The #CommunityArchive is Trending:
An Analysis of the Affordances and Limitations of Social Media as Community Archives for Collective Memory in the Public Sphere

MPhil in Digital Humanities and Culture

School of Languages, Literatures and Cultural Studies
Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences
Trinity College Dublin, The University of Dublin
2021

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Acknowledgements

To the Almack, de Guzman, and Manipis families. For asking too little and giving too much.

To the DH@TCD faculty and staff, especially Jennifer Edmond, Michelle Doran, and Vicky Garnett. Thank you for being my guides in the DH ‘tent’ and for the trust.

To my amazing teachers during the postgraduate programme at Trinity: Jennifer Edmond, Jan Buts, James Hadley, Jennifer O’Meara, and Michael Ludlow.

To Trinity classmates and colleagues I met during lectures, seminars, and workshops, especially the DH cohort (Louise, Annie, Kitty, and Ali) and the dissertation seminar people. Here’s to hoping we’ll actually see face-to-face sometime in the future.

To the great people at the UK-IE Digital Humanities Network, especially Michelle Doran and Jane Winters.

To the Trinity Global Room and Trinity Global Relations Office, especially Kim Boyle and Daniel Faas for the privilege of being a scholarship winner.

To the University of the Philippines Diliman (colleagues, organisations, faculty, and staff), especially Luna Sicat-Cleto, Department of Filipino and Philippine Literature, and Anakbayan. For the grounding and principles.

To old friends, especially Dalzel, Lyka, Pia, Tle, May, Ara, JC, Isa, Kristal, Ezjae, Giel, Kwesi, and Yeye. And Cheska. For sanity breaks and a whole lot more.

And to cookies (chocolate chip and gingernut, not the virtual kind).
Abstract

The #CommunityArchive is Trending: An Analysis of the Affordances and Limitations of Social Media as Community Archives for Collective Memory in the Public Sphere — Nicko M. de Guzman

The dissertation examines the community archive’s effectiveness in a social media context in terms of accessibility, transmission, and sustainability among other factors that deal with archival functions and goals. The critical digital humanities approach to this paper is done by taking cultural-humanities concepts (collective memory and archives) and connecting it with a sociological theory (the public sphere) while being contextualized in a digital-technical milieu (social media). The dissertation wants to argue that collective memory is as much a discourse facilitator that informs public opinions in a public sphere as compared to the news. Archives, then, act as a physical entity containing discourse of collective memory just as a newspaper is for news. These concepts are then transposed in social media: Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram as the new public sphere. The emergence of community archives on social media and their goals of inclusion are then critiqued if indeed social media suffices as an interface to include a community archive’s collective memory in the public sphere. This is done through analysing specific social media aspects such as filters and vague terms and by examining how a particular community archive, the Black and Irish, functions in social media. The results show that the affordances of social media as an interface for community archives are countered by the limitations and barriers embedded in the social media system and its business model that impedes archival functions and goals of collective memory inclusion in the public sphere.
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Introduction

For the past decade, Facebook has focused on connecting friends and families. With that foundation, our next focus will be developing the social infrastructure for community – for supporting us, for keeping us safe, for informing us, for civic engagement, and for inclusion of all.

— Mark Zuckerberg, Building Global Community (2017)

Big technology and Internet companies are keen on using these words of hope and promises of unity when describing their technology and platforms. It is no wonder that a lot of people, especially individuals and groups from the marginalised and vulnerable sector, are drawn to such phrases that embody their ideals for society. However, upon closer inspection and analysis, their inventions present otherwise. The promises and words are only empty when their platforms and technology do not fulfil these through their policies and coding within their systems.

The emergence of community archives on social media, led mostly by the minoritised sectors of society (such as people of colour, the LGBTQ+, and many more), was the impetus for this research. These community archives were formed as a response to traditional, institutional archives excluding them (intentionally or not) in their collections, deeming their histories and identities as ‘unarchivable’ therefore not worthy of being part of a national collective memory. Social media, posturing as an ‘open’ and ‘free’ platform for anyone, was the immediate choice for an alternative platform for these communities and groups to carry out their archival operations and advocacies. As social media has seemingly everyone on its platform, including prominent individuals in politics, it had built up a reputation of becoming an integral space for politics—a public sphere. This gave more reasons for community archives to use it to advocate for the inclusion of their histories in the mainstream and in the consciousness of society.

With that, the objectives of the research are three-fold. The first half, the theoretical, aims to (1) establish the public sphere’s relevance in society, (2) argue that collective memory informs public opinion in the public sphere, and (3) justify that archives
act as a space and authority for collective memory. The second half of the research seeks to (1) connect the functions of the traditional public sphere into the ‘new’ public sphere—social media—and discuss whether it meets the criteria and (2) discuss the relevance of community archives in the context of the institutional archive’s lapses. The third half tries to (1) analyse the digital divide in relation to the goals of a community archive, (2) critique certain social media aspects that afford and limit a community archive’s functions, and (3) assess the practices of a particular digital community archive, the Black and Irish. At the core, the main objective and research question wants to investigate how social media functions as an interface for a community archive to forward advocacies in the public sphere.

Social media as a ‘new’ public sphere is not a new concept and has been studied extensively by other scholars, specifically in the context of the public opinion/debate and social media. While the research aims to be an addition to the literature, it also proposes to fill in a gap by using collective memory as a new angle to look at the public sphere.
Methodology

The first chapter of the dissertation will trace Jürgen Habermas’ definition of the public sphere, its sociohistorical development and transformation, and its primary use in society. It has been stressed that the media, in the form of newspapers, plays a major role in Habermas’ public sphere because it gives people information, therefore facilitating political discourse and debate among its citizens and the politicians which is the primary goal of the public sphere. Collective memory will then be argued as a major facilitator of discourse in the public sphere as this aspect informs an individual’s opinion and disposition on a possible certain topic discussed in the public sphere. It will then be asserted that archives act as a physical entity that holds discourse of collective memory just as a newspaper is for news. The diagram below illustrates the theoretical framework of the dissertation:
The next chapter will weave the public sphere, collective memory, and archives in the context of social media and community archives. The first part of the discussion will revolve around how social networking sites meet and disrupt the traditional functions of the public sphere via its features. The second part will focus on the emergence of community archives, offline and online, and how marginalized communities create them to counter the traditional and institutional archive’s singular and somehow myopic narrative of public history and heritage.

Media and collective memory will serve as nodes that facilitate discourse in the traditional public sphere and the ‘new’ public sphere of social media. In the traditional public sphere, newspapers serve as the object of transmission for media to serve its purpose of informing an individual while an archive is the equivalent for collective memory. The ‘new’ public sphere’s objects of transmission are the newsfeed for the media and online community archives for collective memory. Below are the pertinent factors and questions to consider when evaluating these objects of transmission for information of the individual and the public:

- Access (who has access? How are they accessed?)
- Transmission (how are these objects distributed? Who distributes these?)
- Items/Data (who/what are “featured” in these objects? Articles in media, artefacts in archives)
- Formation/Curation (who forms these objects? How are they formed and collected? How is the knowledge organised?)
- Ownership/Independence (who owns the institutions that make these objects? Who owns the “featured” items/data on the archive? Who owns the archive?)
- Preservation/Sustainability (how are the objects kept and stored? What are the plans for the long-term process of preserving objects and the archive itself?)
The third chapter will serve as the discussion and analysis part of the dissertation where it investigates the terms, conditions, and community standards of social media and whether it really serves its purpose as an “open” and “democratic” space of discourse for the public sphere. Discussions on digital inequalities, algorithms and filters, and the social media business model will support these claims. It will then contextualize these discussions to the purposes of collective memory via the community archives on social media and whether social media is the appropriate and sufficient platform to reinforce collective memory for the public sphere. The third part of the chapter will take a look at a case study, the Black and Irish, and how they operated. This will also outline the affordances of these social networking sites and the limitations that a community archive on social media encounters and the recommended steps needed to overcome these.
Chapter 1
Theoretical Framework

There are three main parts to this chapter that act as a skeleton to the three large concepts of the dissertation: (1) the public sphere, (2) collective memory, and (3) archives. These concepts will be broken down into essential and key ideas that will connect and interact to inform how collective memory shapes a public opinion in a public sphere. Additionally, it will be argued how archives are spaces that hold collective memory and at the same time act as an authority for collective memory.

I. The Public Sphere of Jürgen Habermas

The concept of the public sphere as a domain and as part of civil society is instrumental to any democracy because of its supposed distribution of power to the people and citizen participation, according to Thomas McCarthy in his introduction of Habermas’ book, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989). In its purest and ideal form, the Habermasian liberal model of the bourgeois public sphere is essentially a group of educated private individuals that banded together to publicly discuss at length matters of general interests. It is the function and goal of the public sphere to create a public opinion by informed and critical reasoning and debate that will ultimately affect political change in society via intermediating with the state. With this, three crucial requirements are needed in able for the public sphere to function properly: (1) access to information must be limitless; (2) participation in the sphere must be fair, unrestricted, and protected; and (3) influence of institutions, particularly in terms of economics, must be absent (Kruse et al 2017). The people engaged in the public sphere would discuss these matters with a tone of generality (“common humanity”) and with the common interest of the public in mind (“common concern”) (Habermas 1989, 36), meaning it assumes the position of being ‘universal’ in debating political topics that affect everyone in society in terms of social and economic class, gender, and area/locality (i.e., urban or rural). Topics of discussion in the public sphere, at first, revolved around literary-cultural subjects (the ‘public sphere in the
world of letters’ of eighteenth to nineteenth century Britain, France, and Germany); it then evolved and took a turn broadly to more political and stately matters as time progressed.

This type of public sphere was initiated by the bourgeois class in coffee houses and salons where educated individuals had the chance to interact with other individuals outside their houses and families to talk about issues and news that mattered to them and affected them as a society. Quoting Habermas, he said that the “reproduction of life in the wake of developing market economy had grown beyond the bounds of private domestic authority” (1964). These spaces provided these groups of individuals a separate space, which paved the way for discussions about the need for a separation of their group, their society, from the public authority (which, at that time, was the royalty, nobility, and the feudal lords). Not satisfied with being ‘represented’ by the monarchs, the church, and feudal lords (called “representative publicness” or the “representative public sphere”), they took control of the meaning of public sphere and engaged the state in the “fundamentally privatized yet publically relevant sphere of labour and commodity exchange” through reason and debate; the bourgeois public sphere started acting as critics and judges of these governing personalities and activities, a direct opposition to public authority (Habermas 1964). The public sphere, then, took the responsibility as a mediator between the state and society, articulating what society needs from and demands of its state as providers. The bourgeois society asserted this type of exercise of political power through critical public discussion which was eventually institutionally recognized. The rise of the early modern state saw “political self-interpretation and the institutionalization” of the bourgeois public sphere, making itself relevant in society (Habermas 1989).

The value and significance of the public sphere in society is manifested not just as a physical space but as a “process of counter-hegemonic struggles” where these struggles are ultimately geared towards “a better society” which is a “process of constituting the public that creates spatial domains of resistance in the public” (Fuchs 2014). The public sphere acted as a symbol of democracy where members of society had a chance to contribute their opinions on political decisions that ultimately affected them as citizens.
Public Opinion and the Media

While the political turn of the discussions gave way for the rising importance and institutionalization of the public sphere and its function in civil society, it also built the formalization of the ‘public opinion.’ Habermas differentiated the term ‘public opinion’ from ‘opinion’ because these two terms undergo different processes and carry different meanings; the former undergoes critical reasoning and discourse amongst the educated and well-informed while the latter is usually prejudiced because of the general values, assumptions, and norms. In order to formulate a ‘proper’ public opinion to take part in the public sphere, an individual must have the first requirement of the public sphere which is access to information. This is where the role of media comes in as facilitators of discourse and reason.

