

1.5 The Subculture Archive Manifesto. The role of scholars in the preservation of subcultural heritage

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A b s t r a c t

In times of information overload archives are more relevant than ever, as it becomes increasingly difficult to identify reliable sources. Archives have to guarantee quantity and quality of information while dealing with economic and hegemonic factors. Because of technological and social changes, archives have to process fragile digital documents and cope with changing search habits. Archives have also – they always had – the responsibility of selecting what is important and what is not. Now that the first attempts in archiving subcultures have been made, it has become clear that the plurality of the cultural forms of this blurred field have to be properly preserved. Collecting documents has not only to do with the improvement of preservation and distribution strategies, but also with definitions: the creation of a subculture archive is an ethical decision.

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1. Definition in the making

Subcultures studies as we know them started developing in the twentieth century, and after years of empirical research and debates about definition, it is becoming clear that the time is ripe to start collecting and preserving subcultural production. This task comes with some difficulties, because of the ephemeral nature of the subcultural documents and because of the fact that scholars still do not agree on what can be defined as subculture, and even if this term is appropriate at all. The archiving of subcultural objects is urgent because they are precious and fragile documents of capital interest for the research, but the lack of field definition jeopardizes their quality. A possible way to bypass the problem of definition and at the same time to avoid the dispersion of important sources is to list the whos and what of the field, the profiles of those dealing with subcultures, as well as the products of subculture. Who defines subculture, what does subculture produce, which cultural subjects handle these production.

1.1 Whos

I am a scholar making research on subcultures, a member of a subculture, and an archivist.

As a scholar, I use institutional libraries and archives a lot, obviously. Research in the humanities, even more than in other fields, means going through books, journals, documents; to browse catalogues and bibliographies. What we do is to search what we are looking for: we know (or at least, we pretend to know) what, where and how to look for information, we know the reliable journals, the good authors, the respected theories. We don't have all these skills from the beginning. For collecting information in a reasonable way we get help from professors at the university, syllabus and conference (private and public) talks, committed students, helpful librarians.

As member of a subculture, the greatest part of the resources that helped me build my identity are not to be found in institutional repositories, but more likely in a network of real and virtual friends, or at subculture-gatherings (concerts, football matches or cosplay conventions, depending on which subculture you are in), in video or audio recordings, fanzines and specialized magazines or books, that quite rarely find their way to the library, but can nowadays easily be found online. As it happens with libraries and archives, it is easy to get lost at the beginning, we need mentors and some sort of social connection to help us figure out what is good and what is not. In both cases, as scholars and subculture members, we have to deal with such a huge amount of records, it would be impossible to listen, see or read everything in order to have a first-hand knowledge of each single piece of information. Whether we like it or not, we rely on the judgment of others to form our opinions.

As a scholar doing research on subcultures I find myself inbetween worlds, on one hand I recognize that I am part of an institutionalized system of power – the academic world; on the other hand I know that subculture empowered me in a way that institutions do not represent. Subculture is a cultural form worth investigating and preserving, but there are difficulties on both sides. For many academic environments subculture is not relevant, and for many subculture members subculture should not be institutionalised in any way; still, the dialectical interaction between subculture and mainstream cannot be avoided (Bennett & Guerra, 2019). Inevitably, scholars doing research on subculture end

up transferring subcultural knowledge into institutionalised power systems, and often apply hegemonic structures to their research. What scholars can do is to be aware of the importance of this translation, because while doing research we define our object, and because of the blurred definition and the lack of spokespersons that usually characterizes subcultural scenes, when we describe subcultures we constrain them into boundaries and we assume the position of delegates even if nobody ever gave us such an authority. We use resources we collect from subcultural production and it is in our responsibility to make them available in a correct and respectful form.

