

Defining the undefinable: an analysis of definitions of community archives

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Abstract

The paper explores definitions and notions of what a community archive is, and the tensions between different understandings of community archives.

The paper is a critical analysis of community archives definitions and understanding from researchers and practitioners across the wider heritage information sector.

Community archives are a growing area of interest for researchers because of their intrinsic link to community and their provision of the evidence of it. Definitions around community archives continue to be tenuous, reflecting different real or perceived types and practices and the perspective of the author and the sector they work within. Variations in definition can also occur due to differences in perspective around theory and practice, with many practitioner-based definitions intrinsically bound with the community they represent. This can result in community archives being defined as “alternative” based on mainstream practice, or “political” based on theoretical purview. The paper is conceptual and does not attempt to provide one definition that covers the perceived extent of community archives. It is part of work in progress on the nature of community archives and the impact such discourse may have on archival theory and practice.

This paper provides an overview of some of the key issues and themes impacting a definition of community archives, and in doing so works towards a broader understanding the nature of community archives. In most cases, the concept of “community” seems to provide a common definitive element and practitioner definitions focus on addressing the needs of self-defined community to a greater or lesser extent.

Type of paper: Conceptual/Literature review

Keywords: Community archives, Heritage information, Archival practice, Archival theory, Archives, Archival collections

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Introduction

Community archives are a growing area of interest and an often-overlooked aspect of the wider heritage information sector. Over the last ten years there has been noticeable growth in discussion and research about community archives as a separate and distinct aspect to large and formally constituted archives (see, for example, Battley, 2019; Caswell, 2014; Copeland, 2014). Wider recognition of the value of heritage material and archives by researchers in the sphere of cultural heritage, library studies, digital humanities, and human rights is also noticeable, but the body of literature is somewhat dispersed.

The notion of critical archiving and giving voice to marginalised groups is another aspect that is frequently associated with community archives. Groups seeking to establish or re-establish their identity, or to foster a wider understanding of their needs and problems may use archives to help do this. Marginalised groups include non-dominant cultural, gender, religious, linguistic, ethnic, political and social identity groups (depending on the country in question). These community archives sit beside what could be termed more conventional geographically-based community archives and archives collections in (for example) public libraries and schools.

While *community archives* is used as an umbrella term (both here and elsewhere) to cover the many archival places and collections that don't fit traditional (mainstream) definitions, the concept of community archive is still nebulous within existing literature, and in the archives and heritage communities' perceptions of this phenomenon (see, for example, Flinn, 2015; Jura Consultants, 2009; Ramsden, 2016). Differences in terminology, viewpoints and approaches also mean that information about community archives can be hidden within a variety of sector-based frameworks, excluded them from "defined traditional archival practice" (Ramsden, 2016, p. 4) and making it more difficult to identify themes or concerns because of this dispersal. Additionally, community archives are considered to have a transforming role in terms of challenging the dominant modes of archival practice (e.g., Gilliland and Flinn, 2013; Zavala, Migoni, Caswell, Geraci and Cifor, 2017) and as such may be dismissed, downplayed and undervalued by other archivists or the wider heritage information sector.

This article explores definitions of community archives, drawing on several approaches: use of the term in the heritage information sector literature; the experience of the authors researching, engaging in the ongoing discourse on, and teaching archives management (including community archives); and from research into the nature of archives in New Zealand that describe themselves as community archives (Welland, 2015; Cossham and Welland, 2018). New Zealand is a bicultural nation that draws on an indigenous Māori worldview; this worldview is being increasingly recognised as important in the organisation and management of Māori information and the delivery of information services to Māori clients. As such, there is a strong focus on understanding and accepting an indigenous paradigm as a key part of ensuring that the voices of all New Zealanders are represented in the nation's documentary heritage.

The article discusses the tensions between different understandings of community archives and identifies some key themes that affect how they are understood by the general public as well as the archives research and practitioner community itself.

Definitions of mainstream archives and community archives

Before looking at definitions of archives, community and community archives, we briefly scope the kinds of archives that are talked about as community archives.

Community archives may be stand-alone entities, or they may be part of other organisations based in a particular community, such as schools, universities, historic societies, churches, indigenous organisations, cultural or indigenous communities, and local government-supported or quasi-government organisations. They are generally small collections although there is no particular size definition; most community archives are small although not all small archives are community archives. (Since it is costly to maintain a large archive, large archives are more likely to be government ones.) Since there is nothing in existing definitions of community archive that excludes organisational archives from also being community archives, we are including such archives in this discussion. Events, local history projects, collections held in libraries, and fully online collections and exhibitions may be called community archives.

Materials may include traditional archival items (e.g., manuscripts, papers, records) but also published resources, copies of records (e.g., shipping lists, electoral rolls), multi-media, grey literature, ephemera, oral histories, clothing and artefacts; collections may be partial, incomplete, not intended as a full picture, reconstructed, selective, actively collected for a particular purpose, and deliberately biased in particular directions. We discuss the significance of such collection diversity below.

