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Kimberly Christen
Washington State University

Leslie Davis
University of Kentucky

Zachary Griffith
University of Kentucky

Jacob Neely
University of Kentucky
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Traditional Knowledge and Digital Archives

An Interview with Kim Christen

Interviewers: Leslie Davis, Zachary Griffith, and Jacob Neely

DISCLOSURE EDITORIAL COLLECTIVE, UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY

Dr. Kim Christen is a Professor in the Department of English, the Director of the Digital Technology and Culture Program, the Director of the Center for Digital Scholarship and Curation, and the Director of Digital Initiatives for the College of Arts and Sciences at Washington State University. Christen is also the Director of the Plateau Peoples' Web Portal, a collaboratively curated site of Plateau cultural materials; Mukurtu CMS, a content management system and community digital archive platform built around the particular needs of indigenous peoples globally; and co-Director with Jane Anderson of Local Contexts, an educational website for innovative traditional knowledge licenses and labels for indigenous cultural heritage. Her academic research and grant-funded projects focus on the intersection of digital technologies, intellectual property rights, archival process, cultural heritage movements and the ethics of openness within Indigenous communities, and with and by libraries, archives, and museums.

Zach Griffith (ZG): Can you tell us about your origin story as an academic?

Kim Christen (Christen): Having grown up in the suburbs of Mesa, Arizona, I was not necessarily aware of the large number of reservations in the area. During my freshman year in college, I took an Intro to World Religions class. It was one of those huge classes with 500 people. The instructor, who was this alternative-type guy, did not stick to the five major religions. So, we had a whole section on Native American religions, which honestly blew me away. He was using an overhead projector with transparencies, if you all have ever seen those, and he had gone around the Phoenix area and taken pictures of all these businesses, like Kachina Cadillac, that were using the names of Native American nations or deities. He showed those places and then he took out the names of Native American nations or deities and replaced them with Christian, Jewish, or Hindu names to ask, "Would we do this? Would

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we call a gas station ‘Jesus Mart’?” The answer would be no, right? Yet, we call stores Kachina Mart without a second thought. It’s because we don’t have a narrative about kachinas and people know very little about their meaning to Native communities.

After that class, I was struck by how things can get erased in our landscape. It really started me down the line. My honors thesis looked at a legal case around the use of peyote, the narratives from those on both sides about the use of peyote, and how peyote is classified. We have a regulatory structure that completely marginalizes other communities’ traditional knowledge of plants. The federal government classified peyote as a Schedule III narcotic, but it’s used in the Native American church as part of their ceremonies. Since it has been classified as a narcotic, you can be arrested and put in jail for possessing it. The court case was about two Native American men who had been arrested for having peyote in their truck on the way to a ceremony. I continued to explore these themes in a master’s program in cultural anthropology and conducted research in Australia, which was another eye-opening experience for me. The research was more about how do traditional practices, or the things that indigenous communities label as traditional, get reconfigured in modern situations in ways that don’t replay the progressive narrative that is often overlaid onto indigenous communities.

From there, I went on to complete my Ph.D. in the History of Consciousness Department at UC Santa Cruz, which is really a theoretical department. I was reading a lot of postcolonial theory, feminist theory, and really trying to see the construction of the sorts of structures that we use to filter things through. All of this happened before I had any interest in anything that was digital or media related. There was a digital media program that was sort of in its infancy at UC Santa Cruz while I was there and I started working as a teaching assistant in that department. I immersed myself in the department. As I was doing research, I was digging out archival records of people that I’d met and people who I’d worked with. I wasn’t doing archival research in the sense of trying to find information about something abstract. It was archival research for very personal reasons for the communities that I’d built personal relationships with.

So, the origin is that all origin stories are messy. There’s no singular story but I would definitely say that what still sticks with me today emphasizes *what’s not seen* and *what don’t we see*. It’s not so much about it not being there as it is that we just don’t have the lens on. I saw those things growing up in Arizona every day with my own eyes, but I didn’t *see* them. My dissertation looked at those rearticulations of traditional practices in modern settings. How do these practices get reconfigured and layered and how does that make these worlds more visible? It brings in the social justice angle because when those things start to become visible then how do we make sense of them within a legal structure or within a social structure where indigenous communities are marginalized, penalized, or oppressed for certain beliefs, the way they look, the way they act, or even the way they talk?

Jacob Neely (JN): How do you define the archives, or archive, and what is the role of the archivist?