As an archivist, at last, I am well aware of the fact that to preserve and provide access to information is a huge ethical issue. Even if libraries and archives do their best to ensure free access to as much information as possible to all, still they can offer only what has been preserved, and to those willing to search. As any other cultural institution does, archives relate to the cultural context they are immersed in. Just think about all the documents we lost through history because some religious or temporal power or some excessively zealous archivist considered them inappropriate. Libraries and archives are connected with other cultural and political institutions, and the thematic organization of the documents they preserve is shaped accordingly. The search tools and cataloguing systems used in archives and libraries, help us move through the shelves and guide our knowledge in a specific direction. Valued professors, respected subculture members and indexing systems have the same influence on our learning processes. It cannot be changed but it has to be clear that our choices are always moulded by the cultural context.

Whatever position we take – scholars, subculture members, archivists – we are part of a social and cultural discourse building knowledge. Who is entitled to talk about subculture? Who defines subculture? If we consider the academic research on subculture, we can look back at almost a century of debate, so I have to take the responsibility to pick a couple of statements that I consider reasonable without going through a summary that cannot possibly be presented here. I agree, for a start, with the definition of subculture having a focus on the private and the personal, and expressing itself at first through action rather than through definition (Auslander,2006). When subcultures become visible enough, it is the job of the media (Cohen,1972) to describe them as moral panics, or alternatively as new harmless trends, or cultural phenomena (Polhemus,1996).

It is sometimes difficult to set apart contributions of media experts and scholars, because to give shape to a definition, media pick something from the subculture as they see it, and something from the studies (at least, in the case of reliable journalists) about that subculture. On the other hand, scholars define subcultures through interviews, participant observation, documents produced by the subculture and about the subculture, and this includes reports from the media. Media and scholars define subcultures, then. And do subcultures define subcultures, with their flat hierarchies, spontaneous actions and scattered groupings? As every cultural definition, the definition of subculture is always in the making, every scene (Bennett, Peterson,2004) can represent subculture in a different way depending on local circumstances. Subcultures even include in their peculiar bricolage (Hebdige,1979) a lot of what they hear and read about themselves. The very fact that different scenes of the same subculture do exist testifies how ideas travel with and through media: not all punks in the world were in London in 1977 to witness the “real”

punk, most of us heard of it on TV, radio, magazines and so on over the years.

Maybe it can be said that the definition of subculture is partly made by all these actors: media, scholars, subculture members. The resulting definition is a unique and at the same time multifaceted concept. It is then the texts created by these cultural actors to be relevant and worth archiving.

1.2 What

Even if we're still unsure about the correct definition of subculture, I think we all agree that subcultures create some new kind of culture, produce and rearrange symbolic meanings and give their active contribution to the cultural construction. This takes the form of media documents, that archives can preserve. Subcultures have always produced a huge amount of subcultural documents, fanzines, records, events and radio programs, political action: many of these documents are lost forever, and others are going to be lost soon, but there are also interesting examples of preservation. There are plenty of private collections and some of them are open to the public; some subculture groupings have already started small-scale archives, some libraries collect materials in their local history repositories, some art galleries organize exhibitions.

Take the libraries: there is a growing interest and cooperation between subcultures and trusted institutions such as local or research libraries and repositories. Libraries and Archives have a long and sound history and sophisticated technologies for the storage, so for sure the documents are in good hands. In the case of libraries the problem is (and it is a huge problem at the moment in the debate regarding the possibility of sharing contents) that the description standards used for cataloguing and indexing are inadequate for the materials subcultures produce. The same can be said for archives. As long as archivists have to deal with traditional fanzines, records or photographs, it still works, but some fanzines are unique pieces, sometimes the same people record the same songs with a different name, and not all photographs can be connected with a specific event or place. Summing up, and trying not to dig too deep into library science, there are two main problems, which are inherent to the indexing logics, that make it difficult to work with subcultures: description fields and subject headings. The library standards of description are inadequate (for example, the same fanzine can change the title in every issue. This makes the field "title" developed for the cataloguing of periodicals useless). The subject headings are keywords that should relate to the contents of the document, this implies a knowledge of the field that is possible only if the field has some kind of institutionalised presence (even the most learned archivist cannot apply the category 'glunk' if it does not exist in the controlled vocabulary, and anyway not many fans of glam rock know the term has been used sometimes to define glam-punk).

