

# Preserving Mobilised Culture

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## Abstract

This paper explores the evolving role archivists play in the life cycle of digital media created by citizens on mobile phones, and the key challenges they face. It advocates an earlier engagement with digital media due to its ephemeral and sensitive nature, and outlines a prototype to address challenges preventing deeper and earlier engagement with mobile media. Traditional, often resource-strapped, archival institutions currently do not collect audiovisual media made on mobile phones. However, some archivists are re-imagining established methods of appraisal, organisation, and the description of digital citizen media. As an outcome of this, new opportunities are available for marginalised communities to preserve, contextualise, and improve access to their collections. These archivists creatively leverage technical and archival resources while utilising *participatory archiving* strategies by direct involvement with the publics they serve.

I suggest that archival organisations adopt two key practices, which transcend traditional archival roles: (a) become involved in the media life cycle earlier by engaging more closely with citizen documentarians; and (b) utilise emerging open-source technologies. My approach draws from two participatory archiving case studies, WITNESS and the Activist Archivists, as well as interviews and surveys with expert archivists and citizen documentarians. Non-traditional, participatory approaches to preserving citizen documentation address the challenges both citizen documentarians and archivists face when creating and collecting marginalised, culturally significant media, often produced on mobile phones.

I include a mobile application prototype in *Appendix 1* to test questions arising from my research and explore opportunities to build upon the objects of my case studies' efforts. This prototype application attempts to bridge the gap between digital citizen media and archival institutions by giving the citizen documentarian more control over their narrative, metadata, privacy, copyright, and choice of repository.

**Keywords:** participatory archives, audiovisual civic media, privacy, sousveillance, preservation, accessibility

## Introduction

Increased mobile phone ownership has led to a rise in *citizen documentarians* and the proliferation of *digital citizen media*. This phenomenon creates new challenges and opportunities for all involved in the lifecycle of mobile media, namely those interested in preserving, sharing and using the media created for evidentiary or narrative purposes. Interest groups include archivists, media makers, journalists, lawyers, and scholars. For lawyers and journalists to meaningfully engage with citizen documentation, the media must be authenticated, preserved, and accessible. While archivists have traditionally performed these preservation practices, the whims of the publication platforms now dictate the life cycle of most citizen mobile media.

Most traditional archival organisations are not currently prepared to manage mobile media, due to four key challenges: (a) a lack of resources; (b) few initiatives to collect mobile citizen documentation; (c) no preservation or licensing standards for collecting mobile media; and (d) pressing privacy considerations. I argue that archivists need to take a more active role in mobile preservation to address these emergent challenges. Court cases and news reporting increasingly reference digital media and scholars, artists, and the public make extensive use of these media forms. Thus, archivists working to collect digital citizen media stand to play a critical role in shaping the future of 21st Century civic media (Jenkins et al., 2009).

During the first jury trial stemming from *Occupy Wall Street* in March 2013, charges against defendant Michael Premo for assaulting a police officer were dropped when his lawyers presented video evidence that contradicted accusations brought by police and prosecutors (Pinto, 2013). One eyewitness journalist stated, “the information provided by the NYPD in the trial was fabricated to such a degree that the allegations made by the police officers have turned out to be quite literally the opposite of what actually happened” (Sewell, 2013).

Like footage of the brutal LAPD beatings of Rodney King in 1991, this is just one of the many examples of ways evidentiary documentation promotes justice during significant historic events. Following Derrida’s assertion that “there is no political power without control of the archive” (Derrida & Prenowitz, 2009), the preservation of such documentation supplies *evidence* and has the potential to increase the *agency* of lawyers, activists, historians, students, and researchers.

Yet, there is currently little consensus between and within archival institutions about how or whether to collect and manage digital citizen materials. WITNESS and the Activist Archivists are two groups attempting to change this by empowering citizen documentarians with knowledge about how to navigate these challenges. This paper explores and expands on the practices of these two organisations to better understand the challenges and opportunities archivists face when preserving civic media by answering the following research questions:

1. How do participatory archiving practices bring archivists closer to mobile citizen documentarians?
2. How can archival organisations address key technological challenges involved within this process?