An informed and reasoning public in the public sphere is presupposed in order for a public opinion to come in fruition. This requires the unlimited access of the public information which the media is tasked to do in the form of newspapers and pamphlets (in the eighteenth to nineteenth century), radio and television (in the twentieth century), and the Internet and social media (current era). The media plays a major role in shaping ideas and creating public opinion because it acts as both a means of communication and transmission of information. The media garnered the tag “mediator and intensifier of public opinion” as its function evolved from only gathering and spreading news to actually publishing public opinion via its editorial staff, influencing the ones receiving the information (Habermas 1964). However, this also created the influx of private and special interests to publish propaganda, muddying public opinion and what will eventually be the reason for its collapse.

Issues of Exclusivity

There are two important terms to take note of in the German philosopher’s public sphere: that it is liberal and it is bourgeois. This means that all other factors regarding civility and class differences are already presupposed and predetermined; all private individuals taking part in the public sphere are assumed to have equal access to information and are
educated in order to make a critical public opinion and it is at the context of a liberal government and philosophy and for the purposes of facilitating liberalism in society.

Social preconditions at the time of its conception were very telling of how exclusive the public sphere was and what kind of ‘public’ was considered at that time. Numerous assumptions and unconscious biases are made in this public sphere because of its very nature. One, it is bourgeois, meaning it is already biased toward a particular social and economic class. Habermas notes that “formal education at that time was more a consequence than a precondition of social status, which in turn was primarily determined by one’s title to property” (Habermas 1989). Two, it assumes that information dissemination is equal and access to it is unfiltered without considering that these media and newspapers are prone to carry their own biases or worse, paid to carry a certain person or institution’s propaganda. The recognition of these factors will be the very reasons why the public sphere has collapsed, as will be discussed further in the next section.

It is crucial to point out that labelling it ‘bourgeois’ will have created specific qualifications that are ‘needed’ to be ‘accepted’ or even considered in such a space. These qualifications, in turn, acted as barriers because given the context of the era and areas, only a handful of people would have been able to attain and reach those qualifications in the eighteenth to nineteenth European societies. Although the public sphere was assumed, in Habermas’ view, to cater to “wider strata of the middle class, including craftsmen and shopkeepers” (33), the very notion of having the money and time to go into a coffee house to discuss with people already entails a certain privilege. This privilege also points out how this particular public sphere leaves out the uneducated and poor because the main qualifications to belong to this public sphere are education and property ownership which were not universally given or equally accessed. Coffee houses, the main space where the public sphere met and discussed, were also male dominated as “only men were admitted to coffee-house society” (33) which create barriers for genders. These public spheres were also urban-centric, excluding people outside of town and the city centre. This bourgeois public sphere also leaves out certain racial and ethnic people out of Habermas’ public sphere because of the focus on European countries. Consensus among these groups, then, comes naturally considering how narrow and homogenized their backgrounds are, discussing such
monumental topics and reaching to certain collective agreements on issues that encompass their social classes and circles.

The “common humanity” and “common concern” framing of the discussions in the public sphere becomes problematic in this regard because the people ‘allowed’ or have access to the public sphere are naturally or unconsciously biased toward their own class, gender, race and other subjectivities and worse, will assume the needs of other people outside of their own. Although “issues discussed became general not merely in their significance, but also in their accessibility everyone had to be able to participate” (Habermas 1989, 37) it can still be akin to what scholar Donna Haraway labels as the “god trick” phenomenon (1988). Even if this bourgeois public sphere “did not equate itself with the public”, the very claim to “act as its mouthpiece, in its [the public] name, perhaps even as its educator” is the very problem of the sphere (Habermas 1989). Private individuals who are educated and are property owners who assume the role of the ‘common human’ in the public sphere to ‘universalize’ opinions made in the guise of ‘reason’ and debate becomes unreasonable because of assumptions. Assuming ‘universalized’ humanity and concern in the public sphere is unjust and illogical because one can never assume a subject position of another because of individual and subjective interests, experiences, and particularities. Habermas adds:

> the experiences about which a public passionately concerned with itself sought agreement and enlightenment through the rational-critical public debate of private persons with one another flowed from the wellspring of a specific subjectivity (1989, 43)

Even under the guise of educated reasoning by the bourgeois reading public, the biggest problem here is the public sphere claiming a ‘universalized’ public opinion which can never be attained because ‘reason’ is subjective and/or under informed and will depend on who the people in the room are.

The way these bourgeois individuals would naturally come to an agreement could be seen as strength because the goal of the public sphere, after all, is to formulate social consensus on certain political matters to bring to the state. However, this homogeneity of backgrounds in the public sphere could also be a limitation because of its inherent
“stratified power relations and class” (Fuchs 2014). In short, its conditions are its own limitations. By outlining these bourgeois values and ideals, Habermas reveals how narrow the ‘public’ is in these spheres and how it confines the very participatory factor of the ‘public’ sphere and it is actually much idealized as a domain for political, much less societal, change (Fuchs 2014). The material conditions of access to the public sphere remain idyllic as long as certain unequal circumstances remain; this factor is a huge constraint when it comes to the public sphere’s realization as a concept. From its conception, it basically does not fulfil its promise because of exclusionary requirements and inherent societal barriers.

Public sphere as a participatory society is idealized because it is based upon a narrow perspective of the public. The requirements and resources to access and to belong in the actual sphere (i.e., education, property ownership, being male, residing in a city), in effect, emphasizes how unequal society really is and the so-called ‘universal’ rights that these bourgeois practice and enjoy are actually undermining the unequal nature of society (Fuchs 2014).

The Collapse of the Public Sphere

The social functions of the public sphere waned because of two factors: the ‘widening’ of the public sphere and the influx of private interests in media. The scope of the public sphere grew and came to include the “uneducated” class which Habermas labelled as “political public sphere of the social welfare state” (1989). From a bourgeois public sphere to a social welfare state, this shift was made because of the want by the ‘lower’ classes to include people that “capitalism neglected” in the industrial revolution. However, this expansion caused natural conflicts within the sphere itself, affecting the coherence of public opinion. The public sphere “lost its social exclusivity and coherence created by bourgeois institutions and relatively high standard of education” therefore weakening its critical functions (Habermas 1964; 1989; Fuchs 2014). The widening of this public meant that public opinions could only lead to “coercion into the compulsion of reason” so a critical agreement would not be achievable (Habermas 1964; 1989). Public sphere turned from a consensus of private individuals engaged in public discussion to a public sphere “pressured from the
streets” and brought about by compromise without challenging the whole, presenting the
danger of plurality without unity (Habermas 1964; Fuchs 2014).

The diffusion of the press and propaganda also made the public body expand beyond
the bourgeois. But, more than the widening of the population, the transition from “literary
journalism to public services of mass media, from journalism of conviction to commerce”
began the influx of private interests in these facilitators of discourse in the public sphere
(Habermas 1964; 1989). This meant conflicts of the private sphere and interests of
individuals spilled into the public sphere. Modern societies with this kind of media cannot
achieve the idealized public sphere because of “influence of money via corporate interests
within mass media” (Kruse et al 2017). These hinder the three requirements of the public
sphere mentioned earlier. A shift from a “culture-debating to culture-consuming” public was
because of powerful organisations acquiring power over media/publishing, meaning
information distributed to the public is biased therefore a ‘true’ public opinion and
discourse is not achievable because of manipulation of information/media (Habermas 1989;
Philo 2004). Consumerism and advertising, in effect, contributed to the destruction of any
consensus-based public sphere because control of the public opinion became so prevalent,
public discourse disappeared and the “re-feudalization of the public sphere” took place
(Habermas 1964; 1989; Philo 2004).

Private Interests in the Public Sphere

Private interests and subjectivities may therefore seem to have been to blame for
the decline of the seemingly ‘critical’ debates and discussions in the public sphere. But,
upon further scrutiny, private interests and concerns had already infiltrated public opinions
in the public sphere upon its conception because of its exclusivity and its roots. The public
sphere started in intimate/private spheres, in homes; Habermas notes that the “public's
understanding of the public use of reason was guided specifically by such private
experiences as grew out of the audience-oriented subjectivity of the conjugal family's
intimate domain” (Habermas 1989). The realm of family and economy were one and the
same in the bourgeois modern society of the private sphere because “status of private man
combined the role of owner of commodities with that of head of the family, that of property owner with that of ‘human being’” and paternal heads of properties were also equated to families because of the patriarchal system (Habermas 1989). This connection proves that private experiences and interests very much inform and facilitate public opinion in the public sphere just as well as the media does.

The ‘audience-oriented’ factor of these private concerns was the very reason the intimate/private sphere spilled over to the public sphere. Habermas notes that “subjectivity originating in the intimate sphere of the conjugal family created, so to speak, its own public” (Habermas 1989). He adds that these private spheres actually “provided the training ground for a critical public reflection still preoccupied with itself—a process of self-clarification of private people focusing on the genuine experiences of their novel privateness” (Habermas 1989).

As private interests and “subjectivity, as the innermost core of the private, was always already oriented to an audience” (Habermas 1989, 49), it is clear that public opinions in the public sphere originate in the private sphere and therefore facilitates these discussions. These private concerns, then, naturally emerge in the public sphere. Scholar Chris Philo notes that the “public opinion about such concerns is formed, abstracting away from specific instances to more generalised claims with wider relevance, and so the private is transformed into the public” (2004). The very notion of the bourgeois public sphere as a cohesive unit with similar backgrounds supposes that these groups of individuals, however private they may be and have different private lives, have a collective subjectivity that they agree upon that ultimately influences their creations of public opinions.

**II. Collective Memory in and of the Public Sphere**

Since subjectivities and private interests abound the formation of public opinion, it is then natural to conclude that these at the very least inform if not facilitate discourse in the public sphere just as well as media. One subjectivity to consider as a facilitator of discourse is memory, specifically collective memory in the context of the public sphere.
What is Collective Memory?

French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs attribution to memory is that although it is primarily done at an individual level, memory and the act of remembering is not a private or personal process altogether. Just like the private interests in the public sphere, these memories ‘require’ an audience for it to be ‘legitimized’ because memory formation and remembering is social in nature (Halbwachs 1992; 2011). Halbwachs states that “the individual consciousness is only a passageway for these currents, a point of intersection for collective times” (Halbwachs 2011). He adds that even “our most personal remembrances, offering such a striking character of absolute unity, actually derive from a fusion of diverse and separate elements” (Halbwachs 2011).

Collectives and groups, then, are important because they “provide us the stimulus or opportunity to recall; they also shape the ways in which we do so, and often provide the materials” (Olick et al 2011). Thus, memory and remembering is “how minds work together in society, how their operations are not simply mediated by social arrangements but are in fact structured by them” as stated by scholars Jeffrey Olick, Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi, and Daniel Levy (2011). This posits that memory and the act of remembering is not merely passive but active that “takes place with social materials, within social contexts, and in response to social cues” (Olick et al 2011). These social frameworks for individual memory, as what Halbwachs called it, are what make memories collective; it is “made of those ‘instruments’ used by the conscious individual to recompose a coherent image of the past” (Marcel and Mucchielli 2008). Ultimately, collectives remember to maintain solidarity and a sense of unity amongst each other for their group and their traditions/values to continue existing in some way or form within their unit and in the wider world (Halbwachs 1992; 2011).

