

COMMUNITY ARCHIVES AT THE DIGITAL REPOSITORY OF IRELAND

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Abstract – *The Community Archive Scheme is a bottom-up method of community engagement that the Digital Repository of Ireland (DRI) uses to work directly with no or low-income groups with digital material to preserve. The DRI's usual depositors are academic, cultural heritage, or public organisations and libraries with a long history of archiving who select material from their own collections for preservation. Through the Community Archive Scheme, we work in a hands-on way to provide digital preservation to a wider range of groups that fall outside of this sphere. The scheme celebrates its fifth anniversary in 2023 and during this period DRI has worked with nine voluntary groups to help preserve material on a variety of topics including the experience of asylum seekers in Ireland, maternal health, built heritage, LGBT rights and activism in Ireland. The types of material that we are working to preserve through this scheme vary from photographs of artists' works such as quilts, audio-visual material such as community documentaries, and documentaries produced for digital radio and social media. This paper will discuss how the scheme evolved, how these organisations have strengthened DRI as an organisation as well as making our community and collections more equitable and diverse, challenges we have encountered, some of the solutions we have developed, where our successes have come from and some of the future developments we are exploring so that we can continue to work with these groups.*

Keywords – *Digital Archives, Community Archives, Digital Preservation, Inclusion, Membership, Ireland, Cultural Heritage data*

Conference Topics – **DIGITAL ACCESSIBILITY, INCLUSION, AND DIVERSITY; WE'RE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER**

I. INTRODUCTION

DRI is a research-performing organization and national Trustworthy Digital Repository (TDR) for Ireland's humanities, cultural heritage, and social sciences data.

DRI has been certified by the CoreTrustSeal since 2018. As a national infrastructure for the arts, social sciences, and humanities, DRI provides reliable, long-term, sustained access to social and cultural digital data. We make this data openly available in line with the FAIR data principles of findability, accessibility, interoperability, and reusability. We aim to safeguard Ireland's social, cultural, and historical record through active management of digital content over time to ensure that this content remains accessible to researchers, cultural heritage enthusiasts, and members of the public into the future. We support best practices in digital archiving, digital preservation, Open Access, Open Research, and FAIR data sharing. DRI is funded by the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) via the Higher Education Authority (HEA) and the Irish Research Council (IRC).

The route for adding collections to DRI is through paid membership. We have forty paid members from Ireland's higher-level institutions, local authorities, research groups and centres, galleries, libraries, archives and museums. It is important to say that DRI does not take ownership of the collections that are published on the Repository, we steward them. Copyright remains with the collection owners. Where they arise, questions, or decisions, about the use of these collections are sent to the collection owners. The terms and conditions that govern the management of these collections are laid down in our Organizational Manager Agreement. Our

federated model of membership means that the collection owners are given access to the repository so that they can ingest the collections and the accompanying themselves. The benefits we offer to members include ingest to the Repository, long-term preservation of collections, training on digital preservation, training on how to add your collection to the repository, and access to the advice of DRI staff and our events. Digital objects published on the Repository are issued with DataCite DOIs. This paid-membership scheme was launched in 2018 and DRI has grown by approximately eight paying members yearly. The paid membership scheme, offering full membership at €5,000 per annum or associate membership at €500 per annum, was launched in March 2018.

The beginnings of the Community Archive Scheme

As we were preparing to launch the paid membership scheme we began to discuss the types of groups that would be excluded because of the cost of membership and how we might create a different route for them to access digital preservation in the repository. Over the next six months, we discussed how we might offer the benefits of membership to low or no-income groups and who those groups might be. DRI was still in the stage of digital preservation education for Irish HSS and Cultural Heritage audiences, so we didn't know who might apply to the scheme, what level of support they would need, or what the size of their collections might be. We just wanted to make sure there was a space within our organization for groups who might find our membership fees prohibitive. Our Collection Policy also mandates a focus on at-risk data and topics underrepresented in the repository, and we suspected a convergence between

groups holding this material and those who could not afford membership.¹ With that in mind, the conditions for the scheme were that 'no or low-income groups' could apply and would receive associate member benefits for a year. The scheme was launched in late 2018 for the following year.