I will provide a brief background about citizen media; discuss current tensions in the archival field and the challenges archivists face when collecting this type of media; provide an overview of the case studies' use of participatory practices; and offer a mobile prototype that addresses key challenges in the current mobile media ecosystem.

## Background

*I think of 'citizen archivists' as the first responders of history, arriving early on the scene to gather, capture, describe, and preserve ephemeral artifacts of interest and helping to ensure that they survive over time to share with the future (MacKaye, as cited in Lazorchak, 2013).*

Citizen documentation is increasingly pervasive in the Internet ecosystem, but there is currently no streamlined process to ensure the media is authenticated, preserved, and contextualised. Neither is the personal information about the documentarian that recorded and shared it protected from inadvertent disclosure. Archivists have helped content creators avoid these problems by acting as cultural custodians, often collecting and preserving materials long after their creation. Now there is an opportunity to collect digital media almost immediately after its creation, thus minimising the chance of compromising information when shared on online platforms that are not committed to preservation or authentication. This section will provide a short background on the current online citizen media ecology and highlight where archival practices might address the collection and preservation of media.

## Citizen Media: A 21st Century Paradigm

*"... personal digital archiving democratizes something that only very rich and powerful people had up until now, which is the ability to send a record of their lives into the future." (Ubois, as cited in Ashenfelder, 2012)*

As networked publics (Friedland, Hove, & Rojas, 2006) proliferate, traditionally marginalised digital citizen documentation is increasingly ubiquitous. It functions as sousveillance,<sup>1</sup> is included in mainstream news reporting, and introduced as evidence in courts of law. It is also distributed through social networking sites informing the public at large of events unfolding around the globe, often unedited and in real-time. This type of media often loses meaningful metadata and context once it is published on most social media platforms, thus making it difficult to preserve and authenticate. Nevertheless, social media platforms are the top destinations for this type of media, which is progressively participatory. "[P]rior to the mobile revolution, technology and participatory media practices were strained bedfellows. Then, as technology became affordable and portable, project leaders increasingly surrendered media production to participants" (Weight, 2014, p. 101). Given such widespread popularity, these online platforms function as a 21st Century pseudo-archive.

Rick Prelinger, archivist, writer, filmmaker, and founder of the Prelinger Archives explains how the social media platform YouTube, the third most visited website (Alexa,

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<sup>1</sup> Inverse surveillance or the recording of an activity by a participant in the activity typically by way of small wearable or portable personal technologies.

n.d.), reflects users' expectations to access and engage with videos. "YouTube has become the standard of what people expect audiovisual archives to be – unlimited access and active user participation have become crucial for an archive's visibility and public existence" (Skinnell, 2010).

As I discuss later, archivists working in partnership with outside public interest groups have heeded Prelinger's call, seizing the opportunity to broaden access to their work by sharing and curating videos on their own channels on YouTube. This situation is particularly timely since digital citizen media constitutes nearly two-thirds of the most popular videos on YouTube's news channel (Pew Research Center's Journalism Project Staff, 2012). While YouTube's widespread use and commitment to bidirectional engagement represents what archives could be, unfortunately for archivists, key metadata is lost when uploading videos to the site (De Rham, 2012). Ideally, such media archives would preserve this metadata for digital media. Though popular social media platforms are currently the premiere destination for digital citizen documentation, they do not replace the function of memory institutions. Jason Scott, archivist, technology historian, and filmmaker pointedly remarks, "Google is a library or archive like a supermarket is a food museum" (Ubois, 2012).

The media shift from broadcast to YouTube is mainly due to an increase in smartphone ownership and the use of such phones for recording. A 2014 Pew study found "58% of all American adults now own a smartphone" (Pew Research Internet Project, 2014). This number has no doubt increased since 2012, when:

*[a]lmost two-thirds of the most viewed videos on YouTube (64%) were posted by citizens; 36% were published by organisations. In other words, while news organisations played a larger role in creating the most popular news content on YouTube, citizens were the primary agenda setter in terms of posting it (Pew Research Center's Journalism Project Staff, 2012).*

Although resources enable the creation of a centralised repository for a vast amount of historical public broadcasting content (CPB Media Room, 2009), few are allocated to preserving and authenticating digital citizen media. YouTube is currently the first destination for citizen media; however it is not an ideal archive for this material because the platform makes it difficult to authenticate videos. Given that it is proprietary, it can also disappear at any time. Marginalised communities need their own preservation-focused platforms where they can both amplify and preserve authentic records of their concerns and histories. One such repository is the Internet Archive, a public interest archive dedicated to preserving digital media through interoperability, accessibility and circumventing *link rot*. Citizen media has unprecedented potential for contemporaneous preservation by archivists as mobile devices become smarter and archival initiatives focus more on collecting digital media.

