Radical appraisal in support of archival autonomy for animal rights activism

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Abstract
Working outside traditional bureaucratic structures, animal activists have a long history of creating, managing and using records in radical ways to bring the suffering of animals to society’s attention. Today’s online platforms enable animal activism on a networked scale, with unprecedented reach and immediacy of impact, but also with risks and challenges. This article presents findings from a critical case study of the radical recordkeeping of Direct Action Everywhere (DxE), a US-based animal liberation group. The case study explores the performative role recordkeeping plays in the group’s animal activism and advocacy, and the challenge of ensuring the longevity of an archival record of its activities and their impact. It is framed by Records Continuum Theory and illustrates the benefits of applying a Records Continuum lens to researching radical recordkeeping contexts. The paper reports on the research findings of the case study, including the vital role recordkeeping plays as a form of “strategic witnessing” for the activities of DxE, as well as in developing the DxE community and communicating its mission to the public. It discusses the challenges faced by DxE in preserving their archives into the future through integrating archiving into their current radical recordkeeping processes, Continuum-style, and addressing the risks associated with using online collaborative platforms for recordkeeping and archiving. Overcoming these challenges will ensure that current recordkeeping plays its part in DxE’s animal activism, and that in the future records of continuing value take their place among the multiple narratives of society in the archival multiverse.

Keywords Radical recordkeeping · Archives · Animal activism · Critical case study · Critical analysis · Records Continuum theory

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Introduction

The notion of radical recordkeeping has been described as a “disruption of traditional recordkeeping paradigms in revolutionary or profound ways” by groups and recordkeeping and archiving professionals who challenge or disrupt social or mainstream norms (Jarvie et al. 2017, p. 173).

Animal rights activists have long sought to bring attention to the suffering of animals in human, social and economic activity in ways that garner the most public exposure. Creating and disseminating first-hand recorded evidence of animal abuse and suffering motivate others to identify with the aims of the animal rights movement and advocate for social change. This advocacy in turn mobilizes the movement and increases the pressure for political, legislative and societal transformations to support animal liberation. In the face of engrained speciesism in society, individuals and groups in today’s animal rights movement are often adept at using social media and mobile applications to activate their members, engage with like-minded groups and to influence public opinion and ultimately challenge societal status-quo (Rodan and Mummery 2018).

Working outside traditional bureaucratic structures, animal activists have a long history of radical recordkeeping (Jarvie et al. 2017), creating, managing and using records in radical ways in order to bring the suffering of animals to society’s attention, and thereby change attitudes and behaviors. Yet despite this historical reach and impact, archives of animal rights organizations are rare. Reliance on the collecting traditions of archival institutions and libraries, coupled with the ‘benign neglect’ (Marshall 2008) of preserving paper records for long enough for their value to be recognized and appraised as significant, has failed to achieve the desired goal of securing a place for the narrative of grassroots activism in societal memory. Moreover, collecting traditions that involve the ceding of control over records and their decontextualized representation (Shilton and Srinivasan 2007) does not present an ideal solution for animal rights activists, as it limits their archival autonomy, their ability “to participate in societal memory with their own voice and on their own terms.”

Today’s online platforms enable animal activism on a networked scale, with unprecedented reach and immediacy of impact and community building, but also with risks and challenges. While animal rights activists have demonstrated considerable mastery of social media platforms in time, attention must also be paid to how reliance on these frameworks through time can be made viable. The archival fragility of the social media landscape exacerbates the limitations of the end of active life appraisal and collecting approaches espoused by many collecting archives, including community-centered archives.

This paper reports on a critical case study of the current recordkeeping practices and archival needs of Direct Action Everywhere (DxE), an international network of animal rights activists committed to profound political and social change in ending the commodity status of animals. DxE relies heavily on online collaborative platforms to carry out its activism activities and drive long-term societal
transformation (Direct Action Everywhere 2017–2019) and faces challenges in ensuring the longevity of its records of continuing value in this environment. The case study is framed by Records Continuum Theory and demonstrates the benefits of applying a Records Continuum lens to researching radical recordkeeping contexts. Exploring the critical case study through a Records Continuum lens has elicited in-depth insights on the vital, performative role recordkeeping currently plays in “strategic witnessing,” developing the DxE community and communicating its mission and activism to the public. The case study also reveals that a key challenge for DxE is achieving archival autonomy in the long term by integrating archiving into their current radical recordkeeping processes, Continuum-style and addressing the risks associated with ensuring the longevity of records of continuing value using online collaborative platforms for recordkeeping.

This article begins with an introduction to DxE, and the rationale for using the lens of Records Continuum Theory for the case study. After a discussion of the critical research design, the case study findings to date are explored in depth.

