Collaborating, collecting and representing: queer independent archives and their connections with GLAM institutions in Aotearoa/New Zealand

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Abstract

Introduction. Queer independent archives play a significant role in their communities, preserving and providing access to narratives that might otherwise be lost. Queer archives are assumed to be homogenous and thus representative, although some queer communities are not visible. Collaborations with GLAM institutions and universities have become more prevalent as the importance of supporting independent archives is recognised. Nevertheless, for many queer archives and their communities retaining autonomy in such collaborations is vital.

Method. These issues were explored from the perspective of New Zealand's three queer independent archives through six semi-structured interviews conducted with representatives from each archive.

Analysis. The analysis revealed a range of institutional collaborations, reflecting the needs and situation of each archive. Employing different collecting approaches to broaden community representation and record queer life experiences were priorities for the queer archives although with varying degrees of success.

Conclusion. This paper highlights some of the challenges faced by queer archives regarding representation and visibility and how institutional collaborations could prove beneficial. Conversely, there may be drawbacks for queer archives, particularly during renegotiations, when power imbalances might become evident. A regular review might assist GLAMs to more gainfully support queer archives operating in an evolving queer space.

Introduction

Community or independent 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'* (Flinn et al., 2009, p. 73). Independent archives serve important functions for queer communities, providing access to unique and irreplaceable materials, the struggles encountered and lives lived that would otherwise remain undocumented and forgotten. They frequently function as social hubs, where queer culture in its diverse forms can be displayed in places of safety. Queer archives tend to be viewed as *homogenous* in that they are representative of the queer community and facilitate access to queer history. However, such perspectives do not account for the original collecting intentions of the archive and the communities they serve as well as information accessibility and sustainability issues. This paper will investigate how queer archives are managing some of the challenges around representation and their collaborations with GLAM (galleries, libraries, archives and museums) institutions by exploring the three queer independent archives of Aotearoa/New Zealand.

Literature review

Queer independent archives should enable marginalised communities to preserve their histories and stories and to see themselves represented how they wish, thereby giving meaning to their history (Wakimoto et al., 2013) and shaping community identity and memory. While queer independent archives in the United States and Canada have been subject to scholarly inquiry (Rawson, 2015; Sheffield, 2020), in New Zealand queer archives have received little exposure.

It is only in recent years that mainstream institutions have realised the importance of documenting their queer communities and have begun to collaborate with queer independent archives (Brown, 2010). Collection preservation is often the primary driver underpinning queer archival collaborations with queer independent archives frequently preferring to maintain their independence within such agreements, for instance, the Hall-Carpenter Archives retained ownership of their collections upon transfer to the London School of Economics (Donnelly, 2008). Other queer archives, like the June L. Mazer Lesbian Archive, have institutional digital hosting agreements but retain custody rights (Cvetkovich, 2022). For queer independent archives, these collaborations are important, often essential contributors to the archive's sustainability. Exploring such connections from an under-researched New Zealand perspective will offer fresh insights and additional understandings.

The collection policies of queer independent archives are usually much broader in scope than mainstream institutions. Nonetheless, this may not equate to the representation of all queer communities, particularly in long-established lesbian and gay archives. From a perspective of queer inclusivity and diversity, it is frequently assumed in the literature on queer archives that all communities are represented (Wakimoto et al., 2013), however the significance of identity as a differentiating factor should not be underrated. The virtual nonexistence of asexuality representation was noted by Przybylo and Cooper (2014) not just in GLAM institutions but in queer independent archives giving rise to further feelings of marginalisation, while Sheffield (2020) contended that in queer archives, someone will always be left out. Nor it is enough to just add collections from under-represented queer communities as this will only continue to reproduce pre-existing structures of inequality (Brown, 2020) which need revising and reframing. Considering representation within the context of New Zealand's queer archives would afford valuable insights into different collecting practices and strategies.

Theoretical framework

This research is scaffolded by queer theory, from queer studies, and influenced by Foucault (1978). Queer theory challenges the rigidity of postmodern constructs of sexuality and gender identity (Neal, 2019; Sullivan, 2003) advocating for identity fluidity to allow multiple expressions and interpretations. The very nature of constructed concepts invites the creation of alternative narratives of living and

thinking that are diverse and inclusive, where difference is the *norm*, not the exception. Using a queer lens is not limited to GLAM institutions, it can equally be applied to queer archives. Being a queer archive does not necessarily equate to representation of queer communities' sexuality and gender identities.

This paper will investigate collecting strategies and policies at the queer archives, how these impact representation and affect the relevance of queer archives to their communities. Collaborations with GLAMs and the effects of these will also be explored.

