

## Overdue Conversations: Season 2 Trailer

Although the meaning of “archive” has always been complicated, an image persists: Vast storerooms with rows of bookshelves and boxes brimming with folders, a physical space that stores books, documents, and records of our collective physical and social world.

Today, though, archivists are grappling with a momentous shift. Much of the communication and content created in recent years only exists digitally. This digital transformation poses profound questions about how the form, function, and focus of archives will change—or how this digital turn has already affected the kinds of information that get stored, the way we access them, and how we share them.

My name is Melina Moe and I’m the curator of literature at Columbia’s Rare Book and Manuscript Library. Columbia’s archival collections span 4,000 years—from Mesopotamia to the present day. We have ancient papyri, medieval manuscripts, early printed books, works of art like posters and photographs, and even three-dimensional objects like mathematical instruments and theatrical puppets. And while we do have digital collections, our archives mainly hold lots of *stuff*—physical objects that you can see and touch in our reading room.

But, as we enter a new digital era, libraries and national archives are facing big questions about preserving the enormous amount of digital content created all the time: how will it be organized and accessed, what does ownership and copyright look like? [[These are questions not just for academics, but for anyone who uses cares about preserving the complicated, contentious, sometimes even violent issues of our times.]]

Between social media, emails, and online transactions, most of us consume our news and information online. We have also become content creators, leaving digital traces that can last for years. As everyone from private citizens to presidential candidates has found out, the digital is not always ephemeral. In 2014, the European Union gave its citizens “the right to be forgotten,” or have their personal data erased from organizations.<sup>1</sup> But, when a digital footprint crosses international borders, which laws will apply?

If this all sounds a bit abstract, here is one example of how complicated preserving our digital landscape has become. In 2010, the Library of Congress acquired the archive of public tweets from 2006 onward. By 2013, The Library of Congress said they were already

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://gdpr.eu/right-to-be-forgotten/>

amassing roughly half a billion tweets each day.<sup>2</sup> A scale that prompted curators in 2017 to start keeping only selective tweets. They also announced that the Twitter collection will remain closed to the public, until—to quote the Library of Congress—“access issues can be resolved in a cost-effective and sustainable manner.”<sup>3</sup> The issue of scale is likely only the beginning of this story.

Since the pandemic, digital communication has only become more central to our lives. From the professional archivist to the dedicated social media user, issues concerning data, privacy, and preservation lurk below the surface of all of our digital interactions.

To begin to tackle these types of questions, I sat down with some of my library colleagues to see what kinds of hopes, concerns, and fears they have for the present and future of archives and digital spaces. Here’s what they had to say:

**Courtney:** “The challenge is everyone is creating an enormous volume of records all the time... texts, tweets, facebook, etc ... Everyone is creating so much that it’s almost impossible to manage that volume of material... what truly rises to the top as important?”

**Dennis:** “I would rather have a billion small Libraries of Congresses.. It’s a messier ecosystem. Control becomes difficult, but maybe that’s a good thing.”

**Celeste:** Digital archives expose the tension between replication, access...

**Jane:** “Even though it seems more accessible, in reality it’s much more frightening to give access to it because you can give access to something that can damage people.”

**Courtney:** “The internet is democracy... Knowledge is democratized by the internet itself.. It’s the greatest expression of equality.”

**Kevin:** “People talk about their lived experiences on spaces like twitter, but the profit goes to large corporations.”

After talking to my colleagues, I ended up with more questions than answers. So, I contacted scholars outside of Columbia with expertise about the evolving role of archives in the digital age. In one episode, we talk about what happens to an author’s archive when their correspondence sits in an editor inbox next to HR memos? It’s hard to imagine all those digital files being sorted out so the literary ones can be made available for research. And,

---

<sup>2</sup><https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/12/26/573609499/library-of-congress-will-no-longer-archive-every-tweet>

<sup>3</sup> <https://blogs.loc.gov/loc/2017/12/update-on-the-twitter-archive-at-the-library-of-congress-2/>

libraries are nearly always hampered by limited resources, with digitization one more competing demand, which asks libraries to balance the needs of local users, visiting in person, and digitizing items for a broader audience. The possible global reach was only underscored during the pandemic when schools closed and students turned to online collections.

These conversations became: Season 2 of “Overdue Conversations,” a podcast about the ways archives inform our discussions of history, literature, and politics. From digital publishing to reparative justice, climate change to public health, this series of overdue conversations takes archival documents out of the stacks and into the public forum to consider how collecting practices, selective reading, and erasure of past knowledge inform and distort contemporary debates.

In this season, we investigate how the digital revolution in archives informs these challenges.