

Trigger Warning: What to do with the ugly history that lurks in your archives

Irina Rogova, Tara Coleman, and Cliff Hight, Kansas State University Libraries

Podcast Transcript

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Irina Rogova: Thank you for joining us today. This is a podcast for the Library Collective Connection Conference 2021 entitled “Trigger Warning: What to do with the ugly history that lurks in your archives.” My name is Irina Rogova and I am the Digital Resources Archivist at Kansas State University, and I will be joined by two of my colleagues. My pronouns are she and her. And here's my colleague, Cliff.

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Cliff Hight: My name is Cliff Hight, I'm currently the Head of Special Collections at Kansas State University. I've been the University Archivist for a while, but have just recently handed that off to somebody else. Pronouns are he and him. I will now turn it over to my colleague, Tara.

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Tara Coleman: Hey, this is Tara Coleman, she/her. I am the Web Services Librarian for K-State Libraries. Before we get started, we want to share a land acknowledgement. We are at Kansas State University in Manhattan, Kansas.

As the first land-grant institution established under the 1862 Morrill Act, we acknowledge that the state of Kansas is historically home to many Native nations, including the Kaw, Osage, and Pawnee, among others. Furthermore, Kansas is the current home to four federally recognized Native nations: The Prairie Band Potawatomie, the Kickapoo Tribe of Kansas, the Iowa Tribe of Kansas and Nebraska, and Sac and Fox Nation of Missouri in Kansas and Nebraska.

Many Native nations utilized the western plains of Kansas as their hunting grounds, and others – such as the Delaware – were moved through this region during Indian removal efforts to make way for White settlers. It's important to acknowledge this, since the land that serves as the foundation for this institution was, and still is, stolen land.

We remember these truths because K-State's status as a land-grant institution is a story that exists within ongoing settler-colonialism, and rests on the dispossession of Indigenous peoples and nations from their lands. These truths are often invisible to many. The recognition that K-State's history begins and continues through Indigenous context is essential.

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Irina Rogova: Thank you for reading that, Tara. So we're going to start by talking about why we're interested in this topic of "controversial"--I would just say racist, sexist, etc.--items that exists in our archival collections. Why are we here? And I as the person who gathered us here today, I think it would be great if Tara would start.

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Tara Coleman: Yeah, so, I'm the Web Services Librarian, and my goal is to make stuff accessible and kind of left the preservation and filtering of and to other people. And once upon a time, Cliff came forward to me and said that it was important that we post some--I don't know what you called it--you can say trigger warnings, he probably wouldn't. Some, some--acknowledge that the stuff that we have in our archive could get a little risky or scary or fill in the blank. Again, these are my words, not Cliff's, he'll be much more professional when he talks about it. But it was..it was news to me that we would have stuff that we would want to warn people about. And it turned into many really great conversations between Cliff and I about what was in our archive, why don't we talk more about it, and what do we do if someone sees it and it gets--and is unhappy with what they see.

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Cliff Hight: And I'll add a little bit of--I can't take credit for being the originator of the idea. Some, some people may be aware of back in about 2019 or so--2018, 2019, something like that--there were some national attention about prominent figures being in images in their, in their university yearbooks that were not flattering, and racist. And that had created, I guess in an email thread or an email listserv that our Dean is part of, she had seen some, some of those questions being raised by other deans at other universities. And so she contacted me at our Associate Dean in February of 2019 to say, "Okay this stuff's happening with other places that have digitized yearbooks. What type of, what type of things do we need to do?" And so...I had looked at what some other repositories had done with the language that they used, and then started to draft some language. And then that's when I started reaching out to Tara and some other folks in the libraries to get us all on the same page and make sure we had the right players at the table, and that we knew where we were deploying that language so that people could be aware that we had controversial materials in our holdings that were digitized.

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Tara Coleman: So, I have not--I'm not familiar with the places that this has happened. Can you give an example of what might have happened in other places in archives land?