Criteria for eligibility are that the materials organizations are seeking to deposit are already a digital format and that they have volunteers in their organization who have time to attend training and deposit the collections. We also ask that they have metadata to go with the collections (though we provide assistance in meeting our minimum system requirements). Finally, we ask that they have copyright clearance to deposit the items in their collections.² In the first year, it was clear that there was a demand for the scheme when we received 8 applications. The inaugural winner of the award was the Cork LGBT Archive which was run by Orla Egan, an activist who had a strong archival focus. The collection was well organized, highly curated, had strong metadata, and Orla was very familiar with the work of DRI so she did not require much additional training. Her collection was published in 2019.³ Two groups were awarded under the scheme in 2020, the Asylum Archive and Cork Media Framework, in recognition of the outreach challenges that Covid 19 brought to large and small organizations. We awarded three groups in 2021 including Joe Lee Films,⁴ Dublin Ghost Signs and the Elephant Collective. In 2022 Tusk History Society⁵ and Bray Arts⁶ were awarded under the scheme and in 2023 the winner was Dublin Digital Radio.

Programme Success

The immediate and visible success of the Community Archive is that it has increased the number and diversity

Community Based Films [Depositing Institution], <https://doi.org/10.7486/DRI.90205r016>

⁵ Tusk History Society. (2022) Tusk History Society: Letters from the 1880s - 1890s, Digital Repository of Ireland [Distributor], Tusk History Society [Depositing Institution], <https://doi.org/10.7486/DRI.7h14qf91p-1>

⁶ Bray Arts. (2022) Bray Arts Collections, Digital Repository of Ireland [Distributor], Bray Arts [Depositing Institution], <https://doi.org/10.7486/DRI.5t356b38v>

¹ Digital Repository of Ireland. (2021) DRI Collection Policy, Digital Repository of Ireland [Distributor], Digital Repository of Ireland [Depositing Institution], <https://doi.org/10.7486/DRI.kk91v774c-2>

² Digital Repository of Ireland, Community Archive Scheme <https://dri.ie/dri-community-archive-scheme>

³ Orla Egan. (2019) Cork LGBT Archive, Digital Repository of Ireland [Distributor], Cork LGBT Archive [Depositing Institution], <https://doi.org/10.7486/DRI.2j635q62d>

⁴ Joe Lee. (2021) Dublin based community films by Joe Lee, Digital Repository of Ireland [Distributor], Joe Lee

of our datasets. Many of these collections intersect, thematically or geographically, with collections we already or subsequently held which means the datasets can take on new layers and meaning. The Community Archive Scheme has also brought us into contact with Repository users who have accessibility issues. It has become more common to have users with accessibility issues on DRI's website and the Repository interface but we have worked with these users to upload their collections. We have had to improve our site accessibility and have had the opportunity to work in a hands-on way with these users.

Working with these groups has given us an insight into just how vulnerable their material is. In addition to all of the usual threats like bit rot and digital obsolescence, the material is threatened because of a lack of funding or lack of appreciation for what information it holds. As much of the material lies outside formal organizations, it is held by volunteers with low, or most likely, no income. The material is often preserved by one custodian with an active interest and appreciation of its importance. If this custodian moves on, or cannot afford to sustain the material, it is lost. Working with these nine community groups has made sure that we are preserving endangered material and both the groups and the staff working on these collections value this work. Digital Radio Recordings, for example, have been described as 'endangered' in the Digital Preservation Coalition's 'Bit List' in 2022.⁷ In a broader organizational sense, we have learned a lot from working with these groups and these lessons have fed into our research projects such as our Wellcome Trust-funded 'Archiving Reproductive Health' project.

Challenges and solutions

In addition to the very clear benefits, the work presents several challenges for DRI. These challenges can be practical, technical, outreach or policy-related, or even organizational challenges. Applications to the scheme can be uneven and vary from year to year. Often we are approached by groups whose collections are interesting and at-risk, but not yet sufficiently digitized to be eligible for the scheme. While we run an active social media and targeting campaign, word of mouth is sometimes the best way to find suitable groups. This indicates though that there is a general lack of awareness about digital preservation, what it means and the processes that are needed to support it.

Associate membership was offered to community archives for a year. We now know that a year is not

⁷ Digital Preservation Coalition 'Bit List', 2022, <https://www.dpconline.org/digipres/champion-digital-preservation/bit-list>

⁸ Deborah Thorpe, Digital Repository of Ireland, 'Breaking down barriers to digital preservation through

enough for many community archives to ingest their collections as most are unpaid volunteers. Unlike with the mainstay of our members which are organizations with libraries and archives, we have realized that we need to think about the technical language we have been using at our training sessions and in the supporting material we create. While we stipulate in the conditions of the scheme that material must be 'preservation-ready' we often need to assist with the creation of metadata and this can add many months, or even years, to the project.