Context

In New Zealand there are three queer independent archives: Kawe Mahara Queer Archives Aotearoa (KMQAA) with predominantly physical collections, the lesbian-orientated Charlotte Museum (CM) and a queer digital archive, PrideNZ. They exhibit a range of approaches to collecting and collaborating. Established in 2009, PrideNZ is curated by the owner to document, publish and archive aspects of queer life. The CM was established in 2007 to collect lesbian cultural material, hosted in its own premises. Beginning in 1977 originally to document the gay liberation movement, KMQAA collects the materials of queer people and organisations, which are housed at a national GLAM institution. Encompassing all of New Zealand's queer archives, rather than focusing specifically on one (Cooper, 2016; Rawson, 2015) affords a national perspective that is rarely found in the literature.

Method

For this project a semi-structured interview format was selected as this offers opportunities to investigate more complex issues from a range of perspectives (Qu and Dumay, 2011). Interviews transpired with the two curators and the two consecutive chairs of KMQAA, the PrideNZ owner and the CM director, comprising four individual interviews and a dyadic interview with the KMQAA curators. Two interviews were conducted in-person and three online, determined by the participants and/or their location. Questions included collecting policy and strategy, digitisation and

how this is being managed, relationships with GLAM institutions and how these have developed, and future strategies.

The interview data was analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2022) reflexive thematic analysis. Familiarisation with interview responses was followed by the generation of initial codes which underwent both refinement and review during the process of analysis as themes emerged. Data analysis and interpretation were subject to a queer perspective concerning queer communities' representation.

Analysis

Part of a larger project, this paper discusses interview findings related to the topics of collecting and representation, and collaborations with GLAM institutions.

Collecting and representation

Each archive exhibits a different collecting approach towards their communities, with varying specificity. The CM, which originally collected only lesbian sapphic material, has recently broadened its strategy to include other queer communities where they intersect (P6). The CM recognises the need to be more inclusive and representative to reflect the identity fluidity within its community and is incorporating this approach into its collecting policy, exhibitions and events. While the policy of KMQAA is to collect widely from all queer communities, historically collections of gay and lesbian groups, often politically active, have predominated, often through taking advantage of personal and employment networks (Taavetti, 2016). Recognising there are major collection gaps, digitisation is viewed as KMQAA's way forward to connect with more marginalised queer groups and the younger demographic whose communications occur in the online space (P2).

In contrast to the sexuality and gender identity approaches of the other queer archives, PrideNZ employs a collecting strategy based on recording queer community events and life experience interviews subject to volunteer availability (P5). PrideNZ's approach to representation means documenting as many

queer activities and experiences as constraints allow and making them publicly accessible and visible via the PrideNZ website.

Although these archives are dedicated to collecting in various formats from queer communities, from a queer perspective the material for more marginalised communities, intersex and trans for example, is limited at both the CM and KMQAA, while newer queer identities may not be represented at all. Historical collecting practices, the discord that exists between some of the queer communities, the rapidly changing nature of the way communities communicate and hold records in the digital space and the evolving gender and sexuality identity continuum often mean queer archives under-represent less mainstream queer communities.

Both the CM and KMQAA are cognisant of the need to diversify their collections and the shift towards inclusivity is ongoing although the pace of change differs significantly. This has implications for information access, visibility and ultimately the importance of the archive to its communities. Digitisation of CM's collections is to be completed by the end of 2024 while KMQAA has yet to begin, affecting its accessibility to queer communities unable to physically access the collections.

Collaborations

Interactions with GLAMs were evident for the three archives but varied considerably. In contrast to queer archives overseas, there are no collaborations with New Zealand universities. Since 1988, after an arson attack, there has been an agreement in place between KMQAA and a national GLAM institution. KMQAA retains curatorial responsibilities and ownership, while the institution provides on-premises storage, preservation and access for KMQAA's physical collections with workspaces for the curators. '*For the community, I think, there's a real feeling that things are safe in here and that we have a special repository*' (P1) indicating that from the perspective of KMQAA this agreement will continue into the foreseeable future.

Nonetheless, this collaboration, while providing benefits has a major drawback as digital storage is not covered. For at least a decade KMQAA has been negotiating with the institution for inclusion of digital storage but has been continually rejected. The ever-increasing shift to digital especially in the queer communities space means KMQAA is seriously constrained by its inability to collect digitally. Collaborations with other GLAM institutions are highly unlikely as KMQAA is viewed as part of the national institution. Giving effect to KMQAA's digital collecting strategy for greater inclusive and diverse representation means alternative funding sources are needed but are proving difficult given the levels required. Subsequently, the primary queer archive in New Zealand is only able to collect physical materials. This situation is a major concern (P2) as not only are the digital materials likely lost to queer history but impact significantly on KMQAA's ability to be more representative of, and more accessible to its communities.

The CM, possessing much greater autonomy, has entered into mutually beneficial and strategic collaborations with several GLAM institutions. These relationships have provided access to specialist conservation advice and free institutional storage of the CM's digital collection files (P6). Leveraging queer contacts and networks at the local GLAM institutions opened up resourcing opportunities to make the CM's collections more strategically sustainable and accessible, including funding to digitise their remaining collections.