Archives have been traditionally defined in archival discourse as “The place (building/room/storage area) where archival material is kept” and “an organisation (or part of an organisation) responsible for appraising, acquiring, preserving and making available archival material” (Acland, 1993, p. 463). Emphasis is on “the preservation and administration of archives [i.e., the items]” (Bradsher, 1989, p. 4) within a physical space by an organisation (Hamill, 2013) in ways that carry out a “continuum of care” (Millar, 2017, p. 24) with “objectivity and neutrality” (Copeland, 2014, p. 89).

While these types of definitions are broad, they nonetheless focus on the tangible (the physical place where the collection is stored) and the processes around the management of archival items to ensure continuum of care in mainstream (traditional) archives. With these can also come notions of archival ‘law’ that “situates the archive in a dominant order of paternal control” (Mende, 2018, unpagged) or has a ‘whiteness’ (Sentance, 2018) that can create an environment of unacknowledged colonialization (see, for example, Davidson, 2015; Thorpe, 2019) or uncertainty about ethical and safe cultural practices. (Thorpe, 2018). It also raises questions around the “real or perceived failure on the part of mainstream archives to accurately represent certain voices”, for example, lesbian and queer identified women (Sheffield, 2014, p. 113) and indigenous tribes (Hall, 2016). It is common for community archives to be defined in archival discourse by the ways in which they are different from or contrast mainstream archives (Ramsden, 2016, p. 7) rather than the ways they are similar; that is, by “activism and a passion for justice” through practices such as archival intervention (‘research-based art- practices’ of engagement between archives and communities to call attention to a collection, or to create one that did not previously exist (Sheffield, 2018, pp. 110-111) rather than by Copeland’s (2014) “objectivity and neutrality”. While this can stem from thinking that endeavours to define the different communities that community archives represent and champion as ‘the other’, it

can result in collection practices that are radically different to those of mainstream archives. For example, Newman (2010) says that “community archives often collect local history materials which they call ‘archives’ but which do not meet the archival theory definition of archives” (p. 3.). Additionally, a community archive may not have a physical presence due to less dependence on the preservation of physical items (through a greater focus on digital collections and digitisation), and the continuum of care they provide may be focused on community needs and challenging the dominant rhetoric in which the community finds itself (for example, Bessett, 2018; Punzalan, 2009) rather than ongoing preservation and management of items.

Defining community is potentially problematic. Giddens and Sutton (2017, p. 120) define community as “a group of people living in a particular locality, or who have a certain shared interest, who engage in systematic *interactions* with one-another” [*emphasis in the original*]; it is a notion that encompasses a smaller entity than society. In terms of community archives, Flinn (2007, p. 153) suggests that “definitions of what a ‘community’ might be are ... particularly complex and fluid and capable of multiple interpretations” while Haykal (2011) notes:

The definition of community can be varied; it does not just have to encompass a geographic boundary (i.e. a town, a neighborhood, a street), but also can be defined by gender, sexuality, race, religious affiliation, ethnicity, culture, occupation, organizational and corporate affiliation, etc. (unpaged)

Wales (2014) raises a further issue, stating “Although the term ‘community’ implies grassroots origins and independence from state structures, this usage as an umbrella term shows that it has also been harnessed by professionals in order to classify these groups according to their own standards and criteria” (p. 25). For example, while we might consider a society to also be a community, a national archive that is legislatively constituted and that actively collects the records of that society is not a community archive because it is part of the state structure and has a mandate related to that state.

For a community archive, community includes those “with responsibility for overall governance of the [community archive] collection, staff and volunteers, community users, and people who may not use the collection but may affiliate themselves with the community itself” (Welland, 2015, p. 9). Community can also indicate group interaction with the collection. For example, community archives can occur in form of online participatory archives (Huvila, 2008; Iacovino, 2015) supported by a group of citizen archivists (akin to the notion of citizen scientists) that have no relationship with each other apart from through participation in the archive itself. Here, the archives form the community rather than being formed by it (see for example, Battley, 2019). Ramsden (2016) states that “archives do not merely reflect community; they constitute community, helping to define its histories, membership, and boundaries” (p. 3). This can contrast with the view of many of those working in mainstream archives who have a more holistic approach towards community and community archives. They often see community archives as part of a ‘community of records’ (Ketelaar, 2005), positioning them within an inclusive whole that incorporates broader sector, institutional or governmental memory (see, for example, Welland, 2017).

Questions remain around just how much an archives (community or otherwise) can impact community identity, and conversely, how theoretical paradigms around ‘community archives’ can

practically aid the sustainability of most community collections. Paschild (2012), for example, suggests that there is little evidence that the archive has a strong impact on community identity, and that social agendas around definitions of 'community archives' may not have that much beneficial impact on grassroots collections. Welland's (2015) research on community archives in New Zealand confirms this, at least for small collections. While she found that "a community archives is perceived as existing within the community that forms it, adds to it and participates in it" (p. 10) the community itself did not recognise the collection as helping to enhance the community's own identity, thus reducing the power of the collection to sustainably manage the administration and preservation of archives in its care (for discussion of this point, see Welland 2015, and Welland 2017). The corollary of this is that if community archives are to be 'community archives' in a broader socio-political sense, they cannot be created by an outside organisation or by the state on behalf of a particular group since a state has a different motivation, focus, and understanding to that of the group and its members. A demonstration of diverse and inclusive social and political community responsibility within a community archives requires and involves community ownership or control. Power is vested in the community as part of their self-determination, and its community archives requires an investment of community power if it is to survive as a form of community articulation, advocacy and representation.

