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RECEIVED 22 January 2024

ACCEPTED 18 March 2024

PUBLISHED 02 April 2024

## CITATION

Karels M, Hanlon M and Moore N (2024) DIY  
academic archiving: mischievous disruptions  
of a new counter-movement.  
*Front. Commun.* 9:1374663.  
doi: 10.3389/fcomm.2024.1374663

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# DIY academic archiving: mischievous disruptions of a new counter-movement

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Against increasing injunctions in research governance to create open data, and knee-jerk rejections from qualitative researchers in response to such efforts, we explore a radical counter movement of academics engaged in what we term “DIY Academic Archiving,” the creation of open and accessible archives of their research materials. We turn to interviews with three DIY academic archivists, each drawing on an ethos of community archiving, as opposed to emerging open data schemes: Melissa Munn on *The Gaucher/Munn Penal Press Collection*,<sup>1</sup> Eric Gonzaba’s *Wearing Gay History*,<sup>2</sup> and Michael Goodman’s *Victorian Illustrated Shakespeare Archive*.<sup>3</sup> We see these archives as engaged in a “politics of refusal,” which challenges both conventional methods and ethics in qualitative research as well as new moves toward open data. On the one hand, academics are tasked to “protect” their data by destroying it, under the guise of a supposed mode of “care.” On the other hand, open data makes quite contrary demands, to care for data by making it “open” for further extraction through (re)use. DIY Academic Archiving is a practice of refusal that supports a *redirection* away from this binary. In this article, we explore how DIY academic archivists play with coding as a form of mischievous disruption, and so are contributing to new data imaginaries. We offer insight into how DIY Academic Archiving supports researchers in their theoretical, methodological and political commitments, and at the same time, how it can enable researchers to take the care-full risk of archiving our research data.

## KEYWORDS

DIY academic archiving, refusal, feminist ethic of care, research ethics, reuse of qualitative data, open data, open research

1 <https://penalpress.com/>

2 <https://wearinggayhistory.com/>

3 <https://shakespeareillustration.org/>

## Introduction

This article is an invitation to re-imagine practices of data reuse and sharing in the qualitative social sciences, with an intentionally playful intervention into both current research governance framings of data reuse *and* rejections of it: what we term “DIY Academic Archiving.” DIY Academic Archiving is a process of building online collections of research data, often outside of institutional repositories, and with a strong commitment to public access to data. In our view, “open” is often not open enough; commonly meaning data is made available to other researchers, but not to research participants, communities of interest and other publics, and is usually buried in data repositories, which are not very accessible. We came to describe DIY Academic Archiving through the process of building an open, online archive of research data, consisting of oral history interviews with ecofeminist activists at the Clayoquot Sound Peace Camp in the early 1990s (<https://clayoquotlives.sps.ed.ac.uk/>; Moore et al., 2021).<sup>4</sup> Against our own initial assumptions that producing an online archive might be a straightforward process, we found that our work was in fact deeply methodological, opening up opportunities to imagine unconventional infrastructures for listening and engaging with data, participants, and wider publics (Dankert, 2018). We turn to interviews with other DIY academic archivists who provide reflections on the design and creation of their archives, to show how playful collaboration and accessible design work to create radical potential in the process of creating data archives. We draw on three distinct projects: Melissa Munn’s *Penal Press*,<sup>5</sup> Eric Gonzaba’s *Wearing Gay History* (WGH),<sup>6</sup> and Michael Goodman’s *Victorian Illustrated Shakespeare Archive* ().<sup>7</sup> With each example, we show how these academics are engaging in forms of “mischievous coding” illustrating how they bring their intellectual, methodological and political commitments to the practice of data archiving. In doing so, they counter some of the concerns about new moves in research governance around open data, and offer other ways of imagining the process of data reuse, which might be more meaningful for many qualitative researchers.