Legacy was the major driver for PrideNZ in its collaboration with a national GLAM institution. Preserving the website's digital files in perpetuity has occasioned an ongoing digital donation to this institution, thus ensuring PrideNZ's future survival as well as national recognition of the importance and value of this queer digital archive to the nation's cultural heritage.

Results

With mainstream institutions collecting from across the population, queer independent archives focus solely on their communities, thereby collecting material that might not

otherwise be accepted by a mainstream archive. In New Zealand, as elsewhere, being a queer archive does not necessarily translate to the representation of all queer communities, more marginalised groups may not feature at all while other groups dominate, often the result of the original collecting priorities. Addressing these gaps is important for both KMQAA and the CM who see collection digitisation and a digital presence as a way to reach more marginalised queer groups and/or younger queer people by making them more accessible, visible and relevant. One approach is to review and revise internal practices and structures, especially collection development, to avoid reproducing existing inequalities (Brown, 2020; Sheffield, 2020). Subsequently, KMQAA is undertaking a full policy review from this perspective while the governing board includes representatives from queer youth, trans, intersex, and Takatāpui (Māori term for queer) communities. The CM is also constructing its first collection management policy, recognising the need to document its collection strategies for more inclusive collecting (P6).

To best achieve PrideNZ's collecting aim of recording lived queer communities' experiences and activities, it was found that using peer interviewers whenever possible would frequently mitigate generational and community interview barriers, acknowledging that many queer communities respond much more positively to their peers (P5). It is by employing a variety of collecting strategies that queer representation, however imperfect, will become more inclusive in queer independent archives. All three archives reported they critically reflect on their collecting, representation and visibility to their communities (P2, P5, P6). Nevertheless, they are often constrained by factors outside of their control, such as resourcing, to enact timely responsive change. This has implications for the importance of queer archives to their communities. If communities are unable to see themselves represented in the collections and/or are unable to access undigitised materials then the archives' relevance and significance to their queer communities will be considerably diminished. Such an outcome is possible for KMQAA with wholly undigitised

collections and a preponderance of gay and lesbian material.

Collaborations are frequently viewed as positive arrangements that are advantageous to independent archives (Donnelly, 2008) and the connections the CM has developed have improved the Museum's online visibility and digital sustainability. Using queer social and staff contacts at GLAM institutions has resulted in several GLAM collaborations with the CM demonstrating the importance of queer networks in this space. Collaboration shortcomings are noted less frequently in the literature and are often a consequence of power imbalances around issues like ownership (Flinn, 2007). Negotiating changes to established agreements can prove challenging for queer archives and may ultimately obstruct their strategic development even if other aspects are perceived to work well. Volunteer and/or premises-dependent archives are especially vulnerable to institutional authority. It is essential for GLAMs collaborating with queer archives to recognise the fluidity of the queer archival space and conceivably institute a regular critical review and reflection process to ensure they are supporting the queer archive as fully as possible.

Conclusion

Queer independent archives not only recognise the significance of a queer person's life through the preservation of their story but also ensure their legacy, '*That is the power of our archives, that people living their lives still touch the lives of others, still have an impact just from the point of view that they existed*' (P2). However, the question of whose queer stories are preserved still remains.

While the representation of all queer communities is not realistic given the fluidity of sexuality and gender identities and resource constraints, queer archives must be visible and accessible to their communities to be relevant and valued. Another approach that is proving its worth is to document queer life experiences and events, although again only some aspects can be represented. Moves to digitise collections, critically review strategies and connect with more marginalised queer groups

are therefore essential. These endeavours help to demonstrate to communities the importance of preserving queer materials and upholding their queer archives. Collaborations with GLAM institutions are valuable to overcome some of the resource issues by assisting queer archives to be more visible and accessible if queer archives retain their autonomy within these collaborations. Issues may arise if agreements are long-standing or are embedded within a GLAM institution and do not take account of the evolving queer space. A regular review of the institutional support provided to the queer archive could mitigate some of these challenges.

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About the author

Alison Day (she/they) is a PhD student in Information Studies at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, in the School of Information Management. Her PhD topic explores the collecting, donating and documenting space with respect to Aotearoa/New Zealand's queer communities, queer independent archives and GLAM institutions and universities. Alison is particularly interested in the queer cultures of Aotearoa/New Zealand queer independent archives and their interactions with GLAM institutions and universities. She can be contacted at alison.day@vuw.ac.nz.

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Appendix 1: Interviews

Kawe Mahara Queer Archives Aotearoa
P1 Previous Chair

P2 Current Chair

P3 Curator

P4 Curator

PrideNZ
P5 Owner/curator

The Charlotte Museum
P6 Director