

# Unruly Practice: Critically Evaluating the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives

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**Abstract:** This essay critically analyzes the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives (DALN), an online public collection of over 8,000 personal accounts related to literacy and learning. Intentionally designed to be somewhat unruly, the DALN's collaborative collection and participatory curation of self-representations can also be understood as an experiment in critical archival practice. Through that lens, this article explores the ongoing challenges of open access and ethical curation in the hybrid academic, public, community-engaged DALN: How do technological and administrative infrastructures shape the power dynamics of open digital archives? Reflecting on its evolution, the authors examine the DALN's processes and back-end design through key issues of provenance, custody, representation, and usability. This case study demonstrates how project infrastructure is inextricable from values, with implications for the study and practice of other unruly critical archives.

We believe it is a strength of the DALN that the stories within it are voluntarily contributed, unedited, and personally composed. Narratives submitted to the DALN are screened only to ascertain that they are indeed about literacy, in the broadest possible sense, and not spam submitted by hackers. ... Collectively, we hope, these stories form an unruly collection that escapes the control of our own limited vision. —Selfe & the DALN Consortium, 2013

Becoming unruly is hard. —Bloome, 2013

## Introduction

We write this article at a time of profound social unrest, during a global pandemic that is responsible for historic economic, cultural, and social dislocations. It's a moment that inevitably inspires serious reflection, even reconsideration, of our scholarly priorities and public practices. When the call for this special issue came out, we knew that a critical look at the Digital Archive of Literacy Studies (DALN) would hold value for the archive as well as this journal's interdisciplinary readers. But we also had to ask: How, if at all, does the DALN matter in this moment? Or more to the point, how *can* it matter to the future?

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This article offers some partial and hopefully productive answers, based on our evaluation of the DALN as an ongoing experiment in critical archival practice. Through the lens of critical archive studies, we are reminded of the high stakes of administrative and infrastructural labor: “At its strongest,” Jamila Ghaddar and Michelle Caswell (2019) assert, “archival power is the power to decide what is and what is not a serious object of research, and, therefore, of mention or thought” (p. 76). From its inception, the DALN has privileged the everyday literacies of individuals and communities that are too often invisible in the historical record, leveraging academic resources to assert their present value and future potential:

The DALN is a publicly available archive of personal literacy narratives in a variety of formats (text, video, audio) that together provide a historical record of the literacy practices and values of contributors, as those practices and values change. The DALN invites people of all ages, races, communities, backgrounds, and interests to contribute stories about how—and in what circumstances—they read, write, and compose meaning, and how they learned to do so (or helped others learn). (Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives, “About DALN,” n.d.)

For 13 years and counting, this project has been positioned within conversations on composition pedagogy, community-based research, and digital humanities. Its users and partners have generated an impressive body of research through and about the DALN, drawing on interdisciplinary fields like narrative theory and disability studies. Ironically, however, this article constitutes its first engagement with archival studies.

Encouraged by the generous editors of this special issue, the current co-directors of the DALN have confronted this rather unsettling oversight: despite over a decade of participation, several publications, and countless conversations about this archival project, we hadn’t actually studied archives. Collectively, we have been influenced by and contributed to the archival turn in our home discipline of Rhetoric and Composition, and we have positioned the DALN within the digital humanities. Along the way, we have also validated Michelle Caswell’s (2016) critique:

Yet almost none of the humanistic inquiry at “the archival turn” (*even that which addresses “actually existing archives”*) has acknowledged the intellectual contribution of archival studies as a field of theory and praxis in its own right, nor is this humanities scholarship in conversation with ideas, debates, and lineages in archival studies. In essence, humanities scholarship is suffering from a failure of interdisciplinarity when it comes to archives. (2016, para, 4, emphasis added)

It is humbling now to consider that our 2019 edited collection, *The Archive as Classroom*, on pedagogical uses of the DALN does not contain any references to this rich body of work nor take advantage of the insights we now know it offers for the DALN and its users.

