

‘In A Way I’m Coming Out to All of You Tonight’: Activist Media, Digital Curation Pedagogy, and the Future of Queer Archives

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Introduction

As society continues to move toward an understanding that LGBTQIA+ individuals and communities should not merely be an addendum to the historical record, so comes a demand for more content documenting unique spaces and moments within LGBTQIA+ history. For example, while some archivists have pushed for a tangible and increased emphasis on queer-inclusive histories within archival collections, such advocacy has typically reified document-based materials at the expense of other, alternative modes of documentation (McKinney 2018). Additionally, presumptions about queer culture happening exclusively within queer metropolitan spaces like New York and San Francisco reproduce what Jack Halberstam identifies as “metro-normativity” (2005, 36)—the belief that queer individuals could only be visible and thrive in urban spaces, rendering rural places and states without major metropolitan areas synonymous with queer erasure and impossibility—within LGBTQIA+-focused archives (Cloe 2020). Until recently, one such region suffering from chronic underrepresentation was the state of South Carolina, which possesses its own robust, media-rich LGBTQIA+ history. This article reflects on a still-evolving project engaged in the digital preservation and curation of queer activism in the state of South Carolina. While the article contextualizes the emergence and evolution of this collection, the article’s primary focus concerns methodological and ethical challenges latent in preserving queer media histories across both temporal and geographical moments of preservation and curation. Understanding that projects related to queer media histories and their archival iterations challenge traditional recordkeeping, the article builds upon and extends both queer archival theory and the application of archival science related to questions of archival collection, description, and access.

Further, by emphasizing that the mediated histories of LGBTQIA+ com-

munities exist at a particular intersection of archival endangerment, the article reveals how innovative and expansive methods for digital preservation and access can emerge through unique experiential contexts. To do this, this article highlights graduate and undergraduate courses as integral to simultaneously preserving and teaching queer media archives. Using two examples from experiential learning courses focused on digitally preserving and curating South Carolina queer media as a case study, the article homes in on lessons learned in documenting the queer archival record. The article concludes by identifying future directions for this project and the preservation and access of queer histories within media archives, with a particular focus on the increasing impact of state-sanctioned erasure on past and present work done by LGBTQIA+ individuals within South Carolina and beyond.

Queer Archival Theory and Practice

In her study of lesbian archives, Ann Cvetkovich (2003) reads both historical records and literary productions as sites wherein lesbian and proto-transmasculine identities existed in states of struggle and suffering. Building on this idea, Heather Love (2007) contends that the impacts of loss and cruelty on the queer archival record directly correlate to the contemporary notions of queer grief that render the queer past wholly negative. Others, like Jack Halberstam (2005), instead read the queer archive as a site of hope by looking to depictions of trans identities within both media and state records as a method for dealing with contemporary issues like anti-trans legislation in generative and intersectional ways, using the not-too-distant past as a site of pedagogical intervention rather than emotional avoidance. Additionally, examinations of queerness within archival holdings, as multiple scholars suggest, allow for refiguring otherwise essentialized notions of identities such as womanhood (Eichhorn 2013) and blackness (Snorton 2017). Moreover, media scholars such as Cait McKinney (2020) and Avery Dame-Griff (2023) assert that archival holdings produced by queer communities, such as lesbian newsletter networks or trans bulletin board systems, offer both tools and technologies ripe for replication within contemporary activist work. This particular line of scholarship has emerged in response to and works alongside archival practices related to acquiring, processing, and producing LGBTQIA+ identities within archival collections. Examining archival practice in this way extends the critical work of queer archival theory to the technical and administrative choices of archival work that historically intensified rather than alleviated representational concerns.

As Melissa Adler notes, archives' categorical and descriptive methods function to demarcate and constitute normative bodies. Adler observes that institutions like the Library of Congress throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century "reinforced psychiatric norms" through the "development and refinement of categories" in an attempt to "gain a conceptual mastery over perversion to define both desirable characteristics for citizenship and deviations" from this desired ideal (2017, 30). Operating in ways not dissimilar to the Diagnostic and Statistic Manual of Mental Disorders, which until recently identified multiple LGBTQIA+ identities as disorders (Drescher 2010), library subject headings and description practices fixat-

ed on queerness as non-normative. More broadly, the resulting practices meant that, when present, queer individuals were either conflated into broadly incoherent categories—such as “sexual minorities”—or were described with embodied identities not utilized for non-queer individuals—denoting transgender in descriptions of trans people, without also denoting cisgender in descriptions of cis people (Olson 2013, 145). Attendant to these failures, libraries and archives professionals proposed two fundamental methodological shifts aimed at reframing representation to be more explicitly inclusive.

Ellen Greenblatt (2014) argues that the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ individuals within cultural heritage institutions requires both the institutions and their staff to acknowledge the damage done by previous misrepresentations, while also attending to the reality that, in response, these same communities formed their own counter-institutional, activist spaces, many of which produced historical collections and information that affirmed queerness when others treated it as a site of abnormalcy. Accounting for queerness within contemporary archives, as a result, meant looking to community archives whose tenets and procedures already imagined new methods of archival representation. Critical examples of this work included the New York-based Lesbian Herstory Archive, which documents queer history, explicitly centring on queer and femme experiences. The Lesbian Herstory Archive uses unique subject headings and organizational standards that extend new possibilities for the documentation of gender and sexual orientation within archives (Corbman 2014). Building on the established practices of these queer-centred and community-led archival projects, queer-identifying and LGBTQIA+-allied practitioners turned toward demanding systematic changes, intent on making institutional collections adopt more inclusive archival description and cataloguing practices (Dobreski, Snow, and Moulaïson-Sandy 2022; Cifor and Rawson 2023). While these efforts were critical to surface and prioritize queer bodies within archives, enacting change also necessitated acknowledging archivists’ embodied biases, which informed how and when queerness appeared as worthy of description.