**Introducing direction action everywhere**

Animal activism encompasses a wide spectrum of community activities—from limiting suffering in the use of animals by humans, to transforming community attitudes and legal frameworks to recognize animal sentience and outlaw such use. The movement is characterized by a multiplicity of sociopolitical goals, records, opinions, events and parallel narratives distributed in an electronic network of social media, news outlets, websites, commercial online collaboration tools and blogs (and more). Representing non-dominant views of animal activists as agents with their own autonomy is a challenge for traditional archival appraisal—to balance against dominant narratives (such as those of government, business and agricultural interests) and ensure activists’ voices achieve longevity as a valid record about social change events, facts and memories.

Direct Action Everywhere is an international network of animal activists with headquarters in Berkeley, USA. DxE’s ambition for a meat-free Berkeley by 2025 is one part of its published *Forty Year Roadmap to Animal Liberation* (DxE 2018). The ultimate goal of DxE is to achieve a Constitutional Bill of Animal Rights by 2055, for animals to have recognized rights as equals to humans. DxE has been operating from the San Francisco Bay area since 2013 and self-identifies as a grassroots community as opposed to the more corporate structure of other animal rights groups. ‘Grassroots’ is defined as an enabled network of members, run by and “involving ordinary people” (Macmillan Dictionary 2019). It prides itself on its success despite its humble beginnings: “with no money, no history, no famous names” (Hsuing 2016). Their strategy centers on the use of direct action techniques such as open rescue to both relieve animal suffering and to bring it to the community’s attention. Open rescue involves unmasked activists removing injured animals from suffering on factory farms, videotaped or livestreamed online. Operating in a litigious environment and labeled as ‘terrorists’ in their home states (Greenwald 2015), DxE members in the US leverage the records of direct action and the legal
ramifications—such as felony charges of up to sixty years—to draw attention to the animal liberation cause (Kim 2019). DxE creates and shares records of their own “criminality” for “rescuing” of animals online, promoted and distributed, focused on the goal of achieving societal transformation. Part of the societal shift DxE hope to enact is the change in public opinion—by questioning notions of criminality. DxE positions their records on the importance of rescuing animals from harm (rather than framing it as trespassing and stealing of non-sentient agricultural possessions). DxE’s views of criminality in the multiverse may differ from the US Acts and statutes, but the notions of the legal or illegal, popular or unpopular, change over time and can be evidenced through recordkeeping and memorialization.

Records Continuum theory and practice

Records Continuum scholarship is increasingly engaging with critical and participatory approaches, “questioning the social constructs, values and power differentials embedded in current recordkeeping infrastructure exploring archival and recordkeeping agency, autonomy and activism, and moving beyond insight and critique with the aim of bringing about transformative outcomes” (McKemmish 2016). As evidenced in the literature, Records Continuum Theory models and constructs complement, frame, and support critical archiving and recordkeeping theorizing and practice (Evans et al 2015; Evans et al 2017; McKemmish 2016; Rolan 2016).

Records continuum thinking is based on a pluralistic definition of recordkeeping which encompasses the range of activities and purposes by which individuals, families, communities, organizations and societies create, keep, manage and use recorded information for evidence, memory, identity and accountability purposes (Upward 1996; McKemmish et al. 2009). Unlike Life Cycle approaches which envisage records passing through various stages in linear fashion until they reach the end of their active life and are appraised for permanent retention as archives, Records Continuum Theory conceptualizes recordkeeping and archiving as integrated and intertwined functions and activities, occurring in and through space and time, to deal with the sociotechnical exigencies and complexities of an exponentially expanding digital information age.

Records Continuum Theory embraces the many different forms that records can take and informs the idea of an archival multiverse as

the pluralism of evidentiary texts, memory-keeping practices and institutions, bureaucratic and personal motivations, community perspectives and needs, and cultural and legal constructs with which archival professionals and academics must be prepared, through [practice], graduate education and through research and development, to engage (Pluralizing the Archival Curriculum Group 2011, p. 73).

Whether spoken, written, performed, embodied in people or embedded in country, records are logical objects providing traces of social, cultural and organizational activity that evidence and memorialize individual and collective lives (McKemmish 2005). Continuum thinking eschews differentiation between
records and archives based on institutional custody. Individual, community and organizational archives form as records are created in social and business activities and managed in frameworks and systems as individual, group, corporate and collective memory (McKemmish et al. 2009).

Appraisal in the Records Continuum involves actions occurring multiple times through time and space in different ways by different people as records are created, captured, organized and pluralized for evidential, memory and accountability purposes. Beyond merely determining the value of a record as it crosses the threshold of an archival institution, appraisal occurs in integrated recordkeeping and archival frameworks. It is

… a multi-faceted, recursive process which begins with defining what should be created (Dimension 1), what should be captured and managed as record (Dimension 2), what should be managed as a part of individual or organizational memory (Dimension 3) and what should be pluralized beyond organizational or individual memory (Dimension 4) (McKemmish 2017, p. 141).