## **A Call for Digital Archiving: Key Challenges**

Archivists interested in collecting digital media currently face four key challenges:

1. A lack of resources
2. Few initiatives to collect mobile citizen documentation
3. No preservation or licensing standards for collecting mobile media

4. Emergent privacy considerations for citizens, hesitant to share documentation

Each of these challenges impedes the creation of a viable digital archive. Rather than base my understanding of what an ideal archive is by examining particular archives, I will defer to how the National Information Standards Organisation (NISO) characterises best practices for creating a digital collection. NISO defines a digital collection as a repository of digital objects that are selected and organised to ease discovery, access, and use. NISO's framework of guidance for building viable digital collections elaborates the principles that characterise a well-maintained digital collection. These include accurate descriptions of digital objects, broad accessibility, respect for intellectual property rights, *interoperability*, and incorporation of users into the collection workflow (NISO). Although considerable literature on best practices for managing *born-digital* collections exists (e.g. the NISO framework), the practice of managing born-digital archives is still in its infancy (Dooley & Luce, 2010).

### **Lack of Resources / Few Mobile Media Collection Initiatives**

Traditional archivists are considered experts in material selection, ownership negotiation, authentication, and metadata management – skills that are critical to building and managing a digital collection. The Online Computer Library Center (OCLC) is a nonprofit computer library service and research organisation dedicated to furthering access to the world's information and reducing information costs. In 2010, OCLC conducted a landmark study assessing the challenges faced by special collections and archives at 169 institutions. The survey highlighted the lack of funding, little time for planning, and lack of technical expertise as principal reasons for the perceived infancy in born-digital material archiving (Dooley & Luce, 2010). Jackie Dooley, Program Officer at OCLC Research, aptly summarises born-digital materials as “under-collected, undercounted, undermanaged, unpreserved, and inaccessible” (Dooley, 2013).

### **No Preservation and Licensing Standards**

Lack of standards for collecting and preserving mobile media impedes long-term accessibility. The tension between preservation and access is nothing new, but the unprecedented amount of citizen media online presents new challenges and opportunities for librarians, archivists, and others interested in collection, preservation, and access. Within the archival field, this tension is to some extent mediated by participatory strategies enabling earlier involvement in the lifecycle of the documentation. Such approaches also encourage fostering partnerships with technological and legal specialists. These partnerships then need to address challenges with authentication, long-term storage, privacy, digital rights management, and distribution of mobile citizen media.

Intellectual property disputes can prevent access to, or re-use of the media and are a serious consideration for groups concerned with making digital artefacts accessible online. When the citizen media maker can specify and embed copyright or creative commons settings into the media, it saves time by eliminating back end guessing. Since media makers often want work to spread far and wide, two alternative licensing options to copyright are worth mentioning here: copyLeft (GNU Project, 2013)

and Copyfree (Copyfree Initiative, 2013). Respectively, these initiatives allow for the free modification (reproduction, adaptation, or distribution) of works to encourage widespread accessibility and the full creative control of the works.

## **Emergent Privacy Concerns**

If the aim is to foster increased sharing of mobile citizen media, it is important to acknowledge citizens' privacy concerns as potential roadblocks to the accessibility of media in this post-Snowden era. Unlike analogue or professional works of the past, citizen mobile media are vulnerable to betraying key metadata about the individual creators in real-time. Activists and journalists realise this threat and struggle to learn digital privacy tools such as PGP. However, the public at large is often not aware of the potential for audiovisual materials to include embedded information about personal details. In a talk Lilia Kai gave at a recent conference on behalf of Whisper Systems, a privacy-focused tech company, she mentioned the need for improved usability of privacy tools because, "PGP has failed the Greenwald test" (Kai, 2014). How can we expect the general population to use privacy technology when even tech-savvy journalists like Glenn Greenwald, who work with professional privacy technologists, have a difficult time using the tools currently available?