Another institution which has taken the responsibility of storing subculture documents and memorabilia are museums. The musealisation of subculture is a sensitive topic: usually, what comes in museums are irreplaceable pieces of history, that cannot be used, or shared. Collector's pieces on display are sometimes interpreted from the subculture as a form of exploitation, and it is difficult for museums, because of their structure and function, to describe living cultures in the making and to be open to ongoing contributions.

Private archives and collections, finally, are remarkable DIY projects, but they

usually have poor funding and acknowledgment or no funding at all, they are the product of a group of a few (sometimes just one person) involved enthusiasts, but unfortunately lack external support and cannot ensure continuity. Let's say we have a clear definition of subculture and can develop a proper indexing system, we have reasonable economic support and specialised archivists. And what about all those documents not directly related to the subculture production, but being a comment or a consequence of its action (like media coverage or academic research)? It is easy to see that a classification of this hazy cultural field after the straight archival traditions should be avoided, the risk would be to leave out important information.

There is also an issue regarding the temporal level: even if one could be able to organize an indexing system which includes all available documents to date, it cannot be predicted which other forms subcultural strategies may take in the future. The lack of defined field boundaries and of coordinated archives should not discourage from trying if not a global, at least a connected view of these documents. I am suggesting that we can look at new technologies and try to make the best out of them. After all, there is much more in common between internet and society than between culture and archives. In fact, the world wide web technologies seem to be based on the same cultural textual models Geertz (1973) and Lotman (1984, 2005) presented: the culture being a web cultural subject produce and are suspended in.

2. *The whos and what in a web*

By now it looks like we have cultural subjects with different profiles contributing in a way or another to the definition of subculture, and plenty of subcultural products collected with different archiving systems scattered at every level, institutional, non-institutional and private. It is clear that it is not possible, and not even desirable, to force all this information to a single standard. My suggestion is that the steps already made for the preservation of subcultural documents can be coordinated via a loose definition of the position of subculture inside the cultural system, through an acknowledgment of the subculture as an intellectual capital of our culture. The abstract model that could be taken is that of the Lotmanian Semiosphere or of the Geertzian web: both for the semiotician and for the anthropologists the definition of culture is that of a web of connections, every junction being a cultural text. As long as these texts are connected, in some way, to the whole web, they are still meaningful and worth preserving.

Such a model could help preserve different documents that cannot be filed under a relevant (subculture) category. Furthermore, this form respects the identity of the subculture and shows the position of that subculture in the Big Picture. Here the subculture scholars can be useful. We know how these connections work, because we use archives, libraries, we browse media and subcultural products, and we are aware that while writing about subculture we are describing it, therefore partially creating it. That is why we make our best to cite the sources. But then it is difficult, for scholars, to make them available, because this is not our job as scholars: if we put a list of references at the end of our articles we expect the readers to go and search for those documents, if interested, by themselves.

Sometimes this operation is frankly impossible, if the sources cited are lyrics of some obscure band nobody ever heard of, or unpublished memories

of a friend of a friend. We all know the frustrating feeling of using tons of information for an article and then leaving it in a box or in a computer folder never to be used again. If we have, as scholars, this information, and if we are allowed to use it, why not involve archivists and librarians? In virtuous academic environments this happens already, but archives quite rarely communicate with each other and they are at their best a resource for the local researchers.

The academic world is asked to operate on society: the so-called third mission (dissemination) is an important aspect of the research; scholars have the moral duty to preserve and give publicity to the sources used. To preserve the sources in a correct way, by the way, protects subculture from abuse. Once we identify the actors involved in the creation of subculture – subculture members, media, scholars – and once we identify the actors involved in the preservation of subcultural documents – archives, museums, research centres – we can move to a more practical way of rearranging the information with the involvement of all these subjects, thanks to the philosophy underlying the subculture ethos but also the world wide web ethos.

Other than in the past, it is nowadays much easier to share information. The web is a social creation more than a technological one: it is meant to be open, free and collaborative, as Tim Barners-Lee himself always insisted.