So, why is collective memory an important consideration and/or facilitator of discourse in the public sphere? Because, apart from history, memory is identity and “memory—relating past and present—is thus the central faculty of being in time, through which we define individual and collective selves” (Olick et al 2011). In the context of the
public sphere, it is through memory that we create private and group identities that shape our opinions of not just ourselves but of the things happening around us which can become history. On the validity of these memories, Olick, Vinitzky-Seroussi, and Levy say:

not merely that memory is omnipresent but that it is at once situated in social frameworks (e.g., family and nation), enabled by changing media technologies (e.g., the Internet and digital recording), confronted with cultural institutions (e.g., memorials and museums), and shaped by political circumstances (e.g., wars and catastrophes) (2011)

Memory’s role in history, although, has been scrutinized by its seemingly subjective nature and the scepticism by historiographers toward memory studies stems from their “disdain of oral history” (Olick et al 2011). However, the intricacies and frameworks of memory conception as a collective show how they are complex and are grounded on multiple societal factors which make it a strong force of discussion and legitimization in an important political space like the public sphere.

*Individual to Collective, Private to Public*

It has been established that though memories start or are conceived at the individual level, the collective affirms and makes the memory ‘legitimate’ and complete. So, who are these groups that construct and affirm these collective memories? Halbwachs points out that the ‘main producers’ of collective memory are the family, religious groups, and social classes (1992; Marcel and Mucchielli 2008). In this regard, we can say that Habermas’ public sphere is a main producer of collective memory since it is made up of a certain type of social class, the bourgeois. Much like the private interests in the public sphere, memories are very much ‘audience-oriented’ in this sense for it to be manifested as ‘real’. It is with the public or the collective and the act of publicizing that these private interests, much like individual memories, get affirmation and legitimization, confirming that private experiences and thoughts are actually experienced outside of the self and are also experienced by other people in their immediate collective.
Scholars Jean-Christophe Marcel and Laurent Mucchielli, referring to Halbwachs’ study on collective memory, state that “the past is not really preserved in the individual memory. ‘Fragments’ persist there, but not complete recollections. What makes them true memories are collective representations” (2008). These collective representations of the collective memory are important to consider in the public sphere because it is in these collectives and their representations where power potentially resides and can be potentially wielded to affect political and social change. Collective memories are powerful because when these are collectivized under an influential group in society such as the public sphere, they affect and inform public opinions that can be legitimized and therefore be ‘official’ (as in history) in matters of state and education.

Collectivized Memory

Collective memory when collectivized (in a political sense), and eventually legitimized (through policy, institutionalization, or the like), can become public memory or history because they can be collectively represented by influential bodies like the public sphere. Scholar Erik Meyer notes that “remembrance of the past is impossible without current interests” (2008). These have been demonstrated by nation-states claim to land and/or supremacy (i.e., Nazis in World War II and Zionists in contemporary era); these states “solidify their power in part by manipulating assumptions about time and space, and they do so with both history and memory” (Olick et al 2011). The collectivized nature of powerful institutions’ memories and their collective representations in society is a huge factor as Olick, Vinitzky-Seroussi, and Levy explains:

genuinely collective nature of social memory has demonstrated that there are long-term structures to what societies remember or commemorate that are stubbornly impervious to the efforts of individuals to escape them; powerful institutions, moreover, clearly support some histories more than others, provide narrative patterns and exemplars of how individuals can and should remember, and stimulate public memory in ways and for reasons that have little to do with the individual or aggregate neurological records (2011)
Collective memory is a source of political discussion and decision making, it is embedded and unconscious through biases and opinions in the public sphere because “from a phenomenological perspective, every social act is permeated with memory” (Olick et al 2011). Collectivizing memory means that the “transformation from communicative into cultural memory evokes an increased need for political decision-making” (Meyer 2008). The public sphere here, then, acts as the bridge for these political decision-making processes to transform these collectivized memories into ‘official’ and ‘legitimate’ public memories and histories.

The collectivized memory of the bourgeois public sphere poses as the public memory of humanity, or acts as a “dimension of legitimacy” (Meyer 2008) because of their privilege and influence to access these legitimizing spaces. However, the collective memory as public memory of humanity is false because it is only a portion of the public and not universal (Halbwachs 1992; 2011). Halbwachs states that “there is no universal memory. Every collective memory requires the support of a group delimited in space and time” (Halbwachs 2011). The plurality of collective memory shows that the “shared memories can be effective markers of social differentiation” (Olick et al 2011).

Collective Memory’s Representation

The opportunistic quality stems from the fact that “the collective memory is also composed of what the group aspires to being or doing” (Marcel and Mucchielli 2008). By developing a clear representation of the group’s self, this fulfils the collective’s idea of what it needs in order to persevere (Marcel and Mucchielli 2008). The significance of representation of the collective memory then becomes crucial for it to persist and be legitimized (as history and/or culture) in its entirety. Meyer states:

This process of coming to terms with history on a cognitive level includes activities, both of a developing civil society and of the political-administrative system, which impact the political public sphere, scholarly research, political education, cultural representation by means of artistic artifacts, as well as institutionalized commemoration through monuments, museums, and memorial days (2008).
Considering that “the social group comes into being through stable spatial images representing it” (Marcel and Mucchielli 2008), representation, then, in the form of physicality and space becomes important for collective memory and these groups.

Collective memory is tied to objects and more so spaces because “our physical surroundings bear our and others’ imprint” (Halbwachs 1980). Halbwachs states that “furniture, ornaments, pictures, utensils, and knick-knacks also ‘circulate’ within the group: they are the topic of evaluations and comparisons, provide insights into new directions of fashion and taste, and recall for us older customs and social distinctions” (Halbwachs 1980). As the physicality and space inform collective memory, they are also the very factors that keep the memory alive and connected to the individual and the groups in able for remembrance to take place. The “group’s image of its external milieu and its stable relationships with this environment becomes paramount in the idea it forms of itself, permeating every element of its consciousness, moderating and governing its evolution” (Halbwachs 1980). Spaces, like museums and archives which act as physical representations of collective memories, are then central for the public sphere to utilize for the purposes of upholding their memories as ‘real’ and ‘legitimate’ and for their continued existence in the wider public’s memories.

III. Archives as Spaces of Collective Memory

Institutions like museums and archives, particularly public ones, serve a huge purpose for groups but more so a responsibility for the public as they represent a certain standard of formality or officiality in and of society at large (Blouin Jr 1999; Flinn 2010). The position of public archives, along with libraries and museums, as public heritage institutions in society are important because they potentially shape the public’s sense of unity and identity in terms of the historical artefacts and records it keeps. Scholar Kenneth Foote argues that the social and cultural role of archives is “more than a metaphor and is supported by theories that would view collections of documents and material artifacts as means of extending the temporal and spatial range of communication” (1990). He adds that
its functions “transcend the immediate tasks of documentation, education, enrichment, and research to help sustain cultural traditions and values” (Foote 1990).

The Power of Space and Documentation

The politics of space must be addressed and why an archive taking up a space, physical and/or digital, is significant in building power and authority in society. The intertwining of space and power was discussed by scholar Fran Tonkiss in the context of urban spaces and argued that spaces are “diagrams of social power” (2005). She elaborates by saying that “one of the most visible ways of exercising power, after all, is to occupy or to control space; architecture, meanwhile, makes power legible in material forms” (Tonkiss 2005). In effect, by occupying space in heritage institutions such as museums, libraries, and archives, cultural and social power and authority can be gained and concretized. As these heritage institutions are legitimized by governments and other national bodies that signify unity and formality, the groups and documents within the institutional archives solidify their collective memories in society and plant in people’s minds their weight in terms of influence and power. This way, archives and other heritage institutions act as a “form of intellectual validation for certain approaches to historical memory” (Blouin Jr 1999).

Aside from actually taking up space, the documents and records that are collected and stored are as important, if not more important, as the institution itself when considering how power operates and influences legitimizing collective memories in the public sphere. The very act of writing and preserving a specific document that records an event is already an act of power because it guarantees a certain privilege for the individual or group to be remembered in some way or form. As a matter of fact, the preservation of collective memory through writing and documentation was integral to the formation of the archives (Brown and Davis Brown 1998). Moreover, scholar Francis Blouin Jr. elaborates on the power of documentation:

> Perceptions of the intervention of power in the formation and construction of the historical record compromise the authority and privileged status of documentation in validating historical truth. Notions of a historical truth are
having to yield to varied expressions of pasts, as components of memory
(1999)

As archives and other heritage institutions coordinate the “transfers of information that were difficult to accomplish through means such as oral and ritual tradition” (Foote 1990), being documented and having an actual physical record is an advantage because it means that these memories and records of certain individuals or groups would have a better chance at being communicated to people (at present and/or in the future). Being included in a discussion, having representation in a narrative, and getting long-lasting recognition are clear and significant examples of the benefits to documentation in terms of heritage and memory.

How these documents are labelled and appraised is another important thing to consider (Schwartz and Cook 2002; Farge 2013). These representations and interpretations of artefacts and documents influence whether these records are worth taking a closer and deeper insight, therefore dictating its worth in history and value in the larger scheme of things in society (Josias 2011). Additionally, the labels and appraisal ascribed in these documents are most likely the first thing that a researcher or individual would encounter upon re/searching in the available pool of documents in the archive (Farge 2013). These descriptions and labels, as miniature and insignificant as they seem, carry a big responsibility because they act as a lens through which individuals see a glimpse of what potentially can become history in books and other manuscripts that would be used in and shape the public sphere.

Ultimately, the emphasis on archives over museums and libraries as evidence of history has to deal with the materiality of the collections: there is a certain ‘raw’ quality to the records and documents found in the archives. Scholar Arlette Farge, pertaining to researching in the archives, says that:

This gives rise to the naïve but profound feeling of tearing away a veil, of crossing through the opaqueness of knowledge and, as if after a long uncertain voyage, finally gaining access to the essence of beings and things. The archive lays things bare, and in a few crowded lines you can find not only the inaccessible but also the living (2013)
Additionally, “the richness of the archive lies in its ability to take us beyond simple
descriptions of society” (Farge 2013). Compared to a curated exhibit in a museum or a
written book, the ‘bareness’ or ‘rawness’ of the archive is what makes it attractive to
researchers and individuals to make substantial conclusions and claims about the events of
the past. However, are archives really ‘raw’ and unmediated? Does it really present and
record events as objective material? How do we account for the biases of the researcher or
the individual upon acquiring and analysing these objects?

Collective Memory to Collective Consciousness

The potential of collective memory via documentation as historical evidence to enter
the collective consciousness of the people has been the agenda of some groups in
establishing and developing the archives. Scholar Aleida Assmann states that “the archive is
an institution with a history and specific functions” (2008). The history of the archive, states
Blouin Jr., was that there was an “idea that the past was a singular conception, out there
waiting to be discovered” (1999). This idea gave way for an archival framework of “an
unstated but limited conception of what constitutes the boundaries of historical study”
(Blouin Jr 1999). This framework was crucial in creating a unified, or at the very least shared,
sense of history and embodying a certain kind of nationhood and/or community which had
a singular, official narrative and source (Brown and Davis-Brown 1998; Flinn 2010). However, intentionally or not, this also paved the way for archival functions that privileged
certain kinds of groups and people and, in turn, excluding and marginalising the others.
These functions “served the ruling class with the necessary information to build up
provisions for the future through stockpiling” that “served as tools for the symbolic
legitimation of power and to discipline the population” (Assmann 2008). This origin and
context of the function of the archive, although not intentional, had its ramifications and
rippled throughout history which enabled certain kinds of behaviour in terms of archival
collection and preservation.