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Irina Rogova: I can give an example. So, this happened in 2019, in about February was when I would say--what I refer to as "yearbookgate"--happened. And I felt very close to it because I at the time was living in Richmond, Virginia, and it was actually the Virginia governor's yearbook photo that had come out, Governor Northam's yearbook photo. So we were really--at my

previous institution--at the epicenter of a lot of this. We were not the school that he had attended, but we had very similar materials in our yearbooks. And I was working on a project at the University of Richmond called the Race & Racism Project, where we had already uncovered a lot of these racist materials in yearbooks and in newspapers, student newspapers, etc. So when the yearbook came out there was kind of a scramble--first in Virginia, and then a lot of other places--for institutions to kind of figure out what was in their archives. And if you were paying attention at the time, there were statements made by institutions like mine, like Virginia Commonwealth University, like UNC [University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill], a lot of similar schools, a lot of them located in the South, acknowledging that these materials existed. And that a lot of them had already been digitized. So when newspaper articles are written about these materials they would be able to link directly to someone in blackface in a yearbook that was already hosted online. And for the most part institutions just acknowledged that they had these materials, that they were quote unquote a product of their time--though I would challenge that a little bit, to try to put that back into the past and not talk about modern forms of racism in institutional records.

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Irina Rogova: But there was one incident that really...kind of snowballed a larger conversation about what we're supposed to do with these materials. And this was at an institution, also in Virginia, called Hollins [University], that was a small private women's college. And I came across this--I was on Twitter one day, I follow a lot of archivists and librarians on Twitter, and I saw that there was an archivist tweeting--or a librarian, I should say--tweeting anonymously about being asked to pull four issues of their school yearbook from the digital repository. Everything had already been digitized, had been hosted, had been online for a while. And they were trying to figure out how to respond to this request from their supervisor. And it eventually came about that this request came directly from the university president, and this person was bypassed in the process of taking those yearbooks down. They were refusing on the basis of professional ethics. And eventually those yearbooks came out, but it made national news. And at the end of the day after many statements were made--by the Society of American Archivists, by the American Library Association--the yearbooks were reinstated online with a content warning. And the university president that sparked this controversy is no longer the president of that university. But this kind of led to I think a lot of institutions having conversations about what they should do with these materials.

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Tara Coleman: So Cliff, are we hiding nasty things in our archives at K-State?

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Cliff Hight: ...Hiding is an interesting way to phrase that, of course. Because I think there's a difference between something being hidden intentionally versus not knowing everything in the holdings. And some of it is just a quantity factor, where a lot of times when we have books in our, in our libraries, we catalog them at the book level. You know, where we say, "Okay, this is a

book. It has a title, it has these subjects in it. This is the author, this, these are the dates," all these other pieces of information. We don't necessarily go and in our, in our library catalog, we don't necessarily say, "These are the words that are on every single page." Similarly, in an archives, you've got collections that can be anywhere from a small box to 100 boxes of--filled with paper. And...so one challenge is--is it hidden? No, but it may not be described at a level of detail that is easily discoverable. So that's one of the challenges now. So I guess the answer should be no, it's not hidden. But yes, there are things that we don't know about because we haven't seen every single piece of paper that is contained in an archives. So I don't know if that gives you much help, but I think--you know that's, of course, just in the analog realm. I think if we're considering the digital side of things, there are technological ways that you can find things more easily in the digital realm than we used to be able to do with boxes and papers. And that, that's probably one of the main reasons that this issue has even started to arise more consistently, is because as people digitize collections, they become more widely available in ways that were not possible in the print world.

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Irina Rogova: And I also think that just by the nature of the collecting that we do, there are always going to be materials that, as Cliff is saying, are not necessarily hidden--we're not secreting them away. But there are going to be controversial materials--materials that are racist, sexist homophobic, etc.--because when we are collecting archives--and this has been what our profession has done for over a century, at this point in the U.S. at least-- under the scope of like "archival science," we are collecting primarily the materials of people that are considered "important," "significant." And collecting in a Western institution, those people are usually university presidents, administrators, etc. Most often white wealthy men and women. And because of the history of the United States, and because of the racist history of the United States, those people will have materials in their collections that reflect those historical...situations, that reflect the opinions that they held, that reflect the opinions around them. And it is the job of modern archivists like Cliff and myself to expand our collections, to have equitable collections, to have collections that more thoroughly reflect what our institutions are actually like. Not just having those voices of people of power, but having voices of students, of staff, of the community that is incorporated and surrounds an institution. Because all of those folks influence the institution, but for so long only those people in those power positions had their histories preserved in an archive.