I address these primary challenges in the appended mobile application prototype, which aims to improve the collection, documentation, and accessibility of born-digital materials. It does so by making it easier for archivists to receive mobile media from citizen documentarians that include accurate descriptions and metadata, licensing, and interoperable formats. Additionally, it aims to increase user engagement by keeping personal metadata private. As the next section highlights, the suggested prototype builds on relevant literature and the real-world practices of participatory archival efforts.

## **Participatory Approaches Transform the Archive**

Only a few organisations are addressing the institutional challenges of collecting and preserving mobile citizen media. This paper explores two of these pioneering organisations as case studies: WITNESS and the Activist Archivists. These organisations employ participatory archiving strategies to preserve born-digital media. Their policies are threefold: (a) conserving resources through partnerships and trainings empowering citizens to have more agency over the media; (b) creating long-term schedules for outreach and planning; and (c) partnering with technologists to help facilitate better transfer, storage, and privacy of media. Improved interoperability will, in the long term, make media more widely accessible. Thus, early involvement with archivists will result in the proper preservation and accessibility of more citizen media. Re-imagining the archival process through outreach and partnerships has helped WITNESS and the Activist Archivists close the gap between archivist and citizen media. However, even pioneering projects like these still face a number of challenges from the low levels of citizen engagement to lack of privacy. Other issues include the harnessing of emergent, open-source technologies, and a lack of support from established archival institutions.

## Participation in Practice

WITNESS is a nonprofit organisation dedicated to protecting human rights. It uses diverse strategies to promote the creation, storage, and access to citizen video of disenfranchised populations “to open the eyes of the world to human rights abuses” (WITNESS, n.d.). The aim is to empower people to transform their stories of mistreatment into powerful tools for justice, promoting public engagement, and policy change.

The Activist Archivists are a network of multi-media archivists affiliated with NYU’s Moving Image Archiving Graduate Program. The group formed in October 2011 in response to the unprecedented amount of digital content created during the Occupy Wall Street protests. The Activist Archivists collaborated with the Occupy Media Committee and the Archiving Committee and taught best practices and skill sharing workshops.

There is a difference in scope as WITNESS is a global organisation and the Activist Archivists are national. However, both WITNESS and the Activist Archivists possess flexibility and autonomy not typically afforded to traditional archival institutions. They offer outreach, best practices, and training materials to citizen documentarians. Moreover, both groups amplify the diversity and the reach of culturally significant historical records not often collected by traditional heritage organisations. They defy what social activist and historian Howard Zinn described as the “status quo for records collection and preservation” in the 1970s:

*[T]he existence, preservation, and availability of archives, documents, records in our society are very much determined by the distribution of wealth and power. That is, the most powerful, the richest elements in society have the greatest capacity to find documents, preserve them, and decide what is or is not available to the public. This means government, business, and the military are dominant (Zinn, 1977).*

Working to address this problem of historical inclusion, WITNESS and the Activist Archivists were chosen as case studies for two reasons. First, their participatory approaches help disenfranchised populations advocate for themselves, thus initiating cultural changes in institutionalised power dynamics. Second, they are reimagining traditional archival practice by adapting techniques to handle the accessibility and preservation of digital citizen media in the emergent online media ecosystem.

These new and creative practices are not yet widely adopted due to the four key challenges previously mentioned. Archivists are in an influential position that will enable communities to address those key challenges and help steward digital citizen media as people’s interaction with technology evolves. “Archivists choose which records to preserve and discard, using the power of appraisal to consciously or unconsciously assert chosen narratives as truth while ignoring or reframing others” (Shilton & Srinivasan, 2007).

## WITNESS

Inspired by the Rodney King beating, WITNESS was founded in 1992 to bring often-unseen images and seldom-heard stories to the attention of key decision-makers, the media, and the public. “WITNESS catalyzes grassroots activism, political engagement, and lasting change. We bridge the worlds of human rights, media, and technology by incorporating cutting-edge innovations into traditional approaches to advocacy” (WITNESS, n.d.).