Leah DeVun and Michael Jay McClure argue that queer archival “circulation inextricably depends on bodies,” and further that those “uncategorized bodies” remain “inseparable from . . . the touch of human hands” (2014, 122). For them, the gaze of scholars and practitioners alike must make bodies discoverable and *usable* within libraries and archives. Marika Cifor (2015) reflects on her own engagement with femme embodiments when processing the personal belongings of transgender activist and sex worker Victoria Schneider. Cifor discusses finding a strand of what she believes to be Schneider’s hair within a brush, reflecting on what it means for Schneider to insert her trans femininity into the archival object—even if through a remnant—and notes that the likelihood that her hair remains there accidentally is both a tangible example of her embodiment and a stark reminder of her absence. As Cifor notes, nothing about this encounter explains how or why the hair might be there in the first place, concluding that this temporal encounter with embodiment warrants that she reflect not on the ways that she might *correctly* define Schneider’s identity within the record, but how Schneider’s affective remnants offer a reminder

that trans embodiment persists in such historical records despite systems that aim to exclude, silence, and destroy their presence.

To begin alleviating such challenges, I argue for a “body-oriented” approach to cataloguing and archival description work, which aims to name gendered ways of being through gestures and actions associated with societal constructs of gender (Wagner 2022). This approach contends that acts of dress represent a gendered way of being and suggests that archivists might describe someone as wearing “feminine clothing” instead of ascribing womanhood, trans or otherwise, to the record. Moreover, in line with Cifor’s work, I extend the body-oriented idea to the practitioner and suggest that they disclose how their own embodied identities inform their descriptive work, when it is safe to do so. A body-oriented approach provides library and archives staff an all-too-necessary reminder of the broader social challenges of cis- and heteronormative binaries and the ways in which they impact culture, while also opening up space to consider the parallel impacts such systems have on Indigenous populations, people of colour, and individuals with disabilities (Curliss, Wagner, and Marsh 2024; Antracoli et al. 2020; Brilmyer 2022). The description of queerness within archives, however, only represents one element within the larger effort of preservation and curation. The artifacts themselves often surface other biases and failures within cultural preservation initiatives—especially when those artifacts become obsolete or experience unusual amounts of physical decay.

Audiovisual Artifacts and Queer Documentation Work

Magnetic media, such as VHS tapes and cassettes, were among the most prominent forms of audiovisual documentation, archival access, and preservation during the second half of the twentieth century (Compton 2007). Magnetic media suffer from what Mike Casey (2019) calls “degralescence,” meaning that magnetic media degrade over time regardless of how well-preserved they might be, and that the technologies used to play and preserve these tapes have become obsolete and continue to decrease in quantity. Institutional and cultural neglect intensify the challenges of degralescence, as audiovisual collections remain overlooked and undervalued as archival objects. Additionally, the size and shape of most audiovisual materials prove unwieldy from a storage perspective, leading not only to the deprioritization of their preservation but, in some instances, the deaccessioning and destruction of content. Rich cultural histories, queer or otherwise, have been thrown in university dumpsters. While magnetic media prove particularly volatile within this archival landscape, the emergence of new methods of recording and documenting, and the myriad corresponding technologies these different media formats rely on, appear to repeat such preservation failures as even well-meaning archives fail to identify necessary preservation practices in a timely and proactive manner. For instance, similar challenges have emerged around preserving broadcast television formats, disc-based materials, and born-digital video (Bratslavsky and Peterson 2025; Weaver and Blewer 2023; Albuquerque 2019).

This loss of magnetic media matters especially for LGBTQIA+ communities. As both Alexandra Juhasz (2006) and Lucas Hilderbrand (2006) have shown,

the use of portable, magnetic media was integral for documenting and archiving the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Moreover, scholars within both media studies and archival theory suggest that objects and their utilization offer ways of understanding the cultural contexts of queer activist work and embodiment (McKinney 2018; Lee 2020). This affective value results in a desire for a haptic and tactile relationship with queer historical artifacts that often leads queer archives to prioritize use over preservation, even at the threat of destruction (Wagner 2018; Gilmore 2023). Nonetheless, endeavours to digitally preserve queer media histories remain a site of underexplored practice; digital curation and archives classrooms offer one such site of exploration.

Experiential Learning and Inclusive Histories

Experiential learning can allow students to work within community-oriented contexts (Speck and Hoppe 2004). For graduate students—especially those pursuing professional degrees like a Master’s in Library and Information Sciences (MLIS)—experiential learning can help scaffold learning objectives and outcomes important to, but not necessarily required of, their profession. Experiential learning is about gaining institutional knowledge or learning the daily tasks of a profession, and serves to fill in necessary and critical gaps not addressed through coursework.

Given that MLIS degrees, as well as undergraduate information science degrees, already prepare students for the practical elements of librarianship and information work, including archival science, experiential learning affords students a chance to scale tools and technologies for information work to unique needs and settings. For example, focusing on diversity within experiential learning work makes experiential learning one of the most efficient tools that LIS programs can utilize to prepare students for the needs of their communities, while also helping them understand that inclusion is both an issue of representational importance and a practice requiring meaningful engagement and collaboration with a community and its desires (Wagner and Keeling 2019). Experiential learning can help students see historically marginalized communities and their archival records as richly complex rather than absent or poorly configured. While students could read about chronic failures to practice inclusive description within archival records, having them confront these issues directly within the constraints of a pre-existing archival database reveals how these ethics are negotiated with infrastructural limitations and disparate understandings about what queer inclusivity means. Of course, models of service learning focused on aiding minoritized populations run the real risk of providing an extractive experience that fails to sustain meaningful connections with the community and can produce tenuous relationships between students and the populations with which they work (Valiente-Riedel, Anderson, and Banki 2022; Fenlon et al. 2021). Archival preservation and digital curation coursework, when applied to a specific community and its needs, allow questions of best practices to be complicated and reoriented, whether it be shifting naming conventions to challenge patriarchal logics for community archives focused on feminist activist work or prioritizing accessible digital files over archival preservation copies in digital curation work while working remotely during COVID-19 (Wagner, Martell, and Oltmann 2024; Post

and Hof-Mahoney 2022). Given the unique complexities latent within documenting and making visible queer histories, these types of reflective pedagogies offer the chance to identify chronic problems within both archival praxis and ethics, many of which emerged within our work to archive and preserve the queer media histories of South Carolina.