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Tara Coleman: So, Irina, if what we did in the past was got the stuff of the rich folks, or fancy pants directors, presidents, etc., when they left or when they wanted to give us things. How do we get the stuff of the regular queer K-State student or the first Black female faculty member who came in 1987? Or any of these things where the people are probably important to someone, but they are not equal to the bajillion dollar donor, the president, the person that building is named after?

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Irina Rogova: I think that it's all about outreach. It's all about having people in these positions, who actually care and will put their energy into making connections. A lot of my success in my previous position, where we started a whole oral history project with Black alums, was being able to reach out to that first alum and say, "Hey, I know no one has ever talked to you about your experience here, but we want to do that. And we want to do that in a way that puts power in your hands, that you get to make the decision about what story you tell and what goes online and who sees what." And it's all about relationship building in that way. And once we got that first alum on board, they talk to their friends, they talk to their friends. And all of a sudden we have people who are really interested in contributing their stories, and some who went out of their way to do so, because they felt seen for probably the first time by this massive institution that was a big part of their lives.

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Cliff Hight: I want to add a little bit to what Irina's saying there because she's identified some really important aspects of what helps really constitute an archives that represents our, our institutions and our societies. Because the, the trusting relationships aspect is really important. You have to be able to build trust with people who are willing to give materials to the repository. And often that's where, especially with marginalized communities, that's where some of the challenges are, because they have been mistreated long enough that they don't have trust in the institutions that often exist. And so it requires work on the part of the archivist to even acknowledge that those problems have existed in the past, and work with these communities to let them know we're trying to rectify the these, these problems that have existed. And the ideal, according to--there are lots of debates in the archival community about what really we want to do in an archives--but one, one perspective that I really appreciate that I think is important is at a certain level, we want it to almost, we want the archives to basically be a mirror of society. We want to be able to hold up a mirror, and see represented in our holdings what we see in society. And this ties back a little bit to what Irina was saying earlier, part of why we have sexist, racist and other you know, you know, unfortunate content, is because we are in a society that has those elements. And that's part of why we have those things. And at the same time, we want to try to provide opportunities for people to see a different version of our civilization as well. And so then we do try and build these relationships with marginalized communities so that they can be represented, and they can have a voice in being able to share their story as well in the archives

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Irina Rogova: And there's a lot of opportunity in the digital realm to expand the archive in that way. Because...probably someone who went to K-State 60, 70 years ago doesn't have their materials from back then. But they might have the opportunity to sit down and talk about their experience, and do an oral history. So being able to have all of these digital objects really helps us grow who was recognized in the archive, especially if we're talking about modern collecting. All of our students, they're doing everything online these days. So how are we addressing collecting their event materials or student group materials, if they're doing it all online?

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Tara Coleman: You, Cliff called it a content warning and our title calls it a trigger warning. What is the difference? Why should we do this at all? I can hear someone saying, "This is just coddling people and making fluffier snowflakes." Why, why do we care?

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Irina Rogova: I think that the conversation, the national conversation, that we've been having around trigger warnings for a few years now comes from a kind of basic misunderstanding of what a trigger warning intends to do. It does not come from a place of keeping our students or our users from accessing information. It comes from a very compassionate place, I would say, of being able to tell someone, "Hey, there are materials here that could trigger a emotional reaction, that could be difficult to deal with." And if we think about it a little bit more, I think we'll find that we have kind of content warnings in a lot of places that people don't realize they're content warnings. The one that comes up for me all the time is, we have ratings on films and TV shows. And we have even there--they've become more detailed on streaming. I know I was watching a major streaming network that centers a mouse. And they not only have a rating, but they tell you if there's going to be violence, there's going to be cursing, if there's going to be sexual imagery. And that's pretty much the same thing as letting someone know, "Hey, there might be materials with blackface in them in this collection."