## DIY academic archiving as a politics of refusal

Across the qualitative social sciences, the practice of academics sharing their research data by depositing it within national or institutional data repositories continues to grow, if slowly. We see radical potential in some of these initiatives, but in coming to DIY Academic Archiving, we make a different archival turn. Our inspiration comes from the politics, practice and ethos of feminist, queer and black archival theorists and community archivists (Flinn et al., 2009; Flinn and Stevens, 2009; Bly and Wooten, 2012; Dever, 2017; Bastian and Flinn, 2018). These interlocutors direct us to the importance of attending to marginal knowledge and audiences, as well

as to a need for creativity within formal ways of doing work, here specifically archival theory and practice. The work of DIY Academic Archiving requires academics to question how their data may be shared more openly, productively flushing out tensions related to conventional strategies of qualitative data extraction. The process of such questioning supports the re-imagining practices of care and risk around participants and their data (Moore et al., 2021).

Injunctions to deposit research data into institutional repositories for data sharing, and more recent articulations of a drive for open data, have provoked some understandable dissent among qualitative academics who question the overall benefit of sharing data for (re) use.<sup>8</sup> DIY Academic Archiving offers generative ways through these tensions. Qualitative researchers may feel their “small data” cannot fit into systems designed around quantitative or “big data.” For some, there is a concern that depositing research in the black box of data repositories may result in a sense of loss of control as appropriate contextual information and nuances might not be captured by data (re)use. DIY Academic Archiving alleviates some of these strains by allowing autonomy and an opportunity to engage deeply with “small data” (Rieder, 2015). As an alternative to depositing data in existing repositories, DIY archivists can turn to a range of digital platforms that, while providing turnkey solutions, are built and designed with different ethics, including Omeka<sup>9</sup> and Mukurtu.<sup>10</sup> DIY Academic Archiving, however, involves more than simply harnessing the use of technology to deposit and hold research data and materials. Rather, it is a critical practice that functions as “technology of knowing” (Stokes, 2021), creating potential for fertile meeting points of collaboration and the sharing of new knowledge (Hanlon et al., 2024).

DIY Academic Archiving requires deep and meaningful engagement with ethical concerns related to the sharing of research materials online for (re) use, a topic we explore in Moore et al. (2021). A further concern, however, is that the work of preparing data for archiving is often understood as one of data cleaning, or time-consuming data management, terms redolent with academic disdain for a certain kind of labor that is seen as not intellectual, methodological or creative, but rather as manual, menial and unskilled. Yet feminists have long understood the importance of cleaning as a practice of care and nurturing, which is usually undervalued. Why should we not clean our data, if we care and value them? And understand cleaning as a skilled practice? We argue that the work of preparing data for archiving requires care-full methodological attention to how data is being transformed in the process of archiving (see Moore et al., 2021), a process that is creative, intellectual, political, and filled with epistemological potential. We invite academic colleagues to approach DIY Academic Archiving as a *method*, not a deposit box, and to (re) engage with data in unexpected ways.

Thus, against knee-jerk reactions to calls to archive and reuse qualitative data (McLeod and O’Connor, 2021), we invoke “a politics of refusal,” drawing on black feminist theory and praxis (Moore et al., 2021; Gross et al., 2023). The distinction here is that, as Tuck and Yang

4 This experience also contributed to Moore’s subsequent involvement in a further DIY Academic Archiving project, *Reanimating Data: People, Places and Archives*, see <https://reanimatingdata.co.uk/about/>

5 <https://penalpress.com/>

6 <https://wearinggayhistory.com/>

7 <https://shakespeareillustration.org/>

8 We are not rehearsing all the arguments against reuse here, but see Moore (2007) for an early review of these debates, and McLeod and O’Connor (2021) and Hughes and Tarrant (2019) for more recent discussions.

