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**Post-custodial and Collaborative: A Primer for Memory Institutions Beginning Digital  
Archiving Projects**

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**Abstract**

This paper reviews the three major types of digital archiving projects: memory institutions' digital archiving projects, community-based archiving, and personal digital archiving. An examination of some common challenges and opportunities present in most of these projects-- particularly any in the post-custodial model-- follows, with illustrative examples of various digital archiving projects. This paper may serve as a primer for memory institutional staff wishing to understand the landscape of digital archiving projects, both within and without the authoritative, disciplined approach most commonly taken by memory institutions.

## Introduction

In 2013, the *Pioneers in Your Attic* project began as a joint effort between members of the Mountain West Digital Libraries, headed by Brigham Young University's Harold B. Lee Library (where I currently work as the Digital Initiatives Workflows Supervisor). The project goal seemed simple at the time: member libraries would take turns hosting remote digitization events at local libraries and community spaces across the state of Utah in an effort to digitally capture individuals' family and local history primary source documents, particularly those in danger of deterioration or loss in the upcoming decades (Harold B. Lee Library, 2019, para. 1). At these events, library staff created metadata during interviews with the participants. Digitization occurred nearby. Each individual signed a document giving Brigham Young University permission to display the digital objects online in its CONTENTdm repository. Participants were offered copies of their items' digital scans as well as educational materials regarding basic care of historical documents. I have managed the resultant body of digitized content from these events since 2017.

This project is one example of outreach that memory institutions (libraries, archives, and museums) develop to expand the concept of digital archiving to items and individuals beyond the walls of the traditional repositories. The term "digital archiving" can mean different things in different sectors; for the purposes of this paper, I define it as the collection and preservation of born-digital or digital surrogates of historical primary source records, with the goal of preserving and providing access to the history contained therein. Memory institutions are not the only type of organization with interest in digital archival projects. A growing number of community groups, non-profits, and individual researchers are embarking on digital archiving projects as well. The social justice movement in particular has embraced digital archiving as a way of achieving "self-representation, identity construction, and empowerment" (Caswell, 2014, p. 31), bringing the concept of digital archiving to many new, enthusiastic audiences as a result. Digital archival collections appear in a number of different formats and repositories around the world and across the web. These digital archiving projects are timely, given the tsunami of contemporary personal records (digital and analog) that need preservation, and given the ever-expanding possibilities of the web to store objects and facilitate access.

Due to my involvement in *Pioneers in Your Attic*, I have had many occasions to look at other digital archiving projects and asked myself, "Are we (meaning, my organization) headed in the right direction? Is there is more we should be doing?" In this paper, I review the three major types of digital archiving projects: memory institutions' digital archiving projects, community-based archiving, and personal digital archiving. I examine how memory institutions may act as a bridge between the various project types. I also discuss some of the challenges and opportunities available to memory institutions wanting to begin a digital archiving project. My hope is that this paper may act as a primer for memory institutions wanting to participate in digital archive work, so that they may be successful and in turn support other groups contributing to the great work of preserving contemporary digital records for the future.

## Literature Review

In our current digital era, the expectation from the public (and from the rising generation of memory institution professionals) is that what can be digital, should be digital (Marcum, 2016, p. 110). Thus, it should be no surprise that many stakeholders make digital access a primary pursuit of memory institutions. Digital records, it should be noted, "are more at risk than

analogue due to their shorter lifespan” (Houghton, 2016, “Introduction,” para. 1). Deciding what records must be preserved, and how, are questions left to each individual or organization embarking on digital archiving to resolve according to their collecting scopes, technological and financial resources, and administrative support.