As a result, a collection is seen as being isolated from the community if it is managed or stored by a third party, or if the community perceives that it does not have any ownership and/or control of their collective memory. This has often been discussed in relation to Maori archives (see, for example, Davidson, 2015; Falconer and Jacobs, 2004; Hall, 2016) The question, of course, is: if a community archive *is* isolated from its community, does it remain a community archive? We suggest that the answer depends very much on the exact circumstances, as well as the nature of the collections in such an archive, but that it is unlikely to be a community archive. There may still be archival value of such collections to society broadly, as part of a 'community of records' (see, for example, Bastian, 2006; Ketelaar, 2005) and where the value of archives can be viewed through lenses that include the historical, evidential, accountable, informational, social or 'emotional, religious, symbolic and cultural' (Cook, 2012, p. 115).

Scope and definitions of community archives

A Google nGram suggests that the term '*community archives*' has been used since around 1960 [1] (<http://tinyurl.com/y5d4muzl>). The nGram shows a noticeable spike in its use in the second half of the 1980s and a sustained increase since then. We emphasise that such searches are only roughly indicative of use of a term but provide a helpful starting point to show when a term began to change and the literature in which the term was used (limited, of course, to the literature that Google included). Google Scholar indicates that there have been about 3,370 scholarly publications including the term *community archives* published in the seven years from 2012 to 2019, with a similar number published in the previous 25 years (about 3,650). While such figures are also only indicative (and Google Scholar's coverage may be less thorough for the earlier years), they support the notion of a recent growth in interest in community archives.

Community archives have been variously defined as "unique" (Ramsden, 2016, p. 2), "non-public" (Harris, 1998, p. 2), "DIY institutions" (Baker and Huber, 2013, p. 266), free from outside influence (Cook, 2012; Flinn, 2011; Flinn, Stephens and Shepherd, 2009), "documenting and recording the lives of those hidden or marginal" (Flinn, 2007, p. 161), projects (Latimer, 2016), places of political

activism (Caswell, 2014; Flinn and Stevens, 2009), and storytelling (Lee, 2018), constituting community through its definitions of histories, membership and boundaries (Ramsden, 2016) places that have “self-conscious sense of curation” (Long and Collins, 2016, p. 98), and “preserve the cultural impact of [an] intentional community” (Finnell, n.d.). Community archives can also be seen as “small, local, independent and oftentimes idiosyncratic” (Hurley, 2016). They are a place “through which communities can make collective decisions about what is of enduring value to them, shape collective memory of their own pasts, and control the means through which stories about their past are constructed” (Zavala *et al.*, 2017, p. 203).

In addition, there are cultural and geographic differences in understandings of community archives. Flinn states:

It is also worth noting that the term itself can have different meanings internationally. For instance, in Canada and New Zealand, it is generally taken to mean a local archive which may be run by volunteers but may also be considered part of the public archival provision. Elsewhere the usage is closer to the UK approach, encompassing everything from local history archives to archival and historymaking activities reflecting a shared identification such as ethnicity or faith. (Flinn, 2011, pp. 6-7)

It is not clear from Flinn’s quotation who in Canada and New Zealand considers community archives part of the public archival provision; in our experience it is not New Zealand community archivists but the mainstream archivists that think this, and community archives are moving close to what he terms the UK approach. Newman (2010) defined New Zealand community archives as “collections of archival records that originate in a community - that is, a group of people who live in the same location or share other forms of community of interest - and whose collection, maintenance and use involves active participation of that community” (p. 8). Welland (2015) built on and expanded this definition to include communities defined by genetic or social relationships such as family, or communities of individuals who identify with a specific culture, ethnic group or race, gender, or religion. She included the concept of self-defined community, based on Flinn’s view that they “define *themselves* on the basis of locality, culture, faith, background, or other shared identity or interest” (Flinn, 2007, p. 153; *emphasis* in the original). These definitions could apply to many community archives, both physical and virtual, around the world. The common themes in the definitions above, therefore, are the intrinsic relationships with community to which they belong, and the meanings that are gained from these relationships.