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Tara Coleman: I recently watched a nature show with my toddler, and the rate--it was rated G for violence and gore or something to that effect, I'm like "Whoa." But then it occurred to me, it's because it's a nature show and it's animals eating animals, and I appreciated the heads up because I'm not sure if I wanted you to explain to a toddler why that big lion was eating that cute, adorable, fluffy mouse, or whatever it was going to eat. And if you put it that way, that is helpful. I know that if I'm about to go into an archive and I'm going to see lynching photos, I don't want to see them, and I want to know in advance. Because there are other ways for me to learn, and this is just not the time in my life for me to gaze upon that.

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Irina Rogova: So...back before my time at K-State, how did y'all approach getting a content warning on archival materials?

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Cliff Hight: As far as things that we used to do, we often create archival descriptions of our collections. And that's basically a guide for people to be able to know what's in a collection. And that would be a primary location, or primary place that someone could say, "Hey, these are the types of materials that are in here." In the context of content warnings, we probably didn't do--we definitely did not do anything as extensive as what we have currently done, but there

may have been some, you know, people could pick up on the cues of, "Oh, there may be some racist things in here because of the time period or the organization that was involved," or something like that. But yeah, we, we didn't explicitly put content warnings on our holdings until recently. And, and it's an interesting balance--I might shift a little bit and talk a little bit about ethics in the broader sense because that really has informed our approach to how we've done it here at K-State. The Society of American archivists--it's also known as SAA, so if you hear me say SAA, that's what I'm talking about. They've approved a core value statement and a code of ethics that I think has been really valuable for us to think about how do we balance the various tensions that exist in our professions, to share information but also respect privacy. Or to do, you know, to make sure that we're abiding by laws, but yet not using the laws unjustly. And so there's some fun tensions that exist in it. And one of the core values that also happens to be an important component of our code of ethics, is access. As much as people think about archives as dusty old places that nobody ever goes to and that it's like the, I don't know...it's like this special place and nobody wants to share what's in it. That's not really the case. The whole point of us collecting these materials is to make them available for people to use in various ways, whether it's researcher accountability or other, other factors.

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Cliff Hight: Knowing that one of our core concepts is to provide access to what we have, I think that's an important guide where we've talked about, "Okay, we may have some controversial materials." But if a core value that we have as a profession is to provide access as much as we can, then those controversial materials still need to be available for people to use in various ways. And then another component that I think is really important in the context of what we're discussing today is accountability because--especially if we're at a public institution or we're involved in public activities, there's an obligation that an archives has to ensure that those who are in positions of power are held accountable for the way that they use that power. And I think the Hollins situation...well, I guess the, the Virginia situation, where the governor appeared in blackface as a college student, I think that's an important thing that we need to be able to say, "Look, people in the past have done racist things. And here is evidence. Let's hold them accountable to see if they've actually acknowledged that they did something wrong, and make the changes that are necessary to be better public servants," or whatever else we want to talk about in that regard.

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Cliff Hight: Yeah, those are a couple of aspects that, that we've thought about in the context of our situation as we consider the values and the ethics that go into it. Irina, I know this is, this predates when you were with us at K-State, but I don't know if you've got any further thoughts on the, on the whole, ethics, core values idea and things that you've tried to use in your experiences.

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Irina Rogova: I think it's very helpful to have a major professional organization have a set of core values that supports your work, that supports having access to all of these materials. I will note that even though the accountability process is really important, at the end of the day, there really was no major change after that yearbook photo came out. Northam is still the governor of Virginia, until his term is up next year. While he admitted to being in the photo, and then backtracked, and then--there's actually, there's a person in blackface in the photo and there's a person in a Klansman costume in the photo, and we still don't know which one he was--there was not any major leaving of office for him, even though many activists in Virginia called for it. I don't feel comfortable or capable of speaking of, to like if there was any major policy shift that came about because of this. But I think that the larger conversation that sparked is really the significant part of yearbookgate.

