Re-thinking archiving for increased diversity

Insights from a co-design project with museum professionals and refugees

Elisabet Nilsson, Sofie Marie Ottsen Hansen

Abstract

The design research project Co-archiving Refugee Documentation is based on a collaboration with museum professionals and refugees. The overall aim of the project is to explore and develop collaborative (co-)archiving practices involving underrepresented voices in generating materials for the public archives and museum collections. The underlying assumption is that inviting more people to contribute to the public archives would result in a more diverse and representative record of human existence.

A co-design process involving museum professionals and refugees resulted in a design concept for increasing the participation in archives referred to as the Co-archiving Toolbox. The toolbox is designed for archivists and museum professionals to use when collecting material in the field. It is meant to be administered by a public institution (a museum or an archive), left in the field for a period of two weeks, and used by the people who are being documented, that is, the 'subjects' of the archive. By applying the archiving practices included in the toolbox, they are invited to document their life situations with limited interference from the institution.

The focus of this paper is on the outcome of the first field test of the co-archiving toolbox. The insights gained serve as input to the next iteration of the concept. The test was conducted at a leisure centre hosted by a non-governmental organisation that organizes on a voluntary basis activities for unaccompanied refugees under 18 years. Seven teenage boys participated in the field test. It turned out that only a few of them contributed with material to the co-archiving toolbox. According to the museum professional who worked with the toolbox, some of the boys even seemed to avoid the box. Her impression was that the barrier to engage was too high. The boys expressed a sense of dejection and wondered who would be interested in hearing their stories anyway. Some archival material was however generated during field test, mainly written material. Seeing the toolbox in the specific context of the leisure centre brought forward a clearer picture of the use of toolbox as very much a situated practice, where the physical placement and the specifics of the field influence the kind of tools applied and the way they are used. Whatever the boys' reasons were for not feeling motivated to contribute to the archive, an important lesson to learn is that the toolbox ought to be carefully adopted and adjusted according to the specific context and user group.

The final iteration of the Co-archiving Toolbox will be designed as a completely open source co-archiving toolbox, where both the physical box in form of files for replicating the build, all materials and the handbook are made available for download, re-production and replication. The open source kit will be distributed via online maker communities. The results of this research project will thus reach beyond the academic community and be made accessible to professionals who are interested in continuing to innovate and create better conditions for increased participation in and access to our common archives.

Theme: Innovation
Keywords: co-archiving, co-design, refugees, museum professionals, archives

1. Introduction

The design research project *Co-archiving Refugee Documentation* presented and reflected upon in this paper is based on a collaboration with museum professionals and refugees. The overall aim of the project is to explore and develop collaborative (co-)archiving practices involving underrepresented voices in generating materials for the public archives and museum collections. The underlying assumption is that inviting more people to contribute to the public archives would result in a more diverse and representative record of human existence (Warren, 2016; Dunbar, 2006).

The project is part of a larger research project called *Living Archives*, which aims to explore archives and archiving practices in a digitized society from various angles. The overall purpose of the project "is to research, analyze and prototype how archives for public cultural heritage can become a significant social resource, creating social change, cultural awareness and collective collaboration pointing towards a shared future of a society" (livingarchives.mah.se, 2018-01-11).

One of the cornerstones of the *Co-archiving Refugee Documentation* project is a statement by Derrida (1995, p. 4): "There is no political power without control of the archive, if not memory. Effective democratisation can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation". The consequence of this statement on the field of archiving is an obligation to ensure that all groups are invited to contribute to the archives, and to

achieve this requires the continuous re-thinking and developing of new approaches, methods and practices. The statement raises important questions regarding not only how to involve underrepresented voices in contributing to our archives but also how to support co-archivists who strive to seriously engage their subjects in shaping the archives.

