

Activating the Archives of Activism
Dr. David Magier, Director of Columbia University Center for Human Rights
Documentation and Research

During this University Seminar, Dr. David Magier, director of the Columbia University Center for Human Rights, Documentation and Research, discussed his renewed commitment to building accessible archives best suited toward scholarly research. Tucker Harding from the Center for New Media Teaching and Learning (CCNMTL) also presented a new human rights project, Forced Migration, that allows students and faculty to contribute content to a living case study and archive.

Beginning with a brief overview of Columbia's human rights archive, Dr. Magier explained that Columbia Librarian, James Neal, successfully negotiated access to archives belonging to international organizations, such as Amnesty International and Committee of Concerned Scientists. The University is responsible for preserving the archived material--consisting of photographs, memos, publications, and other documents-- and turning this data into accessible resources.

Dr. Magier stressed the Libraries' goal of achieving the most impact from the information and resources they maintain and contended that it was time for the human rights archive to redefine itself. He expressed his interest in working with the user community to discover how they would use the existing archive data differently. Hoping to gear the archive towards new user-defined goals, Dr. Maiger aims at using feedback to create increased usage of the archive. In light of this effort, government documentation, publications and other critical human rights materials are being compiled by the archive in conjunction with several human rights organizations.

Eventually, Dr. Maiger would like the archive to include materials that are produced at the University. He explained that despite the abundance of organizations at Columbia producing scholarly human rights information, no common repository to collect this data exists. Dr. Maiger aims at having a central location for this data that would foster communications amongst these rights-based campus organizations and initiatives.

The human rights archive Web site was created to facilitate scholarly research by linking the user-community to various online resources. Dr. Maiger explained how the Web site is a portal to the many resources available in the archive.

Dr. Magier then gave a demonstration of the archive Web site. He walked through existing online and print resources, and showed how users could delineate between these resources. During his demonstration he noted that Finding Aids were extremely useful tools in facilitating scholarly research. He called Finding Aids the "fruit of an archivist's

labor,” because they allow users to sift through a specific issue or theme within the masses of archival data.

Dr. Magier’s then addressed sensitive human rights data. He remarked that it is a challenging task for archivists to appropriately categorize sensitive data, like rights abuses, in the human rights realm. This becomes especially important when dealing with organizations and their specific role in a human rights conflict. Dr. Maiger asserted that it is critical to consider how human rights information relates to an organization’s goals and its internal activities when trying to determine how to classify the data.

Tucker Harding, educational technologist at CCNMTL, discussed a recently implemented case study environment called Forced Migration¹. The case study environment was built as a learning tool for students to use alongside other classroom materials. Forced Migration gives students the opportunity to work through online case studies using data that was collected by a CCNMTL team through first-hand interviews with survivors.

Harding explained how each case study is a collection of narratives that revolve around a particular issue. Working with actual survivors, the research team was able to discern what information was critical to student learning. The videotaped interviews and related publications have been tagged with relevant metadata which students can find using the search function.

The case study environment differentiates itself from previous projects because students are allowed to upload their own data to the existing archival data. Students can choose a thematic area and apply relevant metadata to their contributions. Harding demonstrated the site’s search function, which is made up filters driven by metadata.. He then opened the discussion up for questions and feedback.

A number of questions focused on the accuracy of the metadata. The audience inquired about what determines the appropriate metadata fields, and which user group would understand the categorization of the data. Harding responded that the data in the archive exists to make student arguments’ more defensible. Moreover, the purpose of the tool is to improve teaching and learning within this class and therefore, the metadata has been geared toward this particular audience. Another audience member responded with a similar sentiment, stating that libraries are full of metadata. Information is classified in a way that is meant to be most logical for a general user community.

The discussion continued, moving onto the role of archives in a media-rich environment. An audience member asked whether an archive could become an active challenge to other data collection techniques, even though it is by nature conservative. They proposed that the archive could play an active role in bringing together institutions and their related data to help the case of survivors and victims.

¹ More information on Forced Migration tool can be found at:
http://ccnmtl.columbia.edu/portfolio/medicine_and_health/forced_migration.html

Dr. Magier responded that the world is not waiting for libraries to think about these large data problems. Instead, people are collecting and sharing information and he hopes that some are doing so to preserve the data for the future.

Audience members also raised concerns about the idea of endangered content. One individual recounted how she used a particular Web site to research a tribunal in Iraq. When she tried to return to the same site, she found that it had been taken down. She was concerned about the authenticity of the information and whether it could be considered a trusted source. More importantly, when presenting the information, she would no longer be able to refer to this site as a data resource since it no longer existed. Others responded with similar comments, questioning how to determine the original source, when it comes to Web-related content.

Dr. Magier responded to these concerns by agreeing that Web content is ephemeral. He asserted that original sources are often out of reach to users and, therefore, users are left with secondary sources, where content disappears or lacks consistency. He discussed how the library is trying to counteract these effects by trying to define what data is relevant to users' needs. They are also trying to organize the data in their archive in a meaningful way. Dr. Magier asserted that archivists grapple with whether they should continue to add data to existing formats or start from scratch. He maintained that the promise of a living archive is still quite ambiguous and elusive, especially when it comes to endangered or disappearing content.

A significant portion of the discussion was devoted to the idea of whether student contributions to existing archives, like the Forced Migration project, should be considered alongside scholarly data. This was in response to Harding's comment that students can add their own searchable data to the Forced Migration project.

One audience member remarked that if students and librarians contribute to the same archives, it may cease being an educational exercise. They questioned whether students and professors should give the library sole responsibility of maintaining the archive.

In response, Harding explained that Forced Migration was intentionally built to be a learning tool and was not trying to conflate scholarly data with student contributions. Instead, the site is intended to give students in a structured course a practical understanding of a particular human rights issue and a forum for exploration and expression. Harding mentioned that a new initiative would allow graduate students who are on-site at refugee camps, to compile their experiences at these camps in the Forced Migration Web site. This information, documented as situation reports, will provide students enrolled in the course an opportunity to consider 'real-time' data in their application of the case studies.

Upon hearing this, Frank Moretti explained that until very recently education was really never about information -- rather, it was about pedagogy, sequencing, character, and human development. He wondered whether projects like Forced Migration are forcing

educational institutions to forgo their pedagogical art to mimic librarians, journalists and archivists.

In the same vein, a student at the Teachers College remarked that in her courses, she felt like students were learning more about topics than they were about becoming researchers. The student expressed her expectation of a pedagogical experience, not necessarily an education focused on knowledge management.

The final stages of discussion centered on the delineation of new technology in classrooms as a pedagogical tool versus living archives as a scholarly resource. First, a CCNMTL staff member asserted that such a tool might be an amalgamation between VITAL and an empty Multimedia Study Environment (two existing projects created by CCNMTL), where every class would have its own environment. Such an environment would allow students to contribute their own voices to existing scholarly debates through online annotations, discussions, and research, without raising the concern that their material might be mistaken as authoritative. Another audience member countered that student commentary should remain separate so that students practicing research techniques do not confuse their work with the actual creation and maintenance of a traditional archive.

Dr. Magier responded that the “archive-worthiness” of a set of materials is an evolving term. He mentioned items like “to-do lists” that might not seem useful to one constituency, but could be invaluable to another. This again raised the issue of whose role it is to play gatekeeper in the classroom setting versus in the general academic realm. He raised the issue of scalability and questioned whether we were losing something when data is eliminated or ignored. Another audience member questioned aloud, “Where do you draw the line? Who is the authority?”

Dr. Magier responded, “Desperation drives the enterprise... You need to decide what data you want to collect and archive.”