This Records Continuum definition of appraisal challenges appraisal practices in the traditional collecting archives paradigm in which many government, corporate, community, private and personal archives operate. In that paradigm, appraisal is about deciding what should be selected for preservation and transferred to archival custody once records are at the end of their active life. The collecting archives paradigm has not met the needs of organizations like DxE and does not accommodate DxE’s engagement in integrated recordkeeping and archival processes in its social platforms, Continuum-style or its desire for archival autonomy.

There is a typical absence of animal activist voices in worldwide archival collections. For example, historians’ attempts to trace the Australian history of the animal rights movement have had to rely on access to the networks of individuals involved in these activities themselves or from their write up in published works (Villanueva 2018). Beyond a few niche and distributed collections, the voice of animal activism is thus largely unrepresented in institutional archives. Where it does exist is where the activism is the subject of mainstream reporting, policing and law enforcement activities, which privilege the perspective of the status quo. Limitations in traditional collecting and appraisal practices have had the impact of silencing the voices of animal activist groups in societal memory as comprehensive representations of their activities are largely absent from institutional archives.

Documenting these important shifts in societies often relies on retrospective collecting archive traditions to enable the fragmented remnants of activist activities to make their way into archival institutions. Post-event attempts at activist archiving fail to provide holistic representation, merely “extending collecting policies to include records of previously poorly documented groups, or creating documentation, such as through oral history projects where existing resources are deemed inadequate” (Buchanan and Bastian 2015). New initiatives like the Interference Archive, while community developed, still reflect this custodial focus removing records from community places and spaces to be accessible as collective memory from which other activists and the community at large can learn (Sellie et al. 2015). While in
such a context traditional archival administration processes are re-worked, they are not radically challenged.

In a 2015 special issue of Archival Science, “Archiving Activism and Activist Archiving,” Flinn and Alexander (2015) spotlighted projects that engage with archives and the archival process as part of political, human right and social movement activism. These projects were examples of providing coordinated and opportunistic activities to alert, educate and mobilize community sentiment in order to “challenge the powerholders and the whole society to redress social problems or grievances and restore critical social values” (Moyer 1987). Political and social movement activism challenges societal power structures and seeks their transformation. This makes capturing the evidence and memory of disruptive societal changes from within traditional archival power structures particularly challenging.

More radical approaches to community archiving acknowledge the ‘vast numbers of records remaining in communities that shed important light on society’ (Cook 2013, p. 116). Following Cook they often involve partnerships that bring together communities, archival expertise and digital infrastructure, empowering communities to keep their own records long-term to support community identity and memory, ongoing activities or activism, and community heritage (Flinn 2011; Gilliland and Flinn 2013; Caswell and Mallick 2014; Caswell and Cifor 2016). Their focus is on archiving community records or filling the gaps in the existing archival record through both traditional and radical strategies such as documentation, storytelling, repatriation, creative art and performance art. While some of the strategies they adopt may be of value to animal activist groups like DxE in their archival endeavors, by and large, the more radical models of community archives are not engaged with current recordkeeping or integrating recordkeeping and archiving processes throughout the lifespan of records.

Addressing the longevity of records of animal activism is not just about trying to collect fragments of past activist activities or fill the gaps, but on gaining a better understanding of the ways in which recordkeeping is undertaken in animal activist organizations. There is thus a need to study appraisal as the activities animal activist organizations undertake to document and manage their activities in and through time. In some cases, this may also include decisions not to make records when pushing the boundaries of existing laws to highlight animal suffering at the hands of humans. The study of these recordkeeping processes through a Continuum lens within activist communities helps to determine the archival interventions to best support identity, memory and accountability needs.

In summary, Records Continuum Theory and related practice offer the critical case study of DxE a broad and transformative definition of records and recordkeeping that encompasses the multiple forms their records take, and rich understandings of the strategy of integrating recordkeeping and archiving processes throughout a record’s lifespan. Its radical reconceptualization of appraisal is of particular relevance to DxE practice. Countering traditional definitions of appraisal, the Records Continuum posits a multifaceted, integrated recordkeeping and archiving process spanning the life of the record, and involving iterative decision-making about what to create, capture, organize and pluralize with reference to the four dimensions of the Records Continuum Model (McKemmish et al. 2009). Its concept of
archival autonomy supports participatory appraisal and the agency of all stakeholders engaged in the activities that are documented in the record (Evans et al. 2015, p. 337).