To set the stage of the project, this paper begins by briefly reporting on a co-design process involving museum professionals and refugees, resulting in a concept for increasing the participation in archives referred to as the *Co-archiving Toolbox*. The toolbox includes a set of archiving practices designed to be applied at a temporary refugee housing site but could also be potentially used in other contexts. The main focus of this paper is on the outcome of the first field test, where the toolbox was put into use in a real-world context. The insights gained serve as input to the next iteration of the concept and subsequent field tests. The actual co-design workshops which led to the toolbox concept is presented in more detail in previous and forthcoming writings (see e.g. Nilsson, 2016; Nilsson & Ottsen Hansen, 2016; Nilsson & Barton, 2016).

In addition to the project introduced in the following, two more design projects run by master's students in Interaction Design served as inspiration and contributed to the toolbox concept. One of the projects was part of a course from the master's programme and resulted in a collection of concept ideas: *StoryMap*, *Conversation Archiving*, and *StoryBox*, which are co-archiving practices that allow communities to recall and record their experiences from their own perspectives (*Living Archives*, 2017). The other project was a master's thesis project where a collaborative self-archiving system for vulnerable groups was co-designed and explored (Dimitrova, 2017).

2. Background

2.1. The Refugee Documentation project

As a response to the emergent refugee situation in 2015, when nearly 163,000 people sought asylum in Sweden (The Swedish Migration Agency, 2015), the three largest museums in southern Sweden initiated the *Refugee Documentation project* aimed at documenting the emergent refugee situation in Sweden (Nikolić, 2016). Through their initiative, the museums have up to now documented a wide variety of refugees' stories and experiences of coming to Sweden to seek asylum. They have also collected testi-

monies from the many volunteers and activists who participated in receiving the refugees who arrived in Malmö during the most intense period in autumn 2015. One of the goals of the project is to create a large national touring exhibition based on the material captured, and in conjunction with this, to also organize a series of research conferences. A further goal is to produce a documentary film focusing on the issues of activism.

The methods applied in their documentation work followed well-established practices from the field of ethnology (e.g. participatory observations, interviews, video and audio recordings, and questionnaires). As expressed by their project manager, their work has resulted not only in a rich collection of archival material but also in new research questions dealing with methodological challenges regarding matters of inclusion and representation when documenting crisis situations (Nikolić, 2016). Many of the questions raised deal with the need for new approaches, methods and practices to ensure the increased diversity of our archives, and more specifically, approaches that invite people to directly share their experiences.

2.1 The Co-archiving Refugee Documentation project

Based on the questions that emerged in the *Refugee Documentation Project*, the *Co-archiving Refugee Documentation Project* was established building on a collaboration between the *Living Archives* project and the three museums. The project continues to build on previous design interventions within the co-archiving research theme (see e.g. Nilsson 2016; Nilsson & Barton, 2016; Nilsson & Ottsen Hansen, 2017) as well as insights gained in the *Refugee Documentation Project*.

As mentioned in the introduction, the aim is to design co-archiving practices for inviting refugees to share and document their experiences from their point of view and not through the lens of the Other, that is, those who gather the documentation, interview, filter, select and archive. The target group for these co-archiving practices is not only the unheard – in this case, refugees – but also the archivists and museum professionals who are interested in assuming a co-archiving facilitation approach by engaging the subjects (the documented) in the shaping of archives. To explore this, a co-design process was set up which invited both refugees and museum professionals to take part in re-thinking and developing new ways to document and archive refugee stories – told in their own voices and through their own perspectives.

3. Research process and methods

3.1 Design research

The research approach assumed in this project is design research, which has its roots in action research (Agyris et al. 1985) and is often driven by a critical agenda exploring alternatives in existing cultural settings. Assuming such an approach implies that prototyping and design actions are part of the iterative research process, which often involves real world settings and people (Harvard Maare, 2015). In our project, this was manifested by inviting the stakeholders to be part of a co-design process, which is also one of the central principles of participatory design. Instead of designing *for* the users, the designers and/or researchers work *with* the users in a process of joint decision-making, mutual learning and co-creation (Simonsen et al. 2013). Accordingly, prototyping and design interventions have been part of the research process.