WITNESS advocates for human rights via a three-pronged approach:

1. Partnerships with over 300 human rights groups in 86 countries
2. Development of training materials
3. Inclusion of video in over 100 campaigns

Over 260 million people have seen videos made by WITNESS and its partners worldwide (WITNESS, 2012). Partnerships with various global human rights organisations as well as technology experts such as the Guardian Project are essential to the success of WITNESS programmes. These collaborations allow WITNESS core staff to focus on training, long term preservation, and outreach initiatives.

## The Activist Archivists

The Activist Archivists, like WITNESS, created a dialogue between citizen documentarians and archivists. They teach long-term preservation strategies to creators of citizen media and negotiate relationships with repositories. During *Occupy Wall Street*, they collaborated with the Occupy Media Working Group to increase the agency of activists documenting and preserving their narratives and experiences.

*We aim to share knowledge and provide assistance on archiving and preservation matters in order to improve the discoverability of the digital content that is being produced; to support the usability of digital media as evidence and as a creative resource; to ensure that the rights and intentions of media creators are respected; preserve the legacy of social movement for future generations; and to help give voice and history to those who may have traditionally been left out (Activist Archivists, n.d.).*

The Activist Archivists are uniquely positioned between activists and academic institutions, allowing them to engage more deeply with communities they serve than most institutions can. They use their academic affiliations with repositories, such as NYU Library’s Tamiment Collection (H. Besser, personal communication, November 2, 2012), to negotiate preservation and intellectual property terms amenable to both the library and the activist groups producing the media. Their “Best practices for content collectors” address the sensitivity of depositing activist media with “traditional” organisations and suggests ways in which an archive could “collect materials without being tied to an exclusive agreement” (Besser, 2012).

Another AA initiative, the “Why Archive” postcards (see *Figure 1*), helps media working groups and citizen documentarians understand why archiving is relevant to their cause. AA has also condensed lengthy and complex archival standards into a short list “7 Tips To Ensure Your Video is Usable in the Long Term” (Besser, 2012). This



resource educates media-makers about the need for and importance of media preservation.