**Critical research design**

Continuum thinking raises questions about the ways in which traditional record-keeping and archiving processes are conceptualized and designed. Investigating them in community and activist contexts is a way to further our understanding to fuel their re-imagining. Battley’s recent investigation of a community’s recordkeeping from a critical continuum perspective argues for archivists and other recordkeeping professionals to embrace performative and participatory recordkeeping to support existing community processes and multiple bodies of knowledge (Battley 2018, p. 2). Activism is characterized by relational, networked and dynamic organizing structures, emergent and opportunistic activities and therefore bricolage recordkeeping and archiving systems—very different from the stable bureaucratic contexts on which much archival practice has been formulated. Rather than studying the archival remnants of activist organizations, the critical exploration of the recordkeeping of an active activist organization is a fresh approach to understanding the role of records in societal transformations. From this, we can learn how to better support and enhance transformative recordkeeping and archiving processes within activist organizations, so they can exert their archival autonomy. Such an investigation can also help us to unpack ‘deeper ethical issues of control, status, power, and neo-colonialism’ (Cook 2013, p. 116) as we strive to democratize the archive in the digital age.

Case studies are ‘an effective methodology to investigate and understand complex issues in real world settings’ (Harrison et al. 2017). They typically involve detailed analysis of an organization, individual, situation or group as a representation of a problem, situation or microcosm to better understand and learn from. Interpretive case studies have enabled rich explorations of information systems in a range of contexts in the search for understanding and insight into their socio-technicality (Mitev 2000, p. 84).

This research adopts the critical approach used by Evans et al. (2015) in their exploration of archival activism, and Battley (2017) in her investigation of community recordkeeping. It uses the three interconnected elements of critical research identified by Alvesson and Deetz (2000) of insight, critique, and transformative redefinition; in this context to understand the radical recordkeeping practices and appraisal needs of an animal activist organization. Insight and critique come from critical analysis of recordkeeping practices to understand the power recordkeeping has in and through time. It explores ways that activists exercise their archival autonomy, along with the factors that curtail it. Transformation comes from continuum-based modeling of practices to better understand community participation in the archival multiverse.

Critical in its approach and participatory in nature, the case study is a suitable fit for exploring radical recordkeeping in an activist group challenging the status quo. Gaining buy-in for the research from the community required trust-building
and participation throughout. Using Records Continuum Theory aligned with critical theory and a critique of societal structuration (Records Continuum Theory itself is built upon structuration theory), an interpretive, sense-making approach was taken. Influenced by Myers and Klein’s approach to interpretive field studies (1999, 2011), the research has been conducted within the context of critical theory. In this approach, rigor and quality of the case study are measured by attributes such as reflexivity, transformation, contribution to theoretical improvements and improvements in society (Klein and Myers 1999, 2011). Qualitative techniques were developed to ensure disparity was minimized between researcher and activist. With the Records Continuum Model used as an analytical tool, an exciting part of the case study has been the availability of DxE’s records performed and available online, alongside conversations with activist participants in a style Trainor calls “community conversation as a method” (2018).

After receiving university ethics approval, research was conducted in the spirit of a participatory ethos by seeing ethics from the community perspective. Quotations used in this article have been reviewed in context by the participant before publication. Ethical research design ensured the activists were at the center of the research rather than objectifying them by structures that disempower through categorization and coding by third parties outside a conversational method. The activists participating in this study were approached via a snowballing technique through initial contact with interested parties and is based on the participants chosen by the community themselves, limited to the geography of where members operate (e.g., the USA, Australia and member countries).

Conversation with the participants allows for inclusion, nuance and diversity in ways a pre-emptive script of questions does not. By utilizing this kind of participatory research method, it was important that local context is approached in unique ways and inclusive of ways of knowing, a sense-making, rather than categorized in formal coding structures. This approach is not unique, as described by Aragón and Castillo-Burguete, a narrative conversation is more than data to be analyzed but instead considered “contextualized life experiences—and how their future use might therefore continue their adaptation to new local contexts, and continued evolution as reflected-upon patterns of experience” (2015, p. 13). In addition to the findings reported below, the conversations and interdisciplinary discourse analysis provide data relating to the challenge of online platforms and risks beyond the scope of this article. Analysis of how other disciplines characterize these platform limitations to memory practices is out of scope for this article but is part of the ongoing research. Critical discourse analysis as a method collated interdisciplinary texts and sources beyond the literature review to add both informal and formal sources and space to reflect on silences. Critical discourse analysis systematic reflexive investigation of social communications to reveal “unequal power relations, with the overall goal of harnessing the results of critical discourse analysis to the struggle for radical social change” (Jørgensen and Phillips 2011).

1 Monash University Human Ethics Approval Number 2016-7672-7501.
Key findings of the DxE case study

Dispersed digital landscape of recordkeeping in Direct Action Everywhere

The dispersed digital landscape of animal activist group Direct Action Everywhere (DxE), as illustrated in Fig. 1, highlights interrelated personal and collective social media presences as a key aspect of their recordkeeping. DxE records and disseminates their interventions and rescues online, and without editing or censorship, from public and individual spaces. Online videos evidence disruption in places like restaurants, retail stores and factory farms to draw attention to the cause of animal liberation. DxE activists engage in recordkeeping as performance—for the community and as individuals in their day-to-day interactions and activism (Hsuing 2014, 2015, 2016; Farmsanctuary 2016). Recordkeeping plays a critical role in their radicalism and is itself radical in nature.