3. The GLAM Project

It is actually the museums and archives themselves who realised their treasures were well kept but almost unavailable to the public, and they are working to solve this problem. Using new technologies, which help share information easily, traditional institutions are developing the GLAM project: the idea is basically that galleries, libraries, archives and museums can put their resources online using a new and more general single common standard of cataloguing, and connecting them despite the different indexing systems. If we visit an archive or a library, we see that a book, a recorded file and a picture are described in different ways (for some archives the authors are important, in other archives records are ordered by subject, or year, or dimensions). The GLAM project is trying to find a standard of description useful for all kind of documents. It is obviously quite complicated, but not as impossible as it seems, because these standards use machine generated codes instead of descriptions. The turning point is to make the documents machine-readable.

Practically described, every time we put a new definition in a wiki, this entry is identified with an URI – Uniform Resource Identifier – and stored into Wikidata. This means that every entry gets some kind of identification number and every other information put online connected to this URI will be available to those searching for the first entry: I will be able to move from a book title to an author, to the place where the author lived, and to the map of how to get there, to the timetable of the trains to get there and to the weather forecast for this weekend. These kind of metadata – descriptions related to entries – are not the traditional metadata (title of the book, author, year of print) archives and museums and libraries usually use to describe their resources. And this is because until now we thought it is a person who will need to identify an entry, and when we think of a person, we are usually quite focused on our own culture. So if you go to a library looking for a book of Jane Austen you'll have to search for Austen, Jane. But if someone from Vladivostok looks for the same author, they will definitely use another name-form.

The URIs bypass the problem, because it is not the different forms of the name Jane Austen that have to be connected, it is one single machine readable number. The world of information grew much bigger lately and the opening of old standards can be very useful for the mapping of the subcultural documents, because nowadays the language we have to learn is not the complicated self-centred language of archives and libraries, but just a set of machine generated URIs which come as metadata with the resource we are putting online.

4. *Scholars sharing their sources*

Such a procedure could be easily used by scholars researching about subculture, and we should do it in our own interest. Especially when thinking about subcultures, we deal with unique copies of flyers printed on poor quality paper, photographs in analogic formats with fading colors, fragile cassette recordings. All this material should be converted and put online: I am well aware of the copyright issues, but there are many ways of protecting intellectual property that can be discussed, each scholar has the responsibility of the contents he/she collects and produces anyway, and has to make sure he/she is allowed to make them public (Guerra & Quintela, 2016). The unbearable burden of copyright can be lightened through a mindful share of responsibilities. It is nonetheless urgent to find a way to preserve the documents. Once online, every document will get a URI, and is ready to be connected with other already existing URIs: the flyer of a concert should be linked with the bands playing, the venue, the year (if available), the city, and every other inferable information. This work will be made automatically through the machine readable URIs, as for the person on the other end of the computer, doing the research, this person does not need to follow all the links, he/she can choose the more relevant ones depending on the goals of his/her research (Guerra, 2019). Even better: if the person doing the research has some information to add, it can be done adding contents online and linking them with the given information. For example, private fotos or recordings of the concert can be linked to the flyer.

Such a storage system, via URIs, free and available, seems to me the closest one to a model of subculture thinking; there is no hierarchy, nobody saying what is good and what is not; the knowledge is based on the cooperation of many voices, everybody – the archivist, the scholar, but also the private citizen with an internet connection – can cooperate on the building of a definition of subculture. Last, the web model fits the structure of subcultures, made of parallel scenes, local and translocal.

Let aside the technical aspects, this paper is about the importance of preservation. Archives and museums are making their bit and it is the scholars, in my opinion, that not only have plenty of records to share, but could be involved in structuring the information flows. This could be done with little funding, with scholars cooperating with subculture members in the definition of a basic thesaurus, whose implementation can advance with further contributions from media, archives, colleagues. Working in the third mission sector, scholars would coordinate the information and information sources, sharing their knowledge in order to connect all available voices and accounts, respectfully accepting the multifaceted nature of subculture.

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