Activist archiving of alternative media in Canada: The tip of a fast-melting iceberg

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Abstract

The struggles of subjugated communities against the status quo often find their only visibility in alternative media. These are media that function outside traditional market-based routines, servicing small, neglected audiences whose experiences challenge or destabilise hegemonic discourses. Their marginalised political and cultural status is largely what makes them alternative: these are the articulations of activist citizens whose exclusion from dominant media has driven them into the production of their own cultural texts. Yet alternative media texts – like news texts generally – quickly lose their cultural currency. Archives exist as an apparatus of cultural preservation and legitimisation, but they traditionally have been the purview of large state-run or private institutions with little interest in preserving alternative media. This article examines the practices and preservation of alternative media archives in Canada. By mapping archival practices at sites of independent media production across Canada, and also archiving practices at a sample of provincial, municipal, independent and community archives in relation to alternative media holdings, this research assesses the current state of archiving alternative media records in a Canadian setting. The findings of the study suggest that while institutional archives often overlook alternative media records as falling outside of their explicit mandates, alternative media organisations are struggling to preserve their histories due to financial, technological and expertise deficiencies. Our findings suggest that a broad national strategy to help Canada deal with an alarming loss of alternative cultural records is long overdue, and that a partnership of archivists, activists, librarians and alternative media practitioners would constitute an important path forward at a time when our forgotten activist media are close to being lost.

Keywords

Alternative media, activist, archives, digital archiving, activist history, cultural heritage

Introduction

Alternative media in Canada comprise an informal sector of citizens’ groups that produce and circulate cultural texts in a diversity of media: online, print, radio and television. Like most other forms of mediated culture, they are undergoing transformations in response to changing cultural practices associated with digital technologies. As this article will demonstrate, the archiving of alternative media cultures is similarly undergoing upheaval as collective memory practices shift from analogue to digital structures of preservation.

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In this article, we recount findings from research conducted across Canada over three years (2011–14), speaking with alternative media organisations and publicly funded, independent and community archives. Our study suggests that, even with an arguably growing interest in preserving alternative media holdings on the part of activists and archivists, alternative media archives are in a precarious state, not least because of ongoing resource deficiencies and a lack of suitable expertise. The need for new technologies, concerns about state surveillance, limited archiving expertise, the precariousness of cloud-based archives and the growing complexity of intellectual property laws all play a role in the neglect of collections and missing histories in the alternative media sector. A collaborative and comprehensive response to the precariousness of alternative media archives is long overdue.

**Conceptualising activist media archiving**

Alternative media organisations reflect a range of ‘generally small outlets that work to develop and animate community and enable public discussion across a broad range of issues’ (Kozolanka, Mazepa and Skinner, 2012). Alternative media destabilise concentrations of media power by their very existence (Couldry and Curran 2003). They also circulate texts in ‘subaltern counter-publics’ (Fraser 1997), which form realms of cultural exchange that arise as a result of barriers and exclusions from the mainstream public sphere of dominant discourses. In keeping with the aggressively DIY ethos that often governs alternative media production, alternative media often rely on what has come to be known as a form of participatory archiving, where users are active in the formation of archival records through cataloguing and indexing (Huulila 2008). In other words, alternative media generally act as their own archivists by creating their own – albeit at times precarious and ephemeral – archives.

Raymond Williams’ (1977) conception of the meaning systems in society that can be used to identify the broad fields of being as dominant, alternative or oppositional helps to clarify the limitations and barriers of society in performing the social roles that society assigns to them. The dominant meaning system is the terrain within which we function, thus drawing on and contributing to hegemonic notions of society. In terms of creating memory and collective history, it is self-fulfilling and powerful. Within Williams’ conception of an alternative meaning system, contestation from alternative voices nonetheless can lie within the norms of dominant society. Another early and key text by Todd Gitlin (1980) and subsequent analysis found that alternative views and perspectives can be co-opted or compromised – and in fact are often the sources of the negotiation that hegemony needs to renew itself (see also Ashley and Olson 1998; McLeod and Detenber 1999; McNicol 2015). In contrast, the oppositional meaning system, which comprises contestation that lies outside the norms of society, is a site of anti-systemic views and perspectives that are available to us only when they are denigrated or delegitimised, and where they most often appear devoid of context. Other histories are known nominally, but are curtailed, or they are denigrated or invisible. Many examples exist here – the histories of Indigenous peoples, of labour, of feminists and queer histories – as it should also be acknowledged that we simply have limited understanding of what is missing from the dominant frames of meaning. Under such conditions, alternative voices have little opportunity to establish and sustain narratives of meaning – or, if they do, historically we do not usually know about them. As historian and archivist Jennifer Douglas (2010) reminds us, existing histories tell a top-down story. To get beyond the ubiquitous discourses of mainstream media in order to capture what swirls around everyday people, Douglas proposes that inevitably the archives must emanate from the bottom up.