Online platforms enable activists to co-exist and interact within the broader animal rights movement and the public (both supporters and detractors) and the nature of activism overlaps between the personal and collective. Individuals and groups are making decisions in the ‘doing’ of activism and in maintaining and proliferating records of decisions and actions over time, over various media. In terms of their recordkeeping activities, individuals and groups are acting in interconnected and diverse networks in the archival multiverse. DxE values and actions can be performed either by an individual as an actor in a network, or by a group acting in a network, or a social movement enabled as an actor in broader society—but each presence overlaps. The multiple platforms used by activists ensure a range of communications between nodes in a global network—to strengthen and expand to new
network nodes dynamically across social and geographic borders (as shown in Fig. 1).

Platforms used by DxE for public dissemination of information include Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter and web publishing. DxE also partners with news media to deliver outcomes of investigations and campaigns. For communications intended for members only, WhatsApp, Signal, Messenger, Google Drive, Dropbox and text messages are used with varying levels of trust in security. Verbal traces without written record are considered most secure, but open face-to-face communication with members and public is also valued (Direct Action Everywhere 2017–2019). DxE publishes impactful evidence of animal abuse intended to shift the hearts and minds of audiences. The platforms used across the spectrum of recordkeeping are cloud based and third-party owned, have relatively free access, but by the nature of the rights and ownership, are disempowering activists of their long-term access and management of DxE records. To counter this, records can exist across multiple platforms in both group and individual accounts, providing agility and adaptability of community recordkeeping and risk management. DxE’s radical form of recordkeeping disrupts both societal attitudes to animal rights, along with challenging recordkeeping traditions designed for traditional organizational bureaucracies.

DxE’s online community activity both evidences the systemic abuse of animals and the achievements of direct action. Evidence can have multiple truths, from multiple perspectives, over time and space; so a single-faceted evidentiary record is not a helpful way to imagine narratives of animal activism.

Like the biographical subject, a record can never be experienced in all its dynamic complexity by a witness at any one point. It is not wholly present at any given moment, a particularly apt way of thinking about digital documents compared with the artefactual view of records as end products (McKemmish 2017, p. 140).

DxE’s online open rescue videos are an example of records of non-human animals ‘always becoming’ (McKemmish 1994) over time—which means they are shared live online, reshared, re-edited, reused in media and in the social media spaces of individuals and communities (both supportive and oppositional).

**Strategic witnessing and radical recordkeeping**

The case of Direct Action Everywhere elucidated findings for the recordkeeping needs of an animal activist group—in the case of DxE, needs are linked to promoting the animal liberation cause via online platforms for ‘strategic witnessing.’ This term, coined by Ristovska (2016), is characterized by empowerment and thoughtful direction of activist activity. It resonates with categorization of recordkeeping as primarily a form of witnessing (McKemmish 1996). As Rodan and Mummery have also explored, sharing of content on interactive and participatory digital platforms helps animal activist campaigns gain “visibility and virality” (2018, p. 170). Strategic decisions about what to witness, when to witness it and how to share it are
part of activist initiatives today. For example, beyond just sharing images of animals in distress, DXE’s direct action (in open or closed rescues for example) allows the broader community to be actively growing, sharing, learning from and recording positive milestones in animal liberation over time. Records of animal rights groups serve evidentiary and communication purposes as well as motivating the movement and broader public for animal liberation on an ongoing basis.

… the goal is for the general public to understand and accept that animals have rights as much as anybody else so we’re really trying to get that conversation started … our goal is to get it started, get it out there, get people talking (Interview with Connie Pearson, 2017).

Cammaerts notes that platforms used by activists operate as archival spaces (2015, p. 92) but also that digital platforms effectively mediate expressions of Foucauldian “disclosure, examination, and remembrance” (Cammaerts 2015, p. 87), beyond the capacities of traditional media coverage. He also relates this activist recordkeeping back to ‘memorizations of deeds’ (Cammaerts 2015, 89 quoting Foucault 1997, p. 247). Ristovska’s term “strategic witnessing” might sound like formal legally minded administrative recordkeeping—yet in fact, emotion and community power are intertwined in thoughtful witnessing by animal activists. Strategic witnessing by open rescue and direct action videos are used for both investigatory, justice and promotional purposes to foster community building and promote the cause for animal liberation.