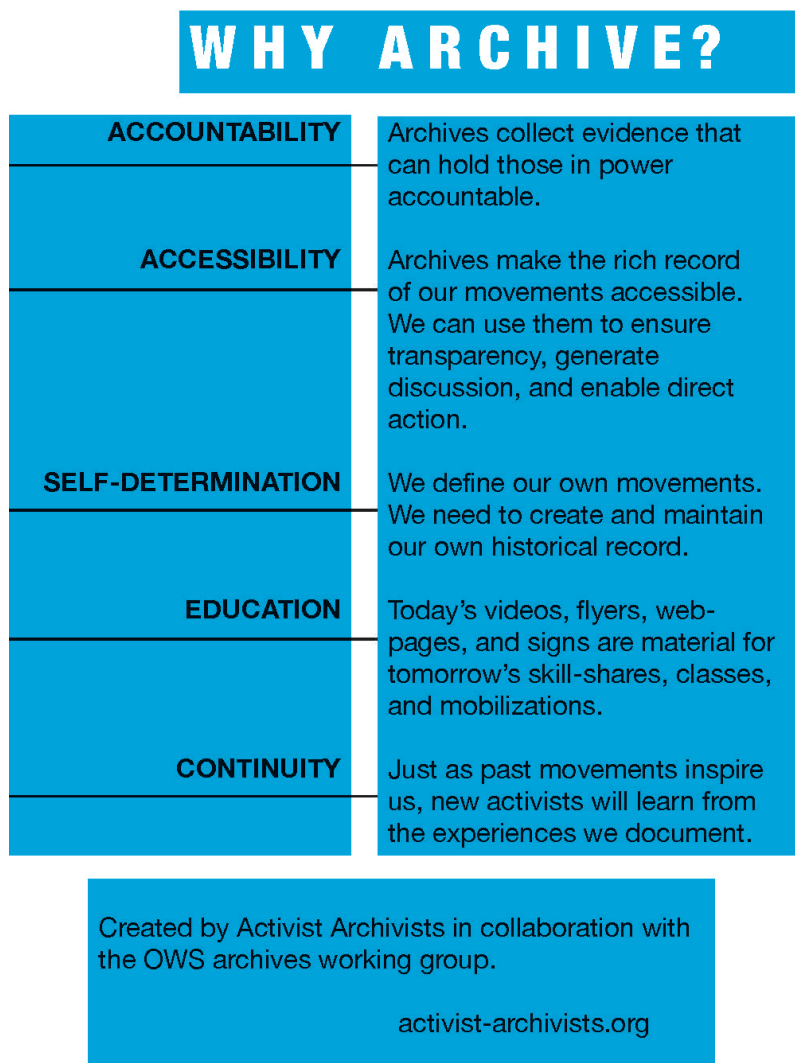


Figure 1. Activist Archivists' Why Archive? Postcard

AA has a compilation of work on their website ([www.activist-archivists.org](http://www.activist-archivists.org)) which acts as a platform for their projects. Through their workshops and lectures, the Activist Archivists promote the importance of archiving citizen media, connecting citizens with archival institutions, while also giving voice and context to those traditionally left out of the dialogue and ignored by mainstream media.

### Key Challenges Addressed

The participatory practices of WITNESS and the Activist Archivists address the four primary reasons for a lack of born-digital archiving challenges. They prioritise born-digital citizen media archiving initiatives and address the problem of limited resources by building capacity external to the organisation through partnerships and training where citizens engage more closely with the lifecycle of the media. They work to create and proliferate archival standards that suit both archivists and mobile citizen documentarians. They provide education about more flexible intellectual property

options, going beyond copyright to include `copyLeft` and Creative Commons licensing. Archivist groups also create long-term schedules for outreach and planning, and collaborate with technologists to help facilitate the transfer, storage, and privacy of the media. Media become more widely accessible in the long-term because of improved interoperability and proper preservation through early engagement with archivists. While both groups focus on the first three challenges, only WITNESS is currently addressing the privacy challenges activists and media makers face when creating audiovisual documentation on their smartphones.

The case studies show ways of strengthening linkages between expert archivists and mobile citizen media. The following section introduces a prototype mobile application that builds on the best practices gleaned from the relevant literature and case studies. The prototype is a simple tool that gives users the ability to choose where, how, and with whom their media is shared, making public interest repositories as easily accessible as social media sites. The app offers users privacy, IP options, and ability to store the media in a non-commercial repository. Archivists will have direct access to the media and mobile documentary makers will have the security of dedicated long-term storage.

## **Recollectiv.es: a Mobile Prototype for Archivists and Citizen Documentarians**

Recollectiv.es builds on research findings indicating that preservation and accessibility of citizen media are best facilitated by early engagement. I worked with engineer Kiran Chandramohan to design a mobile application prototype to simplify interaction between digital citizen media creators and digital archives while addressing four fundamental concerns of archivists. These concerns include metadata standardisation, IP specification, privacy, and long-term preservation in archival repositories. The prototype is used to test assumptions and address questions about the feasibility of fostering deeper engagement between archivists and media producers by employing open source technologies that allow for improved interoperability. Screenshots of the broader workflow and prototype are included in *Appendix 1*.

### **Prototype Features:**

1. **Standardisation:** Standardises metadata by using suggested tags based on crowd sourced location or content-specific information. (see *Figure 2*).
2. **Intellectual Property Concerns:** Offers creative commons licensing options.
3. **Privacy:** Allows users to choose what level of privacy they want by offering anonymous uploads or connecting through popular social media profiles.
4. **Preservation:** Provides long-term preservation by providing institutional recommendations based on the content descriptions and location. (see *Figure 3*).