The LGBTQ Columbia History Project and Media Collections

The preservation of queer media histories within South Carolina emerged as the direct result of a grant-funded project titled the LGBTQ Columbia History Project, an “interactive project” that “documents the often unseen and untold stories of [the] LGBTQ+ community through the creation and dissemination of oral histories, historic site interpretation, and archival collection” (Historic Columbia 2023). The project brought together a collection of disparate yet overlapping endeavours conducted by the University of South Carolina and the Queer Cola Oral History and Digital Archive Project with the shared goal of documenting LGBTQIA+ history within the city of Columbia, South Carolina (Wagner and Whitfield 2019). At the onset, the University of South Carolina followed collection endeavours, much like other LGBTQIA+-focused institutional collections, which centred on HIV/AIDS activism and queer figures associated with the university itself. In response, the Queer Cola Oral History and Digital Archive Project engaged with absences identified within archival representation and documentation, highlighting contemporary ephemeral activist materials—such as posters protesting the “bathroom bill,” S. 1203—and voices absent from previous oral history work, including two-spirit individuals and trans people of colour (Gill-Peterson 2013; Wagner and Whitfield 2019). Historic Columbia, a local nonprofit focused on historical preservation within the city, established the LGBTQ Columbia History Project to provide staffing, support, and digital infrastructure to expand access to these ongoing projects. Notable materials within the audiovisual artifacts include 1980s drag show performances at gay bars within and around the city of Columbia, home video recordings and news coverage of South Carolina Pride Parades throughout the 1990s, and footage of the establishment of the first LGBTQ Community Center in the state of South Carolina in 1990. While only a sliver of the more extensive holdings, these materials provide tangible evidence of often underexamined sites of queer history. Upon realizing their value, the LGBTQ Columbia History Project endeavoured to find viable methods to digitally preserve the materials in an expedient, sustainable, and sufficiently archival fashion. This discovery led to the establishment of one of two experiential learning courses centred on the digital preservation and curation of these materials.

First Case Study: MLIS Course on Archiving LGBTQIA+ A/V Materials

Historic Columbia worked with the University of South Carolina’s College of Arts and Sciences to support the digital preservation of at-risk media across institutional and community archives. This support included the administrative and technical costs of offering an MLIS course to preserve and document the identified media digitally, which resulted in an eight-week intensive experiential learning course I taught

in summer 2021, “Archiving LGBTQIA+ A/V Materials.” The course enrolled three graduate students pursuing their MLIS at the University of South Carolina, two with interests in pursuing archives-related work and one pursuing school librarianship, who saw the course as an opportunity to attain the skills necessary to digitally migrate her library’s vast audiovisual collections. The students were given boxes containing the following formats and materials: 30 VHS tapes, 50 DVDs and music CDs, and over 100 CD-Rs storing organizational documents, fliers, software, and additional moving-image materials, in addition to more obscure formats like Beta-max tapes, MiniDV cassettes, and some born-digital materials. Since the LGBTQ Columbia History Project was an ongoing initiative, more materials also emerged during the course.

The course followed the structure of similar experiential learning courses by identifying community needs and potential service-related skills students might offer (Bringle and Hatcher 1996). The students engaged in biweekly reflections—a typical assessment within experiential learning courses—to identify the technical challenges associated with their digitization efforts as well as critical and ethical questions that arose from documenting the materials to be digitized (Molee et al. 2011). The course description noted that students had the opportunity to “engage in a digital archiving project” focused on “LGBTQIA+ activism in South Carolina” and that their work would address “the needs of multiple stakeholders (donors, institutional archives, and historical societies) to digitize and prepare AV materials for online access.” The learning objectives outlined that students would be able to “display a working knowledge of the metadata and taxonomies for audiovisual content,” “document the process for digitizing physical documents,” and “reflect on the challenges and acceptable practices of queer community archives.”

Additionally, given the emphasis on LGBTQIA+ media history and archival labour, the course included multiple theoretical readings on queer activism and queer archival theory, some of which are cited above. I provided the students with individual technical training, and they scheduled lab times to digitize the VHS tapes and transfer disc-based media to cloud-based and external hard drives following the concept of “lots of copies keep stuff safe” (LOCKSS) within digital preservation work (Reich and Rosenthal 2000). LOCKSS contends that, due to the intersecting threats of data loss, hardware failure, and institutional turnover, saving materials in multiple physical and digital storage formats across multiple locations offers greater redundancy and probability that at least one of those copies can be accessed in the future. Additionally, and especially valuable to the students learning this work, LOCKSS helps distribute preservation obligations across individuals and organizations, making digital preservation work collaborative rather than isolated. Given COVID-19 restrictions, students worked individually and communicated remotely, creating collaborative documentation for a digital preservation workflow and project plan. By the conclusion of the summer, the students had digitized 20 VHS tapes and prepared 30 DVDs and CDs for digital ingestion. These numbers reflect the COVID-based restrictions on in-person meetings, the identification of decayed media or duplicate copies, and the avoidance of digitizing materials under explicit copyright protection,

such as documentaries recorded from television. Figure 1 represents a sample section of metadata created for the digitized materials, while Figure 2 represents a sample of digitized footage from a tape titled “3rd Miss Altered Affairs Kalendar Girls 1992.”

File Name	Metadata Contributor	Title	Creator	Subjects	Content Description	Contributing Institution
1999 SC G&L Pride Newsclips	TAT	1999 SC G&L Pride Newsclips		Gay Pride Celebration 1999; News coverage, Columbia, SC	News coverage of 4-day 10th anniversary Gay Pride celebration weekend WIS TV, 10 WOLO 25 WACH (Fox) 57 Description of Gay Pride events being held in Columbia, SC Saturday June 12, 1999	the University of South Carolina
AIDS Quilt @ Coliseum October 8, 1995	TAT	AIDS Quilt @ Coliseum October 8, 1995		AIDS; Names Project: Memorial Quilts;Columbia, SC	Video of quilts displayed at the Coliseum, located on the the University of South Carolina campus as part of the Names Project memorial quilt October 8, 1995.	the University of South Carolina
1995 SC Pride Vigil at Riverfront Park Part 1	TAT	1995 SC Pride Vigil at Riverfront Park Part 1		Gay Pride	4/9/1995 Personal statements and reflections of weekend by attendees; including musical tribute to Harriet Hancock of Columbia, SC; moment of remembrance for victims of AIDS, statement of support from member of clergy	the University of South Carolina
1995 SC Pride Vigil at Riverfront Park Part 2	TAT	1995 SC Pride Vigil at Riverfront Park Part 2		Gay Pride	4/9/1995 Candlelight vigil with music	the University of South Carolina

Figure 1: Metadata created by students within the Archiving LGBTQIA+ A/V Materials course.