Direct Action Everywhere’s activists are part of a global network successfully co-creating and sharing narratives of animals which are otherwise untold. Strategic witnessing as a concept can be harnessed as a sense-making and appraisal model for other animal activism campaigns. These actions are part of a network of activity that can be mapped across and outside of organizational or geographical boundaries. For example, hidden camera footage of the illegal baiting in the greyhound industry recorded by Animal Liberation Queensland and Animals Australia in 2015 released records of its strategic witnessing through a Four Corners television program (Meldrum-Hanna 2015). The ABC News network was performing its civic duty in pluralizing and further reinforcing the credibility of the activist footage and raising public awareness about the illegal activity of live baiting. Subsequent campaigns on digital media platforms against live baiting called Australia to action, creating more records of shared concern, petitions and proposals for legislative change (i.e., banning greyhound racing altogether). Investigative reports and the video footage were used and experienced in what McKemmish coins “dynamic complexity” (2017) with multiple public contexts and narrative viewpoints. Document analysis, in this example, and in others such as Terrorism vs. Protest (Kim 2019) media coverage has shown diverse characters and narratives described online after investigations and witnessing was broadcast. In the live baiting example, predominant viewpoints of shock and anger at the brutality were combined with emotions connected to the video content of starved greyhounds mauling possums and rabbits baited to a lure. This emotional experience is countered by the brutality of the trainers in the video, cold and unmoved by animal suffering. In other online settings, greyhound trainers were depicted by
some as ‘aussie battlers’ (a colloquial term for working class Australians bravely facing everyday hardship) with family businesses; and by others as perversely embedded into self-governing bodies of the ‘sport.’

News reports and online platforms include performative evidence co-created over time and space, in the above example using participatory methods to relay an emotive narrative. There is power in the ‘doing’ of the action which heightens viewer emotion, but there is also power in recording milestones of achievement for historic reference and community solidarity. Other findings have surfaced powerful benefits of dynamically recording and sharing activist strategic witnessing, from the emotive voice of the activists themselves.

DxE worked with employees at Iowa Select Farms to expose the gruesome mass killing of pigs via “ventilation shutdown,” a practice where pigs are roasted alive by pumping steam into barns. Based on a whistleblower tip, our team secured video footage of the practice and publicized it … (DxE 2020)

The recorded evidence of injustice and exposure of cruel industry practice is critical to DxE’s goals relating to changing agricultural industries like pig farming. Using hidden video camera footage inside the Iowa Farms extermination barn overnight, “viscerally conveys the inhumane cruelty” to its viewers, and sound recordings “document the noises of anguish emitted by the pigs during the procedure, as well as the sound of guns finishing off survivors” after hours of suffocation (Greenwald 2020). The activities of the whistleblower/s’ working at the farm, Direct Action Everywhere investigators, and the media outlets that disseminate the footage are part of radical recordkeeping processes that operate across a continuum of social movement action and awareness-raising. There are decision-making processes throughout the creation of the record that take into account the integrity and longevity of the record long enough for it to be released to the public and edited in a fashion that condenses hours of evidence into an emotive narrative of events. Appraisal decisions at the time of creation to audio record, as well as visually record, ensure a complete picture of the suffering. There are volunteers within DxE assigned media and communications roles that create and disseminate media reports, social media posts and campaigning material thus ensuring effective pluralization of the records to educate an unaware public (Direct Action Everywhere 2017–2019). The DxE website has reported that since the exposé, Iowa Select Farms announced it would no longer use “ventilation shutdown” (DxE 2020). To ensure this promise translates into practice, legislation, policy, auditing or further investigations need to be embedded into societal structures. In this example, witnessing shocking events in a planned and curated way has dramatically driven community conversation and has again highlighted the need for changes and ethical practices in animal agriculture, but is only a step change to complete animal liberation. Continuous strategic witnessing and covert recording are required to document and hold companies accountable for cruelty within a highly policed activist environment. Facing arrest under ‘Ag-gag’ legislation DxE will continue to be strategic in its approach to its direct action. “Ag-gag laws seek to hinder or ‘gag’ animal protection advocates by limiting or preventing them from recording the operations of commercial agricultural facilities, or from making those recordings public” (Voiceless 2019).
Activists are not merely recording or collecting records of action, the scenario is more complex, value-laden and dynamic by nature. Collaboration happens within and outside of the community membership. Acting strategically, through immediate creation and sharing of information, is a key feature of the benefits of using online platforms and social media. The emotive reach of the animal rights movement has achieved significant engagement online. Animals Australia, for example, became the first non-profit in Australia to reach one million Facebook followers (Rodan and Mummery 2018, p. 81). Morrell (2014) claimed that since 2011, “animal-minded groups beat out every other nonprofit” in the engagement score of online social media trends. In their strategic witnessing and network reach, groups like Direct Action Everywhere create and disseminate records in new and radical ways that are exponentially different in scale to the traditional placard and protest of the pre-digital age.

Agility is required of the platforms that DxE uses to meet their need for a united and strong activist community, being at the core of their values to change public opinion. Recordkeeping processes support the community in sense-making and memorialization. With these platforms though, come inherent risks, which are explored in the next section.