Across the archive, library, and museum milieux, there are many differences in software, description standards, and collection policies that muddy the possibility of a united way forward in digital archiving efforts. However, most memory institutions’ collection models tend to be authoritative, disciplined, and standardized when compared to community and personal digital archiving models. One framework seems to hold promise for all interested institutions, no matter their standards, is the “post-custodial model” of collecting, which was first proposed by archivist Gerald Ham (1981, p. 207). Ham’s view was that the role of memory institutions as benign bureaucratic records managers must be abandoned for a more active, collaborative, history-shaping role. This role has become especially imperative “as the volume of material with the potential of forming part of the documentary heritage [begins] to exceed the limits of what could be physically incorporated into that documentary heritage” (Booms, 1987, p. 76).

In practice, digital archiving is generally accomplished through digital scanning or born-digital harvesting. Memory institutions developing a collection model for digital archiving projects may, of necessity and in good faith, provide for the preservation of and access to digital records within their collecting scope *without* necessarily assuming custody of the original records, nor even their copyright or intellectual property rights, which may remain with the original owners of the records. Such “acquisitions” are usually accompanied by some form of a contractual permission agreements, which may involve transfer, loan, or sharing of copyright in a non-exclusive or “distributed custody” loan or licensing agreement, and may include some form of a privacy disclaimer or agreement (Lapworth & Shein, 2016, p. 13).

There are several common issues that crop up regularly in post-custodial projects, all of which were evident during the development of one of the first major post-custodial projects, the MultiCultural Archives project at Virginia Commonwealth University. In this project, historical documents from the African-American community were scanned and then returned to the owners. This collection facilitates valuable research into Virginia’s African-American community, while not depriving the members of this community of the comforts of their personal documents. John Whaley Jr.’s (1994) article about this project ultimately recommends scan-and-return post-custodial collection building with the adage, “access over ownership” (Whaley, p. 672), while still acknowledging that ongoing issues with privacy, copyright, preservation, and workflows exist. *Pioneers in Your Attic* is a similar type of post-custodial digital manuscript collection. We preserve the digital images only and return the originals to their owners, after contracting permission to reproduce and display the digital objects online for public access and educational purposes (see Figure 1 for the permission form used in our project).

Post-custodial work is still earning a foothold among memory institution staff, who may feel that the inability to own the original objects precludes “true” preservation. They also occasionally balk at the possible risks associated with licensing rather than owning historical materials. There is no consensus yet on best practices for rights management or workflows of post-custodial collections; the decisions are left to each institution to work out according to their resources, risk tolerance, and collection policies. Often, institutions that have implemented post-custodial projects become the model’s best advocates, like Emily Lapworth and Cyndi Shein, staff members in the Special Collections library at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. After

researching the theory and practice of post-custodial collecting, UNLV Special Collections elected to utilize the model in order to build more diversified collections and to establish better ties to specific communities in the region such as the Las Vegas Jewish community and the local culinary workers union. Librarians work with representatives from each group on an ongoing basis to select primary source documents detailing the history of these groups, which are scanned, returned, described in a finding aid, and made available online. While some concerns about the practice still exist within the organization, UNLV feels that this model builds a relationship of trust, a valuable achievement given the historical power differences between small Las Vegas communities and authoritative repositories such as UNLV (Lapworth & Shein, 2016).

Alongside UNLV, BYU, and other memory institutions working out post-custodial digital archiving workflows, “community-based archiving” is a growing phenomenon. Community-based archiving projects’ overarching goal is to facilitate the preservation of digital archival records that are reflective of a shared identity and make these records available to the public “when appropriate” to “build and assert this common identity both internally and externally” (Han, 2019 p. 8). Community-based outreach projects include the South Asian American Digital Archive, discussed in the next section, and “mobile digitization kits” such as the Culture in Transit scanning project in New York or the Plateau Peoples Web Portal based out of Washington State University, where scanning technologies are taken directly to members of the public (Han, p. 9; Norton-Wisla & Wynne, 2018).