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Cliff Hight: Yeah, yeah, I think I agree with, with that. One of the challenges with accountability is that it requires, usually requires other people in power to hold those people to account. And I think that's where some of the challenges come in and in that regard. I wanted to mention another aspect on the legal side because we've talked a little bit about the ethics and how that doesn't have the force of law, but it can help influence behavior. A lot of times in archives, especially at a, at an institution like Kansas State University--which is a public university--we are, we also are obligated to abide by either state open records law or federal regulations like FERPA, which is the Education Privacy Act. And those laws also can influence what we can and can't make available in, in repositories. And so there are times that records that we hold in the archives, we won't be able to make accessible for X amount of time because they have to meet some sort of a retention or a privacy regulation before they can become accessible. And that also influences the way that we look at balancing access with privacy, or the legal and ethical tensions that, that often exist. I don't think I've got more to say about that at this point, but I figured I'd add that last part about the legal--sometimes it's complications, but the legal effects that can come.

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Tara Coleman: Irina, I'm curious. I've not personally been at an institution that had an archival scandal or anything like that. Could you share what that was like for you as a employee and a member of the archive that held the item that caused such ripples?

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Irina Rogova: Yes. So I will say that when yearbookgate happened, there were a lot of schools that had like specific items pulled out of the archive and...made into news stories, which I thought was fine. And there was one at my institution. So a little bit of background: I was the Project Archivist for the Race & Racism at the University of Richmond Project from the summer of 2016 through the summer of 2019. And I was hired to be a project archivist for this project that had existed for about a year before I started. It was started by a faculty member, Dr. Nicole Maurantonio, in the Rhetoric Department. And it was started in response to a conversation that

was had on campus, after a speaker--an anti-racist speaker was on campus--where students, particularly Black students noted that they didn't see themselves reflected in university history. And the institution is very grounded and tradition, very grounded in all of these practices that have existed since its founding. So Dr. Maurantonio had a class that went to the archive and went through the yearbooks, and they just started pulling out photos of Black folks, other people of color, to try to start this collection of materials that better reflected the reality of the institution.

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Irina Rogova: So by the time yearbookgate happened, we had already been working on this for over three years. We had an established collection, we had materials that centered people of color at the institution. And then we also had, in that same collection, materials that reflected the white supremacist culture of the institution, that reflected the misogynistic culture of the institution. And they worked in tandem to tell a more complete story of the institution. So the photo that was selected--or not selected--the photo that kind of made the rounds from my institution after yearbookgate was actually a photo of a Black student in the 1980 yearbook--on the SAE [Sigma Alpha Epsilon], which is a fraternity, page--where the student was at a party of some sort. And there's a picture of him holding up a beer and he has a noose around his neck, and he's like laughing. And there's a number of other students around him in faux Klansmen robes. And I'd seen this photo before, it was in our digital collection, we had described it, it was accessible. But we had never known that--who that student was. And then a journalist from the student newspaper did some digging and found out who that person was. And that's kind of when it shifted for us, because now that student was being contacted about this photo from 40 years ago, to speak about the situation. And the, the thing that made it different was that this was a Black student. This was not a white student that put on blackface. This was a black student who participated in something and it blew up, all over local media. And he was kind of asked to speak to this situation that he had been in 40 years ago. And because the other students in the photo were wearing hoods over their heads--and they were, they were all white students, presumably--they were not asked to speak about that situation. So it was very interesting, because I was definitely being asked to comment on this by journalists. And I also had students who were being asked to comment on this, and they were primarily Black students who had worked on the project and seen these materials in the archives, and had reflected on their own experience at the institution, knowing this history. So for me, I really turned the requests that I was getting to speak to journalism--to journalists--to those students, because I thought that their voices were much more important in that conversation.

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Irina Rogova: This was not the first time that something had happened from what we had uncovered as a project, but it was the one that to this day, got the most attention. The thing that I'm really proud of that we were able to do, is after many conversations and because of the many connections that our project--that trust-building--had already made with other Black alumni that knew this student, we were able to get him to sit down for an oral history interview. One where he didn't just talk about this one photo which he admits to not even remembering, but one where he was able to tell his entire experience being a student at the University of

Richmond. And he was interviewed by two current Black students, and they were able to have like a real conversation about the social pressures faced then and now that led to that photo existing in the first place.