The current collected archival material dictates the behaviours of collection and
acquisition of materials and the direction it takes—what objects would be collected,
appraised, and preserved in the future—either reinforcing the canon or changing it (Brown and Davis-Brown 1998; Cook 2013). As Foote notes, “attitudes toward the past, as well as visions of the future, can sometimes condition collecting policies” (1990). This serves a definite purpose of an attempt to unify a narrative for a nation/community but at the same time damaging because other groups and histories may be left unexplored and marginalised (Flinn 2010). This leads to the conclusion “why some events are so well documented and stir so much interest while others leave such a small mark on the historical record, to the point where archives become a memory of last resort” (Foote 1990).

On the notion of an archive’s ‘rawness’, contrary to popular belief, even though archives are perceived to be a collection of the everyday records and documents of people, archivist intervention and curation still happens on the base level. As Blouin Jr. notes, “to fully understand the nature of archives and of archivists, it seems we have to come to grips with the idea of mediation” (1999). One of the reasons for mediation is practicality: archival institutions, both in terms of physical and computer storage, can only contain and preserve documents as its physical structure and/or software memory can hold and as its manpower can sustain (Blouin Jr 1999; Brown and Davis-Brown 1998). Another reason for mediation is pressure, either from society, powerful individuals, or direct orders from the funders of the archive itself (Foote 1990; Blouin Jr. 1999). And, lastly, the archivist herself or himself is a very viable cause of the inclusion or omission of some records and their subsequent descriptions and labels (Farge 2013).

The endeavour of interjecting a certain collective memory into the collective consciousness of society through the archive is an active action that is heavily mediated. The reasons and the contexts of its origins remove the notion that the archive is objective and/or neutral. With that, this only perpetuates the idea that the archive has its limitations when used as a source of objectivity and for history (Farge 2013).

Limitations of Archives

The challenges of preserving complex data and other “practical realities imposed by large collections in relation to the costs of space” (Blouin Jr 1999) in addition to the
machinery and staff needed are a clear manifestation of the limitation of the archive. This is why “archivists openly acknowledged the importance and necessity of selection” when practising preservation (Blouin Jr 1999). However, there is a need for archives to be open and clear about this limitation for context in terms of stakeholder and audience perception.

As the archives are faced with limitations in terms of space, it has to be acknowledged that the archives cannot provide the ‘whole’ picture but only, as scholar Verne Harris states, a “sliver of a window into an event” or, in a broader context, a “sliver of social memory” (2002). It should also be considered that these archival documents are recorded with certain historical and societal conditions that are biased towards a certain kind of view that dictate how it was recorded as truth and reality (Farge 2013). Individuals, historians, and researchers acquiring and reading these documents must therefore take these things with a grain of salt and as unreliable because “the reality of the archive lies not only in the clues it contains, but also in the sequences of different representations of reality. The archive always preserves an infinite number of relations to reality” (Farge 2013). As Blouin Jr. remarks, “if we are to grasp all the dimensions of human memory and its component particular pasts, then we must distrust the archive and archivists” (1999). Nonetheless, the archives, however deceiving or partial, still tell a semblance of the truth and act as “reference points that cannot be ignored whose meaning must be constructed through rigorous and precise questioning” (Farge 2013). If anything, when one encounters these archival documents and records and their complicated origins, one must actually go back to their research question and re-evaluate the approach and purpose (Farge 2013). Additionally, the archives as a heritage institution make up only a portion of the heritage sector which means that it cannot provide everything and is only one of many representations of collective memory in society. As Foote states, “the cultural role of the archives is hard to isolate from the contributions of other institutions and traditions” (1990).

Accessibility is also an issue, in terms of physical space and computer access. Exclusivity is imposed in the physical space when certain people are only allowed to enter the building and have the knowledge to use the facility (Schwartz and Cook 2002; Farge 2013). In the computer aspect, having the actual device and the required applications or software appropriate to even view these archival materials are new barriers that act as a
limitation (Brown and Davis-Brown 1998; Hedstrom 2002). These limitations and barriers to access are societal and cultural in scope and go beyond the control of archives but should still be taken into account when addressing accessibility.

A disadvantage of having the documentation or object in an archive is that it is kept there, hidden from everyone. Assmann notes that the archives act as “passive cultural memory” as compared to museums which are “active cultural memory” because they are ‘exhibited’ and ‘presented’ for the public to see (2008). Additionally, these objects, if not exhibited or acquired in time, may lose their power and significance because of the material being deteriorated or outdated (Assmann 2008).

Archives hold a vast amount of documents that contain events of the everyday; but that is also its limitation as scholar Hugh Taylor notes that “documents contain the record of events; they are not the events themselves” (1982). The records were not documented with the goal of having it in history books or anything of the sort; it is recorded simply because it needed to be recorded. This means that intervention from an archivist and a historian must happen in order for these documents to have significance (Farge 2013). This means that “the archive, therefore, can be described as a space that is located on the border between forgetting and remembering; its materials are preserved in a state of latency, in a space of intermediary storage” (Assmann 2008).

**Conclusions**

As the “concept of memory moves beyond individuals, institutions, and even documents to try and capture notions of individual particular past” (Blouin Jr 1999), the archive’s role as a space for collective memory in contributing to history would only become more relevant because “history is in some ways an official expression derived from institutions (archives) that have official responsibilities. Social memory, this new mode of looking at the past, goes beyond the archives to a validation of situational perspectives on the past” (Blouin Jr 1999). However, the context, origins, and limitations of the archives should transform how records are treated to put knowledge into perspective and improve how history is represented for the people in the future. A healthy “distrust in the archive
and a distrust that we in our differences can come to a single notion of historical truth” (Blouin Jr 1999) should be espoused. As Farge remarks, “history is not a balanced narrative of the results of opposing moves. It is a way of taking in hand and grasping the true harshness of reality, which we can glimpse through the collision of conflicting logics” (Farge 2013). Having a shared and collective memory is a major factor for democracy, for the public sphere, to work; as archives act as one of the repositories of collective memory, it has a huge responsibility in making sure that diverse representations of realities are held in their collections for the public to conceive a common worldview.
Chapter 2
Literature Review

This chapter will map the theoretical discussions of public sphere, collective memory, and archives into the contexts of social media and community archives. The ideas of the ‘traditional’ public sphere laid out in the previous chapter will be transposed on/in the Internet landscape via social media and will be critiqued how these functions operate and/or break down in this ‘new’ public sphere through reviewing selected related literature and their different takes on this expansive social theory. The second part of this chapter will be the discussion on community archives and will tackle its emergence through archival paradigm shifts and its significance for the inclusion and diversity of collective memory representations and documentation in these cultural heritage spaces and institutions.

I. Social Media as a New Public Sphere

A large and growing body of literature has investigated and studied social media as the new public sphere from a theoretical standpoint. Scholar Christian Fuchs has said that these studies have focused on social media’s potential to ‘revitalize’ or ‘resurrect’ Habermas’ idea of the public sphere, echoing its idealistic origins and interpretations, because of certain factors that afford it the requirements of a ‘traditional’ public sphere (2014). One argument that scholars Lisa Kruse, Dawn Norris, and Jonathan Flinchum found is that it is because of social media’s structure—it seemingly makes access to information universal and participation equal and protected (2017). It has to do with the fact that a user only needs Internet connection and an email address to participate in a social networking site, thus creating more chances for the networked user to engage in public discourse and share views on certain topics of interest (Kruse et al 2017). With regards to the variety of information, it has been observed that the “traditional media have increasingly come to rely on contributions from independent bloggers online, thus disrupting the influence of corporate media power” (Kruse et al 2017). Another point is that social media, particularly Facebook, “integrate tools that support various forms of sociality into one platform”
collapsing the three functions of sociality into one tool/space: cognition (e.g., reading books and watching the news), communication (e.g., exchanging of symbols via messaging and commenting on posts), and co-operation (e.g., users creating and maintaining online groups and communities) (Fuchs 2014). This “collaborative information production” feature and social media’s orientation on community building contributed to the rise of the co-operation side of sociality which lead other scholars to surmise that this increase on networking and participation in information production must lead to a public sphere (Fuchs 2014).

These optimistic studies on social media’s potential for a new public sphere, apart from it being only theoretical with little to no empirical evidence, centred on the cultural and political communication aspect, ignoring the political economy and materiality of which Habermas has emphasized in his book (Fuchs 2014). In response to this, Fuchs’ study critically reviews social media as a public sphere using a cultural-materialist lens, inspecting the materiality of this ‘new’ public sphere and how corporate ownership and control affects user behaviour and attitudes in fulfilling the function of the ‘traditional’ public sphere. He frames this by posturing contemporary social media having three “antagonisms” that affect its nature as a public sphere and make it difficult, even impossible, for social media to potentially become a public sphere in terms of public discourse and information dissemination and communication. These antagonisms are found in the (a) economy, (b) politics, and (c) civil society. The economic antagonism is seen “between users’ interest in data protection and corporate tax accountability on the one side and corporations’ interest in user data’s transparency/commodification and corporate secrecy on the other side” (Fuchs 2014). On the side of politics, the antagonism is observed “between civil society’s interest to hold the powerful accountable and protect communications from powerful institutions’ access on the one side and on the other side power holders’ interest to keep power structures secret and to criminalise the leaking and making-public of any data about them” (Fuchs 2014). Finally, the antagonism in civil society is considered “between networked protest communication that creates political public spheres online and offline and the particularistic corporate and state control of social media that limits, feudalises and colonises these public spheres” (Fuchs 2014). These antagonisms create further tensions.
between online users and corporate owners and facilitators that make it hard to argue that social media is a ‘new’ public sphere.

These antagonisms also dispute the claim that there is universal access and equal, protected participation in these corporate-owned platforms. Social media actually intensifies the inequalities and problems in societies that have been present even in the public sphere’s original conception, such as exclusion of the lower economic class, women, and other minoritised groups by imposing new requirements and necessities to join this ‘new’ public sphere (Kruse et al 2017). At the same time, the formation of “niche communities” is also prevalent in social media due to user’s own exclusion and the platform’s algorithms. This exclusion and algorithm makes information participation with other users restricted and homogenous, therefore not exposing the user/individual to other points of views which makes accessibility to information and participation problematic and limited (Kruse et al 2017). This leads to two scenarios, an “epistemic bubble” or an “echo chamber” (Nguyen 2018) which will be discussed further as part of the analysis.

Surveillance on interpersonal, institutional, and national level is also seen as a hindrance to view social media as a new public sphere. The collection of personal data and information for commercial and management purposes embedded in long-winded and legal consent forms in these sites create algorithms that limit the information that the user sees and people they interact with, creating a filtration system that is catered uniquely to an individual user. Surveillance and monitoring also alters user behaviour because the user becomes conscious of their actions on the platform as they are perceived by different audiences (e.g., family friends, employers), therefore creating an inauthentic exchange of opinions and ideas (Kruse et al 2017).

The reasons stated justify the fact that not every user views social media as a space to discuss politics; on the contrary, it has been perceived otherwise. The increased sociality and connection and collaborative information production does not necessarily mean increased participation in political and civic matters of society; it only means the growth of network, not public civil discourse. This is because there is a perception that social media is a ‘happy’ place or a space to not talk about serious matters such as politics (Kruse et al 2017). Kruse, Norris, and Flinchum’s empirical qualitative study, which only surveyed a small
number of US-based social media users but is still valid, also suggested that due to the ‘new’ barriers in the form of algorithms that filter and limit information and contacts, corporate interests in the form of targeted advertisements, and surveillance that prohibit participation, social media proved to be an insufficient space and non-conducive environment for the discussion of politics and formation of public opinion as a public sphere was originally intended for (2017). Social media, in effect, has made the lack of civil discussion and political discourse stronger because of the barriers and its inherent design to be used only for sociality.

