

Katja Müller, *Digital archives and collections. Creating online access to cultural heritage*, series Anthropology of Media, v. 11, ISBN 978-1-80073-185-1, Berghahn Books, New York 2021, pp. 250, DOI.org/10.2307/j.ctv29sfzfx

Katja Müller is a Visiting Professor at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Technology, Sydney, and Privatdozentin for Social Anthropology at Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg. Her 2021 book, *Digital archives and collections. Creating online access to cultural heritage*¹, provides readers an in-depth introduction to the contexts and practices of digitization processes in ethnographic collections and archives of Indian cultural heritage. Müller's clear and accessible writing style and extensive use of excerpts from interviews and personal communications with case study participants; as well as reflections on her own experiences working with the archives under examination make it easy for archival and digital humanities scholars along with cultural heritage and information professionals to engage with the topic, which K. Müller broadly defines as "a novel account of what archives in digital times entail" (p. 9). However, if readers are looking for a best practices manual for digitisation they should look elsewhere. The book is based on extensive anthropological fieldwork and digital ethnography, conducted by K. Müller between 2015 and 2019, in which she "investigates selected [digitisation] examples in depth, conceptualizes these as part of digital archival practices, and thus assists in building a more profound understanding of digital archives, portrayed as a means of encoding culture in digital form" (p. 19). The latter concept referring to the cultural practices within and behind the digitization process (i.e., attitudes, preconceptions, politics etc.).

The book consists of an introduction, six chapters and a conclusion. The introduction situates Müller's research in a postcolonial framework, in which she identifies the colonial dominance of traditional museum and archival

¹ Open access version see: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv29sfzfx>.

organization of knowledge and discusses the selected online archives in terms of postcolonial practices. “With a focus on archives from India and born-digital, community-based archives, it broadens a view of digital archives that has far too long been centred on North America, Europe or a few remarkable examples in societies with strong Indigenous communities” (p. 19). K. Müller also establishes the scope of her analysis as the practices of digital archives, which includes understanding the actors and processes involved in their creation, infrastructure, curation, and use. Her approach acknowledges the sociocultural and sociopolitical forces that shape online archives, exploring both access to them and what is contained within them.

Astute readers will notice that K. Müller does not include preservation in her initial analysis. Yet, in the first chapter she points out that the resources for digitisation as a tool for preservation are time and labour intensive and the infrastructure to sustain digital archives is expensive. Furthermore, despite the fluidity of online information, K. Müller observes that digital archives have a structure that reveals an intention to preserve despite the impermanence of the internet as a platform. In contrast to the stability of physical archives, online archives can be re-arranged according to search terms and information retrieval architecture. By analyzing the dynamics of order and access in both physical and digital archives in the first chapter, K. Müller demonstrates how online archives can potentially disrupt and challenge established archival economies of scarcity and power. Sources for this first chapter include canonical texts by Hilary Jenkinson, Theodore Schellenberg, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, along with contemporary archival scholars exploring postmodernism (Terry Cook, Joan Schwartz), continuum theory (Frank Upward and Sue McKemmish), the digital turn (Luciana Duranti), and trauma-informed practice (Michelle Caswell). As a result, this chapter presents a concise overview of the archival theory relevant to an exploration of digital archives and is strongly recommended as a primer for graduate students wishing to dig deeper into the theoretical construct of digital archives.

In chapter two, K. Müller discusses content management systems (CMS) for museums and archives, demonstrating the influence that stakeholders, political processes, and ideas of cultural heritage and archives have on selecting and/or developing databases for online archives. Of interest in this chapter is her analysis of the politics of improvement and how notions of modernization and efficiency drive digitisation and the development of CMS within institutions. It is revealed

through in-depth interviews that technical advancements must be intertwined with sociocultural factors when programming CMS to acknowledge existing internal stakeholders and provide affordances for expertise (p. 91). In the current climate of experimental application of artificial intelligence (AI) to online cultural heritage collections to increase discovery and improve curation within and across institutional holdings², Müller's lens of improvement politics offers a critical tool for archival and digital humanities scholars to better understand the gains and losses. The introduction of AI within CMS-driven online archives is not simply an additional technological layer, but the addition of a decision-making actor performing digital curation activities that are most likely independent of and invisible to the end user.

