Personal digital archiving in public libraries

How individuals accumulate, organize, store, and preserve digital material as part of their personal lives (Kim, 2013)

A process through which digital possessions are extensions of individual identity (Cushing, 2013)

Involves saving, remembering, losing, and sharing:
- From everyday maintenance to “digital hoarding” (Chen, 2014)
- Online memorials & social media curation (Acker & Brubaker, 2014; Sinn & Syn, 2014)
- Catastrophic data loss, deliberate forgetting, benign neglect (Marshall, 2011)

... at Public Libraries

New library and archives initiatives increasingly bring do-it-yourself (DIY) digital conversion and personal digital archiving practices into public spaces, to support patrons as they organize, store, and preserve digital possessions in their personal lives.

Digital preservation × Personal archives × Makerspaces

Data & methods

Research sites: DIY digital conversion / personal digital archiving workstation at the central branch of a large urban public library

Semi-structured interviews (5 patrons, 8 library staff)
- Experiences with personal digital archiving in and out of the public library
- Experiences using and working at the library
- Relationships between archiving lab and library in general

Data: Notes, interview memos, interview transcripts (by researcher), and support material (e.g. handouts)

What are the values and impacts of personal digital archiving resources in public libraries?

Analysis: qualitative coding (all materials) via these major themes:

- Motivations: What brings you here?
- Values: Why does this opportunity matter?
- Impacts: How has it affected your life?

Memory work is personal, tied to loss

For sharing with a close circle
- Preserving ties to aging or deceased via obsolescent media
- Special projects, not everyday maintenance

Personal digital archiving is a natural fit with library mission

Access to information lifecycle
- Responding to community needs
- Preserving local history

Pros and cons of DIY setup

Promoting autonomy and independence
- Limited time to improvise and play
- Difficult to develop expertise, learn standards for digital archiving

How does personal digital archiving activate discourses about the values and impacts of public libraries?

Analysis: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Gee, 1999)

- Can personal digital archiving in public libraries shift power relations between institutions and individuals?
- "Language-in-use is everywhere and always political" (Gee, 1999)
- How do participants negotiate social change by interweaving different discourses to recount their experiences?

Code interview transcripts to identify “building tasks”: how language is used to build different kinds of meaning (Gee, 1999)

- Significance building – How is language used to foreground, background, and otherwise assign significance?
- Identity building – What identities are relevant?
- Political building – What social goods are involved?
- Connection building – What connections between people, things, and ideas are made relevant or irrelevant?

Findings

Managing (power over) change

Libraries have power to counteract systemic disadvantages
- Libraries can share power with individuals

Re-situating identity

“Changing people” from analog/resistant to digital/open
- Recontextualizing preservation (professional to personal) to rethink practices

(Re)imagining the future

Multiple discourses about technology:
- Materiality, progress, affect, obsolescence, loss, remediation, resistance

References