Christen: Well, traditionally, archives have been sites of collecting that have attempted from their beginnings to take a veiled neutral stance because they were instruments of the state, instruments of empire. I think we can see them as these structures and systems, much

like government or anything else that performs a certain function in society. Rather than what *is* the archive, what *function* does it serve? It serves as a site for remembering. Not only are archives sites of memory and remembering but they're now becoming these generative sites of creation; creation of knowledge. They're sites *for* and constructions *of* memory. They're constructions, first of all, of a national origin story: "This is who we are as a nation." I was just looking at the national archives for the U.S. and it's very much framed around the origin stories of the nation and, within that, it's always our goal to look at the cracks and what's *not* there; what's not put into the glass case for viewing. I'm very interested in what never gets processed. Every time you go to an archive or museum or a library—and we can say it's about budgets, of course—but it's not all about budgets because if you look at the history of archives, only certain numbers of collections ever get processed. If you go to any archive, they'll say, "We have hundreds of collections that we haven't even processed yet." Our university has that, every archive has that. To me, it's more about the decisions we make around that.

Rather than seeing archives as these sterile places where things are collected and placed, it's more effective to see them as generative sites for knowledge construction. At that point, they would become active instead of passive, but I think it would require a whole shift in standards in how we train archivists in the workflow from appraisal to accessioning to processing. If you've read about post-custodial archives before, then you know that the archives were always about the physical custody of materials: "I have your records and papers now." However, proponents of post-custodialism are saying, "We are not going to be the keepers of your collection. We might digitize it, have digital surrogates and make those available, or use them for an art display, but we are not going to keep them." It's getting away from this notion that it's the material object—the thing, the collection, the papers—that have value. I mean, yes, they do have value but archives can also be sites for reimagining and repurposing. Digital technology allows us to do some of that, although not without its own baggage as well. Post-custodialism moves away from the ownership model and the collection model, which is very much steeped in the colonial model: "We're going to own territories, we're going to own knowledge, we're going to take this over."

ZG: Can you talk about how archives figure into your own research and what kinds of archives you work with?

Christen: My work around archives did start out being *in* archives but is now more about building the digital platform that we have created and restructuring standards for archives. Most of my work has to do with creating new workflows for archivists, for those people who are doing archival work but are not necessarily archivists. How do we look at the archival work that people are already doing? That reimagining, that telling of those stories? They're making choices even though they might not look at it as appraisal, accessioning, documentation, and metadata. They might not put it in those terms but that's what they're doing when they're reorganizing and reformulating bits and pieces of information of images, of pictures. For my master's research, I ended up in the national archives in Australia and that involved looking at colonial records. I looked at early explorers who went through the area where I was working in Central Australia. It's really fascinating to look at the framework of a white, male, botanist in the early 1900s who happened to be on the expedition that was trekking through

Central Australia. I mean, it's a perspective and I wondered what he was leaving out. I know that there were women were there, but not in his recording of the time and place. What is interesting about the colonial history of Central Australia is that it has a trajectory that's 150 years apart from that of the coast of Australia because the early explorers kept dying. They thought, "There must be a great ocean in the middle of the continent because nobody could live in this landscape." But Aboriginal people have lived in Australia for at least 60,000 years before the explorers got there and those dates go back even further now. Aboriginal people have always lived there. Why not take that origin story?

I spent a lot of my time in the archives with my children in Australia. My oldest son, Jakob, is 19 and he's a freshman in college. He was 2, at the time, and he broke one of the photocopiers in the national archives. That's just the other reality of your life as a scholar. Your personal life is very much intermixed. I must say, I haven't done archival research like that in many years because it led me to the creation of Mukurtu as a software platform, as a digital archiving platform. I was reimagining that scenario for what happens to those documents when we can get them back to the communities and they can tell their stories on top of the story of W. E. H. Stanner. How do we layer other community histories around that? Now, I spend most of my time thinking about workflow and standards, such as the standards for the creation of a metadata description, which is very formulaic. A description for a photographic representation should be a sentence, maybe two. It's very much that bird's eye objective view where anybody looking at this photograph is going to see the same thing even though we know that's not the case. How do we create structures that allow for those cultural protocols, the knowledge systems, that already exist? For instance, The Warumungu community already has a system for knowledge circulation that is different from an archival, standard knowledge circulation. So, how do we create archives that respect those different ethical codes for managing, circulating, sharing, and duplicating what's in those records?

Leslie Davis (LD): What was the team building process like for you? Did you need a very diverse team when you started this project just by the nature of the issues you wanted to address?

