the very idea of ‘digital archive’ and whether to collaborate with existing institutions for preserving the archive for later generations. In short, activists were already imagining how the ongoing protests would be remembered in the future and in the long-term, and taking steps to shape that memory by creating an archive.

Although the 15M occupation lasted just a few weeks, the minutes of the archiving group cover six years. Their archival lab outlasted the visible protest by far, indicating that social movements live beyond and beneath their spectacular and visible waves of contention.[[3]](#footnote-3) The existence of the 15M archive is a reminder that protest movements do not just have a history (taking place at one particular moment) but also have afterlives in the form of stories, images, and other material traces. Until very recently, however, activist mnemonic and archival labour has flown under the radar of scholars both of social movements and collective memory.

Ironically, the phrase that argues for the lasting preservation of the history of the 15M movement is written on a support made for short-lived reminders (and indeed the words ‘para que’ are already fading). But the words do persist: digitized and preserved in the 15M Archive, these vulnerable materials are now available in digital form as the cover picture for the minutes of the physical archive commission assemblies.

Together with the minutes of their many meetings, the sticky note with its memorializing message reflects the labour and ambitions of the 15M archiving group. It also encapsulates many of the issues that readers will find in this collection of essays: the interplay between remembering and forgetting, the analogue and the digital, the past and the unfolding present and future, as these play out in the archiving of social movements. Whereas the latter are usually seen as forward-looking, the efforts put into the 15M’s archive, now housed in the Tres Peces cultural centre in Madrid,[[4]](#footnote-4) serves as a reminder that memory and activism are more intimately entangled than hitherto surmised; and that archiving has been a way for activists to constitute themselves as mnemonic communities as well as political actors.

The question how people articulate past, present and future in making sense of the world has been studied from different perspectives.[[5]](#footnote-5) But how different temporalities play into struggles for social change has, until quite recently, been a neglected issue in both memory and social movement studies. Things are changing in both fields. Within memory studies, our field of research, there have been calls for more attention to the role of memory in civic life, specifically in political contention as being at the heart of democratic societies.[[6]](#footnote-6) In that context, the concept of a memory-activism nexus has been proposed[[7]](#footnote-7) as a heuristic framework, entailing the study of the interplay between *memory activism* (concerted attempts to change dominant narratives), the *memory of activism* (how later activism is remembered and transmitted across a variety of cultural forms) and *memory in activism* (how memory, specifically of earlier movements, informs later ones). Within social movement studies,[[8]](#footnote-8) the ‘movement-memory nexus’ has been proposed along similar lines.[[9]](#footnote-9) Studying the ways in which social movements are archived, by themselves and by others, promises to add a new dimension to these discussions. Not just by highlighting archiving as a specific future-oriented mnemonic practice but one that may, in certain hands, be considered a specifically activist one. That activist mnemonic practice doesn’t answer to current definition of ‘memory activism’, which emphasizes challenges to dominant narratives; here the mnemonic activism is directed instead towards providing the condition for activism to be remembered in the future.

Archives – as concept, as cultural phenomenon, and as resource – have long figured in humanities scholarship, providing a basis for discussions of their role in activism to which we will return. In social movement studies, in contrast, archives have hardly figured at all as media of transgenerational memory transmission. Instead, the idea of a ‘repertoire’ – consisting of models for interaction transmitted by embodied performances – has been used to explain, not just shared practices in the present, but also how knowledge of those practices is carried across time in social movements.[[10]](#footnote-10) Crucially, this ‘strong’ understanding of repertoire[[11]](#footnote-11) helps explain continuities and changes in the form taken by contentious actions across generations without those involved having access to formal archives or archiving practices.[[12]](#footnote-12) Given this emphasis on embodied transmission, social movement studies have at best looked to (institutional) archives as historical sources for reconstructing and comparing repertoires of protest over time and across different locations. This preponderance of the concept of repertoire in social movement studies explains the traditional lack of interest in activist recordmaking during protests and the setting up of archives, by participants and observers, to ensure that the legacy of protests and social movements is carried over to future generations. The emerging interest in the role of memory in activism provides a new context in which to bring alternatives to embodied transmission into the understanding of continuities across movements, especially in the digital era.

## Changing notions of the ‘archive’

Archiving has been the subject of intense reflection in multiple disciplines within the humanities, not all of whom speak the same language. Michelle Caswell, in an essay called ‘”The Archive” Is Not an Archives’[[13]](#footnote-13) has noted the gap between experts in information sciences, like herself, who think of archives in the plural as dynamic sites of knowledge production, and cultural theorists who have tended to use the term in the singular and with a capital ‘A’ in line with influential work by Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida.[[14]](#footnote-14) While our collection is interested above all of the nuts and bolts of archiving in the plural, it takes from more philosophical approaches some fundamental insights into the nature of archives in order to frame our understanding of archiving as a mnemonic practice.