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Tara Coleman: So I'm curious, we haven't had any scandals at K-State. But I am a believer in learning from other people's experience. I don't need to go through that to imagine what it feels like. What does--what kind of reactions should an organization expect from either stakeholders, donors, administration, etc, when something like this is discovered or as you start digitizing things you yourself, your student employees, start finding this kind of material?

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Irina Rogova: So given this conversation about the process of getting a content warning on our materials, I did want to share the final content warning that is on our website now, that went through a couple rounds of editing. And it reads: "K-State Libraries' digital collections may include images and text reflecting various forms of oppression, including but not limited to offensive language or negative stereotypes. Instances of bigotry reflect the attitudes, perspectives, and beliefs of those that created and participated in them and should be considered records of the era in which they were produced. The collection period includes the modern day, as born digital resources are collected regularly. They are presented here without censorship as evidence of past activities."

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Irina Rogova: And I found it really important to make sure that we included that our collections reflect the modern day as well, because in all of my work around these controversial materials, the number one thing that I heard was, "Well, that just happened back then. That was just normal back then." And the two things that I always said back to people was: One, yes these things happened back then, but there were always people in opposition. There were always people saying, "This isn't right. This is negative--a negative stereotype. This is violent." And two, these things still happen. We are recording this on January 12th [2021], six days after white supremacists stormed our nation's capital. And I don't think that we can ignore that we're going to keep collecting materials that reflect racist and sexist opinions and beliefs. And that our future researchers will always come across those.

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Irina Rogova: Having said all that, at K-State we created this content warning. It's on our materials, great. But I would love to have our listeners have a little bit more information about what they should do next. You can't just--if you really want to use your archival materials, or to encourage the use of your archival materials by your researchers in a way that reflects equitability--equity in our society, then you need to encourage folks to use those materials that are difficult.

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Tara Coleman: So we've put content warnings on our stuff in the archives. What do we do after that? Should people be afraid of using it? Like if I teach a class of freshmen, should I avoid going to the archives because there's some stuff in there that we might not be comfortable talking about? What should we do?

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Cliff Hight: I would strongly say no. Don't avoid the archives. Don't avoid the difficulties. You know, that's one of the things that we see just from living life, is that hard things happen all the time. And so we should expect those types of experiences exist in archival holdings, that people have experienced terrible things and that exists in archives. And so we shouldn't shy away from it. What I think is really important with it is that we have to contextualize it. We can't just, you know, I think it was Tara had mentioned earlier, you know, you don't really want to look at a photo of a lynching just like without knowing beforehand that's what you're going to see. But if you can contextualize why that's going to be something that you are using, it will make it a better learning experience and not the shock and awe that sometimes people want to have. I think that's an important component, is making sure that people who work in archives and libraries, that they reach out to the instructors in their, in their institutions and they start to develop relationships with them. And talking with those who are open to using archival materials, and trying to figure out how to better incorporate those types of materials into their instruction. And then also, you know, starting to work, you know, knowing what researcher interest exists so that people can use some of the, the, even the controversial materials that are holdings.

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Tara Coleman: One of my most favorite--I don't know if it fits controversial--but one of my most favorite photos to share with students is from one of our veterinarian labs. Kansas State University is the Ag[riculture] school. And it is a photo of a teacher in a lab coat with young men in lab coats--I don't know the times--but they're doing a vivisection on a horse. I assume it's a vivisection, it could be an autopsy. Regardless, it's pretty graphic. And I love showing this photo because I want people to see the difference between the way we thought of animals and the way medicine worked. This is a photo that today if we saw someone taking a picture of a horse upside down, perhaps alive, right before surgery, we would say it's the animal cruelty. And that's not the way it was looked at then. And being able to talk about how history changes and why our perspective is different is awesome. I also like to show this at--Kansas State University is very proud of being one of the first vet schools to allow African American students, but there's not a single one of them in the photo. There's also no women. And it gives you an opportunity to talk about where are those people? Because we, we're very proud that they're there--why aren't they in the photos? And I think that there's probably more in the archives that I'm not aware of that could offer some really awesome opportunities. Especially for people who might feel like they can't use the archives. When I talk to people on campus--and even myself once upon a time--I said, "Archives are for the Humanities. If you are not a humanity, there's no reason to

even go there,” and that's not true. But if you've never seen yourself there, as a discipline as an identity, you would automatically assume you're not welcome and nothing of interest or value to you would be included.

