

Automation and Animation
Manchester | Lancaster

Archi-ation

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There is a looming paradox in the way culture is created and represented (visible, shared, present) and in how it is conserved and preserved for posterity (stored, protected, future/past).

While emergent technologies—and the circulation of culture through the web in particular—have inspired various doomsday scenarios, these “internet dark ages” are normally conceptualized around the near-total erasure of social memory due to ever changing formats and versioning, and the loss of control over that which constitutes culture and creativity. The digital is thus confronted with material worries and physical losses. But what if the digital reignites what preservation intends (but necessarily denies): that memory exists within culture itself. Memory lives on through the circulation of stories, through their interpretations, and in the very presence or absence of certain narratives from popular discourse, or better yet, in the very way value, taste and meaning are made manifest.

The paradox (proposed as something of an archival conspiracy theory) is discernible through what constitutes *archival value* (which is itself culturally defined) and more specifically, how the mass circulation, appropriation and recycling of culture online comes to “reduce” this value. In other words, *archival value* is the summary term for what counts, who and what “makes history” and in turn, what is remembered and informs a collective social memory. While *archival value* is determined by the assessment of long-term preservation of historical and evidentiary worth, through notions of integrity, authenticity, fixity and originality (there is no official list but these are common considerations for appraisal), the “free flow of information” online challenges each of these notions, and arguably, functions to preserve culture differently: through mass copying, tagging, documenting, hyperlinking, etc. within a highly searchable environment.

The online environment—as it currently sits in the grey zones of copyright and internet regulation globally—prioritizes the circulation of culture and its preservation through popular use and open access and, in many cases, through practices of (re)appropriation and remix as both homage and critical response. As such, online culture is also defined by what it privileges. In a globally networked context, the medium necessarily functions to circulate and preserve certain cultural ideas, ideals and products feeding into the popular imaginary. The recursive nature of cultural circulation online is thus central to new definitions of archiving, no matter how resistant the archival tradition may be to these emerging contexts.

The establishment and reliance on *archival value* encourages, if not imposes, “scarcity” as a means of recuperating an original and authentic “essence”. It also privileges long-term preservation over access, quality over quantity, and authenticity over appropriation. Here, *archival value* meets *economic value* insofar as unique collections, exclusive findings, rare records, etc., prove to be of significant monetary worth over which competing archives bid (though often with a relatively constrained budget). As such, *archival value* reinstates the idea

that monetary worth, attributable by rival goods, is an important (though not singular) component in determining access to culture.

Online culture, however, while it allows if not invites free circulation, is not without its own complicated relationship to *economic value*. In fact, *economic value* in the context of the free and unfettered web is all the more complicated as it heightens the role of law in shaping culture through issues of ownership, copyright, and intellectual property. While these legal considerations are certainly not born of the web, copyright cases have become an interesting way to track the history of the web's development, especially as pertains to systems that facilitate the distribution of culture (audio and video). Online repositories like *Napster*, *YouTube*, *UBUweb*, *InternetArchive*, *Matricules* and *LastFm*, for example, double up as distribution models and, in some sense, as art spaces or galleries. The triadic relationship between archive, storefront and gallery—or, archival value, economic value, and artistic value—I argue here, reveal something about the web's philosophical convergence through *digital value*. And this without being utopic or tragic: the internet is changing the way culture is circulated, and there is a certain urgency to formulating a language around these transformations.

So how is pointing out this paradox—if it is indeed a paradox rather than a mere lag, or difference—useful for thinking through online distribution?

In the first instance, the paradox of value—how it is determined, generated, maintained and/or challenged—is necessary for conceptualizing the online repository as an *archive of transmission*. Important to note is that this is not a comparison between physical/traditional repositories with their online counterparts, nor is it a continuation of the debates around materiality, but rather, it is a means of comparing subtle shifting philosophies: from a predominantly conservative model of distribution to a liberal mode of digital transmission.

Perhaps common and current uses of the internet will have a significant impact on our understanding of what constitutes *digital value*, but for now, emergent technologies are seen as a challenge, if not a threat, to attainable preservation ends, in that they are causing extreme backlogs in (traditional) archives, bankrupting the so-called content industry (however debatable), and democratizing (outsourcing) art and creativity.

As part of a larger project exploring the ways in which audio and video repositories and distribution sites are extracting meaning and taste from their users (*animators*) as a means of generating value for their products through algorithms and highly visible statistics as markers of membership and popularity (*automators*), I propose the idea of *digital value* as one way of qualifying and appraising the circulation of culture online

For my presentation, and as a means of restraining the potentially infinite nature of such a project, I propose to look at issues of international copyright regulation through these distribution sites. By focusing on non-legally binding alternatives and adaptations undertaken by various transmission archives, I concentrate on the nature of automation and agency (or use) within a growing digitally networked environment.