Chapters three, four and five draw on several case studies providing a deeper understanding of Indian digital archives and demonstrating key issues with practical examples. In particular, the Indian Memory Project (IMP) an online archives comprised of personal images and narratives tracing the history and identity of the India subcontinent³; and the 1947 Partition Archive (1947PA) a non-profit non-governmental organization dedicated to institutionalizing the people's history of Partition through digital documentation (e.g., oral histories) and digitisation of personal images and objects for inclusion in an online archives⁴. Themes explored in these chapters are applicable to community-driven and participatory archives, social media collecting and crowdsourcing projects, trauma-informed archival practice, and cultivating a sense of belonging through online engagement. As a result, K. Müller contributes valuable insight from a sociocultural perspective that is relatively absent in existing literature on these topic areas. Published in 2021, this book arrived during the COVID-19 pandemic, a time in which many museums and archives had shuttered their physical sites and pivoted towards providing virtual reference services, online exhibitions, and the creation of pandemic collections based on social media engagement, digital video oral histories, and online journaling portals. A closer reading of Müller's

² *Archives, access and artificial intelligence. Working with born-digital and digitized archival collections*, ed. L. Jaillant, Bielefeld 2022, <https://www.bielefeld-university-press.org/978-3-8376-5584-1/archives-access-and-artificial-intelligence/>, accessed 1 September 2023.

³ Indian Memory Project, <https://www.indianmemoryproject.com/>, accessed 1 September 2023.

⁴ 1947 Partition Archive. Mission & Activities, <https://www.1947partitionarchive.org/mission>, accessed 1 September 2023.

manuscript in light of pandemic-driven online initiatives led by cultural heritage institutions and reports by UNESCO: Turning the threat of COVID-19 into an opportunity for greater support to documentary heritage (2020)⁵ and Living heritage in the face of COVID-19 (2021)⁶ could provide an opportunity to analyze a variety of digital archives as sites of memory-making and commemorative culture.

The final chapter examines the legal questions of digitisation and online dissemination. K. Müller addresses the key issues of copyright, licensing, traditional knowledge in the context of digitisation and born-digital objects. The concepts of original and copy, as well as the materiality of physical and digital objects are visited in this chapter. Drawing on material culture studies, K. Müller highlights the permeability of traditional distinctions between physical and digital objects, recognizing that in some cases digital archives may be migrated to new formats to ensure their longevity (potentially reformatting digitized media into physical objects). “The movements between human-computer interfaces and novel materializations with digital objects also lead to new or extended considerations and valuations, bringing a softening of the original-copy binary” (p. 220). Much of what K. Müller has to say in this chapter is more thought-provoking than prescriptive, which makes sense considering an international audience that will ultimately rely on more specific interpretations of legal and regulatory environments for sharing and disseminating their archives.

Digital archives and collections. Creating online access to cultural heritage is an impressive achievement on many levels: the calibre of writing and rigour of analysis throughout are consistently high; the case studies are richly detailed and evocative, especially as the reader can access the online archives for an immersive experience; the personal insights drawn from Müller’s lived experience as an intern and her personal conversations with project participants are thoughtful and revealing; and the organization of the chapters and subtopics within each chapter produce a coherent and compelling whole. *Digital archives and collections. Creating online access to cultural heritage* is a valuable contribution to the

⁵ Turning the threat of COVID-19 into an opportunity for greater support to documentary heritage, UNESCO, Paris 2020, https://www.ica.org/sites/default/files/dhe-covid-19-unesco_statement_en2.pdf, accessed 1 September 2023.

⁶ UNESCO CLT/CCE/2021/RP/3 Living Heritage in the face of COVID-19, UNESCO, Paris 2021, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000377671.locale=en>, accessed 1 September 2023.

cultural heritage field and should be required reading for archival scholars and practitioners seeking a more in-depth understanding of online archives.

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