Taking state archives as paradigmatic of all archival projects, Foucault sees archives as instruments of control, as constituting the ‘condition of possibility’ of discursive production (‘the archive is first the law of what can be said’[[15]](#footnote-15)). In line with this reasoning but with different emphases, Derrida then posited ‘the Archive’ as a virtual site for imagining alternatives to state-sponsored projects of recording; on the one hand, by dismissing institutional archives as an ultimately futile and power-driven attempt to fix knowledge in favour of other forms of knowledge transferred in an ever-renewed form through the repertoire of embodied practices; on the other hand, by positing the existence of the ‘an-archive’ as a repository for marginalized knowledge: every act of selection produces an un-archived remainder beyond the reach of official records.[[16]](#footnote-16)

The role of archives has been persistently flagged in memory studies as a key factor in cultural memory-making, but it has rarely been studied in its own right. The exception to this general rule is Aleida Assmann’s conceptualization of the relationship between ‘archive’ and ‘memory’.[[17]](#footnote-17) Although her terminology has slightly shifted over time, her approach remains based on a fundamental distinction between passive and active forms of memory, with ‘working memory’ associated with narratives that are in circulation and ‘storage memory’ associated with the archival storage of information. The archive, here too associated with bureaucracy and state power, is based on selected information that has been deemed important enough to preserve and, although it has not yet been interpreted and brought into structures of meaning, it has the potential to be activated – and hence to become active, working and narrativized – at a later point in time. ‘The archive, therefore, can be described as a space that is located on the border between forgetting and remembering, its materials are preserved in a state of latency, in a space of intermediary storage (*Zwischenspeiche*r)’.[[18]](#footnote-18) Against this background, Assmann argues further that the more that institutionalized archives are tailor made to match hegemonic narratives (‘canonical memory’) the more they took on the character of ‘political archives’. In more democratic societies, in contrast, the archive is ideally constituted in a more open way as truly ‘historical archives’ that can become in the long-term a resource for alternative narratives: ‘Where political archives function as an important tool for power, historical archives store information which is no longer of immediate use’ and constitute ‘a kind of “lost-and-found office” for what is no longer needed or immediately understood’.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Assmann’s key contribution here is her understanding of archives as a form of latent memory, situated between forgetting and remembering, between raw data and its interpretation and narrativization. Her distinction between latent and working memory implies that the dynamics of memory-making are oriented towards the future as well as past even if that future is, as yet, undetermined or merely aspirational. In this, she echoes Derrida: ‘[T]he question of the archive is not, I repeat, a question of the past…but rather a question of the future, the very question of the future, question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow. The archive: if we want to know what this will have meant, we will only know tomorrow’.[[20]](#footnote-20) What both theorists share is a belief that the boundaries of an archive are porous and that archives are not fortresses but rather changing in their meaning and composition as part of a larger ecology. This fundamental principle has been echoed by recent advocates of the ‘living’ archive.[[21]](#footnote-21)

For all the value of this basic insight, theoretical approaches to ‘the archive’ remain very much tied to one model: institutionalised collections produced by professionals, funded by the state, and hence linked to issues of power and governance. In the last decades, however, changes in the very nature of archiving as a cultural phenomenon have occurred in tandem with new conceptualisations of archiving on the part of scholars and practitioners that integrate the idea that archives are dynamic sites and go well beyond this equation between archives and state-based repositories of written documents. To echo Caswell, ‘”The Archive” is not an archives’ and state-organised repositories are no longer (if they ever were) the only act in town. Several inter-related developments can be flagged here.

These revolve around democratisation and technological innovation. Since at least the 1960s the idea of ‘a right to (the) archive’ and in general to ‘a right to memory’ has become more widespread and paved the way for new historiographical and archival practices aiming for greater inclusivity. A milestone in this development was the emergence of oral history as a method to capture histories that were nowhere preserved in the form of written record and often linked to the experiences of people without cultural capital who figured only in criminal and medical records.[[22]](#footnote-22) The ‘right to (the) archive’ has also been taken literally. Archives have been extending the scope of their collecting practices to become more representative as well as opening up their collections to the public in the form of exhibitions on the principle that accessibility and ‘public participation’ should be more central to their workings. Archiving and curation, conservation and access, have thus become more closely entangled as institutions have become more public facing.