Christen: I think that's where my disciplinary, or anti-disciplinary background, serves me well because I didn't have any notion that this was an anthropology project or a digital-humanities project. It was "here is a problem that we have; we need to come up with a solution." It turns out that the solution needs software engineers, designers, archivists, anthropologists, and community members. It was very much purposeful and, in fact, the several sets of software engineers and developers that I've worked with over the years have all had leanings towards social justice. One of the first developers that we worked with was a group called CivicAction and I was really impressed with them because their focus for building technology was social justice. I told them that we already had a prototype of what we could do and we had gotten some funding to take it further to create software that people could download and use. I came to find out that one of the software engineers had a B.A. in anthropology and he was in the Peace Corps. I was trying to explain to him the cultural protocols that we needed to embed these protocols in the design because not everybody can see the same material. He told me, "In the village that I lived in while Africa, I wasn't supposed to ever talk directly to the woman who would be my mother-in-law. Is it like that?" I was like, "Exactly. You're hired."

You're the guy." I needed to find technologists who understood the cultural imperatives of Mukurtu because this is not building technology for technology's sake. It's a cultural shift, it's an ideological shift in how we understand making information available.

It has a partial technological solution, but I'm here to tell you that after fifteen years of doing this, it's also about winning hearts and minds. I say this because the archivists at the other end must decide "I need to change my metadata" and that's not an easy thing for some of them to do but it is changing. The very first time I was invited to give a talk at the Society for American Archivists about the Plateau Peoples' Web Portal, I described these different narratives of metadata and explained how we weren't using Library of Congress headings and you could see alarms going off in people's heads. We must learn to let go of our attachments to these standards that stand in for our ideological preferences. The Library of Congress subject headings—and they're getting better—but they represent a worldview where you can have a subject called Indians of the Northwest. What does that subject heading do? That kind of generalization is a political statement, it's an ideological statement. If you're going to recreate that in a digital archive with your subject heading, then you have already lost. I had to get people on board so we could make the technological shift to allow for different metadata. You cannot just build something and people will come. That's why the ideological shift is necessary as well.

We finally got to a place that we were able to start the Center for Digital Scholarship and Curation on our campus two years ago. It's in the library and all our team is there. We do a sort of boot camp or indoctrination for any developer that comes in and it's lovely to see the change. The developer on our last project works for a software development company and he wrote a blog piece about how working on Mukurtu got him to think differently about programming. I call that a win. I don't spend as much time in the classroom anymore because of my administrative duties, but I see that as a way of teaching. It's a way of teaching members of our team—who work with these big companies as programmers, coders, developers, and software engineers—that software programming, that standards and systems, are in no way neutral and that we embed our ideologies into software just as much as we did into the physical structure of the archives.

ZG: What are some of the specific design or functionality choices that you made in designing the Mukurtu platform? What ideas went into conceptualizing it from the start?

Christen: The conceptualization of Mukurtu came from the community wanting to share their materials on their own terms. The three main functions, what we call Mukurtu Core, are communities, cultural protocols, and categories. To set up any Mukurtu site, you have to set those up. We very purposefully unraveled this notion that any piece of content in the archive, in the digital space, is not tied to something else. There's no free-floating item or record that exists. Everything has to be put in relationship to something else. This is different from your standard library records management systems. Every single story we're telling is part of a relationship. Everything is part of a community and communities have cultural protocols about how materials should be accessed, circulated and shared. How do we highlight those relationships? There's the *who* of Mukurtu; everything is part of a who, so, it's not dehumanized. Then, everything has a *how*; that's the cultural protocols. How do I want this to be seen? Only by women, only by men, only by those who are initiated, only by

the 14 people in your class. There's this notion that this information is just floating out there and it's all up for grabs but, in fact, that's not the case and we all filter our information. So, it's really trying to take those social networks, protocols, and relationships that already exist and build them into the software. That's the core of Mukurtu and every feature that we've built into the system over the last 6 years has been community driven.

We piloted what we call community software development. All our features come directly from communities who are using Mukurtu who have a specific need. The features do not come from professional archivists and librarians. I say "professional" here to differentiate the outside profession that's driven by certain degrees. So, that's why the first instances of Mukurtu was focused on photos, because we started by working with the Warumungu community. We received a set of 800 photos from a missionary in Australia. All the missionaries from one area had collected these photographs and the last surviving missionary had inherited the photos from the earlier missionaries. The photos dated from the 1920s to when we met one of the members of the missionary in 2002. He had 40-50 years of this history in photographs that Aboriginal people in Tennant Creek had literally never seen. It all started around photographs, and every other feature in Mukurtu has grown from specific documented community needs.