Often, community organizations and non-profits fostering these events collaborate with memory institutions, though this is not always the case. Community-based archiving projects that are independent of memory institutions may be viewed as a “virtue in some communities where stories and voices have been exploited, ignored, or misinterpreted by memory institutions in the past” (Han, p. 6). This should give memory institution professionals pause. In order to better collaborate with the communities demonstrating enthusiasm for digital archiving, memory professionals must first ask the question, “How have our previous or present collecting policies or access initiatives contributed to imbalanced power dynamics that affect any groups? How can we better meet the needs of all communities and individuals within our scope?” Collaborative digitization projects, wherein memory institutions assist community organizations interested in digitization by lending expertise, scanning technologies, a hosting platform, or some combination of these assets has been a successful tool used to strengthen and in some cases repair relationships between institutions and communities (Norton-Wisla & Wynne, p. 129)

Not only communities, but individuals’ digitization efforts merit reflection and consideration. Perhaps the most understudied of all digital archiving projects are the individual digital archiving projects. These projects take two major forms. First is the personal digital archiving movement, or PDA, which was recently defined as “the exploration of digital file curation and preservation by individuals, families, groups, or organizations, focusing on materials of a personal nature” (Condrón, 2019, p. 29). The second is what Melissa Terras (2010) calls the “enthusiast” digital collecting phenomenon, in which digital files of a cultural heritage nature are curated and exhibited online by individuals unconnected to memory institutions (p.433). This paper is, in many ways, a response to Terras’ excellent study of the enthusiast digital collector. Terras argues that individuals’ digital collections represent a trove of materials useful to public and professional life and research.

Individuals’ digital collections tend to be narrowly focused on one topic and “completionist” (Terras, p. 425) in nature, thus complimenting and supplementing memory

institutions' "representative sample" collections (p. 429). Individuals lead out in trying new Web 2.0 technologies such as open-source hosting platforms, comment sections, rating systems, review and tagging functionalities, and blog/wiki templates (p. 430). By doing so, they stay in touch with like-minded audiences and often have a better sense of audience needs and desires than memory institutions' staff do. Terras describes how many modern disciplines-- and the majority of museums' and libraries' founding collections-- started out as amateur research hobbies (examples: women's studies programs and Thomas Jefferson's library collection at Library of Congress. Terras, p. 434). Individual digital archiving projects are a valuable resource for communities and memory institutions, though their goals, which should be respected, may not always entail public availability.

In my observation, literature on each of these three types of digital archiving projects is forthcoming in increasing numbers, particularly from various memory institutions who document their experiences, best practices, or failings in developing post-custodial collections (e.g. Britz & Lor, 2004; Caswell, 2014; Lapworth & Shein, 2016; Roiu, 2015; The University of Texas at Austin, 2016; Whaley, 1994). Additionally, the common ground between community-based archives and personal digital archive projects has received growing attention in recent years (Dougherty & Meyer, 2014; Han, 2019). There were seven educational sessions on post-custodial or community archiving projects at the Society of American Archivists' national conference in 2019 (Society of American Archivists, 2019, n. p.).

To my knowledge, there are rarely any discussions of the siloed state of each of the types of digital archiving projects in relation to both of the other two. The potential for collaboration, for learning from each entity, and for sharing resources and responsibilities, makes this a needed area of research. Memory institutions, community organizations, and individual researchers should be more aware of the others' working methods, successes, and challenges. Each has respective strengths from which the others may learn. Collaborative efforts, resource sharing, and distributed custody may prove to be the most sustainable option available to all entities given the enormity of digital data being created each day. While strategies for addressing copyright, privacy, and digital preservation issues for digital archiving projects are often mentioned in the literature of all three types of digital archiving projects, these issues have not been sufficiently resolved by any practitioners sufficiently enough to assuage risk-averse interested parties of the value and sustainability of these projects. In the discussion below, I will describe the lessons that my fellow professionals working in memory institutions may learn from extant digital archiving projects. My sense is that memory institutions' opportunity to act as a partner, or at least source of experience and expertise, to all parties interested in digital archiving is great, provided that memory institutions understand the risks and challenges inherent to digital archiving, and advocate for the rewards.