3.2 Research process

3.2.1 Co-design workshops

In total, four co-design workshops were conducted, inviting both refugees and museum professionals to innovate new ways to document and archive refugee stories together.

Three of the workshops were organized in the facilities of the university, and one was organized at a temporary housing facility for refugees. Four museum professionals and four refugees were engaged in the three first workshops, and the last workshop involved eight museum professionals. In total, fifteen participants contributed to the workshops, in addition to two researchers, master's students, and a visiting researcher. On average, the workshops were 3 h long and conducted over the course of 3 1/2 months. All activities were photographed, audio- and videotaped, and field notes were taken.

At the workshops, a selection of generative design tools and techniques were applied, aiming at giving the participants a language with which they could imagine, articulate and express their ideas (Sanders & Stappers, 2012). Building on the outcome of the workshops, a series of concept ideas for co-archiving tools were then developed. The design process finally resulted in a design concept referred to as the *Co-archiving Toolbox*, which consists of seven archiving practices (for more details see section 4). The concept idea was first materialized with a lo-fi card-

Figure 1. Prototypes of the Co-archiving Toolbox made in cardboard and wood.

board prototype, and then with a hi-fi prototype built more robustly so that it could be tested in the field.

3.2.2 The field test

The field test was conducted at a leisure centre hosted by a non-governmental organisation that organizes on a voluntary basis activities for unaccompanied refugees under 18 years. The activities organized at the leisure centre are aimed at supporting this particular group in the integration process, fostering an understanding of cultural and societal codes, and developing language skills, etc. The leisure centre is open three days a week in the afternoon/evening. The majority of the attendees are boys who come to socialize, do their homework and find new friends. Some courses are also offered, e.g. in programming.

Seven teenage boys participated in the field test. They, as well as volunteers working at the leisure centre, were introduced to the toolbox by a museum professional. All of the boys spoke Dari as well as some English and Swedish. The volunteers were introduced, and they could later explain the purpose of the toolbox to others who missed out on the introduction but were still interested in participating. The toolbox was left at the site for two weeks. During this period, the museum professional returned to the site twice to refill the box's contents and to encourage people to contribute with archival material. During the other times, the box was overseen by the volunteers.

3.3. Ethical considerations

The project follows the ethical standards as formulated in Codex rules and guidelines for research in Humanities and Social sciences (The Swedish Research Council, n.d.). In the first part of the project, that is, the co-design workshops, all the participants were informed about the aim of the project and that their participation is based on their own decision. In regard to the workshops, all participants were orally informed about their rights, that their contributions were to be treated anonymously, and that the gathered material would be used for research purposes only. They were also asked to sign a letter of consent, with the exception of the last workshop where the participants gave oral consent to take part in the project.

In the second part of the project, the field test, the participants were orally informed about their rights and that the content generated would be collected by the museum. They gave oral consent to participate in the project. On the lid of the Co-archiving Toolbox, information is available about the aim of the box, what the material is going to be used for, and that participation is done of their own will.

4. The Co-archiving Toolbox

The Co-archiving Toolbox is designed for archivists and museum professionals to use when collecting material in the field. It is meant to be administered by a public institution (a museum or an archive), left in the field for a period of two weeks, and used by the people who are being documented, that is, the 'subjects' of the archive. By applying the archiving practices included in the toolbox, they are invited to document their life situations with limited interference from the institution. The different archiving practices included in the toolbox are designed to be open-ended so that the individuals who are being documented have much freedom in deciding how they want to use the tools, thus enabling them to participate in defining how their stories and everyday lives are captured, recorded and archived.

The toolbox is designed to be self-instructive, but instructions describing the archiving practices are also attached to the box. There is also a handbook included for the co-archivists to use when using the toolbox in the field. When the planned documentation period has come to an end, the toolbox including the generated archival material will be picked up, brought to the archive and/or museum and added to their collections.