Moreover, archiving occurs increasingly outside the framework of heritage institutions. The number of new citizen-based community archives is rapidly increasing and such concepts as ‘living archives’, ‘community archives’ and ‘autonomous archives’[[23]](#footnote-23) becoming common currency in critical archival studies.[[24]](#footnote-24) Carried in part by skilled ‘pro-ams’,[[25]](#footnote-25) community archives have become one of the pillars in constituting group identity both to its own members and to the outside world. Its very existence bears witness to the fact the group has had a history and aspires to a future, and provides ‘evidence for the creation and continuation of claims to identities and places’[[26]](#footnote-26) which is particularly important for emergent groups seeking to establish or ‘institute’ themselves.[[27]](#footnote-27)

In line with this role of archives in constituting publics, theorists have also increasingly recognised that archival collections are not only a source of information but can also be a focus for affective investment and hence a repository of shareable feelings and emotions.[[28]](#footnote-28) Indeed, the very labour involved in collecting, ordering, making accessible, and caring for the records in the archive acts has been seen as an agent of community-building especially when the resources being archived are material ones, hence requiring the physical presence of their guardians at a designated place.

The value attached to public participation reflects the democratization that has been affecting many fields of cultural production and, in the case of archiving, has fostered new ideas about ownership, stakeholdership, and accountability, and idea that involved citizens should have the possibility of making their own records about their own experiences. The downside of this extension of the ‘right to (the) archive’ means that the relevant know-how (in terms of archival architecture, metadata, sustainability of access) is not always present in such initiatives or the relevant infrastructural support. But the ensuing dilemmas have also been generating new collaborations between professionals and amateurs in, for example, the formation of community archives[[29]](#footnote-29) with the help of engaged archivists whose role is conceived more in terms of mediation, public service and outreach than in terms of the hieratic control of an archive set up and then ‘protected’ by experts from the public at large. Where traditionally archiving served administration, law, and the writing of history, it is now also linked to social justice and community-building[[30]](#footnote-30) as well as to public outreach, often in conjunction with the arts. Seen within this framework, archives have become open-ended and dynamic sites where the question ‘what is to be preserved’ is continuously being linked to its societal value in the here and now; and where ‘meaning’ is produced rather than fixed.[[31]](#footnote-31)

More could be said about current theories of archiving both within the field of information science and humanities at large, but enough has been hopefully said (1) to definitively dismiss the idea their being a monolithic ‘archive’ that represents an exclusive and state-sponsored form of knowledge; (2) to support the idea that we can better think of *archiving* (note the verbal form) in the plural as a multi-sited and multi-actorial phenomenon; and (c), that *archiving* operates through texts, images, objects that are collected and arranged as part of a future-oriented and, in the case of emergent groups, aspirational mode of remembrance that is not yet (and may never become) narrative in form. It’s memory as emergent, as potentiality and as aspiration,[[32]](#footnote-32) rather than as *fait accompli*.

## Activism and the digital

The flourishing of oral history since the 1960s was possible also because technological innovation made the recording of aural – and later visual – information more affordable and manageable. Digital technology has played a similar role in the democratization of archiving practices outlined above. Since the 1990s, the right to (the) archive found a powerful tool in the digital and the internet, with their promise of unlimited and affordable possibilities for storing, reproducing and making available not only written texts, but also visual, audio, and audio-visual information. Digitisation in its various facets has meant that information can be easily replicated but, more importantly, that control over the means of archival production is no longer the privilege of institutions but open to all those who care about certain topics or causes enough to collect information and preserve it for the future. This has led to the emergence of archives that are supported and organised by amateurs or off-duty professionals in their role as committed citizens.

But more fundamentally for our topic here, digitization has changed the very nature of activism itself by providing new social media platforms for expressing dissent and mobilizing opposition be that as part of a movement or as an individual ‘artivist’ in exile with no direct access to public space (see Ann-Katrine Schmidt Nielsen’s chapter below). The term ‘media activism’ captures this new arena, which offers new opportunities for groups who because of disability or geographical distance have otherwise no easy access to the usual repertoire of contention to the extent that this relies on physical presence (see Pollaert and Van Trigt’s chapter below).

Moreover, digitization has also changed the nature of embodied activism. As Castells has argued, these have become ‘hybrid’: demonstrations are prepared online, rely on online interactions even as they are being carried out on-site and, crucially for our topic here, rely on digital technologies to record their own actions.[[33]](#footnote-33) The ease with which contemporary campaigns can be recorded – with the possibility of capturing sound, movement, and visuals greatly enhanced – means that recent protest organically create enormous quantities of images (and hence generates one of the most important preconditions for archiving: the availability of information).