### **Discussion**

One of the most important rewards of digital archiving projects, particularly collaborative projects, is that memory institutions, communities, and individuals doing digital archiving may foster relationships of trust with each other and with those whose history they preserve and make accessible. All people, all groups, experience "a hunger for historical recognition, a realization ... of how important history is as a means of self-identification and cultural continuity" (Grabowski, 1992, p. 470). The preserving of this history, the work of assuring someone's cultural continuity, is a project in which trust is imperative, and it must be earned.

As Britz and Lor (2004) outlined in their reflection on the complicated history of Western digitization projects in Africa, "agreements on the sharing and distribution of information are not

always based on the rights of peoples but more on contracts and licenses” (p. 6). At this point, memory institutions, community organizations, and individuals have not yet fully realized the ramifications (for them and for the donors) of the various approaches to digital archival rights management. Some institutions require owners to surrender copyright of their records, while others ask for licenses to reproduce and display digital surrogates, both of which agreements may be litigated by the owners at a future date, particularly if the market value of the original object diminishes due to the contractual restrictions on it. Still other entities simply accession copies of materials under the assumption that online digital surrogates have no rights-holding creator and are in the public domain. Understanding what rights belong to whom, and how to safeguard them ethically and legally is perhaps the biggest challenge to digital archiving projects, particularly in the post-custodial model. I refer to Britz and Lor’s set of broad moral principles, based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to which any entity entrusted with preserving another individual’s or group’s identity-forming records should adhere. These principles include: recognition of cultural rights, recognition of ownership rights, recognition of economic interest, and the right to control, all of which are inherently the creators’ (pp. 6-9).

A benefit of collaborative projects in the post-custodial model is that the model is “scalable, adaptable, and replicable in the pursuit of sustainability” (The University of Texas at Austin, 2016, p. 11). The distribution of resources, responsibilities, and rights is not a rigid contract, but rather, may be established for each project in a good faith way that is fair and acceptable to all parties. Preliminary planning conversations should fully ascertain how projects may be scaled to fit partners’ financial, technical, legal, and departmental limitations. It is important to note that large-scale projects will require active database management and ongoing IT support. Smaller-scale thematic or “deposit-based” collections benefit from a clearly defined collection strategy, “standard collection development practices,” and “rich metadata” to aid discovery (Dougherty & Meyer, pp. 2197-8).

In practice, if memory institutions are not the entity performing the digitization of analog records or harvesting born-digital records, these institutions may still “[assist] with format and standards issues” (Lippincott, 2007, p. 20), lead out in “software developments,” (Prochaska, 2009, p. 13), and continue to experiment with collaborative collecting models. Metadata and description is a particular area in which community and individual project managers may benefit from memory institutions’ perspective. Metadata is vital to digital archiving projects’ long-term survival. The potential for poorly-described digital documents to become undiscoverable, intellectually lost, and “their authenticity unverifiable and their context unclear” (Houghton, “Metadata,” para. 1) is significant. Additionally, the lack of “formal knowledge of technical and management standards” will almost certainly restrict the types of grants and other public funds for which community and individual digital archiving projects may qualify (Terras, p. 431).

An area of digital archiving in which all entities need further understanding is digital preservation. “One of the major differences between digital and analogue preservation is that digital requires more active intervention throughout a material’s lifecycle, and at a much earlier stage. You can’t just ‘set and forget’ with digital media, as you largely can with analogue” (Houghton, “Introduction,” para. 1). Digital archiving projects that do not have time, money, and other resources specifically designated for ongoing preservation processes run the risk of one day discovering that their collections cannot be migrated or emulated into contemporary formats and are effectively lost. Some project managers mistakenly assume that their online hosting platforms (which may be blogs, Omeka sites, or even CONTENTdm and other repositories) double as preservation housing, which is untrue. These platforms are proprietary and may, like



all services, cease to exist with very little warning to their customers. Conflating online access platforms with preservation-level digital asset management systems is akin to the tragic mistake made by the first generation of oral historians, who collected their interviews on “fragile cassette tapes, untranscribed and [now] unavailable to researchers or to the communities themselves” (University of Massachusetts Boston, 2018, p. 2).