Contemporary archiving literatures and practices widely appreciate that archiving is a process within complex ideological arrangements and relationships of power that shape social memory (Summerby-Murray, 2011). More to the point, absences or exclusions of archival
material can reflect dominant forms of cultural order, and thus play a role in creating the cultural and political context in which alternative media form, which by definition and by purpose seek to make their work publicly visible in a cultural context that excludes the voices and experiences represented. Archives can serve the political elite in its exercise of control over social practices and outcomes – for example, the role of state archives in producing hegemonic social orders (Easterbrook, 2010), but they can also act as a resource for accountability of governments in a democratic society like Canada. Given this, it is not surprising that governments would want more control over the handling of archival materials related to their administrations, as happened notably under the Harper Conservative government (2006–2015) (Bruno, 2012). Archives also can play a central role in the formation of national and regional identities, effectively producing unifying identities that validate and justify actions and authority, while rendering irrelevant and invisible experiences that would challenge the status quo. In Canada, when official histories ignore Indigenous histories, colonial settlement is implicitly validated.

The archiving of alternative media or its exclusion from institutional archives reflects the complexities of discursive struggle carried out through processes of collective remembering. Like the cultural experiences they tend to valorise, alternative media must struggle for their place of visibility in the historical record. Key questions for anyone engaged in practices of archiving – especially when redressing absence – include establishing who has the authority to determine the legitimacy of knowledge, what existing value structures are in place and what records have been left out (Packer, 2010). As Lenora Toth, Executive Director of Archival Programs at the Saskatchewan Archives Board, points out, ‘archives tell us how we’ve become the people that we are today as a nation’ (Personal interview, 2013). In a post-truth era where mainstream media are undergoing upheavals of their own and struggling for their own forms of legitimacy and significance, understanding the procedures of collective remembering, especially those affecting alternative forms of memory, seems an even more important aspect of discourse on which to focus.

Within that struggle, mainstream media and journalism have also gone through changes and face an uncertain future, according to Florian Sauvageau (2012), a former co-chair of the Federal Task Force on Broadcasting Policy in Canada in 1986. The role of journalism has been eroded by pressures emanating from the changes in news-gathering and delivery by the everyday (and often every moment) use of the internet and social media for information and communication. Although this has shattered the future of mainstream newspapers and magazines, it offers alternative media journalists opportunities for information-gathering and setting up their own websites for much less cost. Yet, while ‘there will always be a role, and a demand, for journalism that tries to make sense of the news of the day’ according to Sauvageau (2012: 39), this still requires a degree of financing for both mainstream and alternative journalists.

The current era of digitisation and globalisation suggests a shift in the public consciousness that includes new and emerging practices of remembrance, and new locations and new forms of public memory (Stepnisky, 2008). The study of public memory has traditionally rested, at least in part, on an assumed distinction between archival memory and ‘lived’ memory. Archival memory assumed formal and specialised practices of selection, cataloguing and access (through exhibitions, museums, archives, etc.), and lived memory assumed the more spontaneous, vernacular and generally ephemeral qualities of remembering by citizens. Digital technologies can conflate these distinctions, collapsing the storing and organising functions of the archival aspects of memory, and the access and interactivity of vernacular ceremony, through digital technologies like the internet. The ease with which citizens can now participate in these practices is in marked contrast to traditional forms of archival memory, which generally only
reflected the interests and values of ruling paradigms (Haskins, 2007). The expanded possibilities for digital storage, accessibility and collective authorship through new media technologies have opened opportunities for new landscapes of memory, where voices once excluded from the ordering and preserving functions of archiving can play significant roles (Haskins, 2007).

One of the characteristics of this new digital online repository of information is an overwhelming quantity of remembered materials. However, the mere ‘preservation of large quantities of digital material does not translate into a useable past,’ writes Haskins (2007: 419). Whether online or offline, narratives must be created and organised from the trove of materials available. It is here, in the production of narratives and meanings and in the organising of digitised information, that the negotiation can occur: meanings will demonstrate limited, conflicting and confounding narratives – those of ruling paradigms and those who question or contest them. Yet ‘going digital’ in itself does not resolve the marginalising of materials from activist and alternative media. Bergervoet (2011: 3) points out that ‘the digitisation process and the opening up of archives show a number of structural economic, legal, material and technical obstacles and problems’. Moreover, choosing what to digitalise adds another layer of selection that can result in less material and more control over what gets chosen (2011: 3).

Altogether, collective memory, changing technologies and archival practices to map issues and tensions can and do arise and are reflected in alternative media archiving in a Canadian context.