Figure 2: Screenshot of digitized footage from the Archiving LGBTQIA+ A/V Materials course.

While the Archiving LGBTQIA+ A/V Materials course graciously benefited from financial support to pursue digital preservation, this support only covered the acquisition of basic hardware and digitization software, along with administrative overhead. Beyond access to consumer-grade technologies, the students had to rely on innovative and often cost-effective solutions for digitization. For example, while not an industry or archival standard for digitization work, the VHS tapes were transferred by connecting a proprietary VidBox Video Conversion system to an on-loan Apple desktop computer paired with a VCR from my previous audiovisual archiving work. In a more professional setup, these students might have dedicated VCRs for preservation alongside dedicated computers, hard drives, and cloud storage. By allowing students to use a shared VidBox software suite, they could engage in digital

preservation work that was otherwise cost-prohibitive. The students also utilized a series of open-source tools to view and digitize both magnetic media-based and disc-based materials. Tools like Audacity helped transfer video and audio files from discs, while software like VLC became critical in allowing students to view transferred files in formats not native to MacOS or review files on their own operating systems, which ranged across both Windows and MacOS.

While the three students were generally knowledgeable of the physical formats they were working with, their awareness of open-source software remained limited. For instance, the students required training in identifying the file structures of a DVD ripped from Audacity, which decoupled the audio, image, and text files. Surprisingly, I also needed to remind them of the importance of rewinding a VHS tape before beginning the digitization process. Moreover, since many of these students were engaging in audiovisual digitization for the first time, mistakes and poor transfers inevitably occurred. While it would have been ideal to re-digitize or edit these files, the size of the class and the length of many videos meant that videos often had one chance to be digitized. In some instances, students transferred videos with hour-plus runtimes unattended, resulting in blue screens or irrelevant footage at the end of a video. These excesses were seen as acceptable since the content was nonetheless digitized, creating a digital surrogate that previously did not exist. In line with other community-based digital archiving efforts, the course adopted “good enough” practices rather than best practices. Beyond learning about these technical aspects, the class also helped challenge the students’ preconceived notions about where and how queer history emerged within the United States.

While the students within the course expressed support for LGBTQIA+ community members, all were genuinely surprised at encountering examples of queer visibility within the state of South Carolina from the 1980s onward. While no members of the course disclosed being members of the LGBTQIA+ community themselves, one did imagine how she might use the materials as teaching tools for her openly queer students at the school where she served as librarian. While this is partly because the footage represents otherwise unaccounted-for moments within the queer history of South Carolina, it also destabilized the students’ metronormative presumptions that active queer communities were centred around large cities and urban areas and did not exist within the American South (Halberstam 2005). The impact of this realization was two-fold. It provided the students with new archival objects to make the case that queerness, in all its forms, was hardly a new phenomenon, as well as new ways of imagining support for and advocacy on behalf of queer individuals. Within the context of a state like South Carolina, which for the past few decades has served as a testing ground for state-level as well as national anti-LGBTQIA+ legislation (Morris 2018), the students saw this archival trove of counterevidence of resistance as a vital resource. The discovery of this rich evidence of queer activism within the state also led the students to reconsider where and how they look for similar communities in contemporary contexts. Moreover, the students drew wide-ranging conclusions from the general inaccessibility of documentation of queer history to argue for the likelihood that communities of colour and undocu-

mented communities, among others, similarly suffer from having their rich media histories chronically under-documented.

Though this finding could easily be taken as an invitation for archivists to go out and *find* community stories, reifying deficit models of extractive community knowledge acquisition, the students instead explicitly discussed wanting to take what they had learned and provide these tools *to* historically marginalized and under-documented groups to aid them in preserving and curating their own histories. This critical distinction follows a series of LIS-driven arguments for tool and resource provision to groups doing community-based information work by yielding discursive and structural control back to communities (Gibson and Martin 2019; Floegel and Costello 2019; Kitzie et al. 2022). By digitizing and placing in conversation multiple media artifacts about queer activism in South Carolina, the students increased visibility of the robust documentary work of South Carolina-based LGBTQIA+ individuals, revealing the work these communities had undertaken to ensure the preservation of their stories.

Perhaps one of the most startling challenges was the myriad formats documenting the lives of queer South Carolinians. While VHS tapes and floppy disks were expected and plentiful within the holdings, Betamax tapes and Zip drives proved more surprising and unusual. While the project did have funding to pursue digitization, Historic Columbia and I decided that obtaining a Betamax player to digitize just two tapes with less than thirty seconds of content was untenable and prohibitive. Additionally, while finding hardware to transfer files from a 3½-inch floppy disk was easy, other less common disk formats were similarly avoided. This choice, crucially, was not one the class was in a position to make itself, and reflects that even community-led work remains beholden to some degree of stakeholder support. Ultimately, while the class provided a site to test new possibilities for digitization work, it failed to alleviate the challenges of broad format support found within institutional archives (Wagner and Keeling 2019).



Figure 3: Digitized WIS-TV footage from the graduate course.