In this article, therefore, we attempt to redress our previous neglect of archival scholarship as we reflect on the DALN’s progress and look toward its next stage of development. This process has challenged us to interrogate the alignment between the project’s critical agenda and its implementation. Central to that interrogation are two questions: How does a (digital public academic) critical archive work? How do administrative and technological choices shape the power dynamics of digital archives? This exploration has complicated our usual narrative about the DALN (well honed by grant proposals!), by giving us a theoretical framework and terminology with which to critically evaluate the DALN. To that end, we consider the DALN’s origin and evolution as a critical archive that advances an inclusive record of literacy, one that asserts the value of “everyday literacies” and those who practice them (Barton & Hamilton, 1998). The following sections narrate how the DALN has attempted to align its academic curation and digital infrastructure with that mission, with attendant negotiations of provenance, custody, representation, and usability.

The case of the DALN demonstrates how logistics—both the technological back-end of the archive and the administrative process that supports it—are inextricably connected to questions of ethics and access. Of course, the DALN is only one archive, and an idiosyncratic one at that. This essay, therefore, doesn't present the DALN as an exemplum, but rather as a window into some key issues in contemporary academic-public archival work. Our hope is that this case study may prove useful to others who curate archival materials or manage archival projects themselves, particularly as digital archives diversify in the future.

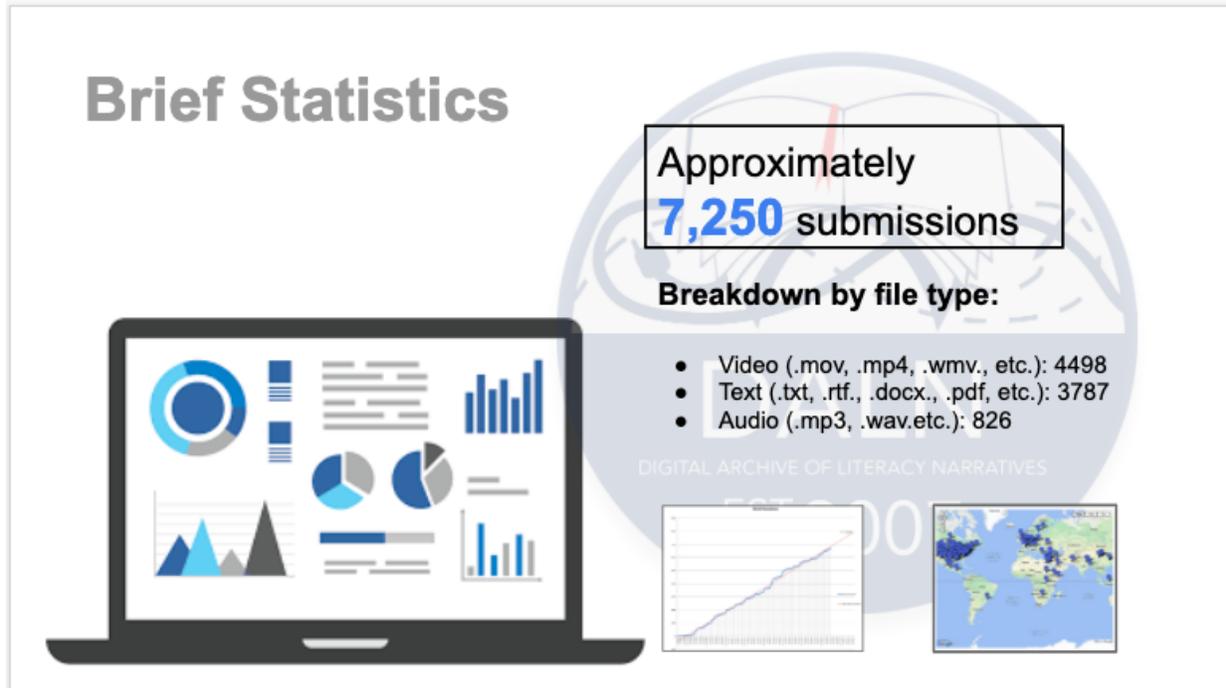
Before we begin, it is worth briefly noting our own positions in relation to the DALN. Each of us has been involved with the project in distinct ways since its beginnings, all situated within English departments with specializations in Rhetoric and Composition. Comer, who served as the DALN's first research assistant when she was a doctoral student, helped seed the site with interviews from the OSU community in 2007. Influenced in part by that experience, her work revolves around community-based research and public rhetoric; she has recently joined the DALN's board. Co-director Harker has been affiliated with the project since its early stages and orchestrated its transition to Georgia State University. He now leads the working group that hosts and maintains the site, while using the DALN in his current research on aging studies. McCorkle, also a co-director since 2014 and member of the original DALN planning consortium, drew on his expertise in digital media to facilitate the project's migration to GSU, as well as the design of the DALN's new interface. Collectively, we have presented, authored, and edited several pieces about the DALN, primarily concerning ways of incorporating the project into composition pedagogy. Our collective perspective on the project is therefore intimate and highly invested, but with variations in responsibilities and priorities that each inform this exploration.

