

Real-Time History: Engaging with Living Archives and Temporal Multiplicities

Seventh Conference on Digital Humanities and Digital History at the German Historical Institute Washington (GHI) in collaboration with the Luxembourg Centre for Contemporary and Digital History (C²DH), the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media (RRCHNM), Chair for Digital History at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, NFDI4Memory, and Herder Institute for Historical Research on East Central Europe. The conference will focus on the theme of “living archives” and their significance in contemporary history. Submissions are encouraged to address the value of living archives for real-time history, reflect on access and stewardship issues, provide examples for analyzing living archives, and explore the history and technology behind them. Deadline for submissions is **August 15, 2024**.

Date and Location

March 19-21, 2025, German Historical Institute Washington, DC, USA

Conference Theme

The Seventh Conference on Digital Humanities and Digital History will revolve around the concept of living archives and its relevance for contemporary history. The digital transformation has challenged scholars and memory workers to define their engagement with historical temporalities, with the past, present and future, in new ways. Digital technologies can be used effectively to support the development, analysis, and preservation of collections, projects, and tools that feature diverse temporal perspectives, including multifaceted, dynamic, relational, and cyclical conceptions of time. Such approaches can challenge, or even disrupt, prevalent linear conceptions of the progression of historical time. While this opens many possibilities for historical projects, it also presents new challenges. For example, historians and memory workers who have used digital technologies to document history in (almost) real time must now address new, unfamiliar, and often uncomfortable ethical and legal questions associated with “documenting the now.” Similarly, while taking advantage of the ability of new methodologies to collect large sets of data in a short period of time, we are repeatedly confronted with the fragility of digital objects and systems, and the challenges and costs of digital preservation, with the futures of the past in a digital era ranging between abundance and scarcity as astutely predicted by Roy Rosenzweig over two decades ago.

Our conference will provide a forum to discuss these and other questions related to making history in real time. A particular focus will be on the increasing number of initiatives de-

signed to capture history by creating “living archives” supported by digital technology. Originally, the concept of “living archives” goes back to the oral history movement during the 1970s and 1980s, when historians set out to capture people’s life experiences and memories while facilitating the transmission of generational memories embodied by living individuals. With the evolution of digital technologies, conceptions have broadened in recent decades to include a variety of collections and archives capturing events as they occur and in their immediate aftermath. This includes pioneering rapid response digital collecting projects like the September 11 Digital Archive and the Hurricane Digital Memory Bank, as well as the countless recent projects documenting people’s experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic such as A Journal of the Plague Year in the United States or Covidmemory in Europe. It also includes collections and archives utilizing social media to document the Black Lives Matter movement, the Arab Spring, the Gezi Park protests in Istanbul, and archives and art installations created as part of the Occupy Wall Street movement, to mention a few. Participatory documentation and archiving projects have also empowered migrants of all ages to document and preserve their migration experiences. Most recently, several projects and collections are documenting wartime experiences such as in Ukraine through social media. These approaches conceive of archives and collections as discursive, dynamic, and open-ended processes that actively contribute to present events and developments, which, in turn, shape the development of living archives and public history.

Submission Guidelines

For this three-day conference, we invite colleagues to submit proposals by **August 15, 2024**, for:

- (a) workshops for (hands-on) presentations of projects, tools, or skills (90 minutes),
- (b) or individual presentations (20 minutes)

that:

(1) *Discuss the value of living archives for doing real-time history.* By emphasizing the contingency and open-ended character of historical developments, “living archives” confront scholars and memory workers with fundamental questions regarding their roles and responsibilities in the present. How can living archives support ongoing dialogues about cycles of violence and oppression in the past, present, and future? What are the epistemological implications for the thinking, doing, and narrating of history when scholars are actively engaged in the creation, stewardship, and analysis of sources through living archives? Do living archives contribute to the democratization of historical storytelling by promoting multi-voicedness and “shared authority” in digital public history?

(2) Reflect on access to and stewardship of living archives. What are some of the ethical and technical implications of “documenting the now,” including documenting the experiences of historically marginalized people and communities? How can individuals and groups be empowered to manage digital collections and archives outside of established repositories and in the post-custodial tradition throughout the life cycle of projects and records? How can living archives be maintained in an environment that is dominated by large for-profit companies driving rapid technical developments and media obsolescence? How can living archives balance the epistemological virtues of open access and respect for informational self-determination and privacy? What might ethical and professional long-term stewardship and research data management of these projects look like?

(3) Provide examples for analyzing living archives. What methodological strategies and frameworks exist to analyze collections of data that continue to evolve over time? What does it mean if archival responsibility shifts from preserving the past for the future to documenting a multiplicity of pasts, presents, and futures? Are there best practices for the documentation of the building, managing, and maintaining of living archives aiming at promoting transparency and traceability of data? What practices can avoid creating indexical regimes that (re)produce biases or representational inequalities?

(4) Explore the history and technology of living archives. What insights can the long history of living archives offer for scholars and memory workers creating and maintaining such archives today? What are the origins of the idea of living archives? What is the specific “archival performativity” of living archives and memory banks, and do they activate historical records in a different way than other forms of archives? How have advancements in technology influenced the development, design, and public use of living archives? How did new “mnemotechnologies” shape the documentary impulses of people and how did this affect historical imagination? Has the digital era paved the way for a new “snapshot culture” making “everyone their own historian”?

The conference will offer a dynamic, inclusive international forum to discuss these and other questions. Building on the established format of past GHI conferences on Digital History and Digital Humanities, we invite submissions of traditional analytical papers, reports reflecting on past and present projects, and workshops. We specifically encourage archivists to apply. While reflections about “living archives” will be an important component of the conference, we also invite presentations drawing on other experiences and analyses of time – and temporal multiplicities – in the digital environment.

Registration and Contact Information

Although we favor in-person attendance of participants and presenters, facilities for hybrid participation will be provided with the aim of making the event as inclusive as possible. Please submit a **short CV and paper abstract of no more than 500 words** to our [conference platform](#) by **August 15, 2024**. Accommodations will be arranged and paid for by the conference organizers. Participants will make their own travel arrangements; funding subsidies for travel is available upon request (for one presenter per paper or workshop) for selected scholars, especially those who might not otherwise be able to attend the workshop, including junior scholars and scholars from universities with limited resources. For further information regarding the event's format and conceptualization, please contact Jana Keck, keck@ghi-dc.org. For questions about logistics (travel and accommodation), please contact our event coordinator Nicola Hofstetter, hofstetter-phelps@ghi-dc.org.

Group Bibliography

- <https://www.zotero.org/groups/5420323/living-archives-dh-conference-2025/library>

Conference Committee

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