While the students accepted that they would not be able to digitally preserve every kind of audiovisual artifact, the students made deliberate choices to digitize some materials that were still protected by copyright. Specifically, the students digitized a news story from local news station WIS-TV focused on the 1990 South Carolina Pride Parade, which included interviews with individuals discussing what informed their decisions to attend the event publicly (see Figure 3). Though the students were careful not to make the video publicly available, we extensively discussed the likelihood that WIS-TV no longer held this footage. Evoking Verne Harris' (2002) idea of the "archival sliver," wherein institutional archives intentionally or unintentionally destroy materials about marginalized communities, we attempted in good faith to learn whether this material was preserved elsewhere by contacting the archive that holds almost the entirety of WIS-TV's extant media archives, but we were unsuccessful. While this could have been because of intentional destruction, it is more likely that WIS-TV reused their tapes and did not retain a preservation copy, a common practice that has caused the loss of countless television materials and the public media histories they represent—perhaps most infamously the BBC's myriad lost episodes of *Doctor Who* (Bratslavsky and Peterson 2025; Braithwaite 2021). Because of this common practice of media reuse, much public media has only been preserved thanks to personal recordings, as evocatively explored in Matt Wolf's 2019 documentary *Recorder: The Marion Stokes Project*. Similar records, such as the ones found within the LGBTQ Columbia History Project holdings, emphasize the importance not only of individual and communal queer media preservation, but also counter-institutional documentation. This realization only further evidenced the cohesion and care of the South Carolina LGBTQIA+ community's community information spaces and activist work. These home recordings of 1990s news footage of South Carolina pride parades and home video documentation of 1980s queer organizing meetings suggest a visual record of LGBTQIA+ activism far richer than previously imagined (Sullivan 2022).

Second Case Study: Undergraduate Information Science Course on Digital Curation

Following the Archiving LGBTQIA+ A/V Materials course, I completed my PhD and moved into a position at the University of Maryland (UMD), where I deployed the digital files from the MLIS course into a new experiential learning course for undergraduate students pursuing their bachelor's degrees in Information Science. The course, "Introduction to Digital Curation," as the course description noted, offered students the chance to "explore various dimensions and contexts for digital curation" with an emphasis on "all activities involving the management, representation, and preservation of both born-digital and digitized information." This course included less explicit discussions of queer theory and archives and instead treated the digitized videos as a case study of a potential collection of complex digital objects a practitioner might encounter in their day-to-day work. The course was taught over sixteen weeks during the Fall 2022 semester and enrolled 40 students within UMD's information science undergraduate program. The career interests of students ranged from data

analytics to cybersecurity. Very few students had experience with digital curation or critical engagement with storing, sharing, and using their own digital files.

Within the course, students received a folder of digitized VHS tapes and DVDs along with documentation from the previous MLIS course. Given the size of the course, sub-groups emerged with focuses on documentation and preservation, data definitions, data ingestion, database design, and data re/use. Documentation and preservation students worked on standardizing file formats across the digitized materials and created tools for checking the quality of the digital files over time. The data definitions team focused on identifying relevant metadata fields for the digital objects, creating definitions for the metadata fields, and creating a workflow for creating metadata records. The data ingestion team established standards of practice for editing and converting files in preparation for ingestion into a database aimed at functioning like a video-streaming platform. Ingestion work included editing out dead time on video files, compressing any notably large files that experienced issues when attempting to stream them, and identifying ethical methods for removing any non-consensually recorded footage—such as home videos shot in a gay bar—or potentially copyrighted material—such as the WIS-TV news story—from a video. From the ground up, the database design team created a wireframe for a database that allowed users to both view and potentially download the videos for use. The database design team also built scaffolding into their database wireframe, allowing only approved users—with database-specific usernames and passwords—to view and download videos. Finally, the data re/use team worked on identifying user experience needs for the database, which included establishing potential user types for the database and creating user personas. Examples of user personas included LGBTQIA+ historians as well as queer youth who might use the materials to explore their still-evolving queer identity. Figure 4 represents example metadata fields from the data definitions team, while Figure 5 shows the database layout, including digital objects and their requisite metadata fields.

I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R
Captions (y/n) - IN DATABASE	Source IN DATABASE	Level of bias (low, medium, high) IN DATABASE	File type MP4 IN DATABASE	Suggested Use (Research, Quotes, Fun) IN DATABASE	LGBTQ Language Tags (standardized drop down list) DOES NOT HAVE TO ACTUALLY INCLUDE THE "#" SYMBOL IN DATABASE	Keywords IN DATABASE	Split Timestamps NOT IN FINAL DATABASE	Content Tagging IN DATABASE	Checksums NOT IN DATABASE
Yes	Someone holding a camera, new stations, interviews	Medium	MP4	Quotes	#LGBTQ, #lesbian	Pride march, fundraiser		Alcohol	10c45886f57 aacae57546c 16bd70b7b
Yes	Someone holding a camera, new stations, interviews	Medium	MP4	Quotes	#LGBTQ, #lesbian	Pride march, fundraiser			959a43a96ee 9318fe99793 37f56c5b91
Yes	Someone holding a camera, new stations, interviews	Medium	MP4	Quotes	#LGBTQ, #lesbian	Pride march, fundraiser	1:41:51 / 1:55:13		b96c8a94c02 fa17e9a798f5 e85f0f5be
	Camera	Medium	MP4	Research, Historical	#queercommunity #gay #lesbian		None	None?	
Yes	Georgia State University Library	Low	MP4	Fun	#pride #gay #lesbian #pride	Parade	1:08:25	None?	8ad6c5f225c 530220e95b7 25801e853f

Figure 4: Database-unique definitions created by undergraduate information science students based on digital files from the LGBTQIA+ A/V Archives course.

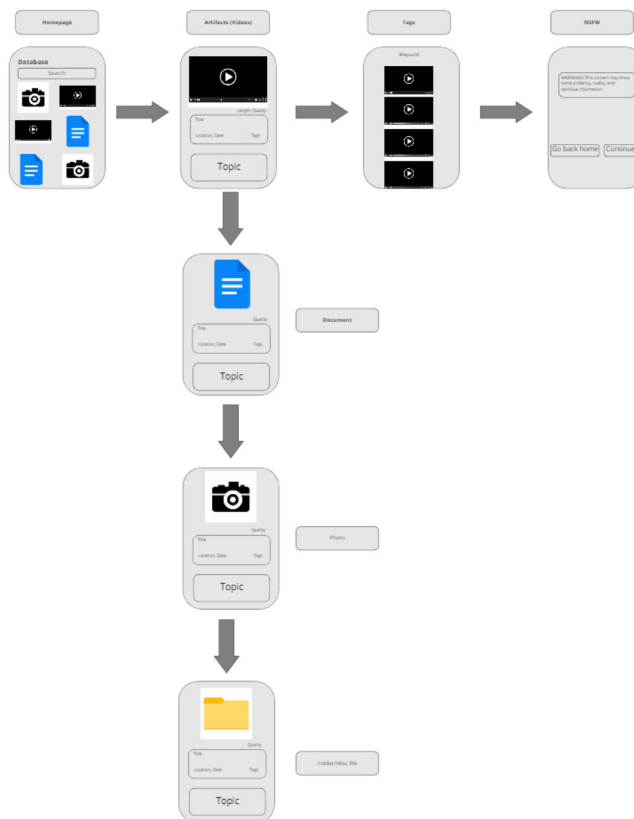


Figure 5: Sample database layout designed by undergraduate students, which addresses the multiple types of digital objects in the LGBTQ Columbia History Project.