As stated in the traditional public sphere, we can also conclude that the social media as ‘public sphere’ will always be an ideal and a concept unless social and political barriers to access information, equal participation, and surveillance issues are addressed. Fuchs also suggests the public service media as a model for an alternative to the current setup of corporate-owned social media; it must be “a service of the public, by the public, and for the public. It is a service of the public because it is financed by it and should be owned by it. It ought to be a service by the public – not only financed and controlled, but also produced by it. It must be a service for the public – but also for the government and other powers acting in the public sphere” (Fuchs, quoting Slavko Splichal 2014). He also pushes for an establishment of a “digital commons” where services are non-commercial and non-profit, is committed to free and universal access, and collaboration and participation is highly regarded (Fuchs 2014). Reforms in media and revisions in taxations of corporations should play major parts. He also proposes a participatory budgeted media fee for these functions to operate. Overall, he argues for a public service online media and ultimately, a public service Internet.

Reconceptualising the Public Sphere

There have been propositions that suggest that in order to properly apply the public sphere theory in contemporary times, the ‘traditional’ concept of the public sphere must be reconsidered. Scholars Alex Bruns and Tom Highfield talk of reconceptualising the public sphere in the context of social media because of the complex landscape that social media
has created in terms of communication and participation (2015). This idea critiqued that a unified and homogenized public sphere was and still is questionable considering how segmented society is because of social inequalities and because the original concept of it was only focused toward specific types of people (i.e., elites). They have also argued that the function of the public to discuss issues has been transferred to the media, “removing more direct forms of participation on such debate and deliberation from the public” (Bruns and Highfield 2015). This also highlights how the mainstream media was controlled by the elite and how it failed to cater to the ‘whole’ public and instead treated the ‘ordinary’ people as only passive audiences to these political issues, which is contrary to the public sphere’s function.

The growing mass media options and channels, especially with the emergence of the Internet, were also brought to the attention to emphasise the need to reconceptualise the public. These options created a public that is segmented in terms of shared interests rather than by geographic location or by national identity (Bruns and Highfield 2015). More importantly, it has also made the public active in their choice of which media to patronise, making the influence of media harder to gauge. This continuous fragmentation of the public now asks: which public do the media cater to? This brought public sphericules, issue publics, and micro-publics into the picture as the ‘new’ public sphere, or rather public spheres, to understand how social media affected this necessary reconceptualisation of the traditional idea of Habermas.

The reconceptualisation of the public sphere was in line, they argue, with Habermas’ original concept stating that he “explicitly describes the structural transformation (Strukturwandel) of the public sphere towards its then-current state rather than a stable, static, unchanging system” (Bruns and Highfield 2015). They add that “moving beyond the orthodox model of the public sphere to a more dynamic and complex system provides the opportunity to more clearly recognise the varying forms public communication can take online” (Bruns and Highfield 2015). They note how the overlap of technology-specific and domain-specific public spheres in the contemporary social media age (e.g., political public spheres and blogospheres) is indicative of Habermasian collapse of public and private sectors in the ‘traditional’ public sphere that “continue to assume that a society-wide
conduct of current public debates is possible and even likely” (Bruns and Highfield 2015). The abundance of “multifaceted public spheres” reflects an extensive pattern of participation which prompts “further exploration of the changing internal structures and dynamics of the wider public sphere” (Bruns and Highfield 2015).

Overall, they believe that “publics exist at various levels, for different lifespans, from the long-standing topical clusters… through egocentric personal publics to more ad hoc assemblages and issue publics developing in response to particular stimuli” (Bruns and Highfield 2015). However, this reconceptualisation diminishes the original function of the ‘traditional’ public sphere’s political agenda and power. If the reconceptualisation must be done, it should be considered that its original political function is not removed from the context of which it is being analysed and reconsidered.

The Stakeholder Perspective

The “breakdown of group identity” became prevalent as “single issues are more important than political ideology” in contemporary era which prompted Marius Rohde Johannessen, Øystein Sæbø, and Leif Skiftenes Flak to conduct their study on the social media as a public sphere but taking on the stakeholder’s role and salience in political matters (in this case, a real estate development plan on a Norwegian urban community site) as its main focus (2016). Studying salience attributes of Norwegian government stakeholders in connection with their usage of social media meant analysing how prominence or importance of power, legitimacy, and urgency affect how each stakeholder/user participates in these sites and platforms when it comes to politics. This approach creates an understanding of why some users are more active in communicating their political interests and/or engaging in public deliberations on policies than others on certain media tools such as social media because of their differences in their levels of power, perceptions of legitimacy, and urgency of the matter being discussed (Johannessen et al 2016). The study’s findings revealed that there is a nuanced approach to each stakeholder’s perception on social media as a platform for political discourse depending on salience level; the higher the salience level (meaning control over power, legitimacy, and
urgency), the less percentage of the stakeholder to use social media. For example, a politician would less likely engage in social media compared to an activist.

The study reflects that social media creates a bubble, not an equal space where all stakeholders participate and get to hear their side of the matter in political discussions. This also has to do with that fact that people in power who already wield great influence over the political arena do not see the point of using social media to ‘reach out’ and are not motivated to participate in it; the value of social media where their citizens potentially group together to form opinions are overlooked. The researchers propose to the people with high power to view social media as one of the many channels to collate public opinion (just like the newspaper and a public forum) and integrate social media in official decision-making processes to assert social media’s relevance as a public sphere (Johannessen et al 2016).

II. Diversity in the Collective Memory: Community Archives

Archives play a significant role as a site of heritage because of the documents that are in their collections that can dictate how collective memory is perceived by society, how history is written, and how future archives will conduct their practices. However, archive’s limitations have also been discussed, particularly of its challenges in keeping the records and the inadequate space, biases (in its conception, the objects it chooses to preserve, and the appraisal/descriptions of its collections) and its role in keeping the status quo. What happens, then, if communities start making their own archives? This part will discuss how shifts in archival practices and perception have been made over the years that lead to formations of community-led archives which respond to power imbalances and gaps in these archival paradigms.

Archival Paradigm Shifts

According to scholar Terry Cook, “archivists can no longer afford to be, nor be perceived to be, custodians in an electronic world” which does not necessarily mean
forgetting or leaving traditional practices of the archiving profession but a “reconceptualizing [of] the traditional strengths of the profession, on taking the best and transforming it for a new age” (2007). Cook does not only mean how archivists should be acquainted and trained with the newly digital tools and formats to be used for appraisal and storage of objects and documents, but how the practice and meaning of archiving itself is transforming. He elaborates by constructing four specific stages of the archival paradigm shift—the evidence phase, the memory phase, the identity phase, and the community phase—and notes that these paradigms “accumulate across time; they do not replace each other” (2013).

The evidence phase and memory phase illustrates how archives started, as a place to store evidence of existence, and how the archive slowly recognized their role in heritage and history as a form of repository and site of authority in terms of memory building and remembrance. From being an “impartial archive” (Cook 2013) and focusing on being a guardian of the “received truths and traditions” (Brown and Davis-Brown 1998), the field then shifted from highlighting the objects to the actual process of archiving (Cook 2007; Cook 2013). The appraisal of documents and records for academic and cultural purposes made the archive a significant institution of legitimacy and authenticity. The archive, as a form of media and communication, has become an important component in shaping the construction of a historical and cultural narrative and memory, one that unifies a nation and brings people to a common knowledge and understanding of reality (Brown and Davis-Brown 1998; Nesmith 2002; Flinn 2011; Cook 2013). This is how collective memories stored in the archives act as vital points that inform opinions of the people in the public sphere; the influence of the archival institution injects its legitimacy in society.

In each transition, notably from evidence to memory phase, Cook has analyzed how the archive (as an institution, a process, and a concept) and the archivist recognizes and utilizes their power in the creation of memory and identity formations within individuals and societies across history. This authority has been used “to commemorate, to celebrate, to symbolize, to legitimize those in power, and to marginalize or efface or colonize their opponents” (Cook 2013).
The transition from evidence phase to memory phase has laid more pressure now from within the postmodern archival society and intellectuals to reassess their roles and values when it comes to their recognition of power and their undeniable active hand in influencing memory and identity, however small or national the scale and effect is (Brown and Davis-Brown 1998; Schwartz and Cook 2002; Nesmith 2002; Cook 2013). Deconstructing the archive has proven that the practice and profession has always been about “maintaining power, about the power of the present to control what is, and will be, known about the past, about the power of remembering over forgetting” and is “neither universal across space and stable across time” (Schwartz and Cook 2002). Therefore, owning this sense of power, in choosing what to label as records and by extension manufacturing history and shaping the overall narrative, and recognizing that these ‘truths’ are only naturalized by way of archival process is vital, no matter how unstable this sense of power is (Schwartz and Cook 2002). Questioning the validity of these ‘truths,’ probing on and exposing the frameworks, mediating factors, and process of history- and identity-making, and making the records transparent via provenance and context building for the people should be a responsibility, if not a mandate, of the archivist (Nesmith 2002). To quote scholars Joan Schwartz and Cook, a “power recognized becomes power that can be questioned, made accountable, and opened to transparent dialogue and enriched understanding” (2002) which makes for a holistic and deeper understanding of the archivist’s profession and practice.

With that, a perspective of the archive as a societal resource was then conceived, reflecting not a singular source or story but many narratives, voices, and viewpoints (Cook 2013). This third paradigm, the identity paradigm, gave way to new methodologies in appraising and acquiring archival materials, recognizing the “functions and activities of society itself” by way of including a broader range of human experience as heritage documents in the established records and institutions (Cook 2013). Seen as a public good, the archive then tried to be inclusive of the public it serves by reconfiguring its collections and processes to respect the “pluralistic and ambiguous nature of the postmodern and digital world” (Cook 2013). It also saw the rise of local and regional offices, decentralizing power and authority and breaking down hierarchies within archival organizations and
establishments. Archival identity has then become more complex, balancing between being a mediator, assisting society as remedy of the multiple identities produced to the archival memory, and being the active guardian of the records (Cook 2013).

While these archival paradigms evolve, technology evolves with it; thus transitioning to the fourth paradigm—the community. Although the emergence of community archives could be traced back to the antiquarianism of 17th century in the UK, the significant rise of it in the 21st century is due to the advancement of digital technology and the World Wide Web (Flinn 2007; 2011). The dawning of the Internet has made an impact on the meaning of ‘democratization of the archive’ by paving the way for individuals and communities to build their own repositories of identity, memory, and knowledge which were not classified or considered ‘archival’ in the past by the institutions that controlled it (Cook 2013). Manoff notes that the abundance of digital media tools and platforms meant that “the state, large memory institutions, and media companies are no longer the sole superintendents of the archival record” (2010). Having the tools and the capacity to build and organize their very own archive has empowered the communities and saw it as “creating records to bind their communities together, foster their group identities” which are fundamental to community building that have within themselves diversity and differences (Cook 2013). This has also made a “cultural and academic shift from reliance on the narrow constructs of the past as associated with history to an embrace of broader constructs of pasts based on ideas about social memory” (Blouin Jr 1999). This paradigm does not only advocate for the proliferation of independent, community-led archives but goes beyond that by emphasizing that the power and acknowledgement that has been deprived has been distributed to the communities.

