The Digital Curation of Broadcasting Archives at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation: Curation Culture and Evaluative Practice

Asen O. Ivanov
Michael Ridley Postdoctoral Fellow
University of Guelph
ORCID iD: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3632-6515

Disciplines/Fields of Study: Library & information science, Media studies

Keywords: broadcasting archives, digital curation, evaluation, information practice, practice theory

This paper presents a doctoral project on the digital curation practices at the news archive of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) (Ivanov 2019). The CBC archive is the largest news media archive in Canada, with over 500,000 hours of digital archival holdings dating back to the 1950s. Data for the project were collected through an organizational ethnography at the CBC news archive’s headquarters in Toronto, Canada ([FN1]). The project examined how archivists at the CBC evaluate, transform, enrich, and reuse archival news materials and sought to understand how organizational and computational processes and systems intersect with human factors in digital curation practice ([FN 2]). This paper describes the project’s approach and summarizes its main findings and conclusions.

Broadcasting news archives provide rich, sometimes visceral, representations of the past. This makes them a vital element of broadcasting journalism's visual language, where they serve as “mnemonic devices” for reconstructing the past (Conboy 2012). But news archives are more than storerooms of information. They are products of a time and place, created through the articulation of different kinds of practices and technologies. As archival ethnographies demonstrate, rather than mere storerooms, archives are more accurately described as dynamic sites of knowledge-making in which different forms of knowledge about the past are configured through information practices such as selection, classification, and organization (Gracy 2004).

The study presented in this paper amplifies the semiotic and material dimension of the digital curation practices at the CBC news archive. It does so by taking up an approach developed for the study of knowledge-making in the sciences and applying it to the curation of the CBC archive, positioning the latter as a sub-set of “social knowledge making” (Camic, Gross, and Lamont 2011). The fundamental assumption of this approach is that neither the social world of actors and actions, the material world of objects and technologies, nor the cultural world of meanings and symbols could be coherently organized or function independently from one another. They are all intertwined in what Barad (2003) calls practices of matter and meaning.
through which the world comes “to matter.” One way to understand these three worlds is to examine the overlapping social, material, and cultural arrangements and mechanisms that bind them together within the context of historically situated expert systems of knowing (Knorr Cetina 1999). In less abstract terms, then, using this approach asks the analyst to ‘open’ practices of knowledge-making, read and organize their contents and symbols, and analyze how they are used.

Following prior work in this analytical tradition, in my dissertation, I analyzed the organizational structures and social interactions at the CBC news archive and the information systems and tools of curation (Latour 1987). I also examined how cultural and symbolic elements such as rules, norms, beliefs, and codes provide strategies for action that allow archivists at the CBC to address pragmatic problems in their immediate environment (Swidler 1986). Lastly, I examined how information is evaluated through the digital curation lifecycle at the CBC news archive, focusing on the methods of comparison, criteria, conventions, and tools supporting these evaluations (Beljean, Chong, and Lamont 2016).

What I found is that the organizational structure of the CBC news archive resembles the axioms of a networked organization, similar to other contemporary knowledge organizations (e.g., software firms). This work environment is characterized by interactions within and across teams and constant information and knowledge exchange. The CBC archivists are expected to develop expertise on the job through an apprenticeship and are hired only in terms of their suitability for this type of work. When hiring new employees, the management seeks for either one of two signals of suitability: training in broadcasting journalism (demonstrated by work experience or a graduate degree) or information management (demonstrated by a library and archival graduate degree). The rationale, I was told, is that the former group understands what makes good journalism, and the latter how to select, classify, catalogue, and organize information. Once on the job, the archivists are expected to master both—they need to learn how to recognize the codes and conventions of journalism and how to manage data and information in complex information systems. It is already in these rudimentary job requirements that the semiotic and material dimensions of digital curation come to analytical light.