The Global Justice movement, starting in the late 1990s with the protests in Seattle[[34]](#footnote-34) and continuing in Genoa in 2001,[[35]](#footnote-35) was arguably the first ‘born digital’ movement[[36]](#footnote-36) to integrate digital recording into the ‘repertoire of contention’. Accordingly, when the Italian police raided the Social Forum headquarter and media centre during the protests against the G8 summit in Genoa in July 2001, their first target was the servers and materials that media activist organizations – among them Indymedia, a global network of independent media outlets – had accumulated as evidence of police repression (which had caused, among other consequences, the death of 23-year-old demonstrator Carlo Giuliani). The hard disks were seized, and the computers illegally destroyed. This shows how at the beginning of the new century, both activists and police were well aware of the power of digital tools in accumulating evidence against the police and state repression, with the potential to be later used, in the media, to counter distortions of the facts and, in court, to obtain justice. Moreover, recordings such as the video documenting the killing of the demonstrator Neda Salehi Agha-Soltan in Tehran in 2009, when brought into circulation in acts of ‘media activism’, feed back into a protest movement while also creating, thanks to the internet, transnational networks of solidarity.[[37]](#footnote-37)

Mike Lukovitch’s cartoon on the Wave of Green movement in Iran in 2009 illustrates well how the presence of recording devices increasingly shaped interactions between protesters and police throughout the 2000s. Reworking the famous photo of the Tankman in Tiananmen Square in 1989, Lukovitch highlights the role that smartphones and social media platforms were believed to be playing in the Iranian protests.

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| Fig. 1.2. The Tank Man of Iran, 2009 (courtesy of Mike Luckovich). |

Beyond their evidentiary function, recordings made by activists also have a role in helping the latter to tell their own story and in their own terms as it is unfolding but also in the future. For that to happen, however, ephemeral materials need to be preserved and made accessible in the long-term; in other words, archived. It is no coincidence then that movements have started to set up their own archives and, indeed, to integrate archiving along with recording in the repertoire of contention. Memory work is not something that occurs after the fact, but is already integrate into movements as they anticipate how their actions may inspire new forms of protest and give the movement and its message an afterlife.

## Between archiving activists and activist archivists

As mentioned at the beginning of this introduction, self-archiving has become a way for activists to constitute themselves as mnemonic communities as well as political actors – witness the work of archiving committees within 15M, but also in Occupy in the USA, Nuit Debout in France, the Egyptian Revolution and – as Özge Çelikaslan shows in her chapter below – in the Gezi Park Protests.[[38]](#footnote-38) These initiatives have in turn led to the emergence of a metadiscourse about archiving and the importance of ‘movement-memory’[[39]](#footnote-39) exemplified by the US-based Interference Archive[[40]](#footnote-40) that aims to provide a virtual hub for different social movements by collecting post factum materials as well as exhibiting material online, offering a counterpart to the physical space of the MayDay rooms discussed by Rosemary Grennan below. Other websites offer practical advice to activists on how to set up their own archive.[[41]](#footnote-41) To be sure, archiving is not usually the first priority of those caught up in a protest cycle both because it takes time and energy away from the struggle at hand, and imagines a moment when that struggle will belong to the past. When movements run out of steam or are forced off the streets, however, cultivating its memory through archiving may be the only form of survival possible.

Activist archiving has a ‘constitutive’ function, to use Stuart Hall’s term.[[42]](#footnote-42) It provides evidence of the movement’s existence and its action: to the movement itself and to the outside world. In the process, it defines its legacy in its own terms rather than those of the mainstream media which tends to emphasize the issue of law and order rather than the movement’s experiences and aspirations.[[43]](#footnote-43) Self-archiving, finally, allows for the movement to ‘stay on message’ for its own supporters as they seek to imagine the movement as a whole from the ground up; but also, most importantly, for later generations.[[44]](#footnote-44) Struggles to control the narrative occur as events are unfolding but are also prolonged in struggles about how best to remember it. Having one’s own archive offers a bulwark against absorption into hegemonic narratives and a bolthole for keeping alive the memory of the hopes that inspired the movement. Claiming the title 'archive' can give greater authority and credibility to a group's materials and, by extension, their knowledge.[[45]](#footnote-45)

Rebecka Taves Sheffield recently suggested that archives serve as abeyance structures for social movements,[[46]](#footnote-46) while Phil Cohen[[47]](#footnote-47) has compared them poetically to Noah’s Ark in that they keep a movement’s energy in place until such time as a later generation will reactivate it: ‘Under these circumstances the drive to archive, to construct a little ark of political covenant in the hope that at some future date, it may be opened under/more hospitable circumstances, is correspondingly intense’.[[48]](#footnote-48) This drive towards archiving activism with an eye to its future influence brings memory work and activism into a very close alliance: archiving in such circumstances becomes an integral part of political action. It creates the conditions for the protest to have an afterlife in memory, hence giving it the potential to become a source of inspiration in the future. The images collected in the 15M archive were mainly taken from the perspective of the precariat involved rather than from the helicopter perspective of the authorities,[[49]](#footnote-49) thus constituting a sensorium for re-experiencing the event as well as lasting evidence of its worthiness, unity, numbers and commitment or what Tilly has called a movement’s WUNC.[[50]](#footnote-50)