While the definitions above focus on the nature of the community and on the purpose of community archives, there is also a wide range of practices associated with community archives that are much less likely to be associated with mainstream archives. These include practices related to collection management (such as can be seen in the Texas After Violence Project [2] (<http://texasafterviolence.org/>) and the Taiwan National Treasure Project [3] (<https://www.nationaltreasure.tw/en>)) as well as to acquisition of items. Flinn (2007) suggests that the range of practices is broad, extending to local and oral history projects of various kinds, but that both those working on the projects as well as those in mainstream archive and heritage institutions may not use the term community archive to describe what is being done. Consequently, most explanations of community archives, where they exist, tend to describe principles and examples of

types rather than give specific definitions. Community archives practices may be at variance with mainstream archival principles and based on pragmatism, convenience, lack of training of staff and lack of funding as much as on the community archives' need to reflect the community they relate to in the approach to their collections. For example, in New Zealand, *tikanga Māori* (protocol) around *tapu* (sacred) and *noa* (profane) means that water and washbasins are available near the collections to ensure that archives users can wash their hands when using the collections or being part of ceremonies that include them.

Community archives, therefore, are hard to pin down, not only in terms of defining them for the general public, but also for those creating community archives, those working with heritage information, and for the archives discipline more formally.

Community archives and the archival paradigm

Much mainstream archival research and thinking does not always accommodate ideas about community archives particularly well (see, for example, Ramsden, 2016), and while excellent theoretical discussion exists about their role and purpose, the realities of day-to-day practice in smaller community archives either demonstrates a gap in theory vs practice or indicates an area not well-covered in the library and information studies literature broadly (i.e., that covering libraries, archives, community archives, recordkeeping, heritage information, and so on).

As Flinn (2007, p. 152) notes, "in reality the mainstream or formal archive sector does not contain and represent the voices of the non-elites, the grassroots, the marginalised". Community archives are often the result of local, grassroots or community initiatives (where community does not necessarily have a geographic meaning) and do not assume that collections were originally created for legal or business reasons, but for other reasons as well or instead, for example, cultural, spiritual, iconic, political activism and advocacy reasons. Such archives may arise from a wide range of practices and activities and may be actively collected as a one-off event rather than growing over time as more traditional and mainstream archives tend to do. One example is archival initiatives and programmes that collect memories of diaspora and refugees.

There is growing evidence of practitioner stories about community archives, but these stories tend to be broadly distributed across many information sectors and journals or lost in conference presentations that are not written up for publication and consequently not available to a wider audience, particularly in smaller countries such as New Zealand. Welland (2017) identified a lack of understanding around the impact of more stereotypical viewpoints of community archives, meaning that the voice of community archives in archival literature and practice may be dismissed or undervalued by the broader profession, noting that the "nature of community archives continues to be ambiguous to many working in the heritage information and recordkeeping sectors" (unpagged).

The attitude of mainstream archives and archivists towards community archives can seem like a somewhat defensive stance: mainstream archival thinking may appear to exclude community archives or their special needs because of the challenge they pose to the mainstream and the traditional archival paradigms. They can also be seen as performing a required but 'lesser role' within the broader heritage sector, existing to fill the gaps in societal memory in areas that mainstream archives do not cover. For example, archivists working in mainstream archives in New Zealand often have an attitude towards community archives that positions community archives within an inclusive whole, without acknowledging the substantial differences that exist between mainstream and

community archives. This attitude can be both positive and a negative. On the one hand, being inclusive means that community archives are part of the New Zealand archival discourse and seen as active contributors to the collective memory of the nation. On the other hand, it means there is a two-tier approach where community archives are seen as 'not proper' archives because their nature is not fully understood nor catered to.

Ramsden (2016) sums up the situation:

Community archives are often defined in contrast to "mainstream" archives so much so that a dichotomy between mainstream archives and community or "grass-roots" archives has developed. ... Intellectually, the contrast is useful. It brings to mind a range of oppositions, such as personal and impersonal, elite and ordinary, local and central and so on. The contrast is also meaningful as it intimates the exclusion felt and experienced by the people behind community archives. The divisions between mainstream and community archives are, however, both real and imagined, true and false. (p. 7)

The concept of community archives, at least according to some of the literature on the topic, doesn't fit within any existing mainstream archival paradigm, which is "a formal (or at least recognised and acknowledged) system, or mental model of attitudes, beliefs and patterns about some phenomenon" (Cook, 2012, p. 97). As Flinn states, "the community archives movement, as it always has done, poses significant challenges for archive services, in particular in terms of professional practice" (2007, p. 167). Thus, many of the current tensions around definitions and understanding of community archives come from two key areas: the need to relate them to more traditional definitions of what archival collections are, and the realisation that in practice community archives may not always have much in common with these traditional definitions. The cause of many of these tensions is summed up by Ramsden (2016):

'the postmodern agenda in archives ... seeks to challenge positivist assumptions that render the archive as neutral rather than political, the archivist as a passive transmitter rather than a producer of knowledge, and the record as an accurate representation of reality.' (p. 10).