When the project moved to UMD, the undergraduate students treated documentary evidence of queer activism, candidly speaking, as unimpressive. When pushed on their lack of surprise, many disclosed that they were either themselves LGBTQIA+ or that they had personally known or encountered queer individuals in their daily lives both socially and culturally. Additionally, UMD is located within the District of Columbia/Maryland/Virginia (DMV) region, which is far more metropolitan and has a more queer-inclusive reputation than South Carolina. Indeed, UMD consistently ranks as one of the most LGBTQIA+-inclusive campuses nationwide (Campus Pride Index 2023). For this set of students, regularly seeing queer people within their own daily lives led them to presume that queer people were similarly visible throughout the rest of the country. We were careful to avoid reproducing the ideas of metronormativity by acknowledging that these materials represented a unique geographic location, and we allowed this knowledge to dictate considerations around archival practice. An archive in Maryland, for instance, might approach access and visibility by imagining the value of this footage of LGBTQIA+

South Carolinians as universal—but by accounting for anti-queer sentiment and legislation within the state, we considered how these materials could be used as tools for harm as much as for liberation. Once students understood the varied experiences and expressions of queer visibility across different geographic locations, this helped challenge potentially implicit presumptions about where and how queerness emerges and expresses itself. This is not to say that these students could not imagine the existence of queer communities within the American South, but that their notions of queer visibility mapped onto what queerness looked like in more metropolitan contexts, replete with their own political and cultural privileges.

While the students found the presence and representation of queer communities within media hardly unusual, the aesthetics and formats of the digitized materials proved confounding. Since the students understood the historical value of the footage, they instead fixated on the aesthetics of the digital files, revealing how a group of students whose experience with analogue media was minimal at best used, engaged with, and approached these digitized materials. Students observed that the videos were of “poor quality,” assuming they were poor digital transfers. This confusion required me to explain to students that this was what VHS tapes looked like. The students took to referring to the videos as having a “deep fried meme” aesthetic, a term often used to describe a meme whose repeated distribution and reediting has led it to suffer from visible compression and degradation (Trillò, Hallinan, and Shifman 2022).

While many students were familiar with different file formats for text-based documents, engaging with media-based file formats resulted in unanticipated hurdles. Students noted that they needed more experience interacting with video and audio files outside the graphical user interfaces of streaming services such as Netflix or Spotify. During a class discussion on file formats at the onset of the course, not one of the 40 students recognized that MP3 was a digital audio format. As such, students across the various groups often needed help with opening the files once removed from Google Drive, as they assumed that the files were corrupted rather than incompatible with their operating system and software. Fortunately, some students in the class knew about tools like VLC Media Player and suggested it as a resource for viewing and listening to the files.

Given the public support for queer communities at UMD, the students in the course assumed that sharing positive images of LGBTQIA+ individuals—regardless of their location—was a universally positive and ethically uncomplicated practice, resulting in conversations about digital curation practices and the impact of sharing pre-internet media in a hypermediated landscape. Evocative of Elizabeth Groeneveld’s (2018) discussion of the ethical concerns around digitizing the lesbian pornography newsletter *On Our Backs*, making analogue queer materials digitally accessible not only highlights tensions around privacy and consent, but further lays bare how digital access to materials discursively marked as “adult” result in state-to-state attempts to block access and erase materials. This conversation required the class to step outside of the otherwise neutral presumptions of digital curation work and examine the impact such technologies and access might have on historically margin-

alized populations as well as, in the case of LGBTQIA+ individuals, the still-ongoing discrimination and tangible social and legal ramifications they might be subject to. The conversation highlighted two key points.

First, when it comes to documenting queer history and its mediated representations, the notion of public space remains tenuous. Since spaces like a pride parade and a gay bar are *technically* public, most institutions argue that this circumvents participants' rights to privacy. However, historically, entering either space came with significant risk to individuals, especially prior to the shift toward LGBTQIA+ equality in the 2000s (as signalled by the achievement of marriage equality). A person entering such a space did so with a presumption of safety and likely did not imagine footage of them would appear online. Since the students had no method to seek retroactive consent from people who appeared in the footage, their response was to deprioritize videos with large groups of individuals for digital ingestion. The students also developed a method to redact footage should an individual request that they do so, while identifying tools and techniques for blurring individual faces as needed.

Second, this particular challenge made students aware that access to and teaching about queer history within the United States remain contested topics. The very same students who were openly supportive of and affirming toward queer communities lacked an in-depth awareness of both prior and ongoing anti-LGBTQIA+ legislative efforts in states like Texas and Florida and the potential for such legislation to take effect in states like South Carolina. This backdrop meant that even a recording of an openly gay man talking to a University of South Carolina social work class about his experiences being queer in the early 2000s became a site of curatorial contention (see Figure 6). While the students were aware that the subject had consented to having the video used as the project saw fit, we still discussed how such consent might not have accounted for how the video might circulate beyond the project and how shifts in state legislation might make its availability, even for educational purposes, illegal. Realizing that this incredibly cautionary approach might result in being unable to upload any videos whatsoever, the students shifted toward thinking about tools and processes to control who has access to the content, not unlike creating a patron account for scholars and researchers hoping to use archival reading rooms. While not an ideal solution, it helped to create access methods and aided in identifying the intent of the database users to weed out anti-queer malevolence. Moreover, this emphasis on restricted access, despite ongoing perceptions of universal access to all digital media, echoes Julia Gilmore's (2023) observation that efforts to preserve minority media histories digitally should push us to rethink the ethics of instant and unfettered access, especially as these communities themselves face continued barriers to accessing their own institutionally preserved histories. This implementation of procedures to curate, and sometimes limit, access surfaced additional methodological questions around the digital curation of media, ones whose inquiries highlighted both universal challenges to digital curation as well as uniquely queer challenges.