One way or another, archiving has become such a significant part of recent social movements that skills in recordmaking and recordkeeping is now seen as a part of the repertoire of contention itself.[[51]](#footnote-51) The term ‘archival activism’ reflects the idea that managing the records of a movement extends that movement, and constitutes a form of activism by other means.[[52]](#footnote-52) Accepting that archiving is part of the protest repertoire cuts through the opposition between ‘repertoire’ (as embodied knowledge) and ‘archive’ (as inscripted knowledge) advanced, for example, by Diana Taylor in her influential book *The Archive and the Repertoire* (2003), where the intergenerational transmission of the embodied knowledge of the oppressed is posited as an alternative to the oppressive state and colonial archive based on written documents.

Reflecting the more general trend towards participatory archiving, activists have emphasized the importance of communality in the constitution of their archive as an extension of the horizontality of their politics. In the words of a member of the group responsible for archiving the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement: ‘What better way to make the archive accountable to the people than to make the people accountable for the archive?’.[[53]](#footnote-53) Alongside the idea that an archive should be a shared ‘commons’, is the commitment that it should be made by and for the activists themselves. Accordingly, ‘autonomous archiving’[[54]](#footnote-54) has become an important principle, autonomous meaning in this instance freedom from all interference from outside the movement itself (something of especial importance in cases, such as the Turkish one, in which police surveillance is an ongoing concern). Part of that autonomy, again reflecting a commitment to the commons, is to use open source platforms. ‘Each of these activist archives does more than collect; they also enact the politics of their communities’.[[55]](#footnote-55)

Nevertheless, autonomy is not necessarily an easy or sustainable option (see in this volume the chapter by Özge Çelikaslan). The tension between autonomy and expertise, mentioned earlier in relation to community archives, plays out in an acute way in the case of social movements. As Message shows with respect to OWS, suspicion of parasitic cultural institutions eager to collect memorabilia with a view to exhibiting them, fear of the consequences of cooperation with existing institutions for the status of the materials collected fed into the desire for autonomy.[[56]](#footnote-56) As Kera Lovell shows below in relation to the People’s Park movement, the possibility of making digital copies of vulnerable materials has greatly assisted efforts to preserve the memory of a movement despite the indifference of institutions. And yet, without professional and institutional support – be that an existing heritage institution or an one set up by activists themselves – it may be hard to preserve and manage vulnerable materials over a longer period. Since a large part of activism is embodied and performative, capturing it in the form of digital records is a challenge in itself and requires considerable expertise, as is brought out below in Daniel Villar-Onrubia’s contribution to our collection.

The challenge is not just one of getting access to that expertise, but also of accessing resources. Material archives require physical storage space and suitable conditions for the preservation of vulnerable documents and banners. Digital archives also require significant investment in virtual storage space: the 858.ma archive of the Egyptian revolution includes thousands of hours of footage, for example, which, if it is to be preserved and legible in the long-term, will need financial as well as technical support. Moreover, the lack of continuity between one protest wave and another can lead to discontinuous stakeholdership: the mnemonic community supporting the archive may dissolve after the mobilization has passed whereas the archive itself aims to provide a long-term perspective on a particular movement.

The tension between institutions and ‘rogues’, and how to resolve it, is one of the red threads in our collection. Solutions include cooperation with institutions that have a track record in providing a home for archives of activism, be they made from within a movement as it is unfolding or post-hoc collected by allies. In contrast to the caricatural linking of ‘the archive’ to oppressive state power, an exploration of the variety of archives in practice points to the existence of friendly institutions with a mission to provide the sustainable infrastructure for preserving the memory of social movements. Cases in point are the Taminant library at New York University, where the archives of OWS were deposited after much debate; the International Institute for Social History in Amsterdam and the Bishopsgate Library in London, which have a long track record in the preservation of materials related to oppositional movements; and the Centro de Documentación e Investigación de la Cultura de Izquierdas (CeDInCI) in Buenos Aires, which is devoted to the preservation of materials produced by Latin American Left movements. One should also note the existence of cultural centres such as the May Day Rooms (see in this volume Rosemary Grennan’s essay) which, in being devoted to the archiving of multiple movements, offer a measure of institutional stability within a changing activist landscape. According to Phil Cohen, such ‘living archives’ of past protest are important sites for bringing people together and for the slow gestation of new movements through the labour of collecting materials and making them available at locations where people can meet.[[57]](#footnote-57)