If digital preservation adds a level of complexity or cost to a project that is unsustainable, there are options to ameliorate this problem include participation in the LOCKSS system (Stanford University, n. d.) and the use of free fixity check software such as BagIt that create copies of digital archival collections that may be sent to partner organizations for safe keeping and frequent health assessments. Additionally, collecting gaps might be supplanted by other organizations, including individual digital archiving projects, which would give organizations additional digital preservation bandwidth to concentrate on collections considered most vital or most at-risk.

The South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA) is a non-profit, community-based archiving organization with eleven years of operating on its own post-custodial model. It is an excellent case study for demonstrating how collaboration between multiple entities may be the best method for ensuring that a more full and fair digital record of individuals or a community is preserved for the future. The 501(c)(3) organization digitizes and provides online access to personal and institutional records of Americans who “trace their heritage to Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and the South Asian diaspora” (South Asian American Digital Archive, 2018, “Values,” para. 2). Its co-founder Samip Mallick wanted to counter his childhood feelings of being a foreigner, which stemmed from being the son of Indian immigrants growing up in Michigan (Caswell, p. 27). He sought to do this by collecting digital archival records that showcased the stories, photographs, and experiences of South Asian Americans throughout the last century.

SAADA has now reached out to hundreds, if not thousands of South Asian Americans and collected thousands of digitized documents from individuals and community organizations around the country. The organization curates online exhibitions of its collections, including an active collection of digital oral histories of immigrants’ first one hundred days in America (South Asian American Digital Archive, 2019). SAADA staff “meticulously [follows] footnotes in published scholarship on South Asian Americans, tracking down cited sources and asking repositories holding these collections for permission to digitize” (Caswell, p. 30), which has been a successful strategy that enables SAADA to give back to memory institutions that lack digitization hardware and software but want more visibility for their collections. SAADA facilitates ties to individual donors as well as academic and memory institutions. It hosts an “academic council” of historians, university faculty, and filmmakers who support the organization by “furthering the academic study of South Asians” (South Asian American Digital Archive, 2018a, para. 1). In 2020, it will provide a fellowship for library and archival graduate students, who will gain real-world experience as they help SAADA continue its collection development and programming. SAADA is a prime example of a community-based archiving project that has succeeded in building trust, preserving a community identity, and cultivating collaborative support from individuals and academic and memory institutions.

SAADA faces the same challenges that almost all post-custodial digital archiving projects face. Because they are a non-profit, funding “remains our biggest challenge” (Caswell, p. 31). SAADA participates in the LOCKSS network and keeps redundant copies of its digital objects on multiple servers to facilitate digital preservation. Metadata has been an issue that

SAADA has tried to make as non-authoritative as possible by setting up a spreadsheet template for donors to fill out, which “counters the symbolic annihilation of South Asian Americans in archives by allowing their voices to be heard” (Caswell, p. 34). The descriptions are not standardized by memory institutional standards, but entirely community-sourced. SAADA staff presented at the Society of American Archivists’ national conference in August 2019, where I took the opportunity to ask them about their rights statements. Samip Mallick explained that they seek “non-exclusivity” in their rights statements, asking for display rights and reproduction rights, while copyright remains with the owners. He feels this model has been successful for their purposes (S. Mallick, personal communication, August 4, 2019).

