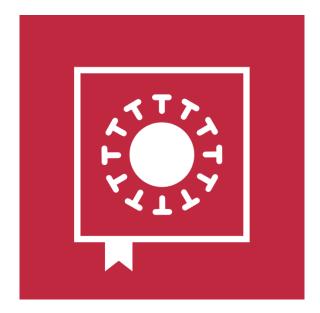# Teaching the Archives Module Three

A Journal of a Plague Year: An Archive of Covid-19

July 2020

Claire A. Tratnyek, Victoria Cain

Northeastern University

Module 3: Civic Purposes of Archives

• **Essential Questions:** How does record-keeping matter in the context of a democratic government? Is archival practice neutral? Who controls the records kept in archives, and who controls access to these archives? What 21st century events may pose a challenge to future historians because of the way records of these events have been collected?

• **Readings:**

1. Elena S. Danielson, excerpts from *The Ethical Archivist*, (Society of American Archivists, 2010), pp. 49-52, 55-56, 61-65, 121-123, 125-129, 137-144, and the "Case Studies" pp. 102-108.
2. Masha Gessen, "The Erasure of Political History at the National Archives." *The New Yorker, (January 19, 2020).* https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/the-erasure-of-political-history-at-the-national-archives-womens-march.
3. Podcast: *Archives in Context – Season 1, Episode 3 - Michelle Caswell* (January 28, 2019)*. Listen to excerpts at 00:00 – 02:40 and 24:10 – 37:49.*
4. Choose one or read both:
    a. Ellery Roberts-Biddle, "The New Gatekeepers: Will Google Decide How We Remember Syria's Civil War?" *Monument Lab*, (February 19, 2019). https://monumentlab.com/bulletin/the-new-gatekeepers-syrian-war
    b. Matt Apuzzo, "Uncovered Papers Show Past Government Efforts to Drive Gays from Jobs." *New York Times,* (May 20, 2014). https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/21/us/politics/uncovered-papers-show-past-government-efforts-to-drive-gays-from-jobs.html?hp
    5. Add course-relevant reading here:

• **Discussion Questions:**

• How can archives be political? How might issues of access and privacy affect private or governmentally-run archives?
• Who are the gatekeepers of information, and how do they control access? Think about corporate and governmental entities that control access to massive amounts of data (Google, Amazon, the U.S. government, etc.). Would a change in administration/ownership alter privacy or access?
• How do the contents of archives constitute the "historical record"? Is this idea flawed? Is archival practice neutral?
• Can we mitigate, supplement, or correct incomplete and inaccurate data from the past? How? What can we do today to ensure that the most complete and correct information is being collected (and contextualized) in archives?
• What is the civic purpose for the COVID-19 Digital Archive? How might it be used now and in the future?

• **Activities:**

1. Work with you partner(s) to choose a recent or current event or social/political movement (for example, the Arab Spring, *Occupy* movements, the Women's March, the Hong Kong protests, the West African Ebola outbreaks, Black Lives Matter protests, etc.) and try to find a digital archive of this event or movement. Use the *Digital Archive Research Organization Template* to list and analyze the following information about your chosen event/movement, and the archive you find for it:
    a. Name and description of your event/movement
    b. Who or what entity has collected information for this archive? Is the archive privately held or set up by a government? Is it a collaborative effort?
    c. Describe and critique
        i. the collecting policy and/or stated goals of this archive - what is the purpose of this archive, and how was it meant to be used?
        ii. the narrative(s) offered/suggested by this archive – do you notice any biases or propaganda?
        iii. the organizational structure of this archive (including user experience – how easy was it to find information?
        iv. the gaps you notice in the archive – whose voices are missing?
        v. The quality of the metadata

d. Summarize: How useful would this archive be to historians now and in the future? How could it be improved or supplemented?

2. With your partner(s) read the "Case Studies" examples of deaccessioning from *The Ethical Archivist* (Danielson, 2010). Briefly summarize the three case studies using the *Case Studies Analysis Template,* and compare the approaches of the three governments and the three archivists. What are the big takeaways Danielson wanted readers to understand by reading these case studies?

3. What are the archives like in your town or city? Where are they located? What is their budget, who is in charge of them? What kinds of documents are saved? How long are things saved? Who can access them? Who controls access? See how many of these questions you can answer by researching your local archives online or in person, and write a paragraph or two to answer them and describe how easy or difficult it was to find this information. Share what you found with your partner(s), and discuss further questions you have after doing this activity.

• **Pairs Well With:**

- Module 1: Archives 101
- Module 4: Archival Silences
- Module 5: Rapid Response Collecting

Digital Archive Research Organization Template

Event or Movement:
URL of Archive:
Who or what entity has collected information for this archive?
Describe and critique the collecting policy and/or stated goals of this archive. What is the purpose of this archive, and how was it meant to be used?
Describe and critique the narrative(s) offered/suggested by this archive. Do you notice any biases or propaganda?
Describe and critique the organizational structure of this archive. How easy was it to find information?
Describe and critique the gaps you notice in the archive. Whose voices are missing?
How useful would this archive be to historians now and in the future? How could it be improved or supplemented?

Case Studies Analysis Template

	Case Study 1: **Canadian Archives**	Case Study 2: **South African Archives**	Case Study 3: **United States Archive**s
Summary of Case			
Archivist's approach			
Government's approach			
Big Takeaways			

• Feedback:

We want to hear from you and your students about how using this module went! Please let us know what worked and what didn't by taking a few minutes to fill out this [survey](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1qP3F3zqYq1c3b3EG-1V89qpV6bk4a0MZTOP02cIDTaQ/edit?usp=sharing) (https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1qP3F3zqYq1c3b3EG-1V89qpV6bk4a0MZTOP02cIDTaQ/edit?usp=sharing). Thank you!