**Canadian alternative media: Context and background**

Beyond the failure of the mainstream media to reflect more than a narrow segment of society, alternative media are themselves constrained by the precarity of their labour and their lack of funding. Certainly, in the very slight recorded history of alternative media in Canada, there are only best estimates of the level to which illegitimate or counter-hegemonic knowledges have been remembered. The specific histories that are available inform us of thriving alternative media, many of which were active during the time of grass-roots labour organising between the World Wars (Mazepa, 2003). They also inform of regional differences, with the province of Quebec having perhaps the only known recorded history – and that only in the form of an exhibition and a keynote address (Levanthal, 2008). Research suggests, but has yet to verify, a niche collection of alternative media artefacts tucked away in the Vancouver Public Library. This is unusual, as typically libraries in Canada do not carry large holdings of alternative media products, which are often produced in small numbers in localised settings by volunteer labour within a highly transient culture. Current databases are scant or housed within much larger archives with limited search and retrieve structures. One such database-archive is the A-Infos (2014), ‘a multi-lingual service by, for and about anarchists’, which specialises in media from all over the world specifically of interest to the anarchist movement.

What do exist in a haphazard form are the localised and often informal archives that alternative media organisations maintain of their productive work. Campus and community radio stations, for example, often automate the archiving process and maintain digital files of on-air programming, indexed only by date and time. Alternative media that predate digital technologies have analogue stores of various formats of tape. These are important and largely disorganised archival resources, sometimes collated, sometimes in shoeboxes and milk crates in basements. Those pieces of history and memory that do make it to existing, formal archives often are in no better shape, although perhaps not unique. Douglas’s (2010) experience includes searching for the original papers of radio inventors in the Smithsonian in Washington, DC – perhaps one of the leading official archives – and found no record that the papers were there. She had to rummage through the stacks herself to find them – all 200 boxes, all unindexed
We may not be facing the end of history, as some have suggested, but we are facing at least the accidental or thoughtless neglect of it. The disaggregated quality and lack of indexing make retrieval difficult and, in cases where there is no information about what is on a digital file or a tape, next to impossible. Of course, the organisation and preservation of archives depend on resources and to some extent technical capacities. Unfortunately, most alternative media organisations lack the resources to address archival needs, which seriously compromises both information dissemination at the time of creation and preservation of what is produced.

In this context, Osborne’s (1999: 1) definition of an archive as a focal point for ‘bringing together issues of representation, interpretation and reason with questions of identity, evidence and authenticity’ must be taken seriously; otherwise its absence challenges objectivity claims of memory and remembrance of things past (1999: 2). The political environment in Canada regarding public memory is a case in point. In 2012, the federal government undertook a campaign to memorialise the bicentennial of a war against America that took place in Canada in 1812. This mostly forgotten war became an opportunity for the government to promote messages that eulogised military heroes at a time when favourable public opinion was waning regarding Canada’s participation in the war in Afghanistan. The government inappropriately elevated the war ‘to pay tribute to our founders’ – which they were not – and to celebrate how ‘the war was instrumental in creating Canada’s armed forces’ – which it didn’t. A rich and accessible understanding of public history was needed, but was not available or researched to debunk this version of our history. Using the Vancouver archives as an example, Leslie Mobb, the city’s archivist, can ‘directly feed into the local knowledge economy through the education system, through the film publishing systems, and through planning and the way in which the city will work’ (Personal interview, 2013).

The research project: Public memory and activist archiving

The purpose of the research that is the subject of this article was to conduct a preliminary inquiry into the historical and current state of archiving in the alternative media sector in Canada by identifying archival needs of alternative and independent media arising as media culture shifts towards an emerging networked world. This study comprised interviews with representatives from 10 alternative media organisations (approximately one-third of identified online and print-based groups in Canada at the time) in seven provinces, five provincial archives, one municipal archive, five independent archives and one artist-run media centre. The list of organisations participating in the study can be found in Appendix 1.

Interviews with representatives from alternative media groups focused on the status of holdings, methods for indexing and cataloguing materials, methods for storage and ability to retrieve, and organisational archiving needs. Interviews with representatives from institutional and independent archives focused upon holdings and acquisitions of alternative media records, archiving strategies and archiving technologies. Unfortunately, due to the federal government’s policy of not allowing employees to be interviewed, we were unable to interview at Library and Archives Canada (a national government department), although our contact there was willing. Other limitations of the project included a lack of available knowledge about alternative media that might exist in some areas of the country but that remained unknown, even to our contacts; non-responsiveness from media groups or inability to locate responsive representatives; and time and resource constraints. This suggested an added urgency for research and attention in this area, especially in a time of technological upheaval and transition when paper artefacts not being digitalised are at risk of being forgotten or trashed.
Three types of groups interviewed