ZG: Do you have any data that you could share about how widely Mukurtu is being used and who's using it?

Christen: I'll have to push back against that a bit. My standard answer is that I think the quantification of "use" is antithetical to building relationships. There's an impulse to quantify users, user statistics, clicks-per-page, etc. Google has provided us with a rich suite of tools and metrics for dissecting the way that we interact with the Internet and the way we interact with information that's moving around the Internet but we put too much weight on what that data means and what metrics mean. Is it important for us to know that 600 people have clicked on the Plateau Peoples' Web Portal or is it more important for us to know that Native community members are curating the content through their own narratives? Mukurtu and the Portal and everything else that I work on is about relationships and constructing our knowledge around the notion that knowledge is a social act—it's grounded in those relationships. User statistics don't tell us anything about that and the notion of people as "users" is not helpful. On the other hand, I'm practical and I do know that there are instances where user statistics are needed. For example, we put numbers in with all sorts of caveats for grant reports.

I will say that we have over 250 installations of the platform worldwide. Any community who chooses to make their instance of Mukurtu public can be found online. Since the whole premise is that there are cultural protocols around access to knowledge, I'm not going to put out list of names of communities that are using Mukurtu if they haven't made that information public themselves. There are the 250 that we know because people come to our workshops, or we work with them very closely. Those metrics are seen as a sophisticated way of measuring a certain kind of use, but I want to ask how do we measure relationships? The reason I only look at Google analytics once a year when I do grants and reports is because it tells me nothing. What I do know is that we held sixteen workshops with 150 native community members across the United States last year. That I know. I saw

them and I met with them and we had human interaction. Dozens of them went on to use the platform and we're in conversation with them and we're supporting them.

And that's the other thing: relationships are a lot of work. This notion that you build a piece of software, put it out as open source, and then people just use it only works in a certain genre of software. However, when you're building a platform for relationships and you're pushing away from a colonial structure of archives that has done all this violence, then it's different. Building relationships takes time. We're putting a lot of our training online but I know there's only so much that can happen online. We also have to hold workshops, we have to have phone calls with people, we have to have Skype conversations with people. That's why we created the Center for Digital Scholarship and Curation at the university so that we can have a space where we do workshops, where we put out information, where we host people. It has to be that whole picture.

LD: It seems like a lot of your Twitter feed is an amplification of things that are going on. Do you ever see that there's a time for confrontation or intervention?

Christen: I don't think that Twitter is the right space for intervention, but I do think it's a space to open up the possibility of intervention. I mean, in 140 characters? I think it's more about amplification. It's about small bites of information that are then connected. Maybe some of you have looked at the DocumentNow project. One of the people on the team is Bergis Jules who's an archivist at UC-Riverside and the project is looking at how tweets can be ethically curated and managed. So, what happens when something like Ferguson takes place? Or what happens when there's a protest around Trump and people are being arrested? How are we using these Tweets to avoid causing more violence because police are now pulling Twitter feeds and Facebook to surveil people? In a certain way, you renounce your privacy once you agree to an open, public Twitter account. It's the antithesis of something like Mukurtu, which is all about how we put those protocols in place so that when you sign your user agreement for Mukurtu you know that it's actually upholding your own values.

JN: You were just talking about archiving social sources like Twitter. These communities using Mukurtu are writing down some of their traditions in a digital space, which has been done through oral tradition for a long time, leaving room for improvisation and for adaptation. Do you think that having them in an archive where people can refer to them limit improvisation or could become a totalizing influence?

Christen: Mukurtu allows for those multiple ways of telling that story to sit side-by-side. When we're doing workshops and we're talking to people about using Mukurtu, we say, "You can constantly update this." But we don't mean write over, we mean put next to. There's no limit on a record. There's no limit to how many iterations of a record you can have as one version of that story. I don't think the technology has a universalizing impulse; I think it's people who have to change their minds. It's the impulse that tells us there's only one story or narrative. That's our intellectual history, in which information is constructed in a linear and progressive fashion. Mukurtu itself is not a totalizing tool, but I'm sure someone could use it that way! How do we train people to use it to see they can have three different versions of a song and they can all sit side-by-side? To recognize the multiplicity as valid and valuable?