The existence of the institutions mentioned above raises yet another question; namely, how far do and should professional archivists go in assuming the role of activist so as to ensure that the records of oppositional movements are preserved and interpreted? The answer in part will lie with the mission of the institution within which the archivist is operating and the degree to which it is committed to promoting the memory of particular traditions (as expressed, for example, in the title of the Center for the Documentation and Research of Left-wing Culture based in Buenos Aires). As indicated earlier, new forms of collaboration between archivists and citizens have been emerging in tandem with critical soul-searching as to whether professionalism in archiving is compatible with commitment to causes. In their survey of these complex debates, Flinn and Alexander distinguish between *archiving activism*, the collection and documentation of political and social movement material; *activist archiving,* the making of archives as an integral part of political activism; and *archival activism*, where the archive itself is the focus of campaigning.[[58]](#footnote-58) The latter is illustrated by activism for access rights to state archives in the transition from dictatorship to democracy in Latin American countries.[[59]](#footnote-59) It is illustrated here, from a different perspective, in the chapter by Eline Pollaert and Paul van Trigt which shows, with reference to the Netherlands, how archiving disability history and disability activism is itself a crucial step towards greater visibility and empowerment on the part of a group for whom access to public space is not self-evident.

The debates on the relation between professional archiving activism are ongoing, as Flore Janssen reminds us in her essay. This collection does not come down on one side or another. But it hopes to have mapped this rocky terrain, showing both the complex interactions between activism and archiving, and the importance of memory to the long-term impact of social movements.

## Outlines of the book

As demonstrated by the minutes of the 15M activists mentioned earlier, archiving the cultural memory of protests entails making a series of decisions regarding what materials should be preserved and how the information should be organized, and made accessible. These decisions constitute what we can call the *politics of archiving*. In this decision-making process, designing the *archive media ecology* and determining the role of the digital in transforming the cultural production of social movements into available archival records is crucial for the very existence of an archive.

In the opening essay, Özge Çelikaslan describes the difficult task of translating the politics of archiving into its material architecture. Çelikaslan analyzes the case of Bak.ma, an archive that originated during the 2013 Gezi Park protests in Turkey. During the protests, activists occupied and turned Istanbul's park into a protest camp to resist the urban development plan of the area and police violence. Protests spread throughout the country, with parks becoming places where people gathered to discuss and oppose police violence. Çelikaslan personally took part in the protests and documented events as a member of the activist media collective Videoccupy. From this frontline position, Çelikaslan describes how media activists recorded protests and collected and secured material recorded by demonstrators across the country. After the protests ended, a group turned their media activism into archival activism, working together to build an archive where they could store and share the material collected during the protests. Çelikaslan describes the archival work that took place after the dissipation of the protest. She argues that affective bonds and attachment to the material and events were the primary resources for sustaining the Bak.ma archive and shaping the Gezi’s afterlife. The archive gradually also included material from other movements, from before and after 2013, becoming a point of reference for activism in Turkey and beyond.

If Çelikaslan describes how activists organize the archiving of material produced on the ground, Rosemary Grennan, in her chapter on the MayDay Rooms in the UK, describes how activists conceive archives not just as by-products of a struggle for a cause, but also as the very cause to which their activism is directed. The MayDay Rooms is a collective which emerged in 2014 in response to the austerity and ‘zero tolerance’ policies of the UK government that threatened the capacity of both institutional and autonomous organizations to preserve and provide access to radical history and the cultural legacy of past social movements. The organization collects, describes, arranges, digitizes and makes material accessible online, providing activists with historical materials from different social movements. The MayDay Rooms also organize meetings in which activists can find inspiration in the archival material and learn to design their own tactics and to archive their own material. In these meetings and in other initiatives that Grennan describes in her chapter, activists and archivists can use archival records as tools for shaping contentious actions in the present, allowing the transmission, adaptation and cross-fertilization of knowledge about protests and contentious actions across different movements and generations. These practices illustrate how activists use archival records in and for contentious actions in the present, transforming storage memory into working memory (to recall Assmann’s distinction). The case of the MayDay Rooms enriches our understanding of the relationship between activism and archiving as well as of memory activism, by showing how the feedback mechanism whereby activists mobilize the legacy of past social movements in seeking inspiration and models for their own action in the present.

Kera Lovell further explores this feedback mechanism by examining how different protest waves, decades apart, have sought to revive the legacy of earlier movements. She does so with reference to the People’s Park movement, which was active during the late Vietnam War era in the USA (1960s-70s) and brought activists to occupy vacant lots and transform them into parks as a means of demonstrating against police brutality, gentrification, and racism. Protest camps were often short-lived as police frequently evicted demonstrators after a few days, making the task of documenting these experiences important but also difficult to implement. In the 1990s, a new attempt by Berkeley University to build residential buildings in park areas sparked a new wave of protests, which found an important symbolic and affective precedent in the archival material accumulated in the 1970s. In the 2010s, with Occupy, the legacy of People’s Park movements revived through the digitization of archival material and its circulation on social media. Archival records are not merely the material ‘residue’ of past demonstrations and social movements, Lovell shows, but are active ingredients in later protests by inspiring and shaping actions in the now. They become tools for activists willing to take over the baton from earlier movements.