Alternative media groups

In this study, we interviewed alternative media organisations operating in a variety of media and platforms: print magazines, citizen journalism websites, a traditional journalism website, a community radio station, a community media centre and media arts collectives. In addition, representatives were interviewed from five provincial archives (Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario and Quebec), and two municipal archives (Vancouver and Montreal). The vast majority of media organisations interviewed were incorporated as not-for-profit organisations. Annual revenues ranged from $15,000 to $200,000 (with one exception at $600,000 annually).\(^5\) The oldest organisation studied began its work in 1963, with several others also having survived over decades, but three dated from the last decade as well.

An example of a long-surviving magazine is Canadian Dimension (CD). CD is a not-for-profit print magazine created in 1963, published six times annually. The magazine focuses on ‘far left activism’ and culture in Canada. Its mission statement says the magazine provides a forum for debate as ‘an alternative to the corporate agenda and the dictates of the global market; that the dream of a better society is still alive’. \(CD\) has annual revenues of approximately $120,000–$150,000. The magazine has two part-time staff only.

An example of a relatively new alternative media website is rabble.ca (2016). Known simply as Rabble, it began offering what it calls citizens’ journalism in 2001, encouraging citizens to participate in the production of political news and commentary through an online platform. Its website states:

> Our Mission? Rabble.ca will draw on the real energy and power of the Internet – passionate, engaged human beings. Blurring the line between readers and contributors, it will provide a needed space for issues, a place to explore political passions and an opportunity to expand ideas.

Its focus is on Canadian politics – any and all issues. Annual revenues are approximately $200,000. The organisation operates with a mixed part- and full-time staff of sixteen.

It is notable that both these successful examples of alternative media have high budgets and revenues compared with most alternative media. There is a general correlation between survival of alternative media and funding, although research also shows that sufficient funding can also undermine the alternative ethos of the organisation (Comedia, 1989). Note also that in Canada, there exists some government funding in the Canada Periodical Fund for some community and non-mainstream independent media, although the amounts are quite small (Canada Periodical Fund, 2012). For instance, the 40-year-old Prairie magazine Briarpatch only received $14,431 from the fund in 2015. At one time, before austerity measures over the last two decades, small independent media also received separate subsidised mailing costs, now reduced and rolled into the same fund.

Independent archives

Four of the independent archives that participated in the project – Connexions, the Toronto Zine Library, the British Columbia Gay and Lesbian Library and Archive Montreal – have all existed for some time. Toronto-based Connexions is a not-for-profit independent archive that collects physical and digital materials related to political activism, social movements and struggles for social change. It was created in 1975 to facilitate the exchange of grassroots activist publication that can be considered alternative media. The emphasis on archiving came later as materials accumulated and other projects took on less importance in a digitally networked cultural context. Connexions asks publishers with suitable materials to send copies to be archived. Its massive hard-copy collection is spread out in different facilities where a network of volunteers from all over the world continues to
catalogue its holdings. Archive Montreal was created in 1998 by Louis Rastelli to collect cultural artefacts from Montreal’s underground and independent arts scenes. The British Columbia Gay and Lesbian Library started in 1976 to collect, organise, preserve and disseminate material related to BC’s queer community. The Toronto Zine Library was started in 2005 to collect and share zines made locally and from further abroad.

The fifth independent archive – the second of the two independent archives in Quebec – was much newer and less institutionally established. The Living Archive for the 2012 Student Movement was started alongside the protests in 2012 at the time of the Maple Spring\(^6\) in that province. The archive exists in the home of its founder.

Institutional archives
We interviewed professional archivist-librarians from seven institutional archives (five provincial and two city archives). An example is the Archives of Ontario, mandated to archive government records and private records relating to the history of the province. It has a passive acquisition policy for private records. In 2011, it implemented a policy to expand private records to include ‘newer groups coming to Ontario’ and traditionally marginalised groups, such as psychiatric patients, women’s diaries and activist groups (Archives of Ontario, interview with Joseph Solovitch, 2011). The Archives of Ontario does not acquire records specifically designated as alternative media, but such records might be included in a portfolio under a topical or thematic catalogue description. Similarly, in Quebec the Bibilothèque does not explicitly acquire alternative media records as a category, but print publishers are required by law to deposit records of their publications. Commercial publishers tend to do so automatically, but other organisations and individuals often don’t. They would only be entered into the collection if the publications came to the attention of an archivist. None of the publicly funded archives interviewed had a policy of collecting alternative media, although each suggested that there might be such holdings in their collections.