Recordkeeping risks and challenges

Reliance on online platforms

Collaborative platforms, such as social media, can provide performative agency for multiple participants in community activity and recordkeeping, in community identity construction and creation of shared memory. Each activist voice can have a role to play in telling a narrative and sharing of experiences online. Online platforms support strategic witnessing for both activist communities and the individual—giving them an unprecedented opportunity to create and share content (according to platform, community and societal rules). Animal activists can communicate in real time with increased ability to collaborate with the public and create records online.

Popular platforms are a place for activism but also a place for censorship of radical voices, which is a risk to any activist group. Extremist and hate groups have been a target for censorship, but as seen with the removal of ‘misinformation’ during the COVID-19 pandemic, the norms for removal of harmful information and arrest of individuals (for example, in Australia, for online incitement of anti-lockdown protests as ‘dangerous’ behavior) have been blurred (BBC News 2020; Weinstein 2020; Groogan 2020). Uldam (2017) noted that social media surveillance by law enforcement was an “under-researched” area in 2017, but has quickly become a popular topic with Zuboff’s Surveillance Capitalism book an awarded bestseller in 2019. As public awareness about online surveillance and monitoring of social media accounts by police grows, there may be further opportunity to develop platforms that are independent, position activist voices as authoritative and stem the spread of misinformation by the agriculture industry and others [such as hens producing “happy eggs” in a farming environment (Sawhney 2015)]. Media stories have traditionally been the
authoritative source for reliable records of events, but over recent decades scandals like the “Children Overboard” in Australia (Trioli 2012) have audiences questioning the authenticity of their news. Records being collected by media and others can be subpoenaed by law enforcement (Reicher 2020), so sensitive records stored by the activist themselves, media or anyone else is open to policing. For DxE, control over their records is limited to what the platform owner is prepared to allow. Given these restrictions and the threat of policing, it is worthwhile to reflect on how far such platforms allow for “archival autonomy.”

An activist community, through radical recordkeeping, may collectively or individually decide “what they record and what they do not record, and how they record” (Ketelaar 2005, p. 284) but their agency is constrained by providers of the platforms taking ownership of, and implementing a range of controls over the content, including censorship. A major challenge is the lack of transparency by service providers about their governance structures, management policies and their commercial exploitation and censoring moderation of online content created by their users, as exposed by writers like Zuboff (2019) and Banchik (2020). DxE is aware of this risk (Direct Action Everywhere 2017–2019). Online platforms are not designed to ensure the longevity of records or to recognize through time the:

multiple participants in records and their rights in creation, appraisal, preservation, access and disposal … and the ever-expanding web of record-related stakeholder relationships [and related rights] that is ‘always becoming’ (McKemmish 2016, referencing 1994, p. 200).

So, while there are performative actions by DxE in physical spaces recorded online and reproduced over time in multiple contexts, the preservation of these records ‘always becoming’ is in jeopardy for both the short and long term.

Distributing content across different platforms can also be a strategy against censorship. In the case of Direct Action Everywhere’s open rescue videos online, Wayne Hsuing notes that: “Facebook could take down all the work we’re doing” (Direct Action Everywhere 2018a, b). Facing potential censorship in an antitrust world, recent congress on the monopolization of public information and personal data in popular platforms (Paul 2020) mirrors the convenient reliance on audience reach for activists but also the inherent risks and implications of this relationship.

Alternative approaches to recordkeeping, autonomously controlled by activist groups themselves may be the ideal response to this challenge, but this would involve successfully integrating archiving into current recordkeeping processes in animal activist groups, and the availability to them of transformed online platforms and interoperable infrastructures to support this over the short to long term.

Sustaining an activist community and a social movement

The inability to memorialize and sustain records through time can pose a significant risk to the sustainability of animal activist groups. Keeping records of achievements over time motivates and inspires a movement to continue its decades-long fight. The sense of community and progress helps maintain this momentum and solidarity among members (Direct Action Everywhere 2017–2019).
Another really huge thing about DxE that makes us different than any other animal rights organisations present today is how much we invest and believe in community building. We believe that the community is kind of the base for the movement … (interview with Ateret Goldman 2018).

Building the DxE headquarters within the Berkeley California area as the site of social movements over many decades brings a sense of pride to the activists of Direct Action Everywhere and continues a long tradition of fighting for animal liberation. DxE is finding new ways to reach audiences and expand growth across the globe. Social media provides online marketing and reach to new and existing members, but rather than being a straightforward benefit to the group, social media has been criticized by others as a place for opinion reinforcement among micro-publics (Hepburn 2013, p. 10). To combat this, Direct Action Everywhere has a mix of face-to-face events and physical protests where members can expose the public to their cause and recruit new members physically as well as digitally (Direct Action Everywhere 2017–2019). These events are recorded in ways that reinforce identity-making, camaraderie, participation and direct action.

