

Documenting Conflicts in the 21st Century

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Abstract: In the 1980s Frank Burke and Helen Samuels asked, “how many archival repositories does it take to document the complexities of the moon shot?” Almost 30 years later archives face a similar question: How many archival repositories does it take to document the wars in Afghanistan and Iraqi? This paper frames a grand challenge for the archival community to richly document and describe the multifaceted and complex nature of these two conflicts.

This challenge presents three underlying questions:

1. What are the unique documentary challenges to the Iraq and Afghanistan wars? Do twenty-first century information technologies and behaviors or current geopolitical realities fundamentally change how we preserve the memories of these two conflicts from how we document the Second World War or twentieth-century counterinsurgencies?
2. What archival institutions, partnerships, skills, and tools would it take to document and describe the experiences of insurgent and government forces, third-party armed forces, NGOs, and civilians in conflict zones and on home fronts? What resources does the archival community already have to do this work and what does it lack to achieve this ambitious goal?
3. Could archives apply the lessons learned from documenting and describing these two wars to preserving the memories of other international and national crises or events such as the Japanese tsunami or Middle East revolutions? Could it change our “normal” documentary and descriptive practices?

This paper offers some preliminary thoughts on these questions and suggests ways the archival community could move forward to meet this critical challenge.

About the authors:

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