## Proposed Design of Recommendation Engine

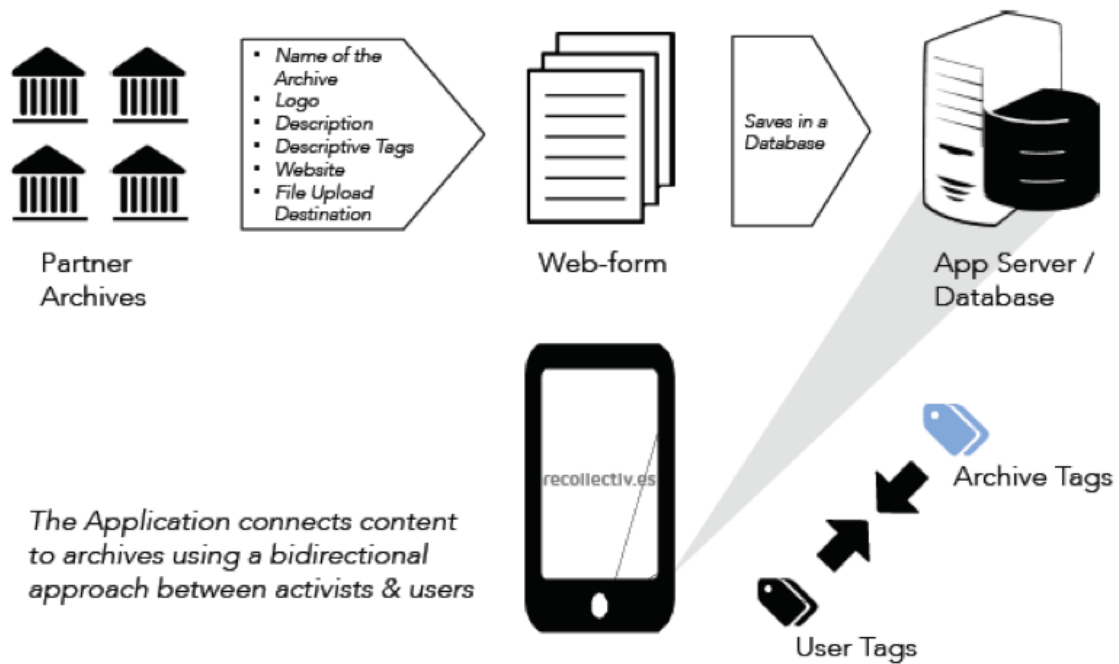


Figure 2. Prototype Features

## Process: Citizen Media → Archive

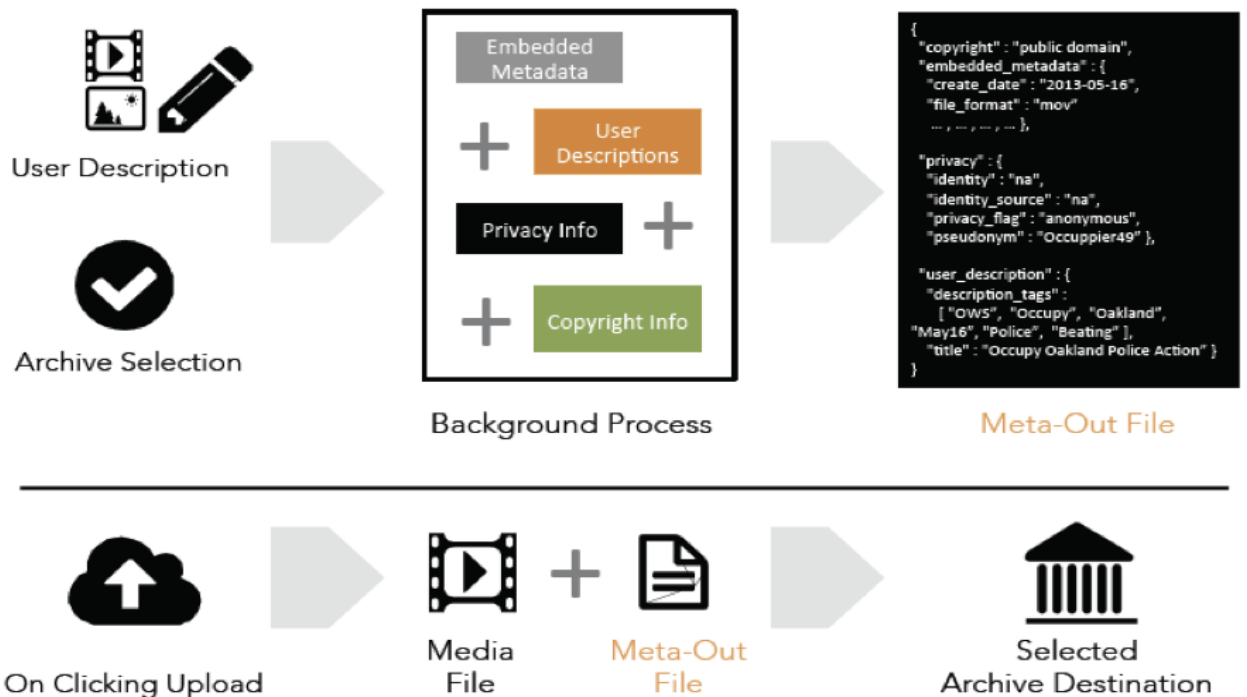


Figure 3. The Process of Archiving Citizen Media

## Conclusion

The ubiquity of mobile devices presents enormous potential opportunities for archivists to engage earlier in the lifecycle of digital citizen media. Despite their dedication and stake in cultural preservation, archivists are often challenged by lack of resources. Many archives currently do not have the tools necessary to preserve digital citizen media. We created the *Recollectiv.es* mobile prototype to provide a simple tool for citizen media creators and archivists alike. This model addresses the four key challenges archivists face when collecting digital media while taking into consideration citizen documentarians' privacy and IP concerns.

The increased availability of open source software allows archivists to adapt to the changing archival context by making the media they collect interoperable, which is demonstrated to improve long-term access. WITNESS and the Activist Archivists have demonstrated how creative collaborations and citizen engagement can transform traditional archival practice, empower citizen documentarians, and preserve and amplify media created by marginalised communities. The prototype builds on their real-world practice and utilises open source tools to simplify the process of media creation to long-term preservation within the online media ecosystem.

Key challenges archivists will continue to confront when planning for the long-term preservation of digital citizen media are an evolving intellectual property landscape, changes in privacy needs, and the ephemeral nature of born-digital media. Fostering greater preservation and sharing of citizen documentation, or sousveillance, creates new opportunities to increase civic engagement and citizen advocacy.

## Appendix 1: Mobile Application Prototype

### Design Iterations



Paper Prototype

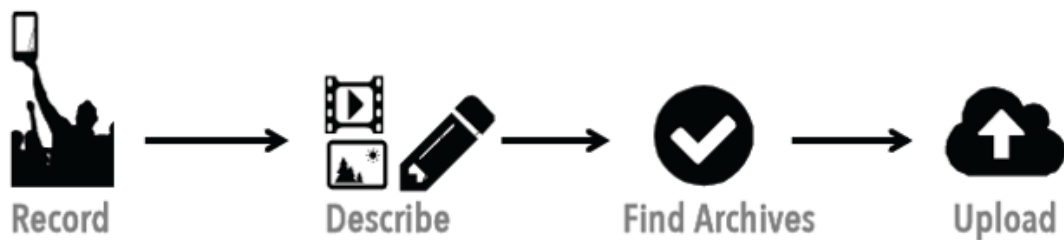