How the material will be used, meta-tagged, and stored is up to the institution to decide. It can potentially be used directly at an exhibition or be stored in their archives for future use. The seven co-archiving practices currently included in the toolbox are designed to be applied by refugees, but the overall concept could certainly be adjusted and applied to other contexts as well.

The co-archiving practices are:

1. Letters to Sweden The *Letters to Sweden* practice collects letters written to Sweden as if Sweden were a person. This may also involve audio recordings of the person reading the letter/talking to Sweden. The instructions given to the author are simply to "Write a letter to Sweden and put it in an envelope". The authors may (optionally) mark the letter with an ID number to match with other documents and archival material generated about that individual, which will then be stored in public archives (such as documents from the Swedish Migration Agency).

2. Question Collector The *Question Collector* collects written questions from the refugees. The questions are open and may range from small, trivial, everyday questions to bigger, more meaningful questions about life and the future. The aim is not to answer the questions (and this ought to be carefully communicated) but rather to generate an alternative story about the life situation of the individuals. The instructions given were, "Do you have a question about something? It could be big or small. Write it on a note and put it in the box".

3. Meaningful Numbers This practice encourages the refugees to "hijack" their dossier number (ID number at the Swedish Migration Agency) and use it to build a narrative about themselves. There are no rules – the individuals may associate their lives with the numbers in any way they find meaningful (e.g. special dates, street numbers, sizes). The narrative could be attached to the official documents about the individual being archived as a strategy to show that a human being exists behind the numbers. Instructions given: "Tell your story with your dossier number. Write your number on the paper and write notes about what the numbers mean to you."

4. Two Futures In this practice, the author is asked to describe two possible futures: 1) "Me in Sweden year 2027" and 2) "Me somewhere else in year 2027". The two versions of the future scenarios should be attached to each other. The authors may (optionally) mark the letter with an ID number to match with other documents and archival material. Instructions

given: "What do you see in your future? Describe what your future would look like in 10 years if you stayed in Sweden and if you had not."

5. Snapshots The participants are asked to take a series of photos of everyday life. A disposable camera is provided to take the pictures, which should then be passed to the next person. Instructions printed on the camera: "Take five pictures of: 1) You, 2) a friend, 3) a meal, 4) a quiet place, and 5) a noisy place, and then pass it on to someone else."

6. Audio Memory A phone number is provided that the participants can call and record an audio message about anything that they wish to share. The receiver of the message and how it will be used and stored ought to be carefully communicated. Instructions given: "Do you have something you wish to share? Call this number and leave a message."

7. Moving Images The participants are asked to self-organize documentation sessions and record them with a video camera. Of the participants in the group, a film director is to be recruited and made responsible for the camera as well as for filming. A list of instructions is given to the filmmakers that suggests topics for film scripts such as 'share a story', 'sing a song', 'film everyday life' and 'have a group discussion'. Only those who have signed the letter of consent form ought to be filmed. Instructions given: "Shoot a movie about life where you live. You decide what the film should be about."

5. Testing the Co-archiving toolbox in the field

5.1 The outcome

It turned out that only a few of the boys at the leisure centre contributed with material to the co-archiving toolbox. According to the museum professional who worked with the toolbox in the field, some of the boys even seemed to avoid the box. Her impression was that the barrier to engage was too high. The boys expressed a sense of dejection and wondered who would be interested in hearing their stories anyway. This echoes a continuous discussion we have had throughout the co-archiving project of how to balance our understanding of the value of individual contributions to the archive with what the participants find valuable or critical in their current life situations.

The concept of the archive in itself might also be a subject where participants could have different cultural understandings of who participates in them and what power structures lie therein. As also expressed by

the museum professional, there may be confusion around the concept of the museum and suspicion around the expressions "document" and "archive" in terms of being tools for surveillance and control.

