DISRUPTING THE SYSTEM:
DECOLONIZING DIGITAL COLLECTIONS WITHIN COLONIAL STRUCTURES?

Richard Arias-Hernandez, Samuel Mickelson, Lisa Nathan

INTRODUCTION

This study concentrates on a traumatic digital collection (Nathan et al., 2015) held by the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation (NCTR) at the University of Manitoba. This collection holds over 5 million digital surrogates of residential school records from the Canadian federal government and church organizations as well as over 6,200 survivor testimonies gathered during Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What role is policy playing in negotiating plural conceptions of trust in traumatic digital collections situated in multicultural contexts?
- How is the socio-technical infrastructure of the NCTR developing (with a particular focus on policy) in a national climate of high expectations and ongoing conflict?

DATA COLLECTION

The research team gathered data through three strands of inquiry:

1. A literature review of books, articles, legal cases, and other sources related to the TRC and NCTR
2. Semi-structured interviews with archivists, systems designers, and others involved with the NCTR
3. Twice-weekly web captures of the NCTR website to track policy announcements

FINDINGS | THEMES

COLONIAL LEGACIES

The NCTR operates within the University of Manitoba. As such, it functions under the same federal and provincial frameworks and legislation as the University.

"…[The NCTR] has to figure out a strategy to overcome that historical reluctance…[and] mistrust and to frame itself as an Indigenous-controlled, community-based institution that wants to help bring out more information and knowledge about what happened in the era." (Study Participant)

COLLECTION, CONTEXT, AND REPRESENTATION

Participants were also concerned about how the colonial gaze is perpetuated by a collection of records created by the government and Church organizations (e.g., selection, acquisition, and description of materials).

"Well, I don't like the idea of say the NRC publishes this wonderful database that Survivors…or the general public can browse through….[It] would be horrible to think that they come up with a document and have no idea of context. There's information there, but not enough…to be able to make an educated or informed decision about what the record speaks to…." (Study Participant)

PLURALITY OF INDIGENOUS VOICES

Some interview participants emphasized challenges that the NCTR faces incorporating the plurality of Indigenous voices in Canada into the design and delivery of its information system.

"And I think that…the geographic challenges that we have…and the range of cultures…[makes] it impossible to come up with any…monolithic way of approaching this that is going to be meaningful and trustworthy and helpful to everyone. So, how do you…mediate for those kinds of problems and minimize situations…[in which] somebody might feel that their voice has been lost, or that they are not being treated respectfully?" (Study Participant)

CONCLUSIONS

This study contributes to the growing literature on archival pluralism by identifying and articulating the paradoxes facing those striving to decolonize digital collections within colonial structures.

SELECTED REFERENCES

1. Nathan, Lisa, Shaffer, Elizabeth and Maggie Castor. (2015). "Stewarding Collections of Trauma: Plurality, Responsibility, and Questions of Action." *Archivaria* 80: 89-118.
2. National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation. (2013). "Centre for Truth and Reconciliation Administrative Agreement." Retrieved from http://umanitoba.ca/admin/indigenous_connect/media/IND-00-013-NRCAS-AdminAgreement.pdf

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