Balsamiq



Axure

### User Flow



**Record**  
User recorded some media, which she thinks is worth preserving

**Describe**  
User selects and describes the media

**Find Archives**  
**recollectiv.es** suggests relevant archives for the user media. User selects the desired archive(s)

**Upload**  
User media is uploaded to the selected archives with relevant metadata, copyright and privacy information

## **Acknowledgements**

My work would not have been possible without support from:

Kiran Chandramohanam, for his assistance with the design of the mobile prototype.

Paul Duguid, for being a supportive and patient advisor.

Rick Prelinger, for his dedication to participation.

Howard Besser, for providing incentive for the mobile prototype.

Dave Rice, for always being accessible to help parse archival anomalies.

Camilla Hawthorne, for helpful comments on early drafts of this paper.

Lindsay Bayham, for helpful comments on later drafts of this paper.

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## **About the Author**

Natalie Cadranel is a civic archivist, artist, researcher, and recent graduate of UC Berkeley's School of Information where she earned a Masters in Information Management and Systems. Using a participatory action research approach, she explores the lifecycle of mobile citizen audiovisual media and opportunities to expand citizens' "narrative agency" in the public sphere. She employs a holistic approach to archival and human rights advocacy, working at the intersection of: authentication, contextualization, privacy, preservation, and accessibility. She believes civic media is the cornerstone of a more just and empathetic world.

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**The Journal of Creative Technologies (JCT)**

<https://ctechjournal.aut.ac.nz>

ISSN: 2230-2115

Colab, Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand

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*JCT* is a research communication platform published by Colab at the Faculty of Design and Creative Technologies, Auckland University of Technology.