The Independent, Community-led Archive

The term ‘independent, community-led archive’ contains elements that need to be unpacked in order to be understood in its entirety. This section will discuss the terms ‘community,’ ‘independent,’ and ‘community archives’ to have a better understanding of the word as a whole.
Similar to scholar Andrew Flinn, the encompassing and broadest definition of a ‘community’ would fit this purpose because of the awareness of the fluidity and complexity, even reductive and exclusionary at times, that the word carries (2007; 2011). A ‘community’ is, then, “a group who define themselves (original emphasis) on the basis of locality, culture, faith, background, or other shared identity or interest” that may or may not be inclined on geographic location/locality (regardless if they meet face-to-face or virtually), sexuality and gender, occupation, race and ethnicity, faith, or an interest, or a mixture of it (Flinn 2007; 2011).

In the archival context, ‘independent’ means not being associated with the mainstream and formal archives, be it by the state or by private entities. It also means having full autonomy over the decisions made and the collections kept within the community-established archive. Having administrative and authoritative independence can bring about positive effects but also poses challenges, especially with regards to finance and funding because the archive should be a sustainable endeavor (Caswell 2014a; Flinn 2011). This ‘independent’ factor is important because often times, formal archives would want to keep the material in their repositories and in their care and have full ownership. Even if it is done or said ‘in good faith,’ these mainstream institutions do not have proper sensitivities and lack an understanding that the materials archived by these communities have personal and cultural value to the collectors and are not easily transferrable or negotiable and should, therefore, be under the community’s control and responsibility (Flinn 2011; Caswell 2014a). This assertion of independence stems from mistrusts and conflicts of interest with the institutional archives which have, consciously or not, excluded and/or altered their histories and identities in their walled institutions and have certain rubrics for archiving which they do not agree with (Flinn et al 2009; Caswell 2014a). In some cases where some independent, community-led archives partner with formal institutions, it is for the purposes of “seeking to engage with and insert their stories, perspectives and expertise into the heritage mainstream and thereby gain greater recognition for their ‘community’” (Flinn et al 2009) thereby still regaining original ownership, control, and direction of their community archive.
Community archives are defined as “collections of material gathered primarily by members of a given community and over whose use community members exercise some level of control” which have a defining attribute of “the active participation of a community in documenting and making accessible the history of their particular group and/or locality on their own terms” (Flinn et al 2009). Much like how communities structured themselves, archival scholar Michelle Caswell notes that some community archives have formed around racial, religious, and ethnic identities, gender and sexual orientations, political affiliation, economic status, and physical/geographical location (2014a; 2014c). On an important note, though, Flinn says that “the designation of ‘community’ is an external one as opposed to something that comes from within” and, therefore, problematic in usage to some extent (2011).

As a summary, the ‘independent, community-led archive’ can be loosely understood now as an archive of materials and objects collected and documented by self-identified members of a community who have autonomy on administration, authority, and finance on the archival materials, their appraisal and description, and the overall organization in itself. This is, by no means, an attempt to clear or fix any working definitions of the term. Most communities, even the formal ones, do not recognize or even use these terms to describe their organization or activity (Flinn 2007; 2011) but nonetheless are important to illustrate in these circumstances.

*Communities as Experts and Sharing Authority*

The idea of transferring archival power and authority to the communities almost seem like a threat for the institutional archive, an “attack on professionalism”, because this movement or paradigm advocates for a democratisation of scholarship which jeopardizes the standardized, authoritative voice and expertise of the institution (Flinn 2010). This mindset and perspective is harmful and detrimental for the archival institution and the profession in general because it prohibits the generation of new knowledge and knowledge-exchange between the institution and the community. Instead, the institution should only
view this paradigm as an expansion of the archive; a sharing of authority in the archival profession and community.

It is important to recognize that this call of making communities as experts and democratising archives, and by extension democratising the production of knowledge, is a response to the origin of the archive and its centralization of its collection towards the elite and the already-powerful in society (Flinn 2010). The “inclusions and exclusions from our histories and national stories mirror and reinforce the same inclusions and exclusions in wider society” which gives more reason for this call to resonate time and again as long as gaps and inequalities are seen and encountered in the public (Flinn 2010). The ‘singular authoritative source’ is a product of the ‘traditional’ way of transferring and transmitting knowledge practiced by heritage institutions such as the archives (McLean 2011). This entails that learning is generally one-way, meaning the institution provides the knowledge and the audience and community as the passive receiver.

This ‘old’ or ‘traditional’ mode of learning and knowledge production ignores the fact that “knowledge-generation is complex, is socially situated and learner-centered, and requires interaction, conversation, and reflection” (McLean 2011). As a response, scholar Kathleen McLean proposed to renew this knowledge-generation model into a conversation type of model. This model disrupts the traditional ‘top-down’ transmission of knowledge and advocates for a ‘learning along’ or ‘learning with’ approach which encourages participation from the audience and the community (McLean 2011). This may come in the form of an open forum during an exhibition, letting the community curate the actual exhibit, or by letting the community archive their own collection. This does not only encourage participation but most importantly broadens the definition of ‘experts’ and ‘expertise’ which include communities and audiences that have “broader domains of experiences” not tied to academic or institutional standards (McLean 2011). It is also indicative of having less elitist notions of knowledge production and generation (Flinn 2010). This mode of knowledge-generation in the form of conversations and what scholar and curator Liz Ševčenko calls “dialogue-driven” is collaborative (2011). It also potentially addresses the biases of whose histories are being told or from whose perspective and other issues pertaining to the dynamics of authority.
Although it appears to be very simple, the process of sharing authority, of community participation and collaboration, is not easy and straightforward. As scholar Steven High notes, “sharing authority is a negotiated process” (High 2009). Proper acknowledgement and reward must be considered when working with communities (Flinn 2010). That just not entails what or who to acknowledge or the proper reward but more importantly how in terms of authorship (in the traditional sense of scholarship and academia). An understanding that the collaboration and sharing of authority is not just a product (of research, or archiving, of historicization) but is a continued process and a relationship, is also a must when delving into this type of activity (High 2009). Sharing authority and collaboration in this sense exists outside of the project itself and is more about building and cultivating trust and continued communications with the community and the ‘subject’ of the heritage project (High 2009). Above all this, a consciousness of one’s position and boundaries in the research process must be practiced to not just overstep but to keep the respect that has been built (High 2009; Ševčenko and Tchen 2011).

This model of making communities as experts and the sharing of authority can also have its pitfalls. On the side of the institution, a possible danger could be supposing that the community represents the ‘whole’ and that it is unitary (High 2009). High adds that “when taken for granted, community becomes a static category that exaggerates differences with the world without and erases the differences within” (2009). In relation to this, some communities could reinforce already existing inequalities of society, therefore diminishing the core purpose of the activity of diversifying knowledge (Ševčenko and Tchen 2011). Although communities add another dimension of expertise, the lack of existing archival knowledge and attitudes and the years of practice pose another challenge for working with the communities (Ševčenko and Tchen 2011).

Ultimately, the goal of sharing authority and opening collaboration with the communities is to get a conversation going, to ask questions, and to develop criticality of the dominant narratives at present (Ševčenko and Tchen 2011). Giving space to these communities to not just include their histories but to change how the typically one-sided current conversations about them are going, how their issues are being talked about, and how they (as a community and their issues) are being contextualized in history are very
important issues to highlight when talking about sharing authority (Ševčenko and Tchen 2011). Collaboration projects give opportunities for traditionally marginalised communities to insert their histories into the ‘main’ historical narrative of the nation and assert that they do belong there and are part of it. Sharing authority ideally should be “instilling collective responsibility” for the ongoing practices and the re-imagination of how our histories and narratives are written and conceptualised for future archivists and heritage institutions to replicate (Ševčenko and Tchen 2011).

*Opportunities and Challenges for Archives*

The community phase of the archival paradigm and the notion of sharing authority have presented opportunities and challenges for the profession and its practitioners. For one, it potentially addresses the issue of storage when the institutional archive reaches out and partners with community archives. It provides the opportunity to expand the archival institution’s collections and address the issue of limited space for preserving the documents; but this also presents a new challenge by way of ensuring quality archival work will be done in these spaces outside of the institution (Cook 2013; Manoff 2010; Hedstrom 2002).

It is important to note that archivists in the community phase of the paradigm are also challenged to immerse themselves in these communities; to not be a mediator, doing the archiving, but by being a facilitator, sharing expertise to these communities on how to better their practice especially with regards to provenance and preservation. At the same time, archivists are encouraged to take a step back and learn from these community archivists, “recognizing that community-based archiving is often a long-standing and well-established praxis” (Cook 2013). The relevance of marking the presence of these unheard of communities, shifting of power, and community-institution collaborations in the archive field is a huge step in archival history in terms of material and practice. The balancing act between giving independent control and helping curate and manage the materials that the communities have started and provided is a challenge; it has to be understood that intervention must be made only when necessary (for instance, when it is asked or if a deadline is near) (Ševčenko and Tchen 2011).
Digital tools, digitisation, and the Internet help with not just dissemination but with collaboration, visibility, and access (Cook 2007; Cook 2013; Manoff 2010). However, along with these affordances, it also presents new challenges for established archival practices and barriers for accessing the archived objects. New formats and media of archival material by way of utilising digital tools widen the variety and types of material to be archived in the collections; but this also proposes finding new ways of acquiring, preserving, and appraising these new types of data into the archive. Digitisation also creates ways for existing material to be viewed and studied in new ways and different formats, enriching further research and debate. Especially for older objects, digitisation is also a way for these documents to be preserved digitally; however, digitisation will require the acquisition of the tools and necessary digital repositories (i.e., databanks) and the training and familiarization of these new tools by archivists and other practitioners. The Internet, on the other hand, can be used for dissemination, collaboration, and participation of more people and possibly individuals and communities outside of the immediate proximity (physical or otherwise) of the institution; but, this does not mean it automatically widens accessibility for diverse people and makes the usage and participation of the archives easier as socio-economic factors, among many other things, affect the access and knowledge to access the Internet (Lutz 2019). The Internet, social media in particular, as an interface for archives will be elaborated in detail in the next chapter.

Finally, the need to actively engage the wider public, not just the usual or same visitor/audience such as academics, to be able to fulfil the archive’s ‘mandate’ as a public memory/history is both an opportunity and a challenge. It is an opportunity for collaboration and participation but a challenge to make the archives accessible and approachable (in the actual physical space and the online one). To address this, the constant questioning within the institution about their collections, archival practices, and overall reputation/value is essential (McLean 2011). At the same time, it is therefore important that institutions encourage the visitors/audience to generate knowledge-exchange and formulate their own questions for the benefit of the institution and their future processes and practices (McLean 2011; Ševčenko and Tchen 2011).
Conclusions

History is written with the help of the archives through its collections and documents; ideally, scholars of history rely on these documents (and all the descriptions/labels that come with it) to create a unified view of the world. Although it could be argued that historians have their own biases and responsibilities in collecting data in the archives, it does not absolve the archive’s responsibility in making sure that the data is there to begin with and they are labelled correctly and are preserved thoroughly (Farge 2013). The “positive role that memory institutions, including archives, might play in supporting more cohesive and equitable societies is undermined if the stories they tell, or make available, exclude or misrepresent” (Flinn 2010) is crucial to the archive’s responsibility in history making. This means that “both presence and absence from the archive are signs we must interpret in order to understand how they fit into the larger landscape” (Farge 2013) such as the public sphere.