9 <https://omeka.net/>

10 <https://mukurtu.org/>

have usefully articulated: “Refusal is a generative stance, not just a ‘no,’ but a starting place for other qualitative analyses and interpretations of data” (Tuck and Yang, 2014b, 812). While many criticisms of archiving and reuse as framed by mainstream research governance are well made, we argue that they often also foreclose the possibilities of alternative ways of imagining the archiving of qualitative research data. To be clear, our *refusal* of current research governance and emerging conventions around depositing and sharing data is not intended as a *rejection*. National data archives and university library data repositories are doing important and necessary work, which is often undervalued by academic colleagues, or perhaps even more commonly, simply unrecognized. Instead, our refusal is intended as a mischievous play with these existing framings. Our refusal seeks to redirect discussions of open data, actually expanding the possibilities of creating and sharing open data, and, at the same time, doing this in ways that might be more consistent with many qualitative researchers’ pre-existing methodological and political commitments.

## Mischievous coding in DIY academic archiving

We came to these insights initially through creating our own DIY Academic Archive, Clayoquot Lives: An Ecofeminist Story Web, which holds oral history interviews and other materials related to the Clayoquot Sound Peace Camp. Having learned through our own process of building this archive (Moore et al., 2021), we were keen to hear from others who, perhaps as accidentally as us, ended up creating archives with research data and learning much more along the way than anticipated. We carried out selected interviews with others who we saw as engaged in their own forms of DIY Archiving. We turn to brief examples from these interviews to illustrate the potential of DIY Archiving and what we came to understand as a rather mischievous approach to coding, one that emerged to enable access to and engagement with the data, but on the academics’ own terms.

Coding is a common research practice across multiple disciplines.<sup>11</sup> Coding might often be understood as rigorous, consistent, robust and standardized—and we understand coding as a creative process. Here, data are “cleaned up” differently, demonstrating how generative a process DIY Academic archiving can be. In DIY Academic Archives, the researcher controls what information (metadata, categories, and tags) is made available when designing and organizing the infrastructure of the archive. This is a type of strategic curation that ultimately impacts how audience (s) will come to encounter the research materials. It is in this process that possibilities of redirection—what we call “mischievous coding”—emerge.

Mischievous coding involves critically thinking through questions related to audiences and users. The three examples we feature here are alive with mischievous disruptions through play, born of invisible, off-the-side-of-the-desk labor. This playful labor is not easily recognized or valued by institutions, but it has a profound importance

for the researchers in question. In these examples, mischievous labor becomes mischievous play, as each DIY academic archivist plays with coding to consider multiple publics: Munn builds infrastructure to disrupt any easy assumptions about the prison populations she researches; Gonzaba works with community interlocutors to establish best practices; and Goodman actively decontextualizes images for public engagement.

## Making mischief with the search infrastructure—Melissa Munn on *The Gaucher/Munn Penal Press Collection*

*The Gaucher/Munn Penal Press Collection* is an open-access online archive holding thousands of digitized prison newsletters, collectively known as “the penal press,” which were created and produced by prison inmates within the Canadian penal system. Dating back to the 1950s, the newsletters offer a crucial insight into everyday life behind bars, as well as prisoners’ concerns about the justice system, carceral policies and prison reform via drawings, reflections, essays, stories and poems. The archive is intended to preserve this prison journalism and make the newsletters available and accessible to prisoners, former prisoners and their families, as well as to scholars, other publics, and media outlets. Building on the collection first started by Dr. Rober Gaucher, these newsletters (old and new editions) continue to be collected and digitized by Professor Melissa Munn.

Munn provided a strong account of her decisions around how the newsletters would be searchable, and why. She told us how *The Penal Press*, by design, “is not organized to be word searchable, so you cannot put a word in [...] and it will find it in every document for you. That was a very deliberate choice I made” (Munn). Thus, while the newsletters themselves are not word searchable, each newsletter is attributed to certain categories or codes, which can be searched. Munn recounted her thinking about coding the newsletters and how she created the search function on the website:

MUNN: I had to make a decision on what were the topics that I thought people would want to search about. In that, there are some judgments. For example, if you look at my website, the categories, there is nothing on alcohol addiction, because I do not know that I like the framing of it as alcohol addiction. So politically, that was not in line with my position, so they are not there. However, if you look you will find a category called “Claire Culhane” because she is my hero. So Claire Culhane gets her own category on my website.