A lot of current discourse around community archives focuses on points of difference and how these aspects could aid archival theory and practice generally, particularly in instances "where materials are collected *for* communities rather than *with* them" (Caswell, 2014, p. 311; *emphasis* in the original). Consequently, some archival researchers and theorists see community archives as providing a possible answer to many of the issues facing mainstream archives such as government or national archival repositories where materials are collected for and about communities. Community archives can be viewed as a way of shifting some of the established public, custody-based and western/colonial archival paradigms, opening possibilities to the "democratising of the archive" and challenging "the legitimacy of the mainstream sector" (Flinn, 2007 p. 167). They also can provide opportunities for the marginalised to regain and maintain control over information that is created by or about them, thus re-negotiating traditional polemics around power, control, and interpretation. (Caswell, 2014). This can include re-imagining (Halilovich, 2016) or re-creating (Frings-Hessami, 2018) viewpoints in a world where "*who* you are largely determines *what* you know" (Caswell, 2019, p. 5; *emphasis* in the original). One example here is the need to create community archives based on indigenous knowledge paradigms that incorporate relevant conventional archival principles, providing an opportunity to help "re-contextualise, reassess and re-describe" (Hall, 2016, p. 47)

indigenous material in both community and mainstream archives. This may include a complete re-thinking of how a collection is arranged, who can access that collection, and who owns the resources in it. Guardianship may be a stronger incentive than ownership (Welland, 2015); there may need to be “a shift in core principles from exclusive custodianship and ownership of archives to shared stewardship and collaboration” (Cook, 2012, p. 115).

Defining the themes around community archives

The literature raises four themes that help us to determine what community archives actually are.

Firstly, community archives have active community support and participation by a self-defined community. While not all members of a community actively participate, it can be assumed that the community provides sufficient representatives that are involved in the collection, maintenance and use of the material that makes up the collection, or at least in the donation of materials to the collection and support of it in that way. That is, community participants take part in the collection and the control, management, ownership (or entrust on a continuing basis) and use of the memory of that community, so that other members of that community can also contribute to the collection and get meaning from it.

Secondly, community archives are places (physical or otherwise) that validate and provide access to community memory and the stories that may be created from it (e.g., Battley, Daniels and Rolan 2014; Flinn, 2011). They can be symbolic places (Caswell, 2018) that enable a space for what the community wants to remember about itself, rather than what an authority or outside agent wants to have remembered about that community. Welland’s (2015, 2016, 2017) research shows how archivists facilitating small community archives understand the purpose of such archives as meeting community needs by ensuring community memory is accessible in an equitable and educative way, within the community rather than in a central repository. However, mainstream archives and heritage information professionals tended to view the purpose as addressing perceived memory gaps in collections across wider society.

Thirdly, community archives contain not only archives as traditionally understood but also a variety of items that traditionally have not been considered archival (e.g., Flinn, 2011; Gilliland and Flinn, 2013; Welland, 2015):

Certainly most community archives collect traditional archival documents, such as individual and organizational records, but also a wide variety of other things including artifacts, artworks, clothing, oral histories, photographs and film, leaflets, badges, newspapers, books, grey literature—all items which individually, and more importantly when viewed as a collection, are perceived as reflecting significant aspects of the community’s life. (Flinn, 2011, p. 6)

They can also cover cultural events such as carnivals, which are “a living archive where the many events within the celebration constitute the numerous records comprising this expression” (Bastian, 2013, p. 122). This last example presents a notion of a living archive that is challenging traditional definitions because it conflicts with the notion of an archive being permanently available for consultation over time yet is still valid because it incorporates the notion of a community archive representing the community, its memory and its identity in all its expressed forms.

Fourthly, community archives usually operate without direct government funding and/or control, “as collections of materials created, held and managed primarily within communities and outside the formal heritage sector” (Community archives and identities, n.d., para. 1). It is this notion of community archives being outside the formal heritage sector and having the power of self-identity and self-determination that is one of the main reasons for the tension between them and the traditional archives paradigm, and this tension seems to be exacerbated by the fact that community-driven demands are often (if not always) prioritised over accepted practices around administration and preservation recognised by the archives community. Having said that, where a community archive is part of a wider organisation, governance and/or corporate needs of the organisation take precedence, affecting practices, preservation, staffing, access, and even what can be collected and how it is described (see, for example, Welland, 2015), and this can apply to non-organisational archives as well. Where community archives staff have archival education and training, this prioritisation of community over archival principles and practices can be a daily challenge, particularly where the governing body has little understanding of archives or archival practice.

Caswell (2014) articulates what she sees as five key principles arising from community archives discourse: participation, shared stewardship, multiplicity, archival activism and reflexivity. She notes that “over the past decade, a growing body of archival studies literature has addressed burgeoning community archives movements and examined the ways in which communities have developed independent grass-roots efforts to document their own histories” (p. 307). This move by (in particular) non-dominant and marginalised groups to document their stories and histories rather than having them documented by the dominant outsiders, including official and governmental agencies, is a key difference between community archives and traditional archives in the formal heritage sector. Self-representation, self-autonomy and freedom from outside influence, and the right to intellectual ownership are common aspects identified in discussions of community archives (For example, Caswell 2014; Cook, 2013; Harris 2014; McCracken, 2015).