Lovell concludes her analysis by emphasizing how the performative character of the protest repertoire in the case of the People’s Park protest made its archiving very difficult. This challenge is not unique to her case. Tilly compared contentious actions to jazz improvisations or to ‘the impromptu skits of a troupe of strolling players’[[60]](#footnote-60) who adapt their repertoire to local circumstances.[[61]](#footnote-61) So how can archives capture the performative nature of protests, which resists traditional recording technologies like writing? Performances are, in fact, ephemeral by nature and pose a series of epistemological and technical challenges to the archivist, which the digital may help resolve. Ann-Katrine Schmidt Nielsen and Daniel Villar-Onrubia reflect in their essays on these dilemmas but bring them back to their non-metaphorical domain: the use of the performing arts for the articulation of dissent.

In his analysis, Schmidt Nielsen takes as her point of departure the use of Instagram by three exiled Afghan artists: Kubra Khademi, Shamsia Hassani, and Rada Akbar. The author argues that social media platforms may work as a platform for archiving activism, allowing artists under the threat of dictatorial regimes to document, reproduce, and distribute their work; furthermore, she argues, social media are not just a means of reproduction and distribution, but also shape aesthetic practice by providing an infrastructure for materializing an archive of feeling (to recall Ann Cvetkovich). Since the return of the Taliban regime in August 2021, the Instagram profiles of Khademi, Hassani, and Akbar serve as archives for their artistic work and for defying Taliban repression. Hassani, a street artist, used Instagram to document the erasure of her work in Kabul by the Taliban. Khademi works on urban space by replacing the plaques naming streets after soldiers and past battles with ones recalling women activists and uses Instagram to record her performances for a broader audience. Akbar, who fled Afghanistan after the return of the Taliban, made her Instagram stories available as a thematic collection in her profile, documenting the daily life of an Afghan woman before the return of the Taliban regime. These records are defiant acts of ‘resistant’ memory against the return of the Taliban regime.

In the following chapter, Villar-Onrubia examines the digital archive of the Spanish activist and artist Miguel Benlloch. Born in 1954, Benlloch was involved in various groups and movements, such as the Communist movement, the Revolutionary Youth of Andalusia, the Homosexual Liberation Front of Andalusia, and the Andalusian pacifist and anti-NATO movement. Because of his activism, Benlloch's archive serves as a prism through which to view post-dictatorship Spain as well as the transition from pre-digital media scarcity to post-digital media abundance. As a scholar and practitioner personally engaged in archiving Benlloch’s cultural production, Villar-Onrubia articulates long-debated ontological issues (for example, is it possible to distinguish between original and copy in a performance?) with the material circumstances and technical options that arise in the (digital) archiving process. Benlloch's political engagement was expressed through his artistic work, which included both performance and creative slogans as a way of acting out dissent. Archiving his cultural production poses a challenge, particularly with regards to preserving and providing access to his ephemeral performances. Despite these challenges, Benlloch recognized the importance of organizing and archiving his work for future generations. Today, Archivomiguelbenlloch.net serves as a central and permanent node for accessing and connecting the artist's legacy across various online and on-site locations. Villar-Onrubia details the practical steps taken to address the challenges of archiving performances, ultimately providing Benlloch's legacy with a digital home.

The cases discussed by Schmidt Nielsen and Villar-Onrubia show how the digital not only connects different publics online and on-site, but also enables performances to be archived and thus to be made available and visible despite their being ephemeral, for aesthetic reasons (e.g. Benlloch’s artistic practices) or because of political constraints (e.g. Afghanistan under the Taliban). The question of visibility returns also in the chapter by Eline Pollaert and Paul van Trigt on disability activism. The authors emphasize that the traditional image of activism as made of in-person mass gatherings makes other forms of activism invisible. This is especially the case with disability activism since disabled activists may not have access to physical protests, and their online activism is often dismissed as 'armchair activism'. As a result, disability activism is not recognized as a form of political engagement that calls for archiving.

After analyzing these pitfalls, Pollaert and van Trigt go on to explore how digital tools can support the archiving of disability activism and make it more visible. They discuss how digital tools can facilitate activists and self-archiving processes, connect archival materials to a broader audience, and create new archival/archivable material and activist networks. Nevertheless, the authors note some persistent problems: the lack of time and resources for use in archiving; the tendency of disabled activists to prioritize actions in the now over archiving the records of the movement their cultural production, the lack of continuity in the maintenance and ownership of the digital platforms used for preservation and transmission. The authors explore in this light the challenges and opportunities offered by the digital for disability activism with reference to three case studies: the disability justice collective Feminists Against Ableism, the website DisPLACE.nl, and a community project with the Kreukelcollectief (Crinkle Collective) on eugenics.