Munn’s decision not to allow prisoners’ lives to be easily reduced to pathological stories about alcohol addiction, alongside her commitment to making sure that the prisoner rights activism of Claire Culhane is remembered, demonstrates the power of coding and its potential to remake worlds, through her mischievous disruption of research conventions that reduce people to objects of analysis. As Tuck and Yang remind us, “analytic practices of refusal involve an active resistance to trading in pain and humiliation... refusal can comprise a resistance to making someone or something the subject of research” (Tuck and Yang 2014a, 812). Material on alcoholism *can* be found in the archive, but it is not made easy for users. Rather, users would need to work through all the newsletters before they can find material on

<sup>11</sup> Qualitative researchers use coding practices to identify themes across research materials. While DIY Academic Archiving also draws on coding as a tool for understanding research material and organizing data, it is also used to prepare and curate data for public engagement and use.

alcoholism. In this way, Munn provides readers with alternative stories of prison life—both through the text of the newsletters, but also through the form of the newsletters. Munn was committed to showcasing the art and creativity of the prison journalists and manifested in the drawings, setting and materials (also see [Clarkson and Munn, 2021](#)). This was a necessary part of the story she wanted to tell about prisoners through her research. Here, we see how DIY Academic Archiving provides a way to bust through persistent myths about prisoners, working to strategically amplify alternative stories about prisoners' lives. Coding and archiving were not a technical or administrative exercise, but rather part of the research process whereby Munn was able to shape her research narrative, and narratives about prisoners, as she would in other research outputs, such as academic articles or books.

This mischievous approach to search infrastructure exemplifies Sneha's reminder that "The digital object is made through all of these processes: digitization, encoding, cross-referencing, querying, collation, reading, and narrating—all of which involve conceptual and material aspects of thinking and doing" ([Sneha, 2017](#)). Munn's deliberate refusals of certain narratives of prisoners offers a powerful rebuttal to some which reduce understandings of preparing data for archiving to matters of cleaning or admin, and fail to appreciate the considerable methodological and conceptual work involved, how the ways in which stories are told using data, do not begin with articles and books and other more formal publications, but also through the arrangement of data in an archive.

## Collaborating with communities—Eric Gonzaba on the *Wearing Gay History* archive

*Wearing Gay History* (WGH) is a digital archive created by Dr. Eric Gonzaba to showcase LGBT+ communities through their material cultures. The collection documents queer history through t-shirts from gay cafes, bars and nightclubs, queer festivals and events, campaigns and more, offering an extensive digitized t-shirt collection from archives from across the US and beyond. In one digital space, the collection brings together items that would otherwise require extensive travel to see in material form. The WGH archive demonstrates the potential of "pooling power" in creating digital archives, where a single t-shirt does not exist in isolation, but rather becomes part of a wider (and large) community, and in this case global movement, which can now be experienced by new audiences.

For Gonzaba, a key element of organizing the archive meant engaging with LGBT+ communities throughout the process of building the archive. Rather than develop an archive design and a coding framework as a solitary practice, Gonzaba worked collaboratively with a highly engaged and knowledgeable community of interest:

GONZABA: Things will be messy, they're meant to be messy, but working in public... *Wearing Gay History* was built openly, people were commenting, be it Twitter and Facebook, were commenting on the site and offering suggestions in real time as I was building it, literally as I was adding the first five t-shirts people were saying 'this is awkward', 'you should change this', blah, blah, blah and

working openly and being messy [...] It's one thing to have instructions in front of you, I certainly follow those instructions, but until you actually get your feet wet, do you actually realize how the site and how archives actually works.

Gonzaba's participatory approach to archiving brought LGBT+ communities directly into the process of building the digital site from the beginning, drawing on their own knowledge of items in the collection, as well as their ideas about how queer community would be displayed. Such a collaborative approach challenges researchers' usual practice of being in control of how data is managed and shared publicly, leaving it difficult to anticipate how coding structures might develop. While the liveliness of the design process proved fruitful in building the architecture of the DIY archive, it was also necessary for Gonzaba to establish certain boundaries. Many who heard about the archive wanted to submit their own t-shirts to the collection:

GONZABA: I had to make some decisions at the beginning and one of the decisions I wanted to make was that these shirts were going to be able to be found. So, you're going to look at these shirts and you're going to be able to find a copy of it in some archive.

