

THE CHRONICLE

of Higher Education

[Home](#) [Blogs](#) [The Wired Campus](#)

think

<p>Previous</p> <p>← Judge Rules Former Nursing Student Cannot Collect Damages for Dismissal Over Blog Posts</p>	<p>Next</p> <p>Venture-Backed Enterprise Seeks to Satisfy Global Demand for an Elite Education, Online →</p>
---	---

For Archivists, 'Occupy' Movement Presents New Challenges

April 3, 2012, 12:36 pm

By [Jeffrey R. Young](#)

Baltimore – Howard Besser, a New York University archivist, recently got into a shouting match at an Occupy protest, making a case for why the activists should preserve records of their activities.

“Within the Occupy movement there’s a huge suspicion of traditional organizations, including libraries and universities,” Mr. Besser explained Monday at the spring meeting of the [Coalition for Networked Information](#).

The shouting match was an extreme moment, but Mr. Besser and other archivists on a panel here explained that they have had to take unusual steps to try to gather a snapshot for future scholars of the nationwide Occupy protests, which call attention to income inequality in the United States. Those steps—including distributing postcards promoting archiving at protests, developing automated systems to download photos posted online, and asking participants to vote on which images are most important for the historic record—could serve as a model for preserving future events.

Mr. Besser, who spoke at the conference wearing an Occupy Wall Street T-shirt that he had made by hand at the event, said he led a [group of volunteer archivists](#) to create the postcard, which will soon be given out at rallies. The card is titled “Why Archive,” and stresses that the efforts could help future “mobilizations” understand what happened today. The bottom of the card says in bold lettering: “Record and Collect what’s happening around you. Preserve the record.”

Even Occupy protesters who become convinced of the value of such archiving have rejected traditional relationships with the archivists, however. NYU’s library is working to collect and store materials from the protests, but groups such as Occupy Wall Street have refused to sign “donor agreements” that are common and grant the library permission to use the materials. That felt too much like a trapping of the traditional hierarchical organizations the group is protesting, says Mr. Besser.

As a compromise, many protesters are releasing videos and photos they have taken at the protests under a Creative Commons license that allows anyone to store them and use them for research purposes.

That means that the materials are unusually public, however, sitting on the Web for anyone to see rather than in a box in a library storage room. Mr. Besser said he has felt the need to warn protesters that the photos and videos they share could be used by authorities policing the protests, as well as scholars. “These videos have been used by police and by lawyers in cases,” said Mr. Besser, in an interview. He feels that archivists have an ethical responsibility to warn participants, even if that means some will hold back their photos and videos. “It’s not in our best interest,” he notes.

He and other archivists have guided them to smartphone apps, such as ObsuraCam, that automatically place black squares over faces while making video recordings.

The Occupy Wall Street movement now has an [Archives Working Group](#) that has met to discuss how best to preserve material from the events.

At the conference on Monday, David Millman, the NYU library’s director of digital technology services, said that his staff has also given protesters recording equipment and asked them to tape their meetings, which are famously run with a “[human microphone](#)” where members repeat speeches line by line even without a sound system.

One challenge has been getting protesters to note key details that will help future historians organize the vast trove of digital materials. That information, called metadata, includes things like the date and time that recordings were made, said Mr. Millman. “We asked them to follow naming conventions” for their audio and video files, he said, “but they didn’t follow that.”

In an age when so many people hold recording equipment in their pockets in the form of smartphones, deciding what material to store in archives might be the biggest challenge, Mr. Besser said. One approach he tried recently was asking protesters to vote on which videos or photos should be preserved, and then archivists make the final decision of what to keep from that smaller sample.

"The old way of doing things doesn't scale," he said. "We have to find new ways of doing the selection and doing the metadata."

Sharon Leon, director of public programs at George Mason University's Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media, spoke of her center's efforts to have volunteer archivists organize digital material from Occupy protests nationwide. The efforts were recently outlined in [an article](#) in *The Economist*.

This entry was posted in [Archive Watch](#), [Social Networking](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).

Comment powered by DISQUS

Add a comment

Log in to post

with your Chronicle account:

Don't have an account? [Create one now](#).

Or log in using one of these alternatives:



Showing 4 comments

Sort by **Oldest first** Follow comments: [by e-mail](#) [by RSS](#)

Real-time updating is **paused**. ([Resume](#))



11159766 1 day ago

Is not withholding of donor permissions by Occupy protesters itself a gesture of the hierarchy of ownership that the Occupy protest calls on us to reject? I do not mean to write this in disrespect of the Occupiers, and admittedly I am a scholar who works with the records of long ago protests, so I, too, have an interest.

1 person liked this. [Like](#)



Neeneko 14 hours ago in reply to 11159766

Pretty much yes. OWS ended up with a lot of ad-hoc hierarchies within the group, so under the facade of 'hierarchy is bad' you had a reality of 'our leaders want power instead of outsiders'.. and they discovered that just like drumming up anti-science works for the tea party and other conservative groups, anti-institutional/educational sentiment was a good way to consolidate power within their own ranks.

[Like](#)



howardb 7 hours ago in reply to 11159766

No! Executing a donor agreement is conferring an exclusive right to a single institution. Executing a Creative Commons license instead is allowing both institutions and individuals to collect and re-distribute the material. This is the very antithesis of ownership and hierarchy.

[Like](#)



starrnw 13 hours ago

Doesn't asking a group to pick and choose what to archive make the "history" skewed to one point of view? What about the negative side of things they might want to hide? If you want to truly archive "history", you need to show BOTH sides of an issue - not just how you would like your side to be perceived...

[Like](#)

Copyright 2012. All rights reserved.

The Chronicle of Higher Education 1255 Twenty-Third St, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20037