

Metadata Dignity: Ethical Description in Community Archives

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community archives, metadata ethics, LGBTQIA+ archives, descriptive cataloging, queer theory

1. Introduction

Community archives have emerged as crucial sites where marginalized groups document and preserve their own histories [1]. Unlike institutional archives, community archives are initiated and controlled by the communities themselves, serving as sites of agency and self-determination [2]. The preservation of LGBTQIA+ histories faces unique challenges, including evolving terminology, historical bias leading to material destruction, and privacy concerns regarding individuals who weren't publicly out [3,4].

This study addresses three key research questions:

1. How do traditional archives use subject description metadata standards for LGBTQIA+ materials, and do these approaches meet community needs?
2. How can archives produce more ethical and relevant metadata through community involvement, collaboration, and respect?
3. What practices do community archives follow in descriptive cataloging, and how do these approaches differ from institutional standards?

These questions emerge from identified gaps in archival literature concerning the representation of marginalized communities whose identities and experiences have historically been misclassified or erased within traditional archival frameworks.

This research aims to develop a framework for "metadata dignity" in LGBTQIA+ archival practice. Metadata dignity encompasses ethical descriptive practices that prioritize community agency over institutional standards, extending CARE principles [5] to LGBTQIA+ archival contexts. This research is grounded in three interconnected theoretical frameworks. Critical Archival Theory recognizes archives as sites where power is exercised through decisions about what is preserved and how it is described [6,7]. Care Ethics, as applied to metadata by Jolicoeur [8], considers how relationship-centered approaches might transform descriptive practices.

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Queer Theory provides a foundation for understanding archives as bodies that resist normative categorization [9], challenging binary thinking often embedded in conventional classification systems.

2. Methodology

This research employs a mixed-methods approach combining ethnographic observation with structured data collection [10]. The current phase focuses on autoethnographic reflection. As both a researcher and community member, the author has documented metadata practices while participating in community archival spaces [11]. Data collection includes participant observation during cataloging sessions and reflective journaling. Autoethnographic insights will transition into structured data collection through semi-structured interviews, comparative metadata analysis, and user experience studies.

3. Results

Through autoethnographic work, four key tensions emerged:

- **Terminology Challenges** reveal gaps between standardized vocabularies and community terms, e.g., catalogers using "Resistance Literature" for AIDS activism materials.
- **Ethics of Representation** center questions about descriptive authority when processing correspondence from deceased individuals who weren't publicly out.
- **Personal/Political Dimensions** show how metadata creation blends personal connection with political consciousness, while
- **Accessibility vs. Cultural Specificity** reveals tensions between discoverability and preserving community-specific language.

Based on these insights, "metadata dignity" emphasizes four principles: Community Agency, Temporal Flexibility, Ethical Interoperability, and Reflexive Practice.

4. Discussion

The metadata dignity framework offers practical applications for information professionals. **Community Agency** prioritizes community involvement in descriptive decisions, while **Temporal Flexibility** accommodates evolving terminology while preserving historical context. **Ethical Interoperability** creates bridges between community vocabularies and broader standards, and **Reflexive Practice** establishes ongoing metadata review processes. Rather than forcing conformity to conventional systems that fail to capture emotional and political dimensions, this approach suggests community consultation processes, inclusive vocabulary policies, and contextual notes that balance historical language with contemporary understanding. This contributes to ethical metadata literature while addressing broader questions about power, representation, and justice in information systems.

5. Conclusion

Metadata dignity provides an adaptable framework for marginalized communities inadequately represented in traditional descriptive systems. By documenting innovative LGBTQIA+ community archival practices, this research demonstrates how ethical metadata serves cultural preservation, historical justice, and community empowerment.

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