Research findings from the interviews
Archiving problems and needs
Unsurprisingly, alternative media groups generally face ongoing funding difficulties and deficiencies, not only in terms of archiving but also for general operations. In an environment of chronic under-funding, archiving is routinely downgraded in priority, a difficulty that can perhaps be met by wider access and availability of education and training, but that requires time and money and the incorporation of archiving practices in production cycles rather than as an afterthought. Financial constraints also affect staff time that could be allocated to archiving practices, digitisation efforts and the availability of physical space and storage. As Kim Elliot at Rabble.ca told us:

> The discussion comes down to time and money in a sense, and how much which parts of the site are used. We just don’t have the time and resources. You know, we’re all part-time, including me. And the board also volunteers time ... Rabble is a lot of volunteer energy. (Personal interview, 2011)

Another difficulty faced by alternative media organisations in Canada is archiving knowledge and expertise, a deficiency that includes lack of familiarity with indexing and cataloguing protocols, lack of access to archival training for staff and citizen-producers, inexperience with design strategies for database search ability and user interfaces, and constantly changing third-party platforms and new media applications, making the information difficult to find. As Irwin Oostindie, Director W2 Community Media Arts Society, says:
We use Vimeo [to archive video] and we use Livestream and we use YouTube and we use SoundCloud. But frankly … YouTube is dominant now, as is Vimeo, but five years ago it was different names and different owners and different startups. And so, it’s unclear how the distribution system will change and how those distribution systems connect with the users: Is it at the interface level that the work is documented, archived? Or is it at the source, producer level? … As we know, as evidenced by our own organisation and by independent media production, people tend to have a pretty sordid and difficult relationship with archiving because, you know, unless it’s automated and secure, it’s out of sight. (Personal interview, 2011)

Technology also presents certain difficulties for many groups, including access to digitising technologies, upgrading from one archival format to the next, archiving dynamic content and measuring use of digital archives through infometric tracking strategies.

In addition, some groups raised concerns about the tension between archiving and state surveillance. For example, archives of radical activism suggested implications for state prosecution, persecution and harassment. The distinction between archiving for research and educational purposes, and the use of archival records for state security apparatus raises important questions and issues that need to be foregrounded and more thoroughly considered. For example, Oostindie expressed concerns about the implications of dynamic data capture as a form of live-archiving:

[O]nce we get into the moment-by-moment archival production, then we really have the capacity to do very, very serious surveillance – there’s a double-bind with that and the double-bind is going to repel a lot of people from going into that type of a thing. I suspect there’s bell curves against people’s willingness to participate in the systems that are essentially going to be tools against their own freedom … I’m questioning how will people respond to archiving systems when we haven’t caught up to the fact that these archiving systems are in fact monitoring tools of our own activist media production. (Personal interview, 2011).

One of the underlying issues in archiving some kinds of information is trust: who is creating the archive, who will have access to its contents and/or what will be done with the contents? When the organisations archiving are from marginalised communities, the question of trust is so much more important – a point to which we will return in the discussion below.

Finally, the alternative media groups interviewed demonstrated a keen sense of the precarious and marginalised nature of alternative media enterprises and their output. Some organisations rely on third-party hosting sites such as YouTube or flickr in the presentation of their content – sites over which they have no control in terms of long-term storage. The preservation and/or destruction of these materials is out of the media group’s control.

What was surprising was the degree to which the needs and problems identified by independent and institutional archives mirrored those in the alternative media sector. The dominant problematic involved difficulties associated with digitisation, including a number of sub-issues: adequate resources to create a trustworthy digital repository, increasing public access, preventing the loss of records through technological attrition, access to state-of-the-art digitising equipment, adequate staff resources to digitise existing records. Other issues included access to physical storage space, community relations and intellectual property rights for records on permanent loan.

**Archiving strategies**

The archiving strategies discussed by alternative media groups in the interviews included many key processes: physical storage, digital storage, third-party hosting versus internal hosting of digital archives, archiving software, archiving dynamic data, quality of archived materials, indexing and cataloguing strategies, online accessibility, staffing, archive plans and tensions between archiving and concerns over state surveillance.
The archiving strategies identified by both alternative media organisations and archives can broadly be grouped into four categories: strategies for storage (including physical and digital storage, questions of third-party versus internal administration software and technology); strategies for indexing and cataloguing (including protocols, staffing and crowd-sourcing); strategies for making records accessible; and strategies for succession and longevity (archive planning).