The social and political nature of community archives

A key factor influencing these themes is an assumption by some archives researchers that community archives will be representative of political or social movements rather than being just another form of heritage and memory institution where the collection and management of archives is a key (but not necessarily only) focus. This is a notion summed up by Drake’s statement that “archivists must shift their paradigms away from the fictive notions of ‘local’ and ‘community-based’ towards a more radically precise and politically liberatory language”. (Drake, 2018, unpagged). Discourse as a result is around the themes of identify, power and influence, and the ability of the community archive to work successfully (or not) within this paradigm. (For example, Bastian 2012; Caswell, 2014; Cook 2012; Kaplan 2000).

For example, Flinn, Stevens and Shepherd (2009) see community archives as acting as a form of social or political movement, and Flinn uses this definition to separate out certain community history projects from the umbrella of community archives where they simply seek to celebrate or reinforce the status quo rather than challenge it (Flinn, 2011, pp. 8 -9). This viewpoint is often phrased as activism, whether social (e.g. Yaco and Hardy, 2012) or archival (e.g. Caswell, 2014; Flinn and Alexander, 2015). However, the concept of “archival activism” by itself may need further definition as it can mean different things to different people. For example, while some discourse focuses on the concept of archival activism to “campaign on issues such as such as access rights or participatory

rights within records' control systems or act to deploy their archival collections to support activist groups and social justice aims" (Flinn and Alexander, 2015), other discourse focuses more on traditional concepts around archival practice.

Scott (2013, unpagged) notes that Yaco and Hardy's (2013) research on archivists and social activism "simply asks people working in the field what they do and how they do it" rather than attempting to find a meaning in terms like community archives and collective memory. Yaco and Hardy (2013, p. 259) found that the "among the 76 archivists who responded to this question, the most common form of activity is to encourage activists and activists' organizations to preserve and retain their records (80%), followed by encouraging the deposit of records in an archival repository (66%)".

Even though a common indicator of community archives is independence, this does not equate to an associated degree of political activism necessarily, although this can be a common distinction in community archives discourse. Caswell (2014, p. 313) suggests that "Flinn and Stevens (2009) position community archives as parts of larger social and political movement..." while Caswell herself sees community archives as different from 'local geographically based historical societies' (p. 310) based on this distinction.

Factors affecting definitions of community archives

Definitions of community archives continue to be developed, with most sitting outside the accepted standard definitions of what an archive or a library (or even a museum) is.

Notions of identity continue to affect definitions as those that choose to accept the moniker of community archives vacillate between definitions of purpose and definitions of practice. However, even allowing for identity markers such as self-determination, power and influence and the existence of responsibility for a diverse and inclusive social and political community, five factors seem to exist that make defining community archives problematic. These are a lack of a public "brand", lack of agreement from those in the information heritage sector as to who can use the term community archives, the defensive stance of mainstream archives, definitions of community archives that focus on "what could be" rather than "what is", and confusion from within the community archives' own community about what the community archives are.

1. Lack of a public "brand"

Unlike libraries, which have a strong brand (De Rosa *et al.*, 2005) with public libraries firmly embedded in the public consciousness, there is no one community archives type that stands out from mainstream archives to help provide the public with general concepts of what community archives are and what they do. If a community archive is to represent, memorialise or support its community, its purpose needs to be understood in order for it to have power or influence within and outside its community.

Feedback from practitioners clearly demonstrated that the general public has very little idea of what community archives do (see for example, Welland 2015 and 2017). As a result, the public are also much less likely to understand the nature of archival collections (whether constituted in a community archive or a similar collection in a public library). For example, one of the participants in Cossham's (2017) thesis research pointed out that the public library users did not understand why the heritage collection wasn't digitised fully and complained about it; the library did not have either

the budget for digitisation or the copyright for all of the materials they held. While the availability of digitised collections (e.g., Papers Past [4] <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/> or the Digital Comic Museum [5] <https://digitalcomicmuseum.com/>) have improved the public's understanding that such things are possible, there is still general misunderstanding around what can be done.

2. Lack of agreement from those in the heritage sector about who can use the term community archives

While archival discourse tends to group together disparate examples of community heritage collections under the term 'community archives', the real situation is more complicated, with Practitioners, researchers and theorists in the formal heritage sector (including libraries, archives and museums) having different views of what can or can't be included under the community archives banner.

One reason is that definitions based on similarity of content or of community are not possible. The general public, archives users and, in many instances, archivists, can have difficulties understanding just what different community archives have in common. For example, a sports club archive, local history project and social movement archive may have little in common with each other and more in common with a local government archive, sound archive or public library history collection, yet each can be considered a community archive, depending on the particular definition of community archives that is being used. This can result in a range of various descriptions as collections try to define themselves on their terms or 'hijack' terminology used by others. Flinn (2011, pp. 6-7) suggests that

A further problem with the term is that it has not only been employed to define a potentially disparate range of activities going under many different names (community archive, independent archive, autonomous archive, ethnic archive, oral history archive, local history project) as something resembling a coherent community archive movement, this naming has also often been done without recourse to those involved to see if they recognized the term.

