

Writing the Docs Honestly

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Opening the Black Box: Transparency and Complexity in Digital Preservation

SLIDE 1

Hello all, and thank you for coming to our panel. A small request: I ask that, if you feel moved to take photos, you keep them to photos of my slides, not my person.

SLIDE 2

I'm about four years into a digital preservation-related job that is turning out to be a lot of writing. In fact, I sometimes feel that I'm having trouble doing all of my job because of all the writing. This talk is a little bit about that.

Not only do I do all of this writing but I also negotiate with people about where the writing should live and who should see it. For example, folks in archives don't always agree on whether policies and manuals are "internal" and should not go on our website because users don't care about them, or whether it's important to expose our processes and positions in order to be a more responsible repository. There are also differences of opinion on whether everyone working in an archives should be expected to read and know, cover-to-cover, a 130-page reference manual, 120-page processing manual, 20-page web archiving manual, description guidelines, repository software documentation, and so on. I've developed some personal positions about writing documentation through listening to and participating in these discussions, and this talk is also about those positions.

SLIDE 3

I can divide the digital preservation-related documentation I come in contact with into two main categories: docs I write and docs I read.

These are some of the docs I write. Who are they for? They're mostly for me to know what I was working on and why I made a certain decision. Some of them are for colleagues: Here's what I do and how it hooks in to what you do. Here's what I need from you in order to do my job, which is fundamentally about helping both users and you. Here's why I might need you to leave me alone about this or that issue. Here's why I, or at least my position, deserve to exist. Here's how to replace me. Some docs or versions of docs are for friends at other institutions. Of late, I've been writing the docs that are primarily intended for colleagues with two additional audiences in mind: future new archivists and users of archival materials.

SLIDE 4

As much as I can, I borrow from these writing principles by Write the Docs. Even if I only aspire to meeting them, they hold up a useful mirror to let me know where and how I might do better. Of course, there's only so much work that principles can do. Precursory documentation doesn't necessarily mean more effective planning, and won't protect you from situations where you're having to humbly walk back language from a previous round of docs that reached just a little too far. Or the participatory principle: When I and a colleague write documentation together and disagree, these principles are not going to show us how to listen to one another and figure it out.

SLIDE 5

I read as well as write docs: Software documentation, most recently Social Feed Manager, Fixity, Youtube-dl, Archive-It. Hardware documentation, most recently comparing laptop specs and revisiting the FC5025 manual. (Couldn't get the jumper settings to work. I might need some help with that.) I read research, lots and lots and lots of research. I read extremely boring meeting minutes ... news alerts about how this or that news archive was taken down overnight and who is going to do what and feeling what type of way about it ... personal tech columns about new devices with fresh archival implications ... tweets and toots and Facebook posts, listservs, Google Groups, other people's LibGuides ... this list is really getting out of hand. I read documentation to identify and attempt to solve specific problems, but also to maintain a sense of my community of practice, here with my 3-4 jobs crammed into one.

SLIDE 6

In clarifying my approach to all of this writing and reading and negotiating, I'm borrowing for the nth time from "Towards More Honest Description" by Jennifer Douglas, and looking for ways to adapt this approach to documentation. I've come up with about four (so far).

SLIDE 7

For one, honest docs spell out what the work entails, unpacking the black box to identify agents, systems, relations, actor-networks, territories, flows, and all of that good socio-technical stuff. (As you can tell, this is not a theoretically rigorous talk.)

SLIDE 8

There are always ways to do this better. Here's some low-hanging fruit: I recently changed the "authenticity and provenance" section of our web archives collection policy from the text on the left to the text on the right. As you can see, spelling out the work also means stating positions. Quite a bit remains black-boxed – for example, where I say "Archive-It," I should distinguish between Archive-It the system and Archive-It staff like Karl and Jillian – but it's good to be forthcoming about what we do and do not have control over, and what we're doing about it.

SLIDE 9

For another thing, honest docs acknowledge the work that documentation does.