In the process of making the online, open archive, flexibility and a commitment to collaboration generated questions for Gonzaba, not only in so far as what materials the archive would ultimately hold, but also in setting limitations on the degree of audience engagement. This resulted in the decision to document t-shirts available from established collections only, where there was already public access to materials. Through community engagement and participatory archiving, Gonzaba's work played with questions of who is an expert and who knows most about the items in the collection, recognizing that as a researcher he is not the only one with knowledge. By letting queer publics into the archive from the onset, Gonzaba demonstrates how his refusal of the solitary role of researcher, and his invitation to users into the archive-making process, offers an opportunity for play and mischief with usual research practices, but in ways that do not compromise data, but instead complements and enriches it.

## The pleasures of designing for users—Michael Goodman on the *Victorian Illustrated Shakespeare Archive*

*The Victorian Illustrated Shakespeare Archive* (VISA) is a visual digital archive of Shakespeare illustrations. Created by Dr. Michael Goodman as his PhD research, the collection features over 3,000 digitized illustrations of vintage etchings published in the mid-1800s, and which have appeared in four major United Kingdom editions of Shakespeare's Complete Works. For Goodman, accessibility of his archive for audiences and users were key commitments, which shaped the architecture of his DIY archive. By design, VISA provides very little contextualizing information for audiences visiting the digital collection. Rather than guide, suggest or control navigation through the archive, users are invited to explore it as they please, allowing for audience-led encounters and creative interactions with the extensive collection of illustrations.

Like Penal Press and WGH, creating the VISA archive was a labor-intensive process<sup>12</sup> that involved sourcing publications, scanning thousands of illustrations and assembling them in digital form. Such labor is often invisible, as user-audiences experience a public-facing version only. As [Smith and Whearty \(2023\)](#) note, “these materials may seem to ‘magically appear’ on our servers and screens—but it is skilled labor, not magic, that brings them there.” For Goodman, the labor of scanning thousands of illustrations and getting the materials “there” (onto the online platform), made possible the things he valued most in the making of his archive: the pleasure of play, creativity and discovery, for himself and for audiences alike. In making his archive, Goodman was able to play around with form and esthetics by adjusting images, “feeling [his] way about the place and just seeing what happens” (Goodman). This was an enriching experience to Goodman, further heightened by his ethos of building an accessible archive for general audiences. The delight which Goodman conveyed when speaking of designing VISA, echoes [Kim’s \(2018\)](#) account of building digital archives, particularly user-centered sensory pleasures, which can hide the labor involved, as well as archival agendas. To Kim, “the question of pleasure speaks to the importance of desire in archival building and about emotional affect.” The seeming lack of contextual information on Goodman’s site risks obfuscating the considerable thought that went into its design and creation:

GOODMAN: There’s a lot of thought that’s gone into the way I wanted that presented, and the way it’s been designed and thought through, but saying that, what I wanted people to do is look at it and not realize it’s designed in that sense. So, it’s like, the design—it’s a cliché of design is that a design is invisible. So, you don’t necessarily see it, you just use it. And you play around with it and it might provoke some questions in your brain through the juxtaposition of images. Also, I wanted it accessible and easy to use, that was the other main important aspect.

This invisible labor of pleasurable play involved actively decontextualizing the images. Again, mischievous coding is used as a tool of redirection. Goodman’s commitment to open and accessible design and the resulting space of playful discovery mischievously disrupts both user experience and ideas surrounding labor, which highlights the generative (and joyful) power of making, as well as refusal by making things differently.

Designing his archive in this audience-centered way brings to the fore questions about scholarship and academia and the public good. Making, building, and playing with design allows space for both reflection and refusal ([Loveless, 2019](#)). Presenting data via the archive refuses institutional systems which value and reward publications, quality indexes and research excellence frames, yet often remain inaccessible behind paywalls and academic frameworks.