Digital archiving is clearly of growing and increasingly central importance in the alternative media sector, even for those whose primary archives are in physical form. This is not to ignore the importance of physical storage for physical archives, which in most cases remain informal and largely inaccessible. At the Columbia Journal, the archive was located in the long-time publisher’s garage. While on tour at W2 Community Media Arts Centre, we were shown a stack of Redwire magazines; Redwire is an Indigenous youth magazine published in Canada from 2004 to 2009 before it moved online (Redwire, 2016). While the magazines have been archived online, the stack of magazines in the cupboard was apparently the physical archive for the print publication (Oostindie interview, Director, W2 Community Media Arts Centre, 2011). At Shameless magazine, we were told:

We have a few different systems of archiving. For our physical copies of the magazine, they are everywhere. There’s a box of them here, there’s a box of them there, there’s a stack of them hidden, you know, behind my desk, there’s some at Nicole’s house, there’s some at Claudia’s house. They’re kind of just everywhere … and they’re disorganized, like they’re stacked over each other, and we kind of just pull them together when we need to sell them or look through them. For our digital archives, I archive everything, every issue that I’ve ever worked on, but I’ve only, I think, started on the ninth issue. (Personal interview, 2011).

When we asked Jim Lipkovitz at The Columbia Journal about his archiving needs thinking five years into the future, he replied somewhat wryly, ‘Well, a bigger garage.’ Physical archives present issues of storage and accessibility.

But even organisations with closets and garages filled with archival materials were exploring digital archiving. Every group with which we spoke for this study had some form of digital archiving in place. Drupal emerged as the most popular form of archiving software, but indirectly: Drupal is used by half of the organisations for online content management of material that over time becomes a de facto archive. The most significant barrier to expanding public access to the alternative media archives under consideration in this study appears to be resources, staffing and expertise in indexing and cataloguing the materials to be archived.

Independent archives are also actively engaged in both digitising records and preserving digital records. Strategies for making the most of limited resources include using custom and open-source software, custom and professional index subject headings (i.e. Library of Congress), targeted approaches to digitising records (i.e. covers only, abstracts only) and diversification strategies for their own preservation by keeping multiple copies of digital records on different types of media (hard drives, flash drives, DVDs, etc.). Institutional archives were also using open-source software for database management, such as Archivematica and Keystone/Minisis, and professional models for indexing and cataloguing, such as RAD and ICA-ATM. ‘Refresh’ policies for digital records tended to be in the five- to seven-year range.

Significantly, alternative media organisations appear to be seeking out third-party hosting strategies to address long-term digital storage. Some hosts are similarly alternative and/or activist in their orientation, while others are large commercial cloud services. Contracting out archiving services raises questions of long-term sustainability in terms of cost, and risks of content loss in the event of having to repatriate archived content, and due to factors outside of the control of the alternative media organisation. A related issue is emerging over the archiving of content hosted by non-affiliated websites – for example, video material on YouTube or images on flickr.
– which are then embedded or linked to in a web page by the alternative media group. Special procedures would have to be taken to capture content uploaded to third-party websites, adding an additional layer of complexity to the process.

The archiving of dynamic information also emerged as issue in the transition from Web 2.0 to Web 3.0 cultural practices. Dynamic information includes RSS feeds, Twitter feeds and any form of automatically updated and/or customised element in a user interface. The question is, on the one hand, how to capture content (and what to capture) in a dynamic system that is theoretically perpetually changing and, on the other hand, how to address the tensions discussed above between archiving and surveillance where dynamic information in the context of activism might be of interest to state security apparatus.

Finally, of the alternative media organisations interviewed, none had an archive plan in place as a strategic response to questions of archival growth, long-term sustainability (both digital and physical), technology changes and content migrations, resource and expertise deficiencies, indexing and cataloguing requirements, expanding public access, and digitisation.

Public access

According to our study, making archives accessible to the public is a significant concern for alternative media organisations. The digitisation of archives is well underway in this sector, with fully 80 per cent of respondents having digital archives as the most accessible form of archived cultural work. The growing use of digital technologies makes it possible to archive and make publicly available all the work being produced. This requires the expertise to index and catalogue materials in such a way that they can be retrieved in a user-friendly and efficient way. In at least one instance, at The Tyee, public access to archived records fluctuates in response to search results related to trending stories, indicating that records that are properly indexed and catalogued for internet search engines can and do appear in searches for trending stories, and thus help bridge the gap between archival repository and cultural resources:

Because our content has always been free and open and available, we have what we call a long-tail, so the long-tail describes the graph of what, when we first publish something it gets the most number of views, and then it gradually goes down, but what we find is that for a lot of our stories, there’s a tapering off but a constant amount of access to certain stories for a long period of time … Sometimes we get these spikes with stories that get taken out for their own purpose. For example, recently we had a story … got mentioned in Cracked.com, which is a humour site, and for weeks now it’s been getting massive amounts of traffic, and that story came out last year … So it’s not uncommon for us to see old stories being viewed at any given time. (Personal interview, 2011)