However, some archival material was generated. The co-archiving practices that was most used and which seemed to be the most engaging and also probably the easiest to get started with were the archiving practices, *Snapshot* and the *Question Collector*. The practices, *Letters to Sweden* and *Two Futures*, also generated some material. *Meaningful Numbers* and the *Audio Memory* were not used at all. The practice, *Moving Images*, was excluded in the toolbox due to the lack of technical resources.

All written contributions were in Swedish. The instructions included in the toolbox did not say that they were allowed to write in their own language. This was implied, possibly too vaguely, by having all written instructions translated into seven different languages, including the participants' native language, Dari. The *Letters to Sweden* and *Two futures* contributions were written in Swedish but nevertheless consisted of strong and touching testimonies. However, the simple and restricted language of the letters can likely be attributed to the lack of language skills.

Seeing the toolbox in the specific context of the leisure centre brought forward a clearer picture of the use of toolbox as very much a situated practice, where the physical placement and the specifics of the field influence the kind of tools applied and the way they are used. Originally, we envisioned the toolbox would be placed in a space where people lived (temporary refugee housing), so that the tools may be taken home or the box approached at different times of the day. At the leisure centre, the refugees only visit after school for a few hours, and as this happens after school, one might suspect that the tools in the box could be regarded as homework. When one participant was asked why he chose the disposable camera, he explained that it seemed the easiest and fastest to do. Many of the tools are aimed at a more immersive use perhaps over a longer period of time. Moving forward, it is crucial to consider how this practice could be supported or suggested.

Evidently, the boys lacked the motivation to participate due to various reasons. Some of them may have seen the toolbox activities as a burden and as extra duties on top of homework rather than an opportunity to express themselves and be part of writing history by contributing to public archives. Others expressed the disbelief that anyone would be interested in hearing their stories. A volunteer also suggested that the physical, non-digital toolbox made of wood was too old-fashioned and suggested that

we should use some digital devices instead, such as an iPad. Whatever the boys' reasons were for not feeling motivated to contribute to the archive, an important lesson to learn is that the toolbox ought to be carefully adopted and adjusted according to the specific context and user group.

5.2 Iterating the toolbox

The next step of the project is to test the toolbox in two more contexts. The toolbox is currently being tested on another site, but the outcome of that test will not reach to be included in this paper. Based on the insights generated from all of the field tests, a last iteration of the toolbox will be produced.

The handbook for the co-archivist applying the toolbox will also be updated based on the outcome of the field tests. As experienced, given that using the toolbox is a highly situated practice, an emphasis will be put on the importance of adjusting and adopting the toolbox to the situation and the subjects of the archive. It will also be more clearly communicated that they are allowed to write in their own language, which will hopefully lower the barrier for participating. When introducing the toolbox in the field, the co-archivists will also be encouraged to spend time discussing the concept of museums, archives, and the importance of creating conditions for everyone contribute to the archives. It ought to be clarified to those using the toolbox that to document and archive fragments of life situations and experiences of contemporary time is *not* about control and surveillance, but rather that their contributions are crucial if we are to ensure increased diversity in public archives.

6. Future development

To repeat Derrida's (1995) argument, to create conditions for inclusive archiving and increase the access to and participation in the archives, is an essential criterion in a democratic society. This project is ultimately about re-thinking and developing new approaches, methods and practices to document and archive life situations and experiences, and potentially, the writing of the history of our times. Besides being concrete archiving practices that can be put into practical use in the field, the co-archiving concept may also contribute to challenging the role of the archivist. The co-archiving practices developed as part this project can serve as an example of how an archivist may become a co-archivist, by going

from a focus on archival appraisal to co-archival facilitation. As experienced in the *Refugee Documentation Project*, there is a need for new approaches for documenting crisis situations and for inviting unheard voices to directly share their experiences. The hope is that this project may contribute with some input in this challenge and provide an example of how various stakeholders (as in the case of the co-design workshops) can to come together to innovate in order to create a social change.

