

“Are You a Spy?”: Methodological Challenges to Studying Community Archives

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Abstract:

Within archival studies, the past ten years has seen an increased interest in research on identity-based community-based archives, specifically independent efforts by people of color and LGBTQ communities to document their own histories. Yet, the standard post-positivist social science research paradigm does not adequately address the realities of conducting community-engaged research. For example, the kinds of contextually-situated, politically-engaged, identity-dependent research warranted by community-based archives challenge standard post-positivist assumptions about the objectivity of the researcher, the epistemological benefits of outsider status, and the very possibility of doing comparative analyses across organizations and contexts. Based on the presenters’ experiences conducting nine focus groups with users of community archives at five different sites in Southern California this past year, this presentation addresses the methodological challenges presented by conducting empirical research on identity-based community archives. First, the presentation will address notions of insider/outsider status, arguing that researchers who are outsiders to the communities they are studying may encounter an insurmountable level of mistrust that may severely limit the types and quality of data that can be collected. Next, the presentation will address how the issues impacting community archives are often deeply dependent on the specificity of the political and historical context of the communities they serve, weakening conclusions based on decontextualized comparative analysis. In conclusion, the presentation argues that research on community-based archives necessitates a methodological shift and calls for increased engagement, sustained relationship building, and deeper attention to social, cultural, and political context.

About the authors:

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