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Up-and-Comers: News for Student and New Archivists

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Risky Business: Archiving Digital Heritages

By Kate McManus, *National Digital Stewardship Resident, Minnesota Public Radio*



Like most archivists I know, I fell into archives accidentally. When I was a kid, I thought I'd be the next Jacques Cousteau or a shipwreck hunter like Robert Ballard, or a Radio City Rockette. But my ears don't pop so I can't SCUBA dive, and I'll never meet the Rockettes' minimum height requirement. After years of going to libraries and hanging around archives while getting a history degree, I decided to get my MLIS so I could pursue archives.

I have no regrets, I love this profession. It's been wonderful, though I admit, you have to learn to love the hustle.

I'm very lucky—my career has been on a pretty clear trajectory (despite a few roadblocks here and there). So far, each position has built on skills learned at previous roles. I try and say yes to everything that crosses my path: writing and publishing, presenting, volunteering, serving on my local library's board of directors. I feel like I have built a solid foundation that, hopefully, I'll be able to keep building. At the time of writing, I am a member of the American Archive of Public Broadcasting's (AAPB) National Digital Stewardship Residency (NDSR). Sorry in advance for all the acronyms.

The AAPB is a collaboration between the Library of Congress and the WGBH Educational Foundation to coordinate a national effort to preserve at-risk public media before its content is lost to posterity. It also aims to provide a central web portal for access to the unique programming that public stations have aired over the past 60 years. To date, over 40,000 hours of television and radio programming contributed by more than a hundred public media organizations and archives across the United States have been digitized for long-term preservation and access. The

entire collection is available on location at WGBH and the Library of Congress, and more than 18,000 programs are available online at americanarchive.org.

In 2015, the Institute of Museum and Library Services awarded a generous grant to WGBH on behalf of the AAPB to develop the AAPB NDSR. Through this project, I am working with six other recent graduates from master's degree programs across the country at different public broadcasting stations to help to preserve the materials that those stations produce. Each member of the cohort has two built-in mentors, one from the NDSR board and one local. This doesn't include our supervisors and mentors at our host sites or our program coordinators. The level of support and the richness of experience across all members and mentors are incredible.

At the time of writing, I'm the resident at Minnesota Public Radio (MPR). In 1967, MPR was a small college classical radio station in Collegeville, Minnesota, that grew into a giant entity much respected in Minnesota and by the larger public broadcasting community. MPR pushes out an impressive amount of content through its three cornerstone radio stations and more recently through its podcast networks. While our internally built digital asset management system manages the content pretty well, it is sometimes messy and certainly not easy to make stories public through the current archive portal.

My project has several discrete goals, with the overall aim being to clean up the internal metadata, normalize fields, and make it easier for digital content to be published to the web. Producers populate our metadata, each using fields very differently, and because of the nature of breaking news, we can't make any fields mandatory on the production side.

I'm very lucky to have an archivist to work with, and that archiving news stories is built into existing production workflows. We also have awesome in-house IT folks who are constantly refining the databases that feed the websites. Right now, we have an internal content management site called Eddy. Eddy was the third attempt at developing an internal database after two proprietary digital asset

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management systems were “burned down” and raided to build what we have today. Eddy is useful for in-house content management, but there’s no way right now to make Eddy accessible to outside users. By the end of this residency, I’ll have made recommendations to streamline this process.

Other expectations are part of this residency. I have now presented at two conferences with my cohort. I took on another opportunity to help plan the first NDSR Symposium in Washington, DC, in April 2017. Prior to that, I had never presented at a conference, much less helped plan one. I will present at the MAC Fall Symposium as well, and, in July, I will be presenting at the Society of American Archivists’ annual meeting. I’m a little nervous about that, to be honest. But even though I dislike public speaking, having these experiences under my belt has given me a lot of confidence. These are skills I need to stay engaged in the profession. Along the same lines, I recently presented a webinar on metadata usage models, as well as reaching out to communities to encourage crowdsourced information. I highlighted the fan-fiction community.

Which is a nice segue into my advice for other up-and-coming archivists, as my first tip is to never apologize for things that interest you. I have loved the Harry Potter books since I first read them, so much so that I took a class on them in college, where I first started writing about fan fiction (as opposed to writing fan fiction). Getting that article published¹ was the first step toward cataloging the fictional books in the Harry Potter universe at hogwartslibrary.omeka.net. This is the “digital project” I submitted as my sample for the NDSR search committee to review. It was all I had, but it was enough to impress my mentors at MPR. I’m still kind of surprised that it worked as I was worried they wouldn’t take me seriously. Instead, they saw my passion. Fan fiction became an interesting way to frame my own thinking as I approached MPR’s metadata usage. Sharing that with others made presenting the webinar less scary. Childhood interests have time and again paid it forward. I wish I could go back in time to tell my fourth-grade self that I wasn’t weird for doing all my science reports on the International Space Station, because in 2014, I got to work in the archives at NASA’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory and go to the 10th birthday party for Cassini, the orbiter that was sent to Saturn. If something interests you, hold on to that interest. Keep it in your back pocket, you never know where it might take you.

The second piece of advice I have is to find your mentors. I have so many professionals “in my corner,” and, whenever I start something new, I feel I always have people to talk things over with. Even if it’s just applying for jobs and asking them to look over my cover letter and resume, it always helps to get feedback.

The next few pieces are generally under the mantle of “get involved”—go to conferences, talk to people. Buy business cards if you don’t have them already. Chat with people on Twitter. I’m @libkatem, and you can always start a conversation with me! Say yes to everything, apply for everything. I could never have anticipated getting an internship at JPL, but I had a vague goal of doing an internship out of state. I applied to as many paid ones as I could find. (After only one unpaid internship, I only pursued paid opportunities. That’s my advice for those wishing to mentor—pay your interns.) You never know what’s going to happen.

And my final bit of advice is to do things that scare you. Getting out of my comfort zone has pushed me to be a better person and a better archivist. Certainly this residency has pushed me in ways that, at the beginning, I did not want to be pushed. I have felt myself grow in the past few months in ways I could not have predicted. It’s been challenging and intense, but I can’t recommend the experience highly enough.

Ultimately, this residency taught me that I have so much more to learn—we all do. Everyone has to learn new things, to push themselves in new directions, to say yes to something that scares them. And when we do things together (as a profession, as a cohort, as coworkers), we can get so much farther because we can learn from each other. This is not exactly new information to anyone, I’m sure. Nothing I have done is particularly revolutionary, I know. But it is revolutionary to me, and it might be to someone else just getting started in this profession or to someone just getting started with digital archives, or audio archives, or community building. I have found that being open to things can make the good things that I’m striving for feel a little accidental and a little magical.

Note

1. K. McManus, “Loading the Canon,” in *A Wizard of Their Age: Critical Essays from the Harry Potter Generation*, ed. C. K. Farr et al. (New York: SUNY Press, 2015), 35–47.