Human Rights Archiving: From Postcustodial Theory to Praxis

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postcustodial theory of archives noun – the idea that archivists will no longer physically acquire and maintain records, but that they will provide management oversight for records that will remain in the custody of the record creators.1

The postcustodial model emerged in archival literature in the 1980s, but over the past decade the debate about the model’s usefulness and applicability has waned.2 Part of this decline could be attributed to the tendency in the professional literature to focus on the theory of the model and rarely draw upon actual use cases of it. Hopefully, providing contemporary concrete examples of the postcustodial model in action will stimulate further discussion and action around the actual challenges and possibilities of this model.

Since 2008, the University of Texas Libraries’ (UTL) Human Rights Documentation Initiative (HRDI)3 has used a postcustodial model of archiving that leverages archivists’ professional expertise in service of human rights documentation creators and advocates who do not have the technical, financial, or human resources to ensure that their documentation is preserved and accessible far into the future.

Although we’ve found that a postcustodial archival model is an essential tool within the human rights context, the postcustodial model also can be implemented in other archival contexts and enables archives to consider new possibilities for collaboration in collection development, preservation, and access. As digital preservation remains an ever-moving target, it’s important for archivists to draw on diverse tools and methodologies that will facilitate their work in preserving the historical record.

Why the Postcustodial Model

UTL established HRDI with the goal of partnering with human rights advocates and organizations to preserve their fragile audiovisual documentation that would be important for the historical record as well as future education and advocacy efforts. To date, HRDI has established partnerships with seven organizations that are creating and/or collecting documentation of human rights violations: Free Burma Rangers (Southeast Asia), National Police Historical Archive (Guatemala), Kigali Genocide Memorial (Rwanda), Museum of the Word and Image (El Salvador), National Security Archive (United States), Texas After Violence Project (United States), and WITNESS (United States).

The documentation held at these organizations includes video testimonies by Rwanda genocide survivors, raw footage of undercover investigative journalism on human trafficking, guerilla radio broadcasts during El Salvador’s civil war, official documentation regarding disappearances and extrajudicial killings during Guatemala’s civil war, and oral histories with people who have been directly affected by capital punishment in Texas.

Initially HRDI envisioned that it would use a centralized archival model in which individuals and organizations would send their materials to UTL for digitization and/or deposit. We soon learned, however, that potential human rights partners were understandably wary to send their materials to a distant repository, even if temporarily. Removing the documentation from its original context disrupts the partners’ operations, be it education or advocacy, and shipping already fragile archival materials puts them more at risk.

Furthermore, as with any collaboration, trust plays a key role in the success of postcustodial partnerships. When operating out of a large institution in the United States, this trust is earned and not assumed due to histories in which the United States had been an explicit or complicit partner in human rights violations that occurred in countries in which HRDI partners reside, such as Rwanda, Guatemala, and El Salvador. Thus HRDI had to consider alternative archival models that would help build trust and address partners’ preservation and access concerns.

Postcustodial Theory and Practice

The implementation of a postcustodial archival model necessitates that archival preservation begins at the materials’ inception, not when they are no longer in high use. Through these partnerships, HRDI provides partner organizations with the necessary equipment and training to incorporate preservation practices into the organizations’ existing
workflows. As a result of this training, local staff at partner organizations digitize their materials onsite, and the resulting digital copies are sent back to HRDI for long-term preservation should anything befall the original materials. The original materials remain with partner organizations, and HRDI then works with these partners to determine appropriate modes of access for the digital surrogates.

A guiding principle of HRDI’s implementation of the postcustodial model is that record creators are experts on their own records. The traditional collection model disempowers record-creating communities by taking their materials away from their oversight and expertise. In a postcustodial model, organizations are responsible for the arrangement and description of their materials. This is often necessary on a practical level, as in-depth description of materials often requires language skillsets and subject expertise not easily found within UTL.

More importantly, however, local description and arrangement practices help build preservation capacity and promote the organization’s ownership of its historical materials. Ideally the work resulting from postcustodial collaborations serves the partner organizations’ programming needs, meets established standards for preservation, and serves as a valuable primary resource for teaching, research, and advocacy.

Challenges with the Postcustodial Model

The postcustodial model helps overcome significant barriers to preservation. Even so, HRDI has encountered certain challenges around privacy and access as well as scalability and sustainability.

Balancing archival access, which is typically expected of public university archival collections, with the privacy and safety of individuals and communities documented can present a complex challenge. Many collections must be wholly or partially restricted to help protect the physical safety of those documented; however, most access platforms for digital audiovisual objects do not enable fine-grained privacy and access control.

Additional privacy concerns also arise when archival institutions author materials to promote partner collaborations and collections (for example, press releases or finding aids). To address this concern, HRDI archivists rely on partner organizations to articulate and dictate privacy and access restrictions, and we share any written materials with partner organizations before they are made public. We then work closely with partners to devise access solutions that do not compromise safety.

These solutions include creating specific access points for partner organizations and the general public, restricting access to materials to in-person patrons as opposed to making materials publicly accessible online, and experimenting with technology that can anonymize subjects. By respecting partners’ privacy and access requirements, HRDI is able to build and maintain the trust that is necessary for the success of the partnerships.

In addition to building and maintaining trust, the success of postcustodial partnerships also necessitates the ongoing commitment and support at all levels of the partnering archival institution. Postcustodial partnerships are long-term relationships, and archival institutions must commit resources to travel to partner organizations to build rapport and provide training and oftentimes equipment; ship materials between organizations; and store, process, and provide access to ongoing accruals.

Therefore, archives must be able to justify to resource allocators why investing in these resources is beneficial to their institutions. At a university, this often means being able to tie the archival resources to the research and teaching activities of the faculty and students. This justification can significantly affect the extent to which university-based archives can leverage funding to further the use of postcustodial collections in the classroom, external outreach, and faculty research.

Despite these ongoing challenges within postcustodial partnerships, the HRDI has learned that our partner organizations would not have worked with us had it not been for the postcustodial archival model and the ability to maintain physical custody and intellectual control over their materials.

Postcustodial Possibilities

The postcustodial model provides obvious advantages within the realm of human rights archiving; it also can be implemented in other archival contexts. Drawing on the successes of HRDI, the University of Texas will continue expanding its use of the postcustodial model through its ongoing “Primeros Libros”7 project and the recently received Mellon Foundation planning grant, “Postcustodial Archival Development and Digital Scholarship: Learning from Latin
America," for which it will launch three postcustodial pilot projects with partners in Central America.8

The postcustodial model is not prescriptive. It will be most successful when considered as a framework for relationship building and decision making and tailored to a partner’s needs rather than as a strict formula that can be applied uniformly. Through creative and collaborative experimentation with and application of the postcustodial theory across diverse archival contexts, archivists will be better equipped to fulfill their responsibility to preserve and provide access to the historical record.

Notes


2 The earliest reference that I have found for postcustodial archiving is Gerald Ham’s 1981 The American Archivist article “Archival Strategies for the Post-custodial Era,” Vol. 44, No. 3, Summer 1981.

3 For more information on the University of Texas Libraries Human Rights Documentation Initiative, see www.lib.utexas.edu/hrdi.


7 The Primeros Libros project (www.primeroslibros.org) is a collaboration between the Benson Latin American Collection and fifteen institutions in the U.S. and Mexico to digitize and provide open online access to the first printed books in the New World.

8 For more information, see http://www.lib.utexas.edu/benson/announcements/lilias-benson-latin-american-studies-and-collections-receives-mellon-foundation.