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Cliff Hight: Thank you for sharing that because I think that's--that represents a view--I mean, you expressed some, some great ideas that, that really...a lot of people hold because they think they--“I don't need to go there, there's nothing that I can gain from being there.” Thanks for sharing that.

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Irina Rogova: And I found that...our students--at least in my previous institution, but I feel safe to assume that the students that every institution--are interested in the history of their institutions. They--a lot of our students are very proud of their institutions, but they also want to know about what things were like in the past. And particularly students who experience oppression, want to understand further what the history of that is like, want to find a historical connection to another student. At my previous position, I can't even tell you how many times I had students who approached the project and wanted to find the first Black baseball player, the first Korean-American student, the first Muslim student, the first trans student. Because they were also living that experience, and they often felt isolated in living that experience and wanted to make that historical connection. And a really incredible thing that came out of this--not only were we going through our existing archival materials--I mentioned the oral histories that we did. We were able to start connecting students with those very people they were looking for. I had one student who was a Black student on the baseball team. There weren't a lot--there still aren't a lot of Black students on the baseball team, but he ended up conducting an oral history interview with the first Black student on the baseball team. And that was 40 years of history that they were able to connect over. So it's not just about, “Oh, our students did this cool project and we can promote the archive now.” We have the opportunity to really build connections that enrich our students' experiences overall. Not just their academic experiences, but their experiences that make them want to stay in a place that sometimes can be very damaging to them.

[00:41:57]

Tara Coleman: I'm curious, we're an academic library. I know that people who are in school media libraries or public libraries are probably more familiar with having challenges to the material than--because they're in a public library--than we do. And I honestly can't think of any academic library that has had a challenge outside of the archive. What do we do if someone comes forward and has some concerns about what we've digitized or they've discovered that we have?

[00:42:29]

Irina Rogova: I've had an experience where someone was very upset and uncomfortable that we had found something in the archive and made it publicly available, and a student had even written a blog post about it. And it was an alumni--an alum who graduated many, many years ago and knew the university president that was being talked about, and was being reflected in frankly a negative light. Because a lot of his actions around the desegregation of the institution had come from the archive, and we were learning about the choices that he made. And she had a personal relationship with him. And this was someone that in my three years at the institution, I met with a couple times because of similar circumstances. And every time I found it really important to have a conversation with her about, "Hey, there's all sorts of things in the archives. And there's all sorts of things that are missing from the archives. There are experiences you had with this person, and a relationship you had with this person, that might not be reflected in the archive, because there are all these gaps and silences. And then there are these materials that do not reflect well on this person, as well. But the most important thing is that we build the most complete archive we can." And after many years, I can't say that she and I ever saw eye to eye or agreed, but...she did an oral history with us. And we were able to have this amazing record of nearly 70 years of her connection to the institution. And she became a really strong advocate for the growth of the archive. She understood that not everything was in there that needed to be in there. So...we may never have like a perfect answer to access challenges, but I think having conversations and letting people understand that the archive needs to constantly be, be growing--and may not always reflect the things that they think it should reflect--is pretty significant.

[00:44:45]

Cliff Hight: And I think because you brought up--that's like...I really liked that story, that experience. Because it touches on something that--I don't know if we've talked a lot about stakeholders. We kind of touched a little bit on it, but I want to circle back to that, And then come back to the whole, the whole challenges to public access thing. Because I really think this is something that can be useful to our listeners, where...as they think about the stakeholders that they can have, it depends on their institutional context. In our environment, where it's a, you know, an educational university setting, academic setting, you know, we're going to be thinking about the students, current students. We're going to be thinking about alumni. We're going to be thinking about instructors, we're going to think about administrators, retirees, you know, all these different groups could be stakeholders in this process of creating content warnings and also in expanding what we have in the archives, and in better representing a more complete view of of our holdings, and of our history.