Another reason is the lack of uniform practices for managing material in community archives' care. A community archives can cover different facets of archive, library and museum practice, and yet not really follow any of them to the letter. Often, they can be collecting archives that have enough unique factors and issues characterising them that they are deserving of their own space as a separate type of memory institution (for example, special collections of personal papers may be held in libraries but could benefit from space and treatment separate to other collections). They may adopt the practices of the host institution rather than use those practices specifically identified as 'archival', such as recognising the archival principles of provenance and original order. They can also be completely different to the traditional notion of physical archives with reading rooms, stacks, and archivists, encompassing the virtual and the transitory to the point where the only thing that is recognisable between them and more traditional archival repositories is the description that is placed on it: community archives.

3. The 'defensive stance' of mainstream archives

We have noted the somewhat defensive stance towards community archives by mainstream archives, based in part on the challenge that community archives are perceived as presenting to archival paradigms. This can perpetuate confusion around definitions of community archives when mainstream archives may (intentionally or otherwise) create confusion around the role and purpose of community archives by implying they are 'lesser than' mainstream archives and therefore are questionable whether they should be defined as archives at all. We suggest that there can be a certain element of snobbery by mainstream archives for a number of reasons: community archives practices are often very different to mainstream archives; community archives are frequently grassroots organisations, arising to represent marginalised or under-documented groups and not part of 'the establishment'; they do not (for many reasons) necessarily employ archivists to manage them; and they have a range of different purposes that extend beyond maintaining a record for posterity. There is a sense of deliberate marginalisation of community archives by mainstream archives because community archives do not measure up to what has until more recently been considered the "proper" archival paradigm. This in turn reduces any concerted attempts at generally agreed definitions by the practitioners themselves, both the mainstream and the community archivists.

These factors can influence (intentionally or unintentionally) broader cross-sectoral and professional and industry thinking about community archives. For example, in Oliver's (2010) article 'Transcending silos, developing synergies: libraries and archives', she states that "very little research crosses the institutional boundaries of libraries and archives, and there appears to be little predisposition to look for areas of common interest" (p. 1). Since many community archives often demonstrate a hybrid of archive, library and museum practices, writers and researchers may either not consider community archives as part of *their* area or they may interpret collections as being entirely within their area and not community archives at all. Wales (2014) states that "in asserting itself as autonomous and separate from other bodies, the archival profession can be considered to be inhibiting the development of a fully cooperative and accessible heritage sector, as community archives have also been perceived as doing, which is an interesting dynamic to consider in the context of professional attitudes and approaches to outreach initiatives" (p. 21).

These aspects can create definitions that may suit a particular collection (or even a variety of collections within a specific sector) but these definitions may not address the incorporation of practices from the archival, museum, library and other sectors, resulting in definitions that may 'seem' inclusive, but are in actuality relating only to the sphere of understanding of those who created the definition in the first place. In questioning the purpose of the concept of community archives generally, Paschild (2012) emphasises that we should not let specifics "raised as representative of issues for the whole, supporting misperceptions that the challenges for one community archives are the challenges for all community archives" (pp. 133–134). Such perspectives are helpful as a foil against which more positive views of community archives can be set, and can improve our understanding of the political nature of community archives identity.

A useful way of looking at this in practice is to look at how small community archives define themselves. For example, it is uncommon for those working in small community archives in New Zealand to think of their collections as archives or themselves as archivists. Reasons may vary, but often they may be uncertain about how to manage the collections within an archival paradigm, and lack qualifications or training to support their work in the archive (Welland, 2015). As a result,

terminology around the archive collection can vary considerably. In ongoing research by Cossham and Welland (2018) into local government memory-making, one challenge in exploring the relationship between local government archives and public library archival collections (both funded by the same local council in each instance) was to identify common terminology that both archivists and librarians would understand, and would help locating what each particular local council did with archives (based on searching council websites).

4. Definitions of community archives that cover “what could be” rather than “what is”.

While traditional definitions of archives tend to focus on practices – i.e., what they *do*, many definitions of community archives focus on what they *could* do. That is, definitions are more about the possibilities offered by the existence of a community archive than stating actualities. Mainstream archival theorists appear to want collections to be perceived as political entities and for this to be a key feature of their identity, while the community archives may conceptualise their identity in different ways, with little emphasis on broader political roles or terminology. As a result, the narrower purpose as expressed by the individual archivist carrying out work in a small community archives may seem very different to that expressed by other archivists and archival theorists. Research by Welland (2017) supports this showing that while practitioners and other archivists “share a similar overall *concept* of community archives, analysis showed that they perceived the role and practices of community archives very differently” (unpaged). Three areas where these different perceptions were particularly evident were the role of the community archives, the carrying out of collaborative work, and the prioritisation of areas of concern” (unpaged). For example, a small community archives in New Zealand may be innately defined by its purpose to retain the decisions, knowledge, and records of events from the past. However, other archivists and information heritage professionals may view it simply as “the archives of X community”, categorising its perceived purpose in community and society from their own worldview, or else valuing it (or not) in terms of how it fills perceived ‘gaps’ within the wider social or community record. Definitions as a result reflect ongoing tension between the narrower reality of those working in the community archive and the often unreal perceptions around wider purpose by those who don’t (Welland, 2017).