Students invested in queer allyship and students who themselves identified as queer in some capacity often had differing opinions about the most appropriate methodological approaches. While many students initially argued that they could

identify individuals' gender based on what they looked like within the footage, or deduce sexual orientations based on the video file's name, a handful of students noted that gender and sexuality, because of their socially constructed nature, were impossible to name without explicit acts of disclosure. For example, some videos were initially titled things like "Gay and Lesbian Awards Dinner," and students quickly assumed that all in attendance were either gay or lesbian, without necessarily considering the presence of allies or even people with other sexual orientations across the LGBTQIA+ spectrum. Students, in response, identified and adopted alternative methods for describing apparently queer embodiments that named gendered potentialities—"a person wearing feminine clothing" instead of "a woman"—rather than explicitly ascribing an unknown gender identity or sexual orientation, following the "body-oriented" approach to describing identity within archival records I discussed earlier (Wagner 2022). Since the materials in the collection ranged from the late 1980s to the early 2000s, students encountered a range of self-imposed LGBTQIA+ terminology within the materials, some of which challenged their perceptions of appropriate, queer-inclusive language. Specifically, some records included historical, outdated terms for transgender individuals as well as reclamatory uses of historically anti-queer slurs, which led students to inquire about how best to acknowledge such language while being aware of its potentially negative impact on contemporary users of the database. For instance, some descriptions included the term "transsexual," reflecting the word's use in the video itself and acknowledging how individuals were referring to themselves or their community at the time. As a result, the database was designed so that users could access additional contentious or problematic terms and descriptions only upon creating a user account and requesting such access. Moreover, the data definitions group, ultimately responsible for naming choices across the records, worked with the database design team to implement an in-database button that would direct users to a form to provide feedback on terminology they felt was inappropriate or needed correcting. This ability to alter descriptions and representation to attend to contemporary uses mirrored another concern among the students about footage that included nudity and potentially adult themes.

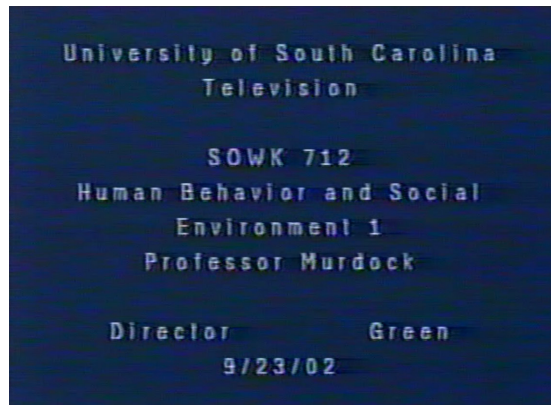


Figure 6: Title card of LGBTQ Columbia History Project video whose contents included explicit consent to be shared online.

Imagining that users for the database might include children, and acknowledging that the database might eventually become part of the public-facing LGBTQ Columbia History Project, students voiced concerns about footage that included either nudity, cursing, or depictions of alcohol consumption. The students' immediate response was to edit out any potentially adult materials. This prompted a discussion around the historic and ongoing impacts of content moderation and censorship related to queer digital communities. In particular, the data ingestion group questioned what it meant to protect users from controversial materials that happened to include LGBTQIA+ individuals. Further dialogue teased apart connotations between protecting vulnerable users such as children from seeing adult themes as a legitimate concern and implicit biases that presumed all queer content to be nonnormative and, therefore, unsuitable for children. Based on the work of Avery Dame-Griff (2017) and Oliver L. Haimson et al. (2021), ultimately, the class identified the disconcerting realities of over-moderating queerness as inherently pornographic and, yet again, imagined ways to curate the materials for contextual use instead of adopting a policy of blanket inaccessibility. As a result, the data definition group flagged potentially controversial or triggering materials and worked with the database design group to implement a content warning system for those media. This approach helped the data ingestion group to clarify their video editing standards to explicitly state that removing blue screens from the beginning and end of a video, along with copyrighted materials, remained within the scope of their work, while the non-requested removal of an individual or their activities became a curatorial overstep.

Experiential Learning, Mediated Activism, and the Future of Digital Queer Archives

The sociopolitical backdrop of resurging anti-queer sentiments meant that releasing these digital objects to the public might have done a disservice to the queer communities presented within the preserved media. Alternative approaches to our project could have included creating a sandbox database for the communities in question and training them in adding to, reusing, and making this digitized history sustainable, so that they themselves could raise awareness about the contemporary needs of LGBTQIA+ South Carolinians. While anti-queer discrimination is decidedly different from the experiences of systemic racism, reframing the project toward contemporary community needs would ensure that access to digital objects remains affirming and of value to those represented within the materials. This approach would support the findings of Fenlon et al. (2021) in their exploration of how Black communities impacted by the systemic racism of land grant universities sustain community beyond the mere creation of digital history projects by providing those communities with the means to use the digital materials for their own educational and fundraising purposes.

The project's findings reaffirm that adapting to community needs is more important than following any best practices within archives and digital curation work. A person's acceptance of visibility within semi-public spaces and their consent to be recorded do not necessarily translate to new contexts when materials are

remediated online. While making materials accessible and usable tends to be the preferred practice of archivists and information professionals, the reality that it remains uncertain how a queer individual will be perceived within different contexts and spaces necessitates caution and reassurances around consent. The “failure” to be visible might speak to agentic choices by queer individuals to remain out of sight, and their absence in archival holdings, institutional or otherwise, may be intentional. As Halberstam asserts, “failure” often reveals more about the limitations of institutions and their infrastructure than it does about those whom failure betrays or alienates. In their refusal to engage in the cisheteronormative logics of reproduction, queer people intentionally fail to reproduce, in the same way that they may intentionally fail to be documented. Refusing to see such failure as a defect, Halberstam contends that examining what arises from failure can in fact be generative and allows us to “potentially unlock new modes of knowing” (2011, 63).