Archives (and other public memory/heritage institutions) cannot represent a ‘complete’ historical record through its collections and cannot accommodate every artefact in its holdings because of institutional/physical constraints and epistemic lapses; however, this does not mean it can be excused because the institution has a role and responsibility that it needs to fulfil. Flinn notes:

Not a ‘total’ archive necessarily, but an ‘archive without walls’ which conceptually at least holds within its remit the obligation to reflect the archival heritage of the whole nation or relevant community, including but not confined to, only government and other official records. This means an archive that acknowledges and seeks to make available the traces of other voices and other stories which might be held outside the walls of formal established archives, located in other physical and virtual spaces (2010)

The archive’s effort of continuously reaching out and learning through communities and by being transparent and explicit with the collection’s contexts and its subsequent methods and practices of acquiring these collections are ways in which the institution is recognizing their imperfections and distributing the authority of history-making.
This chapter tackles how the Internet, particularly social media, acts like a catalyst tool and alternative space for independent, community-led archives to break into the collective memory of and in the public sphere without the institution. The discussion on digital divides complicates and contextualizes analysing the impact of community archives on social media. Additionally, further inspection of the social media as an interface for community archives will be done; specific social media aspects in relation to archival practices will be critiqued. It will present that these social media aspects create multiple barriers and constraints to accentuate the difficulty of accessing the public sphere and its collective memory, further magnifying existing inequalities in society for the marginalised communities. Lastly, a specific community archive, the *Black and Irish*, will be used as a case study of how a community archive has navigated and used social media’s affordances as an interface but will also discuss its limitations as a platform if the community archive persists in/on social media.

I. Community Archives on Social Media

As previously stated in the second chapter, digital tools and the Internet paved the way for more community archives to form. However, at the same time, it also presented challenges because these digital tools and the Internet required certain equipment, knowledge, and expertise in order for it to be utilised efficiently. Communities struggling with complicated digital tools and the web, financial and political issues to establish their physical archives, and general visibility saw social media as the answer and the alternative platform to start operating and reach people within and beyond their community. The appeal of using social media has to deal with its seemingly simple steps and requirements of having access to it and the numerous functions it affords (e.g., creation, editing, and sharing of content, communicating with people, and creation of groups) collapsed into one space and platform (Fuchs 2014; Lutz and Hoffmann 2017; Kruse et al 2017). Norwegian scholar
Holger Pötzsch adds to this and says “multinational corporations behind such applications as Facebook, Twitter, or Google combine social networking, cloud storage, online search and electronic communications” (2018). However, by using social media, community archives may have overlooked a significant factor that greatly affects accessibility and gauging influence: levels of digital divide. This is necessary to consider since a community archive’s goal is to include their histories and heritage into the ‘mainstream’ narratives of history and people’s consciousness; these digital divides are major considerations that an online user would come across to participate in the online community archive and to trace their level of engagement.

Levels of Digital Divide

Technology companies and Internet corporations advertise and promise people ‘open’ and ‘free’ access to their platforms and inventions to ‘connect the world’ and ‘bring people together’. However, it must be recognized that “digital inequalities tend to mirror existing social inequalities in terms of socio-economic status, education, gender, age, geographic location, employment status, and race” (Lutz 2019). These promises may be true to some societies but remain empty for many because these promises are not contextualized properly where said factors about inequalities of basic and fundamental rights such as access to shelter and education still persist (Lutz 2019). Technological and Internet optimism are not grounded enough in societal inequalities, let alone digital inequalities, to claim that access to and connectivity through the Internet is possible on a global scale. Scholar Christoph Lutz says the “Internet is not a monolithic technology and new systems and applications are constantly being developed” hence the need and significance of constantly and continually studying the Internet access phenomenon—the first-level digital divide (2019).

Since factors such as social, economical, gender, education, age, ability, and region still affect access to the Internet and therefore cannot be universal, these inequalities further deepen the problems experienced at the second-level digital divide: the inequalities in skills and uses of the Internet and emerging technologies which affect online participation.
(Lutz 2019). The second-level also exposes how if inequalities at the base level are not resolved, the digital tools and Internet platforms will not be used to its intent or full extent therefore not benefiting the user and its society. This lack of skill and knowledge (of the device and of the nature of the Internet and its platforms) could also lead to misuse, abuse, and possible vulnerabilities which could cause harmful consequences (online and offline) for the individual and their connections and communities (Tufekci 2017; Zuboff 2019).

In connection with consequences, the different outcomes of using the Internet and digital technologies and the different gains reaped (by the individual and the companies that own these technologies and platforms) are the focus of the third-level digital divide (Lutz 2019). This is important to study on socioeconomic grounds because while some individuals and societies have already progressed and have attained skills and knowledge of using these digital tools and Internet platforms, a large portion of the world that were given access to these do not know the nature of these technologies and subsequently the companies that own them. They are, then, made vulnerable and are proportionally disadvantaged because while they may have access, these groups do not possess the necessary knowledge and skill to work with and navigate around these technologies. Worse, they would be taken advantage of by the more skilled and knowledgeable for some nefarious and/or individual purpose and/or gain (Tufekci 2017; Zuboff 2019).

Overall, the three levels of digital divide, although separated, interact with one another and will affect the outcome of each in some way. These digital divides complicate how community archives use social media as an interface to further goals of inserting their narratives and collective memories in the public sphere.

II. Social Media as an Interface

A number of scholars have noted that the advances of electronic and digital technology have made the archive field “question whether new modes of representing and distributing information demand modification of archival theory and practice” (Hedstrom 2002). This also has to deal with the evolution of new formats of documents, records, and objects to be archived (Hedstrom 2002; Manoff 2004). Representation of the digital archive
and circulation of its materials, therefore, rely on an interface which acts as a “passage or site of interaction” (Hedstrom 2002).

Archival scholar Margaret Hedstrom stresses that the interfaces of the archive are “critical nodes in the representation of archives and as a means through which archivists enable, but also constrain, the interpretation of the past” (2002). Archiving is heading towards a more digitized and technological age and it is imperative to know that “the nature of the interface becomes a critical element in the interaction between documentary evidence and its consumers” (Hedstrom 2002). Manoff adds that “access to the archive is becoming more dependent upon the technologies of the interface even as the interface is being transformed to accommodate a host of new digital devices” (2010). Therefore, the significance of examining not just what collections the archive includes but how it is presented, accessed, and sustained via the interface is opportune. In this scenario, specific aspects of social media as an interface will be analysed in the context of archival practices and functions. Although there are benefits to having social media as an interface for the community archives because it combines archival functions into one platform (ownership, collection, access, curation, communication, dissemination and reproducibility, storage and preservation, participation and interaction), there are a number of things to consider when using it.

Terms, Conditions, and Community Standards

This is a potential danger and future liability for community archives because these terms, conditions, and standards lay out issues of ownership and independence as well as the items and data allowed on the platform. While social media only requires an e-mail account and has seemingly sped up and eased the process of having access and control of an online account and page, the finer details of the terms, conditions, and standards of using it complicate how “open” and “free” it really is upon signing up and will reveal hidden “fees” and “costs”. Scholars Brett Frischmann and Evan Selinger talk of this phenomenon of being conditioned by these legal and technical online contracts to just click agree without reading or understanding it because individuals just want access, are too fatigued by many
decisions outside of the contract, and are daunted and/or deceived by the legal jargon used (2016).

There is also precariousness in how these terms, conditions, and standards are written and coded because it can be easily used against the community archive’s goals and purpose. These terms, conditions, and standards are made to keep civility in the platform and are definitely helpful to a certain degree; but these can be used to censor content and swayed to be in favour of an individualistic and ‘wrong’ purpose (Tufekci 2017). For example, an archived photo of a massacre of peasants in a land owned by a high-profile politician can be mass reported by users and be taken down because it will ruin the image of the politician.

The quick-and-easy process of social media is very appealing because of the ‘friendly’ interface but hidden in the overlooked terms, conditions, and standards are the things community archives should be particular about. Although it is long and full of law jargon, a community archive must fully read and understand it before venturing into any platform as their ownership, independence, and items/data rely on these.

**Personalizations, Filters, and Algorithms**

These particular features have made great improvements for individual user experiences by uniquely tailor-fitting the contents and advertisements seen on the social media feed based on a person’s preference and social media habits and attitudes. But, arguably, these features have narrowed user experience and worldview as well by limiting and gatekeeping content and by deceiving users of a fabricated world through their personalized social media feeds and interfaces. All these concerns point to accessibility, curation, and transmission of archival content on social media.

Personalizations, filters, and the coded algorithms can potentially work in the community archive’s favour. For one, online users would be suggested and recommended individuals, groups, and pages that the algorithm thinks the user would be inclined on connecting to and associated with based on the basic information given (i.e., age, gender,
area/country). This algorithm can lead the way for easier, faster, and instant connections of individuals that can make the community archive bigger and its visibility and reach wider. This can potentially make accessibility, curation, and transmission digitally ‘organic’ since no personal coding or labour will be made in order for these archival functions to work (Tufekci 2017).

These customizations that create filters give the individual user benefits because it tailors the feed and the content to one’s personal liking and tastes, however “choices that seem perfectly reasonable in isolation may, when taken together, badly disserve democratic goals” (Sunstein 2011). These very filters create epistemic bubbles (accidental) and echo chambers (intentional) that entrap the user in their own ‘world’ and exclude other voices, deceiving one’s worldview and perception of society at large (Nguyen 2020). This can also be limiting in terms of reach and visibility for the community archive because instead of reaching out to more people, these algorithms make the community preach to the same individuals already included in the community and involved in its activities (Nguyen 2020). Although the platform provides you access to changing and modifying the algorithms on social media, it does not explicitly say it unless an individual is already familiar with algorithms and how to modify it. Even so, if the individual decides to not engage with filters and personalizations, the platform will still provide the most used and popular algorithm of the user’s area, age, and gender (and other information that the user must provide upon signing up) (Tufekci 2017). Additionally, the social media platform overtime will figure out an algorithm based on your social media habits and behaviours because companies track that as well for targeted advertisements (Zuboff 2019). In short, there is no escaping the algorithm. The algorithm which can be advantageous at the onset, in turn, presents barriers and actually makes it harder for communities to make accessibility, curation, and transmission of their archives and their materials on social media visible, easier, and ‘organic’.

Personalizations and filters that create bubbles and chambers are counterproductive and counterintuitive to what the public sphere must achieve which is an agreement. These filters seemingly create agreements and unities through these bubbles/chambers but it is only an illusion because the people in the bubble/chamber are not the total or whole
society (Tufekci 2017). Personalizations and filters and the algorithms that employ and sustain it are at odds with community archives and the public sphere when their goal is to construct a collective memory since it perpetuates the exact opposite—divisions and separations. If there are too many niche communities and too customized information on social media feeds, there will be no collective memory which is a prerequisite of a working democracy and a functioning public sphere.

The Social Media Business Model

At the core of everything, the way social media has been modelled for business and the priorities and principles of the technology companies that invent and run them greatly differ with what an archive is meant for and what it aspires to be for society. This greatly affects every aspect of archival functions, but most especially curation, ownership, and sustainability.