Also of interest are distinctions among three kinds of archival content. There is the archiving of programming and texts, which is the category of archive content in which this research project is interested. However, there is also the archiving of internal organisational records and, where applicable, archives of member interactions through some kind of social media platform. Each of these will attract a different archiving strategy and different expectations for public accessibility. Third-party hosting was also identified as an issue that affects public accessibility of archives. For example, archiving work with a public library is a cost-effective and potentially long-term strategy for creating public archives of alternative media programming. On the other hand, having a third-party host might introduce unexpected costs associated with increased traffic or accidental loss of records. In the case of CFRO Radio in Vancouver, this took the form of a sudden spike in traffic (and thus costs) caused by spider bots and other automated scripts. When the third-party US host asked CFRO to remove its files from their server at short notice, 250GB of archived records were eventually lost.
Many of the organisations interviewed facilitate cultural production and publish work by independent third-party contributors. Multimedia cultural texts sometimes use third-party intellectual property – for example, copyrighted music or visual material. Making archives accessible online introduces the complication of ‘long-tail’ publishing rights – that is, public consumption after the original publication date.

Another issue that was raised was sensitivity around creator’s rights. By allowing producers to retain full rights (bearing in mind that for many alternative media groups production is done by volunteers or for little pay), archived materials may be jeopardised in the sense that producers can withdraw materials or restrict access. It may be helpful for organisations in this position to consider producer-contributor agreements that address this issue. Such agreements would also address the issue of having to track down producers long after the fact to seek permissions to accommodate new technologies and/or public access to archives.

In addition, the use of commercially copyrighted materials by producers, and how to address their legal status in an archive, remain an unresolved issue. Independent archives have devised a variety of strategies for handling digital materials for which they do not have copyright, including making archives available only at their offices, providing only descriptions or only the first few pages of a publication online. Institutional archives try to acquire copyright when they acquire records. For older records, institutional archives often off-loaded the burden of securing use rights to those who wanted to use the records.

Interestingly, all three groups – alternative media, independent archives and institutional archives – were using a ‘publish first, apologise later’ rule for some kinds of records. This underlines the need for public policy or a general agreement among independent media to clarify the conditions under which material should be re-used in the digital age.

Power and trust

While it was not asked about directly in interviews, the issue of power emerged in conversations in various ways, particularly in relation to the content of archives reflecting voices of dissent and resistance to particular kinds of social domination. The comments showed a keen sense of the precarious and marginalised nature of alternative media enterprises and their output. For example, a spokesperson for Rabble.ca expressed concern about what the future holds for free sites commonly used by such media. The Tyee, an online news site, indicated a preference for open-source tools as a means of ‘democratizing voices’ and ‘a values choice as well as an economic choice’, as well as opening up alternative perspectives to much larger audiences (The Tyee interview, 2011). Taking this a step further, the W2 Community Media Arts Centre noted the need for ‘creating trust between remote locations of cultural production – a “web of interaction” among alternative media sites to facilitate sharing (W2 Media interview, 2011).

However, another aspect of trust between progressive voices and alternative media has emerged in the context of large demonstrations, where a trust relationship between alternative journalists and their sources, coupled with the instantaneity of technology, can get alternative messages out to those who want to hear them, but can also foster instant surveillance:

The G20 [held in Toronto in 2010] is a perfect example. Right now, analyzing all the Twitter traffic from G20 is fascinating, analyzing the Twitter traffic from the G20 to learn where the actions are happening in that moment is fascinating. But archiving the Twitter traffic to figure out who’s where, who’s with who, and what are they doing, that’s part of fascism. So if you’re archiving a day later, Twitter traffic, that’s great. But if you’re archiving it as the seconds go by then it’s a tool for fascists repurposing. I think there’s a bell curve where people are going to be reluctant to participate in effective amazing Web 3.0 archiving where you can essentially Google in the moment. (Personal interview, Irwin Oostindie, Director W2 Community Media Arts Centre, 2011)
Archives are apparatus in the Foucauldian sense (Packer, 2010), but the kinds of discourse outcomes will remain a matter of the relations formed in their assembly, maintenance and use. The significance of trust relations in the context of creating archives for and about subjugated communities will likely grow in importance as an issue to be resolved when tackling questions raised by digital practices.

In summary, ‘in an information age, trust is a massive requirement for [alternative] participation’ (W2 Media interview, 2011), but may become more vulnerable in the future.

The path ahead: Uncovering and recovering alternative media

The marginalised cultural status of alternative media is largely what makes them alternative: these are the articulations of people whose exclusion from dominant media flows has brought them to self-production. Alternative archives exist in part as a component of a legitimising process that counters such ‘cultural illegitimacy’ (Sturken, 2008). The very existence of the archive suggests that these are cultural expressions worth remembering. Further, they implicitly challenge the objectivity claims of mainstream archives. In archiving alternative media, uncovering illegitimate objects is a technical act; recovering them is a cultural act that gives them meaning. Both are needed to sustain the memory of alternative media.