While practitioners may often consider the ethical implications of their work, they may only sometimes reflect on how their own unique embodied experiences impact their choices. Having archivists acknowledge their positionality remains an area of contestation, especially as debates around the role of neutrality in curating information continue (Scott and Saunders 2021). By identifying their own biases, archivists might develop more careful and considered archival records, which would benefit users of all identities and backgrounds (Cooke and Kitzie 2021; Curliss, Wagner, and Marsh 2024). Furthermore, admitting the limitations of their own perspectives and experiences may make archivists more likely to reach out and work with the specific communities represented to ensure careful, correct, and community-centred curation. This reflection invites archivists, especially of community-produced artifacts, to curate *in conversation with* rather than *on behalf of* the community. While the curatorial strategies encountered and developed throughout the two courses described here hardly replace having meaningful community buy-in, they may allow practitioners to converse with community members and leaders who might help obtain retroactive consent for making footage available or help provide the most appropriate terminology for individuals represented within the collections. Such work engages in a more intentional archival process, or what Kimberly Christen and Jane Anderson (2019) identify as slow archives work. Echoing Christen and Anderson’s idea, LGBTQIA+ materials may be better served by taking the time to inclusively and ethically curate fewer records instead of producing many records at scale, quickly, and without pausing to reflect or check in with those represented within the materials. This community-led approach also builds on praxis-led ethics of care, such as those informed by feminist epistemologies (Caswell and Cifor 2016).

While the future of the LGBTQ Columbia History Project rests mainly on the assurance of sustainability enacted by the multiple individuals, organizations, and monetary support systems involved, the project invites and encourages possible future directions. For example, while the project emphasized the geographic boundaries of the city of Columbia, the materials handled by the students revealed a far broader regional network of LGBTQIA+ activism. Projects aiming to digitize and preserve queer history within a smaller geographic area might find better support

through regional efforts. Anecdotally speaking, many of the members working across the LGBTQ Columbia History Project were unaware of a similar project being developed just two hours away in Charleston, South Carolina, making clear that localized digital history work, without outward-facing goals, often remains hyperlocal.

Additional future work related to this project and other queer-focused media archives might also try to establish shared methods and an ethics regarding procedures for removing non-consenting individuals from historical images and videos. Efforts to make digital mediations of marginalized groups available without consideration for their consent can endanger rather than support inclusive endeavours, and impacts not only queer communities but also Indigenous communities, communities of colour, religious minorities, and otherwise colonized populations (Ghaddar 2016; Rév 2020). Given that this work also relates to the challenges of describing historically evolving LGBTQIA+ identities, organizations and institutions might build consortia focused on inclusive metadata and curation practices, sharing best practices and distributing the labour of seeking retroactive consent or improving terminological definitions. Though such consortia remain limited, the Trans Metadata Collective or the Digital Transgender Archive might offer models and guidance for this kind of work (Watson et al. 2023; Brown 2020).

Finally, since this project laid bare the limitations of even meaningfully supported digital curation projects, especially around preserving more challenging audiovisual formats, the intersections of obscure and obsolete media formats with LGBTQIA+ history warrants further examination. For example, a vast amount of AIDS activism is documented on video—digitizing and preserving this obsolete media while also attending to the unique curatorial challenges related to queer embodiment could prove a generative shift in focus in queer archival work (Juhász 2006; Wagner 2018). Some of this work may necessitate explicit buy-in from institutional holdings. However, this could also include extensions of experiential learning projects across MLIS- and public history-adjacent courses, wherein the production of digital queer media histories provides students with otherwise non-existent opportunities to learn how to scale practices to singular course projects or expand them to program-level initiatives that might evolve into regional or national endeavours.

Conclusion

This article offers a reflective analysis of my work related to the ongoing preservation of queer activism within the state of South Carolina. In emphasizing the historiographic and technical challenges latent across care-driven queer archival work, I examined the possibilities and limitations of using experiential learning as a site to radically reimagine digital preservation work. Given that the archival labour of LGBTQIA+ communities is often purposefully self-initiated and self-curated, and emerges through extra-institutional means, what have historically served as best practices for community digital history work often fall short for these communities, especially when many community members still experience and navigate anti-queer hostilities in their daily lives. In this current historical moment, these anti-queer hostilities, alongside the erasure of queer histories, seem to be intensifying rather

than receding. Tangible examples of the federal Republican administration removing contested material related to queer communities and their health from government websites show that relying on institutions to document LGBTQIA+ history remains risky, if not outright dangerous (Sarnoff et al. 2025). Alternative approaches to preserving queer history, outside of the shifting control of political ideologies, are plenty—this article has offered one such potential site of practice. By documenting the lessons learned from digitally preserving audiovisual materials documenting South Carolinian LGBTQIA+ history through various types of digital preservation and curation coursework, this article offers a modest set of pedagogical practices, ethical approaches, and technological strategies to iterate slow-moving albeit effective ways of increasing the digital memory of LGBTQIA+ communities.

The project further revealed that the movement of queer historical artifacts across geographic lines failed to map out in equal ways. As students worked on materials from a state they did not possess intimate knowledge about, they projected their own metronormative notions about queer culture, politics, and visibility onto that location. As a result, efforts to make these collections accessible clashed with the ethics of visibility, which was presumed to be a universal good rather than a deeply localized issue. While it might seem an exaggeration, working with these unique queer archival materials forced students to despatialize and detemporalize their presumptions about LGBTQIA+ history. While this careful work sometimes fails to produce the instant accessibility and visibility we have grown accustomed to, this is not due to a failure of the students on this project, nor is it due to an inability of LGBTQIA+ persons to produce meaningful artifacts of their existence; these failures, as Halberstam (2011) suggests, revealed how larger sociotechnical forces make the preservation of LGBTQIA+ culture and history a particularly challenging endeavour. The digital archives of queer people, both within South Carolina and beyond, wait patiently for a society that can acknowledge their pasts as real and their futures as a possibility.

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