Curation practices at the CBC have been evolving gradually for decades since the founding of the archive in the late 1930s, but established ways of working were upended by the organization’s digital transformation in 2008. One consequence of digitization is that news archivists took on a more proactive role in the production of news. They become embedded into the newsroom to anticipate, rather than react to, editorial needs. Digitization accelerated the transfer of information, and consequently, the pace at which work is experienced, creating new pressures and demands for accuracy. Videotapes (as media carriers) were replaced by a complex set of digital assets, some of which are highly unstable and could be easily altered. This made it more difficult to determine and document the identity and integrity of news materials as doing so required a new set of evaluative criteria and practices (FN 3).

The digital transformation of the CBC also led to the introduction of new information and media management systems, whose adoption resulted in unanticipated changes to due process at the
workplace (Gerson and Star 1986). This is because while the new information systems archivists had to learn how to use are state-of-the-art, they are designed with the goals of media production in mind. The “affordances” of these systems presented material and semiotic challenges to the established ways of conceptualizing, representing, and doing curation at the CBC (Gibson 2014 [1979]). As my analysis suggests, the material challenges are addressed through information systems workarounds (Alter 2014). The semiotic challenges, on the other hand, are addressed by developing home-grown file classifications systems that map onto organizational structures and function as sense-making mechanisms that represent the spatial temporal, and causal relatedness among different organizational actors and the archival holdings (Weick 1995).

Lastly, I interviewed my research participants to learn more about the evaluative practices in their work, asking them questions about the various forms of decision-making strategies and heuristics they apply in the selection, cataloguing, and retrieval of archival news materials. This analysis, most broadly, indicates that evaluative practices are consequential during all stages of the curation lifecycle but are particularly salient at the stages of acquisition (when value is established), cataloguing (when value is enriched), and reuse (when value is negotiated to fit into a new context).

Beyond that, my interview data suggest that at the CBC news archive evaluation occurs within both situated and institutional frameworks of understanding in practice (Ivanov 2020). Archivists base their evaluations of archival news materials in the CBC archival policy—which succinctly outlines three value criteria: cultural-value, significance to the corporation, and reuse—as well as in the codes and conventions of broadcasting journalism (which often entails making aesthetics judgements about the content and visual quality of news materials). But as my analysis further suggests, when the archival policy and the codes and conventions of broadcasting journalism cannot provide concrete strategies for action, archivists draw on their subjective experiences, taste, and preferences in evaluation. They, thus, base their evolutions on what institutions identify as valuable but equally so on what they, based on their subjective experiences, recognize as valuable. The intertwinement of institutional and situated frameworks in evaluation differs depending on the situation, the archivist doing the evaluation, the type of materials evaluated, and the goals of evaluation (e.g., for acquisition, cataloguing, or reuse), but it consistently recurs. The outcomes of these evaluations are inscribed in the materiality of the archive in various ways as they are written into item- and collection-level metadata records, taxonomies, indices, and classification systems.

In conclusion, based on these findings, I propose that aside from being supported by socio-technical systems, digital curation practices are also supported by cultural systems. These cultural systems sustain collective action and situated cognition by providing vocabularies of motives and strategies for action that cohere in a curation culture. Second, I propose that evaluative practices are an integral part of digital curation and a prerequisite for enhancing the value of digital materials. They are imbricated in institutional and situated frameworks of understanding, and while computationally imperfect are practically indispensable. It is in the
context of evaluation, I thus argue, that human intelligence and judgment most saliently influence the semiotic and material outcomes of digital curation practice.

FOOTNOTES:

[FN1] — For my methodology see Ivanov (2019, 98-107); See also summary in Ivanov (2020, 2892-2893).

[FN2] — Digital curation is defined as “the active management of data or digital materials through their lifecycle with the goal of ensuring their preservation, enhancing their value, and facilitating their use and reuse” (See, Dallas 2016, 430; See also, Higgins 2008).

[FN3] — In archival science, the evaluation of the integrity and identity of archival records are key perquisites for determining their authenticity and reliability (Duranti 1995). These concerns translate to digital curation, where have been further elaborated as concepts and practices (For discussion see Duranti and Thibodeau 2006; Ross 2012; Becker 2018; Ivanov 2019, 32-43).

REFERENCES