Community-building is a key way that activists create a sustainable movement over time. This can happen online and offline (in meetings, protests and events) supported by records, but some animal activists in DxE have acknowledged the challenge of sustaining online recordkeeping over time (Direct Action Everywhere 2017–2019). When lives of animals are at stake, the long-term preservation of video formats and website links is not the first priority, but they do meet the needs for strategic witnessing. DxE creates influential narratives about its milestones and calls for social change and navigate recordkeeping in social media platforms that both nurture their reach, yet limit their recordkeeping autonomy. Appraisal is considered throughout this process of record-making and influencing, and the recordkeeping structures put in place to protect the strategic witnessing by activists also need to mirror liberal rather than restrictive structures. Radical rethinking of appraisal is needed to support radical recordkeeping and archiving as an integrated process, rather than rely on end-point appraisal (after decades of evolution of the social movement over various media types) into traditional archival constructs. Records provide memory-making and milestones that drive the movement forward. Dynamically supporting recordkeeping as it happens is supporting the sustainability of the group itself.

**Conclusion**

This paper explores the role of performative recordkeeping in the animal rights movement with particular attention to its ‘strategic witnessing’ of events, role in advocacy, and its reliance on online collaborative platforms through a critical case study of the animal liberation group Direct Action Everywhere (DxE). The platforms used by DxE demonstrate the emergent risks, challenges and opportunities for designing radical appraisal frameworks as part of the broader ongoing research, including the challenge of ensuring the longevity of an archival record of its activities and their impact. It is framed by Records Continuum Theory and illustrates the
benefits of applying a Records Continuum lens to researching radical recordkeeping contexts.

Performative recordkeeping is a form of radical action animal activists undertake for radical purposes, using radical forms of participatory recordkeeping. These disruptions typically use online platforms and videography via smartphone or CCTV and empower activists by documenting compelling and emotionally charged evidence of wrongdoing. Records support strategic witnessing in an age of video and online activism (Ristovska 2016). This consciously emotive way of recordkeeping is a key feature of radical recordkeeping in animal activist contexts. The literature on activism and social engagement acknowledges that activists are creating repositories of community memory in digital media platforms, such as social media and websites (Cammaerts 2015), but these types of evidence and memory stores are seldom explored in terms of their recordkeeping and archival functional requirements and are often absent from the archival corpus.

In the short-term, online platforms and technologies can support radical recordkeeping by activist groups, shift societal opinions about animal rights and strengthen the community. However, radical recordkeeping uses online platforms and technologies that limit the degree of autonomy in recordkeeping and may not provide for the sustainability of records through time. Online platforms facilitate strategic witnessing in multiple contexts and the telling and retelling of counter-narratives but their completeness and sustainability are at risk. Transformed platforms are needed to support the vision of archival autonomy and transformed appraisal frameworks in the archival multiverse for groups like Direct Action Everywhere. The immediacy of radical recordkeeping is striking to audiences, but the platforms on which radical records are created and performed do not yet support full autonomy or participatory rights for their community users, or the inclusion of their historical narratives in the archival multiverse.

The Direct Action Everywhere case study illustrates how critical recordkeeping of “the now” is an integral part of the current activities of the group; but ensuring that records created online are not lost over time remains a major challenge. Media studies and aligned disciplines are also investigating this problem. While there is limited discussion about the range of related projects in this article, further ongoing research will draw upon developments in interdisciplinary fields. A uniquely archival contribution to this discourse is that traditional collecting frameworks appear to be part of the problem rather than a solution to community archiving. Approaches to archiving cannot rely on current online platforms and technologies, institutional archival collecting, or retrospective bringing together of records. Alternative approaches and appraisal frameworks controlled by activist groups are needed. This would involve integrating archiving into the robust radical recordkeeping processes already present in animal activist groups, and the availability of transformed, sustainable platforms.

The radical recordkeeping being undertaken by activist groups inspires researchers to rethink and remodel inequitable recordkeeping structures embedded into broader societal frameworks. Working with activist groups, radical recordkeeping researchers can contribute to a future in which integrated radical recordkeeping and archiving processes are supported by transformed, distributed platforms, free from
outside control, commercial misappropriation of content, hacking, or governmental intervention. The Direct Action Everywhere case study is an example of research that delivers rich understandings of the role of radical recordkeeping, which further research could build upon to consider appraisal frameworks and applications to understand other activist communities.

This research raises the challenges archivists face, with cloud platforms becoming a primary information access and communication modality for social movements, which also challenges us to think about appraisal in new ways. The findings about the need and roles of recordkeeping for activist group DxE raise further questions around design and engineering of online platforms for the future. This understanding is essential to precede a transformed radical appraisal framework for an activist group based on radical recordkeeping needs over time and space, the archival multiverse and Records Continuum Theory. The findings contribute in-depth understanding and significant insights relating to the performative role of radical recordkeeping in an activist group and perspectives on the complexities of “multi-dimensional and multi-layered views of recordkeeping and archiving” (McKemmish 2017).

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