SLIDE 10

Stay with me on what might feel like a detour: In her very important book *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*, Sara Ahmed unpacks the stifling experience of doing diversity work in institutions of higher education. A major theme is materializing through reference, kind of like speaking or writing things into being. Examples like 1) how bringing up racism opens one to the charge of invoking/creating it; 2) how diversity, equity, or equality policies allow institutions to conflate the creation of documents with the practice of diversity by referencing the existence of such documents as credentials; and 3) a pattern of repeatedly invoking commitment, as if referring to a person's or institution's commitment to diversity were enough to make it real. Ahmed argues that the way institutions handle diversity work merely serves to reinforce and protect the institutional default, which is whiteness.

For me, the idea of materializing through reference hits extremely close to home – certainly when it comes to institutional whiteness, but also (and more directly pertinent to this panel) in the context of digital preservation. The reality of a job that revolves around documentation is that, more often than not, the documents I produce and the “value” I “demonstrate” stand in for other, arguably more concrete measures that would or should underpin digital preservation. In the absence of a trustworthy means of preserving records, docs are how I demonstrate trustworthiness as an individual and on behalf of an institution. “Trust me: I will tell you when I didn't work on that thing and show you what I did instead.” “Trust us: we're trying.” Documentation does the work of signifying accountability.

I also found Ahmed's discussion of what it means to “institutionalize” to be very helpful: normalizing something to the extent that it becomes background. Producing and dealing in documentation makes a norm out of seeing documentation as an end in itself, and treating documentation like it does work and is supposed to do work has been a learned behavior for me since starting to work in libraries and archives.

Acknowledging that documentation does work is tied up, again, with actively stating the positions of people who write the docs. For example, documentation I write about digital preservation activities will not say much about the unsustainable nature of digital preservation, environmental and otherwise, unless I choose to write it in. There has been a suggestion out there to put archivists' bios in finding aids - should my bio go in the docs I write, and what should it say? Maybe that I use docs to inform my work, but that I also use them as currency. Producing docs does the work of getting me step by terrible step closer to going up for tenure. You'd better believe I'm listing these policies and manuals in my dossier for the big neoliberal committee on the hill. The bio might say there's a side of me that writes docs because I love checking things off a list (Wake up. Put on pants. Drink coffee.) A bio might say that I accrue

tangible benefits in the process but we got a letter this spring that read, “This year, as you know, there are no merit awards,” so I would be lying.

Anyway, this is just to say that when I write and use documentation I’m “doing being digital preservation person” as much as I’m contributing to the secure, ethical, authentic preservation of bits.

SLIDE 11

A fourth position: Honest docs value labor. Give credit where credit is due for writing the docs and other forms of often invisible labor that supports digital preservation. Thank people. It's cool to center workers rather than collections for once (or, like, forever).

SLIDE 12

I'm part of the Digital Library Federation Labor Working Group and we have a research agenda on Valuing Labor in Digital Libraries. The agenda documents some questions, concerns and fighting words that the 79 members of the working group and others in the DLF community consider important to pursue. We were writing it even before we knew we were writing it, through introductory emails, Zoom meetings, panel discussions, and a working breakfast. Then we did some formal researching, writing, editing, and commenting, and it's out in the world as of quite recently.

I wanted to credit every single person, from Roxanne Shirazi who came up with the idea, to Karly Wildenhaus who did a ton of writing and chose the nice font, to Hillel Arnold who offered to edit and then did edit, to Todd Suomela who put all the references in Zotero, to everyone who left a single comment including the lady who accidentally added a space and then deleted it, to Ruth Tillman, Sandy Rodriguez, and Melissa Chalmers, who got this group off the ground in the first place and let me help. A doc is a doc is a doc that does work, but it's also a celebration of the fact that we worked together on this thing, as well as a celebration of the vast body of research, writing, activism, and lived experience that validates our concerns and spurs us towards action - but also towards more writing, argh.

SLIDE 13

If I had to give a rubric for writing honest documentation, it would be these things: spell out the work, acknowledge that documentation does work, state your positions, and value labor, including your own.

I complained earlier about not getting to do my job because of all the writing. But the truth is that all of the writing in digital preservation has basically been my way in to getting to work with bits and machines and people. I am so grateful that documentation with various levels of honesty has existed along the way to help me develop my own critical approach to the work. The very least I can do is continue writing the docs honestly, so that critical and curious archivists of the future may one day find it much easier to replace me.