5. Confusion from within the community archives’ own community about what the community archives are

Another contributing theme is a community’s confusion regarding the exact purpose of the community archives that belong to them. This confusion may exist between the community archives and its own governing body and community as well as among the wider society. It appears that community archives are often not well understood by their own communities, and championship of it from within the community often promotes different aspects than those with responsibility for the archival collections would say was important (see, for example, Welland, 2015). While a key premise behind community archives is to “give substance to a community’s right to own its own memories” (Earles, 1998, p. 2), just how this is articulated is open to conjecture within each community, and results in a wide variety of practices and expectations. For example, collection practices can still privilege areas of shared thinking or agreed purpose by those deemed to be ‘in charge’, even if the collection itself was born out of a need to represent viewpoints and memories from the marginalised or ‘other’.

Community archives do not necessarily have self-determination, and those working in and with such archives may face stigma or discrimination from archivists in larger archives who focus on 'what is done' in the more traditional sense (for example, arrangement, description, appraisal) to identify whether or not a community archive is actually a community archive (Welland, 2017). Underlying this thinking are embedded notions around both formal and informal and professional and non-professional practices that can establish the identity of the 'community archivist' as a practitioner of less value than those working in larger archives. (For example, Wales, 2014, Welland, 2017).

In New Zealand, the level of understanding that a community has around its community archive seems to be directly linked to that community's level of engagement (see for example, Newman 2010, 2012; Welland 2015, 2017). For example, where a community archive is fortunate enough to have a qualified information professional in charge and a governing body that demonstrated active interest, the notions of (for example) "proper" maintenance of the collections (where "proper" refers to the traditional archival paradigm), the possible extent of digitisation, the use and re-use of the resources, access, education and advocacy of heritage are more likely to be addressed (Welland, 2015).

Conclusion

The nature of community archives is diverse, variously understood, open to discussion, and likely to continue challenging archival paradigms. Community archives are a growing area of interest for researchers because of the link to community and the provision of evidence of it. They are especially significant for communities that have been historically marginalised and lack a voice or equal (or even any) recognition. Notably (in western societies) this includes indigenous communities, LGBTQI communities, migrants and refugees. In New Zealand, and despite its bicultural framework, the voice of Māori has often been hidden or dismissed, sometimes deliberately and often through conscious colonialism and unconscious institutional racism, and also because Māori has been an oral culture whose recordkeeping and history has been conveyed through stories and physical artefacts such as whareniui (meeting houses) and weaving.

It is important to understand the scope of this part of the heritage sector even if it is not possible to provide a precise definition of it because this facilitates explicit recognition, support and acknowledgement of an important source of archival records (however the term 'archival' is defined by the public and the creators of the community archives themselves). Definitions around community archives continue to be tenuous, reflecting different real or perceived types and practices and the perspective (and the bias) of the author and the sector they work within. Variations in definition can also occur due to differences in perspective around both mainstream and alternative theory and practice, with many practitioner-based definitions intrinsically bound with the community they represent. This can result in community archives being defined as *alternative* compared to mainstream practice, *political* based on theoretical purview, or *meeting the needs of community* by the community archives themselves.

Such definitions are helpful as a starting point for supporting the development of community archives and generating understanding among the public and the wider archives community of the nature of and possibilities offered by such archives. It could be possible to develop a taxonomy of types of community archive and from that build an understanding of the practices and needs of different types and different communities; this is an area of future research. This would enable

community archives to place themselves in a more concrete framework of understanding that helps to actualise a corporate identity around community archives management that addresses the variety of practitioner perspectives and draws support from similarities of roles, purposes and practices across the heritage sectors, leading to a more sustainable future.

We have discussed how the notion of community archives challenges dominant archival theory and practice. However, perspectives about community archives from theorists and grassroots practitioners are often radically different, and more research needs to be done on what the differences mean for archival thinking more broadly before existing theory and associated paradigms can be said to transform or even effectively influence current roles, purpose or practice around community archives.

We conclude by pointing to a way forward: Cook suggests that we need to

stop seeing community archiving as something local, amateur, and of limited value to the broader society and to start recognizing that community-based archiving is often a long-standing and well-established praxis from which we can learn much – this is not about professional archivists jumping to the rescue, but drawing on rich traditions to broaden our own concepts of evidence and memory, and thus enrich our own identity as archivists, transformed to be relevant actors out of our society’s communities more than proficient professionals behind the walls of our own institutions. (Cook, 2012, pp. 115-116).

Whatever the definition of community archives, the notion of community cannot be separated from it while the notion of archives may be broader, more transforming, more powerful, more political, more inclusive and much more flexible than the traditional archival paradigm suggests. Incorporating community archives into the archival paradigm will benefit both.

Notes

- [1] <http://tinyurl.com/y5d4muzl> nGram of the term community archives
- [2] <http://texasafterviolence.org/> The Texas After Violence Project
- [3] <https://www.nationaltreasure.tw/en> Taiwan National Treasure Project
- [4] <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/> Papers Past
- [5] <https://digitalcomicmuseum.com/> Digital Comic Museum

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