One of the issues that we are increasingly encountering is the size of the collections. As storage has become more accessible broadly, and it's easier to create digital material, the size of these types of digital collections has of course grown. Community groups have often not undertaken critical appraisal of these collections and want to deposit the collections as a whole. The DRI publishes the collections it preserves under a variety of open-access licenses. Community groups don't always have enough information about the copyright of material they hold so assessing and working through copyright can take time. While we ask that groups have some metadata for the collections they'd like to deposit, it often needs work to get it to a standard that we can accept and this can mean offering more training and support. Supporting groups to overcome these challenges can raise the issues of competing resources at an organizational level as we can find ourselves offering a lot of assistance to those who win the scheme. While we have balanced that in previous years, we are also aware that we can't accept all the organizations who apply to the scheme because we are limited in terms of time, staff and resources. It's important to ensure that the support we offer these groups doesn't impact what we offer our fee-paying members who support the scheme. We are also aware that we need to work to promote the positive opportunities created by the scheme so that fee-paying members also feel invested in how the scheme is progressing and its outcomes.

In Autumn 2021 we developed a training program aimed at community archives and members. Working with the community archives in a more collaborative training setting, and alongside regular members, provided us with important insights about what we need to do to break down barriers. Our Education and Outreach manager captured her takeaways from the sessions, and the thoughts of some of the groups involved in a DRI and DPC blog post 'Breaking down barriers to digital preservation through training'.⁸

training' <https://www.dpconline.org/blog/wdpd/wdpd2021-thorpe>, <https://dri.ie/news/digital-preservation-community-archives/>

Including regular members in these training sessions has meant that they get a real sense of the vulnerability and value of the material that is being preserved through the scheme. We are exploring how running a similar type of training program on digital appraisal for community groups might work to make the size of the collections they want to deposit more manageable.

The main obstacle that we have encountered as an organization is that our membership policies are focused on preserving material for organizations we expect to be active well into the future, such as higher education institutions. All of our policies, including our Organizational Manager Agreement are focused on the idea that we steward collections and that where decisions need to be made about the future use of collections, for instance, that decision is made by the depositing organization. Some of the community groups we work with come to us to deposit material because their organization is winding down. Others cannot commit to long-term involvement for various reasons, including a shortage of time and volunteers. While some want to be a core part of our community, others need to be able to deposit and leave.

We began talking in 2022 about how we might restructure the scheme to make it easier for groups to deposit their data. This would mean the introduction of a one-off deposit agreement where we would invite applications from community groups and they could deposit collections outside of the membership framework. We will continue to work with groups who have the material they want to deposit over the medium term but an agreement like this allows us to make organizational plans for how the material will be managed if the community group winds up. There is a balance to be struck here, however. We need to make sure that we create enough space for community groups to be active, own their data, participate and provide input into DRI and our community as a whole, while also allowing them to leave knowing that their data is safely preserved. A second potential route for the preservation of community archive data is through a partnership scheme with current members. This year we are undertaking a pilot scheme to pair community groups with some of our members which will see a community group ingest through a geographically-linked, or disciplinary-linked, member. In this way, the member can become the collection's custodian in the long term, while the community group is recognised as the work's creator.

We are also beginning to develop more partnerships with Community Archiving groups, other archives and

funding bodies who support these types of activities as well as looking at how this work can feed into our research project. In September 2023 we are running an Irish Community Archive Symposium with the Irish Community Archive Network (iCAN) that will look at Digital Preservation. iCAN has worked with twenty-eight community archives across the Republic of Ireland. This partnership will allow us to broaden our audience while also raising the profile of Digital Preservation. We are also working with the Radical Archives network this year, which is made up of volunteer and community archivists with digital material. We hope we can work to help support the group in the future. Our work with community groups on the Archiving Reproductive Health project helped us develop a resource for Community Groups 'Guide to Archiving for Community Groups'.⁹

Conclusion

The Community Archive Scheme has undoubtedly brought several successes to DRI by diversifying and enriching our datasets and community as a whole, but it has also raised challenges for us as an organization. With a growing network of members and ever-growing data sets, we want to continue to work with these groups in a way that is sustainable for us as an organization but also equitable and supportive for community groups as well. This means recognizing where these organizations do not fit within our regular structures and creating new pathways for these groups so that we can all work together to preserve their digital collections. We also feel that in opening up these new pathways, whether it's through a single depositor scheme or by creating partnerships with our members, new opportunities will arise that we haven't yet considered.

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⁹ Digital Repository of Ireland, Archiving Reproductive Health, & Archiving the 8th. (2023) Guide to archiving digital records for volunteer and community groups, Digital

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