[00:45:52]

Cliff Hight: And...so I think that's something to think about. And in more community based settings--where maybe it's not academic, maybe it's a public library--you can think about who are the, the different stalwarts of the community or the people who would be supporting you, that can really engage in these types of conversations. So yeah, it just depends on your institutional context. But I really think you sometimes can take people who are adversarial with what you're doing like Irina mentioned, and they can become an advocate, they can become a

stakeholder, because they see the value that comes from understanding our past so that we can make better decisions now and in the future. So I wanted to throw that in there a little bit.

[00:46:35]

Tara Coleman: So it sounds like as we process, there's value in discovering something and then reaching out right away, rather than waiting for someone to discover. So if we find out some unfortunate history about a group on campus, reaching out to that group, the advisor, whoever and saying, "We found this and we want to use this as an educational opportunity. Will you be our partners so that we can plan it together?" might help build community. I don't want to say shape the message, because that sounds manipulative, but it is helpful to throw context first. And when it's discovered and thrown out on social media, the first impression is the one that's often remembered, even if it's out of context or incorrect.

[00:47:18]

Cliff Hight: So circling back--we went off this tangent to talk a little bit about stakeholders. But coming back to the ideas related to these challenges to public access. In the United States, there aren't a lot of laws right now that revolve around the right to be forgotten. But that is something that's picked up some traction in, in Europe, especially. Where they have--whether it's...like there's a EU regulation, I can't remember--the acronym is GDPR, but it stands for something else. But it has to do with data privacy. An being able to tell companies and other entities, what to do with the data they're collecting about you or that they can't collect data about you. And so that has implications, if those things begin to be statutes in the United States, then that starts to change the game a little bit. But as I've, as I've thought about it and and read about some of these challenges, we've got the accountability aspect. And then we've also got the right to be forgotten. And...so how do we balance the ethics and the legal implications of those two? And I think that tension is really important. And it doesn't mean we're always going to get it right. There are times that we're going to say, "Well, this person has the right to be forgotten." And actually, maybe they need to be held accountable, because this thing that we are trying to forget actually shows a pattern of their behavior throughout their life. And maybe it needs to be available to be able to hold them accountable. But...anyhow, there's a lot of fun things that we can think about with that. At this point, thankfully, that's not something that we're, we really have to worry about on the legal side yet. But I could foresee that happening in the years ahead, where we will have to then grapple more with how do we hold those in power accountable, while at the same time respecting their right to say, "I don't want you continuing to keep this information out there." Fun things for us to think about for the future.

[00:49:29]

Tara Coleman: Yeah, that's fascinating because now it's not just your diaries, or the paper you typed on a typewriter. It's anything on social media that you put out, or other people recorded or captured in some way and put out, that you might not own even though you're in the photo. And that's being saved somewhere. Good thing we have such smart, resourceful archivists who are

working diligently on this so that it doesn't fall to people like me, whose job is just to put it out there, not to worry about all of these things.

[00:50:01]

Cliff Hight: That's why there's so many other smart archivists that we rely on to learn from. [Hight laughs]

[00:50:06]

Irina Rogova: Exactly. And we will include articles and tweets and other topics in the resource list that will accompany this podcasts, because we are certainly not the experts or the...last word on any of these issues. Yeah, we really intend this conversation to be just that, a conversation and a conversation starter. This is a issue in archives world that has no perfect solution. I don't know if it ever will. But there are tons of people with experience who can contribute a lot to our collective knowledge here at The Connection.

[00:50:55]

Tara Coleman: Listeners, it'd be great if you would share your experiences. Has your archive had images discovered and people have asked to have it pulled? Do you have a really awesome statement that you want to share so other people can learn from you? Please let us know and share out with other people.

[00:51:16]

Irina Rogova: Thank you so much for listening. This has been "Trigger warning: What to do with the ugly history that lurks in your archives." I hope that it was helpful to get some sparks about what your future projects can be. And thank you to my colleagues for joining me in this conversation. I'm Irina Rogova.

Cliff Hight: I'm Cliff Hight.

Tara Coleman: I'm Tara Coleman. Thanks for listening. Peace out.