As the example of SAADA demonstrates, digital archiving outreach projects are multi-faceted and may include both digital surrogates of analog materials and born-digital objects. Much of the literature and the workflows regarding the preservation of these two types of content intersects, so I have chosen to present examples of projects that collect both types of materials. As Bill Landis’ colorfully explains, “[W]e keep talking about digitizing collections as though there isn’t an enormous train of born-digital content barreling down on us. ... [W]e shouldn’t be making decisions about access to digitized content as though somehow the issues are different from access to natively digital content” (2009, p. 1). In my work, I have observed that although the initial collection of digitized surrogates differs from born-digital harvesting, ultimately the management of both types of objects involves the same overarching principles and technologies. Memory institutions should familiarize themselves with both workflows in order to determine what types of projects their organization will be best suited to support. An exemplary educational resource for basic preservation of both types of materials is the Library of Congress’ Personal Archiving website, which contains videos, posters, kits, and blogposts for digitizing personal analog records *and* personal digital materials like e-mail and digital photographs (Library of Congress, 2019).

## Conclusion

Given the expanding number of participants in the growing field of digital archiving, a collaborative approach to digital archive projects is recommended for memory institution professionals seeking to develop projects. We are not alone; many community organizations and individuals are developing collections of their own, with their own goals, audiences, and technological tools. Each entity participating in digital archiving projects faces challenges, particularly in rights management, digital preservation, metadata creation, collection scope, and technological development. No entity is an island in this pursuit. Memory institutions, community organizations, and enthusiastic individuals share common ground, and should share their experiences, understanding, collections, and tools with their fellow digital archiving pioneers more frequently.

In the introduction to this paper, I described the “seemingly simple” goal of the post-custodial project initiated by my institution. I’d like to note that successful collaboration does not necessarily need to last forever. Brigham Young University is now the only member of the Mountain West Digital Library still actively hosting remote scanning events for *Pioneers in Your Attic*, which we have renamed *History in Your Attic* in order to broaden the collecting scope to contemporary personal history records. Rather than see BYU’s stance as the lone participant in this project as a negative, I have taken the opportunity to research and implement some of the practices for post-custodial collection that other project managers around the country and around the world have shared. Our workflow for digital archiving projects has improved significantly

thanks to the collaborative sharing of expertise by others. In particular, other BYU staff and I have had to resolve questions regarding secure tracking of all digital items and the subsequent matching of each item with its corresponding digital metadata. We have yet to determine if our library, based upon the experience with History in Your Attic, should expand our post-custodial model to any other collecting areas, something I will presumably discuss with curators and counsel for a long time to come. Nevertheless, the goal of preserving contemporary digital records, putting “access before ownership” remains one with so much promise, and so much potential for personal, professional, and public fulfilment, that the endeavor continues to be worth the effort.

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## Figure List

**PERMISSION TO DISPLAY ONLINE**  
**THE PIONEERS IN YOUR ATTIC PROJECT**

The *Pioneers in Your Attic: Preserving the Legacy of the Overland Migration* is a project of the Utah Academic Library Consortium (UALC), its Member Institutions and the Mountain West Digital Library (MWDL). I understand that the purpose of this project is to display digital reproductions of items on the local institution and Mountain West Digital Library websites for use by researchers. The Hub Coordinators of the Pioneers in Your Attic Project may digitize my item(s) so that they can be accessed by the public through the various institution websites and the Mountain West Digital Library online digital platform, [www.mwdl.org](http://www.mwdl.org). The publication of any of these images will have a credit line naming the individual institution and the MWDL as the source of the photograph.

As the owner of the material described below, I recognize that the digitization process will be performed by properly-trained professionals who are members of UALC and/or the MWDL. I also recognize that the documents so presented by me for digitization are aged and fragile and may be damaged in some form or fashion regardless of the care taken by the UALC and MWDL representatives. I hereby waive any action for damages that may occur during or following the digitization process against UALC, MWDL, or their agents/representatives.

The items listed below are hereby offered free and clear for digitization, and with no restrictions, to UALC and MWDL for the purpose of public access through the institutional and MWDL websites. Said items can and may be digitized, photographed, microfilmed, photocopied, or otherwise reproduced by the Institutions and MWDL for future researchers in accordance with established policies and procedures.

Description of Collection:

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Figure 1. The "Permission to Display Online" form for the Pioneers in Your Attic Project. Mountain West Digital Libraries. 2013.