Algorithms do not only have a hand in keeping the social media experience narrow by way of gatekeeping content on user’s personal feeds but it is also designed to keep up with the business model of prioritizing the increase of page views (Tufekci 2017). This means that the social media algorithm is designed to prioritize what is trending and most popular among its users—in a way a sort of narrowing mechanism on the user’s feed as well. Since the algorithm controls what a user sees in his/her feed, there is the possibility of a burial of important and pertinent issues and stories of society over something that is popular (i.e., a post/topic that has more likes, shares, and hashtags). An example that scholar Zeynep Tufekci noticed was the ALS Ice Bucket challenge burying content of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2014 (Tufekci 2017). This prioritization of trends and page views has to deal with the companies and corporations pressured by advertisers and wanting profit and generating wealth out of their inventions and platforms (Tufekci 2017; Zuboff 2019). The algorithm and this business model make it hard for community archives to be visible for different users and have to constantly find ways to compete with other individuals, pages, and stories and overcome the algorithm if they want their content to appear in as many feeds as possible.
Social media and the archive clash ideals and values as separate entities in society, all the more when considering the social media business model. Archives value preserving the past, acting like a time capsule of events and memories. Social media, on the other hand, is obsessed with the present and immediacy, prioritizing the generation of new content and trends. The archive’s mission is to contribute to the cultural heritage while social media’s goal is really unclear, but ultimately to profit. Compromises may be made but eventually, the community archive will have to do most of it because the platform is not owned by the community. The social media platform and interface is owned by these big technology companies that are profit-hungry. When the usage of the interface and platform is reliant on user experience and not for durability and sustainability of the infrastructure, problems will definitely arise in the long run.

III. The Black and Irish Community Archive

The Black and Irish conception, according to one of its founders Boni Odoemene, was born out of the Black Lives Matter Movement and its resurgence in the year 2020 from American people seeking justice for George Floyd, an African American in Minneapolis, who was murdered by policemen (DRI 2020). Black and Irish’s goal is to “highlight and celebrate the identity of Black Irish people and to spread awareness around the world of the experiences, struggles, and successes of the Black-Irish community” (Black and Irish, n.d.) by way of sharing personal testimonies and stories. Odoemene adds that they also want to be an “active participant in shaping Irish society” by dismissing the notion of the nonexistence of Black and Irish (people and identity/concept) in history, incorporating “Black and Mixed Race history into White Irish society,” and “mainstream[ing] Black-ness into Irish-ness” (DRI 2020).

It started operating on the social media platform, Instagram, and initially featured narratives from people of the Black and Mixed Race Irish community via voluntary submission of the people’s stories through direct messaging the Instagram page and/or writing in a Google form. Since then, the group has expanded both in form and content; aside from the Instagram page, it has also used Facebook and Twitter, established a podcast
series, and has set up their own website for their platform. Black and Irish has also worked and collaborated with institutions such as the Digital Repository of Ireland and Europeana on projects to further their advocacies and goals to the public. In terms of content, they have posted figures from across history that they researched and unearthed to trace the lineage of Black/Mixed Race-Irish people living and making history in the Republic before the 2010s and the Celtic Tiger period, alongside other innovative and engaging media such as live videos, screening events, and pop quizzes.

It must be noted that Black and Irish does not label itself as a community archive but rather identifies as a “social media community” (DRI 2020). However, the social media pages, particularly its Instagram page, function as a digital community archive because of its nature of collecting historical and oral narratives, as described earlier. Additionally, Zakiya Collier, archivist and scholar, states that the “memory work” done by Black and Irish is archival because it does similar labour as an archive and archivist, such as curation, co-locating material/collection, research, and reference and citation work (DRI 2020).

**Affordances and Limitations**

The Black and Irish has a number of social media pages and has even established their own website. However, for this purpose, it will focus on its archival practice and social media activity on Instagram since this is where the group officially started. This critique will also look at Instagram broadly as a social media platform to weigh in its affordances and limitations for the community archive.

Firstly, Instagram is a technology that most people use already so its interface is explicitly ‘friendly’ for the digital archivist as well as the audience to use and navigate (Collier, DRI 2020). The platform’s ‘friendly’ interface and popularity is an affordance for community archives in terms of accessibility and transmission of archival objects to the wider public. Additionally, Instagram as a platform is popular and engaging because of the features included in the application (Collier, DRI 2020). The Black and Irish, as noted earlier, takes advantage of these features actively in their platform—users can engage their page via various activities (e.g., Instagram Live, Instagram Stories, etc.) and has used the hashtag
function to make their account and advocacies more findable. Scholar Bente Jensen notes that there are multiple advantages in using the hashtag function (2013). These hashtags act as a self-categorizing and self-curating tool in the social media landscape which helps the archive co-locate and curate materials for their own pages and purposes but also helps interested individuals and researchers to find these materials easily and efficiently (Jensen 2013). Moreover, the hashtag also functions as a communication and engagement tool for participatory purposes, sharing, and user involvement of the public (Jensen 2013). Hyperlinking and co-locating other internal and external pages, activities, and websites (e.g., Black and Irish podcast series on Spotify, fundraisers for Black and Mixed Race causes within Ireland) on its webpage and individual posts to boost the user’s knowledge and participation on the group and its activities and advocacy has also been utilised extensively.

Adding to the accessibility aspect, Collier notes that Instagram is already a community space in and of itself which is beneficial in terms of community and audience building (DRI 2020). She further states how content and data can also be localized. This means Black and Irish practices, advocacies, and goals can possibly transcend outside of Ireland and be replicated by other groups in different places that have similar struggles, advocacies, and principles (which is how Black and Irish started). This digital archival interface is also a way of bridging the gap of physical contact in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Above all, social media brought the collaboration and participation aspect to a new level, highlighting the coming together of a community from different physical locations to tell their histories and to better diversify and talk about differences, enriching discussion about their heritage in a public space (Collier, DRI 2020).

The limitations and vulnerabilities of this social media archival interface are as many as its affordances, if not more. Collier points out the possibility of the Black and Irish digital archive being erased because content is owned not by the communities but by Instagram (DRI 2020). In relation to this, Manoff notes that “corporate control of the digital record is having and will continue to have a tremendous impact on the historical record” and that “the confidentiality of private information has long been an issue, though never on the scale fostered by today’s huge databanks and social networking Web sites” (2010). Pötzsch adds to this, saying “both states and multinational corporations exploit user interaction in and
with digital environments to create and curate their own deep archives that capitalize upon user-generated content and metadata” (2018). Social media only acts as if it is ‘open’ and ‘free’ but is actually both a gatekeeper and panopticon because of the implicit conditions and algorithms it carries upon using their application that is employed for corporate profit. In relation to that, Collier notes that limited access for the digital archivist is also a problem where losing a password or an e-mail might stop the digital archive from continuing its operation (DRI 2020).

Apart from accessibility issues, surveillance, and data autonomy, preservation is also a big concern. Collier echoes this by saying that these corporate-owned social media platforms were not designed to be archive-friendly, thereby hindering the archival objects and the actual community archive for long-term preservation (DRI 2020). Swedish scholar Rikard Friberg von Sydow provides evidence by looking at Instagram’s preservation and reusability features and found out numerous difficulties with working out how to manage preservation and provenance. For example, how the file came out when downloaded (JavaScript Object Notation) and was not easily opened because of software compatibilities and did not maintain its interface when opened. He also took notice of how important preserving the comments and the reactions are to these posts for archivists and how it would be another layer of keeping track in the name of provenance (Friberg von Sydow 2018).

The study by Carl Öhman and Nikita Aggarwal on a social media platform’s hypothetical extinction is important to consider because it deals with long-term sustainability of an archival platform/space which is essential in the archival medium and practice (2020). The reasons for the hypothetical closure and failure of social media platforms (e.g., exit of all users and advertisers, a richer company buying the technology/social media company due to bankruptcy, shifting of priorities due to advertiser’s demand and social trends, etc.) points out how technology and its infrastructure are faulty and how the business model is imperfect because it is hinged on uncertain factors such as user activeness. Immunity against the closure and failure of social media platforms is impossible because it has happened before (i.e., MySpace and Friendster) (Öhman and Aggarwal 2020). So, the questions to ask for these technology companies are: are they
ready for it? Do they have the necessary framework to combat this inevitability? Who is going to be liable for the insurmountable data sold or lost? A number of ethical, social, and legal risks and repercussions are at stake with the closure or failure of these “data-rich, Big Tech platforms” which have become “systematically important technological institutions” in society and for its stakeholders (Öhman and Aggarwal 2020). Major consequences would be felt by dependent communities, among them the community archives, solely reliant on these platforms to carry out daily functions, transactions, and communications with each other and to their constituents because the loss of these technological platforms and institutions would mean the loss of very large amounts and important, personal data of numerous individuals and communities (Öhman and Aggarwal 2020).

In summary, using social media as an archival interface may have its advantages when it comes to building an audience and engagement with its users but may pose bigger problems for significant archival activities such as provenance, reusability, data management, and sustainability. Contingency plans on the preservation and sustainability of the archival objects, digital and otherwise, must be made in order for Black and Irish to continue and flourish even outside of social media especially since its goals and advocacies are societal in scope.
Final Conclusions

The appeal of social media as an alternative platform is very strong, especially for communities struggling economically and is at odds with working with institutions due to epistemic and/or political differences. There are certain affordances that community archives can take advantage of for specific archival functions such as accessibility of the archive and participation and engagement of the public. However, limitations have arisen upon closer inspection of social media aspects that challenge a community archive’s operation such as ownership (of data and the actual platform), transmission of archival objects, and sustainability. Additionally, the intricacies of using social media as a platform must be dissected to be able to uncover motivations of the companies that invented them and how to effectively work around these in the future for efficiency and effectiveness. Social media only makes it easier for community archives to operate on their platforms at the onset but actually makes it difficult for them by adding another layer of complication. Apart from gaining and mastering the archival knowledge and skills, they now also have to learn and master the necessary knowledge, language, and skills of social media and the Internet (and all its legalities and terms) in order to successfully operate in and on the platform. This is more necessary if the ‘new’ public sphere is social media to further advocacies of including the community’s collective memory in the collective consciousness of the public sphere and subsequently into the national narrative and history. Community archives would also have to outsource technology and digital tools since social media does not provide long-term security and sustainability in terms of data management.

The ever-looming presence of the levels of digital divide is also a major concern especially for community archives because of the layers of marginalisation that these communities and their potential audiences are currently in and will encounter in society. If anything, this notion of social media as the ‘new’ public sphere contextualized under the levels of digital divide only highlights its origins of being discriminatory and unequal for the actual wider public. The minoritised population are yet again left out in this ‘new’ public sphere because of the digital divide, reinforcing issues of exclusivity in the Habermasian
public sphere. The technological optimism surrounding the concept of social media as the ‘new’ public sphere is not grounded on how these new technologies mirror the existing social inequalities that the wider public still face. Apart from accessibility issues, social media has failed to deliver as a public sphere because of how mediated the information is on the platform due to algorithms and filters—a vital factor of a functional public sphere.

Community archives with their collective memories will not break through the public sphere if they solely rely on social media as their archival interface and medium of communication to the public. Along with being tactical and strategic in using social media, community archives still have to work with institutions if their ultimate goal is to make a difference in the public sphere and include their collective memory in the collective consciousness of society. Archival institutions carry with them power, influence, and a certain reputation in housing select collective memories that is why partnering with them is significant, if not crucial. However, archival institutions must also be aware of their power, lapses, (e.g., physical incapacity, intentional or accidental exclusion of certain documents, mislabelling and misrepresenting certain archival objects) and responsibilities (i.e., representing a wider, diverse collection) so that a respectable and fruitful collaboration with communities will come out from the partnerships.

Overall, the differing values and goals of the archive and social media collide and will create tensions in the long run. Social media, as a technology, was invented for a certain purpose. Although community archives have been clever in using this technology to produce certain positive outcomes for archival functions, social media was not invented for archiving purposes. Social media has also not proved to be beneficial for the purposes of including collective memory in the public sphere. If community archives are meant to make a difference, they should rethink and be strategic in using social media as an interface.
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