The final iteration of the *Co-archiving Toolbox* will be designed as a completely open source co-archiving toolbox, where both the physical box in form of files for replicating the build, all materials and the handbook are made available for download, re-production and replication. The open source kit will be distributed via online maker and DIY communities. The results of this research project will thus reach beyond the academic community and be made accessible to professionals who are interested in continuing to innovate and create better conditions for increased participation in and access to our common archives.

Acknowledgements

Elisabet Nilsson
Senior lecturer in interaction design,
School of Arts and Communication (K3),
Malmö University, Sweden
elisabet.nilsson@mau.se

Sofie Marie Ottsen Hansen
Adjunct lecturer in interaction design,
School of Arts and Communication (K3),
Malmö University, Sweden
sofie.marie.ottsen.hansen@mau.se

References

Dunbar, Anthony W. (2006). Introducing critical race theory to archival discourse: Getting the conversation started. *Archival Science*, 6(1), 109–129.

Warren, Kellee E. (2016), We Need These Bodies, But Not Their Knowledge: Black Women in the Archival Science Professions and Their Connection to the Archives of Enslaved Black Women in the French Antilles. *Library Trends*, 64(4), 776–794.

Argyris, Chris, Putnam, Robert, and McLain Smith, Diana (1985). *Action Science – Concepts, methods, and skills for research and intervention*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Derrida, Jacques (1995). *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

Dimitriova, Raya (2017). *Designing a collaborative self-archiving system for vulnerable groups via co-design means.* (Degree project/Master's thesis, Malmö University, Malmö)

Dunbar, Anthony W. (2006). Introducing critical race theory to archival discourse: Getting the conversation started. *Archival Science*, 6(1), 109–129.

Harvard Maare, Åsa (2015). *Designing for Peer Learning: Mathematics, Games and Peer Groups in Leisure-time Centers*. Lund: Lund University Publications.

Living Archives (2017). IxD Master Student Project: Co-archiving Practices for Refugee Documentation. Retrieved 2018 January 11 from http://livingarchives. mah.se/2017/06/ixd-master-student-project-co-archiving-practices-for-flight-documentation/

Nikolić, Dragan (2016). Lecture: Refugee Documentation project presentation at The Department of Arts and Cultural Sciences, Lund University.

Nilsson, Elisabet M. (2016). Prototyping collaborative (co)-archiving practices – From archival appraisal to co-archival facilitation. Conference proceedings *22nd International Conference on Virtual Systems & Multimedia*, Kuala Lumpur.

Nilsson, Elisabet M., and Barton, Jody (2016). Co-designing newcomers archives: discussing ethical challenges when establishing collaboration with vulnerable user groups. Conference proceedings *Cumulus Hong Kong 2016: Open Design for E-very-thing – exploring new design purposes*, Hong Kong.

Nilsson, Elisabet M., and Hansen Ottsen, Sofie Marie (2017). Becoming a co-archivist. ReDoing archival practices for democratising the access to and participation in archives. Conference proceedings *Cumulus Kolding 2017*, Kolding, Denmark, May 30–June 2.

Sanders, Elizabeth. B.N., and Pieter Jan Stappers (2012). *The Convivial Toolbox: Generative Research for the Front End of Design*. Amsterdam: BIS Publishers

Simonsen, Jesper, and Robertson, Toni (2013). *The Routledge Handbook of Participatory Design*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Swedish Migration Agency (2015). Applications for asylum received, 2015. The Migration Agency. Retrieved 2018 January 11 from http://www.migrationsverket.se

The Swedish Research Council (n.d). Codex rules and guidelines for research in Humanities and Social sciences. Retrieved 2018 January 11 from http://www.codex.vr.se

Warren, Kellee E. (2016). We Need These Bodies, But Not Their Knowledge: Black Women in the Archival Science Professions and Their Connection to the Archives of Enslaved Black Women in the French Antilles. *Library Trends,* 64(4), 776–794.