While the digital can be a tool for promoting inclusivity and reshaping activism, Flore Janssen notes in her chapter that it is also a double-edged sword. Archival practices are rooted in social hierarchies, and many principles of archival praxis were set in administrative manuals, such as the Dutch Manual, written in colonial times, reflecting assumptions that privilege those in power. The author argues that the use of the digital may simply perpetuate inequalities and injustice. Analyzing the concepts of ‘active archiving’ and ‘archival activism’, Janssen highlights the importance of critically assessing how collections perpetuate social injustice before implementing digital tools, and of acknowledging personal positionality in the archival profession. She then goes on to discuss one of the most significant innovations, facilitated by the digital, in archives' mission: postcustodialism. Janssen explains that simply digitizing catalogs and records to make them findable online is not enough for democratizing archives and offers examples of good practices in which digitization serves social justice and democracy, such as the South Asian American Digital Archive and the Early Caribbean Digital Archive. These initiatives challenge some of the oppressive and gatekeeping structures of existing systems and institutions and seek to expand archival record to include marginalized voices and experiences.

Mention of the South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA) brings us to the end of the volume, with an afterword signed by the co-founder of SAADA and prominent scholar in critical archival studies: Michelle Caswell. In her reflection, Caswell engages with our topic from an outspoken position as an activist archivist. How can archives be constituted and mobilized as resources to combat inequality in the present? How can they be used in the service of what she calls ‘liberatory memory work’? In a thought-provoking move, she creates a continuum between the work of the archivist in caring for precarious records to the politics of care for the precarious in today’s world. In this way, she reminds us that creating better infrastructures for recording the past and present will be a key element in the creation of better futures.

As scholars in the field of memory studies, our approach in this collection is grounded in the belief that understanding the relation between archiving and activism in the digital age requires collaboration and dialogue among researchers, activists, and archivists. Our intention is to bring together diverse perspectives, experiences, and backgrounds in order to facilitate a rich and productive exchange of both theoretical and empirical knowledge. Whether readers approach this collection with practical concerns, such as how to build a digital archive for activism, or more theoretical questions about the role of archiving in protest and activism, our hope is that this book will provide answers and useful suggestions. Exhaustiveness was not our aim. What we hope, more importantly, is to inspire new questions and open up new areas of common interest, exploration and collaboration among scholars and practitioners interested in cultural memory, archiving and social movements.

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45. Susan Pell, ‘Radicalizing the Politics of the Archive: An Ethnographic Reading of an Activist Archive’, *Archivaria 80* (2015): 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Rebecka Taves Sheffield, *Documenting Rebellions: A Study of Four Lesbian and Gay Archives in Queer Times*, Sacramento, CA: Litwin Books, 2020. Although Sheffield’s analysis is focused on LGBT archives, it is possible to imagine her suggestion applicable to many types of activist archives. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Cohen, *Archive That, Comrade*, 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Cohen, *Archive That, Comrade*, 28–29. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Egea, ‘Square Photography’. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Tilly, *Contentious Performances*. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Pell, ‘Radicalizing the Politics of the Archive’: 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Egea, ‘Square Photography’. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Jeremy Bold in Kyle Message, *Collecting Activism, Archiving Occupy Wall Street*. London: Routledge, 2019, 175. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Artikişler Collective (Özge Çelikaslan, Alper Şen, Pelin Tan) (ed), *Autonomous Archiving*, Barcelona: DPR, 2016; see also Pell, ‘Radicalizing the Politics of the Archive’. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Alycia Sellie, Jesse Goldstein, Molly Fair and Jennifer Hoyer, ‘Interference Archive: A Free Space for Social Movement Culture’, *Archival Science* 15 (2015): 457. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Kyle Message, *Collecting Activism*. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Phil Cohen, *Archive That, Comrade*. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Andrew Flinn and Ben Alexander, ‘”Humanizing an Inevitability Political Craft”’. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Ludmila da Silva Catela and Elizabeth Jelin (eds), Los archivos de la represión: documentos, memoria y verdad, Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2002; Kirsten Weld, *Paper Cadavers. The Archives of Dictatorship in Guatemala*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Tilly, ‘Contentious Repertoires in Great Britain’, 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. See also Tilly and Tarrow, *Contentious Politics*: 16; Donatella della Porta, ‘Repertoires of Contention’ in David A. Snow, Donatella della Porta, Bert Klandermans and Doug McAdam (eds), *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Social and Political Movements*, Hoboken: Blackwell Publishing, 2013, p 1–3. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)