<sup>12</sup> The labor involved in digital archiving is significant and featured extensively across the interviews. While a detailed exploration exceeds the scope of this article, we explore this further in our forthcoming book on DIY Academic Archiving (Palgrave 2024).

GOODMAN: Making things is just as valuable as writing things... It doesn't necessarily have to be in a book form, it doesn't have to be an article, I can make things, I can do stuff, I can be creative in creative Cloud, I can be playful, I can explore ideas in a practical visual way or a musical way or whatever.

For Goodman, a scholarly resource’s value does not automatically mean it shuts out the public, and popularity among the public does not necessarily mean it excludes academics. Indeed, the success of the archive design can be seen in the praise and recognition it has received in multiple media outlets, such as the BBC Shakespeare (2018). Academics, perhaps more used to weighty background information and guidance and direction, may paradoxically find it harder to use, or to grasp the complexity of the behind-the-scenes decisions. Goodman is critical of academic gatekeeping. Placing a strong emphasis on ensuring the material’s accessibility in a user-friendly manner was a key for him, prioritizing the archive’s potential for sharing, inspiring, and connecting. By making these materials available in this way, Goodman invites visitors to discover and engage with it playfully, whether pedagogically, for scholarly pursuits, or creative mischief.

## Conclusion

We see the archives created by Munn, Gonzaba, Goodman and others as a powerful counter-movement, refusing mainstream framings of open data, while persistently, and with considerable dedication, offering new, arguably more meaningful, “archival imaginaries” for qualitative researchers ([Moore, 2016](#)). In this process, the dismissive rejection of the labor of preparing data for archiving is transformed into a site of mischievous trouble-making, knowledge creation (both the knowledge that comes through attending to the detail of making archives, as well as the act of retrieving knowledge that might otherwise become lost), and the insistence that some knowledge are not erased, destroyed, disavowed, but are worthy of intense care. Each of these examples demonstrate how data curation is tied to notions of access, complicating the ideas and assumptions of “open,” and the binary of what it means to be “open”: while all of their archives look “open,” there is often invisible, yet intentionally mischievous, curatorial labor at work, guided by the *researcher-creators’* commitments. While Munn’s archive moves against a type of data extractivism, Gonzaba’s archive challenges unidirectional processes of engagement. Meanwhile, Goodman’s archive resists dictating the terms of the audience encounter, to avoid leading them toward certain interpretations.

DIY Academic Archiving offers a playful “politics of refusal” and as such can be seen as a form of mischievous academic labor that supports productive disruptions and redirections, and which perhaps paradoxically, insists that open data is often not open enough. Understanding DIY Academic archiving as a form of *method* ([Moore et al., 2021](#)) creates opportunities for academics to challenge emerging norms around expected ways of sharing data as a form of generative refusal. In taking up and proposing DIY Academic Archiving as a counter-movement of academic archiving that is already happening, we make mischief by insisting on archiving outside of the current norms of research governance, as well as by refusing the destructive

ethic to destroy data which researchers have so carefully co-produced. We make mischief by insisting on the care in cleaning, in preparing data for others to use. We make mischief by insisting on the methods, and methodology, in archiving and data cleaning, and in insisting that marginalized people's knowledge count and deserve the care-full risk of archiving our research data.

## Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material; further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

## Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by School for Social and Political Science, University of Edinburgh. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

## Author contributions

MK: Conceptualization, Data curation, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. MH: Conceptualization, Data curation, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. NM: Conceptualization, Data curation, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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## Funding

The author(s) declare financial support was received for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. We would like to declare a small amount of funding to support the transcription of interviews from the School of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Edinburgh, as well some funding from Okanagan College to support a Research Assistant through the Grants-in-Aid fund.

## Acknowledgments

We express our gratitude to the following people: Nikki Dunne, an essential member of our team and co-conspirator; Sacha Alfonso Villafuerte who worked as a Research Assistant at Okanagan College; and of course, Melissa Munn, Eric Gonzaba, and Michael Goodman for their time and invaluable insights.

## Conflict of interest

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