Online repositories are forms of what Halbwachs (1992) terms ‘collective memory’ – the meanings we share and that emerge from ongoing negotiations over what to remember, the significance of those memories, and where they will lead us into the future. It is with all this in mind that the possibilities of a participatory digital media archive for alternative media in Canada need to be examined, recognising that this is contested territory – that the negotiations that eventually produce shared meanings are themselves situated within ‘geometries of power’ (Massey, 1999). Given this contestation, it is highly disturbing that the current government in Canada, through budget cutbacks and strict information management, has effectively closed down communication with the media and public by the main repository for public history, Library and Archives Canada. In addition, the government has closed or consolidated many of its departmental libraries (CAUT, 2014; Ditchburn, 2014). Without a broad legitimising public and state sense of the importance of public memory, even the liberating potential of online participatory archiving envisioned for alternative media will face obstacles. Federal and provincial archives have more institutional legitimacy. Scott Goodine, the Archivist of the Province of Manitoba, notes:

Our government records are the foundation of society, they have the history to society, but also hold the evidence to society. Everything, almost all research, is based on a record. If - if - we lost the records of Library and Archives Canada, basically the legitimacy of the country would cease to exist. (Personal interview, 2013)

In the same way that alternative media themselves have found new audiences for and adherents to information sharing and mobilisation, many alternative archivists will nonetheless look to the internet to share their histories, as well as provide a podium to continue their work. The internet, along with ever-expanding capacities for digital storage, has allowed for huge volumes of texts to be amassed relatively easily, in traceable ways and often through spontaneous and collaborative efforts (Web 2.0’s much-touted interactive qualities, ‘wikinomics’, etc.). These masses of digital remembrance can be accessed instantly by anyone with access to the internet. Any number of examples come to mind: the September 11 Digital Archives, the International Campaign for Justice in Bhopal, the Nanaimo Community Archive, the Kent State Remembrance website, UNESCO’s Memory of the World Program, the Citizen Archive of Pakistan, the Radical Activism Visual Archive and many others.

Osborne (2010: 1) suggests a new ‘archival turn’ in the humanities, the ‘foregrounding of the archive as an object of analysis’. In archiving alternative media, given the considerable
challenges to archiving revealed in this pilot project, it would be providential to use this archival turn to ensure that subaltern texts and collections become part of enriched public memory. In Canada, the findings of the pilot project suggest that a broad national strategy to deal with this deficiency is long overdue, although it will not be forthcoming from government in the current difficult political environment. However, a partnership of archivists, activists, librarians and alternative media practitioners would constitute one important path forward at a time when the iceberg of our forgotten activist media past is melting rapidly away.

Notes
1 Kozolanka, Mazepa and Skinner (2012) characterise alternative media through one or more of three qualities: democratic structure, participatory nature, and activism.
2 Archivists would refer to these artefacts as ‘media’, while we use the word ‘media’ to refer to journalistic output.
3 This research was made possible by an Insight Development Grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC).
4 The authors gratefully acknowledge the interviews conducted in French by Evan Light, assistant professor at Glendon College, York University, Canada.
5 All money quoted is in Canadian dollars.
6 ‘Maple Spring’ was the unofficial name given to a student strike in Montreal, Canada in 2012 that fought the provincial government’s huge hike in university fees. The name came from the 77 per cent of the world’s maple syrup produced in the province. The demonstrations took 76,000 students out of their classes in the spring and lasted through the summer. The strike was believed to have contributed to the provincial government election loss later the same year.
7 This involves trust issues with communities whose records are sought for inclusion in institutional archives.
8 Spider bots crawl through websites to pick up information that can be processed and used elsewhere later.

References


### Appendix 1: List of interviews

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<tr>
<th>Alternative media</th>
<th>Government archives</th>
<th>Independent archives</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Canadian Dimension</strong></td>
<td>Archives of Alberta</td>
<td>Archive Montreal, Distroboto and Expozine</td>
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<td>Canadian Women’s Health Network</td>
<td>Archives of Manitoba</td>
<td>British Columbia Gay and Lesbian Archive</td>
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<td>The Dominion/Media Co-ops</td>
<td>Archives of Ontario</td>
<td>Connexions Archive</td>
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<td>Archives of Saskatchewan</td>
<td>Living Archive 2012: QC Student Movement</td>
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<td>Rabble.ca</td>
<td>Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec</td>
<td>Toronto Zine Library</td>
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