## The DALN as a Critical Archive

The Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives (DALN) officially launched in 2007 under the co-direction of Professors Cynthia Selfe and Louie Ulman at The Ohio State University, with the assistance of colleagues at institutions including Michigan State, Purdue, University of Illinois, Kent State, and others. Thirteen years later, the DALN has a high profile and strong network of support among scholars and teachers across composition, rhetoric, and literacy studies. Through their efforts, the DALN has become an important site for community-based research and partnerships; its joint commitment to preserving and sharing stories about literacy make it an asset to the humanities as well as public participants. The DALN also unsettles traditional notions of archival models by challenging hegemonic concepts of literacy and working towards greater visibility of marginalized communities. DALN scholars have associated these decisions with values endemic to the field of Rhetoric and Composition, particularly feminist and critical pedagogies. In hindsight, we identify a profound alignment between founding values and commitments of the DALN and calls for critical archival practice.

The contents and circulation of the DALN are determined by users' identities and definitions of literacy. Submissions range in scope from isolated but impactful anecdotes to comprehensive, lifelong accounts of how individuals learned to read, write, or acquire some knowledge of particular symbol systems, whether those be alphabetic literacy, gaming literacy, musical literacy, or workplace literacy, to offer just a few examples. Some are carefully composed rhetorical narratives, while others are informal interviews. People share their narratives in classrooms, at conferences, through collaborative partnerships or entirely on their own, in the media of their choice, with the metadata they create. The result is an alternative record of literate lives, supplementing official histories with community and personal self-representations.

Contributions represent six of seven continents, all major regions of the United States, and reference more than 90 individual countries, territories, or distinct ethnic regions. The DALN has attracted over 30,000 unique visitors as of this writing; most of these come from the US (20K), but visitors also come from countries such as China (498), Russia (279), and Sweden (267), among others.



*Figure 1: Data shared at “State of the DALN” event at Computers and Writing Conference, May 2019.*

Though the DALN does not fit neatly within categories of community or decolonial archives, it has certainly challenged scholars across disciplines to “imagine both a different way of archiving and a different world to be archived” (Ghaddar & Caswell, 2019, p. 72). It does not document a particular demographic, but its holdings include collections based on shared professions, learning disabilities, or marginalized gender identities, to name but a few. It wasn’t formed around a pre-existing community, but a growing network of field collection volunteers, teachers, and scholars has coalesced around the project. For those of us who work with the DALN, this participatory dynamic challenges “fundamental humanities assumptions about how we exist in the world, how we know what we know, and how we transmit that knowledge” (Caswell, Punzalan, & Sangwand, 2017, p. 4). In this section, we examine the origins and mission of the DALN through this lens, highlighting how its inclusive and expansive definition of what literacy is and whose literacies matter have shaped the archive.

Professor Cynthia Selfe, co-founder of the DALN, often explained the value of the archive’s record in terms of its future benefit, asking, “How valuable will these literacy narratives be to researchers 100 hundred years from now?” Such a question is inextricable from social responsibility; as Michael Cook (2006) reminds us, archivists decide “what is remembered and what is forgotten, who in society is visible and who remains invisible, who has a voice and who does not” (p. 169). The DALN was designed to support memory and visibility for a diversity of voices; this focus on access and inclusion has resulted in an “unruly history of ordinary people” (Bloome, 2013) that influences current and future users’ perceptions of everyday literacy beliefs and practices.

Regardless of context or methodology, understanding literacy’s meaning and power depends on what researchers count as literacy’s record. As an object of study, literacy raises a host of evidentiary questions for researchers: What ideologies are behind competing definitions and understandings of literacy and its consequences (Shor, 1999)? How do perennial claims about the ostensible decline of literacy impact the effectiveness and longevity of educational reforms (Graff, 2011)? What observable expertise, behaviors, and/or habits explain literacy acquisition or decline in children or older adults (Bowen, 2011; Hall & Harker,

2018)? How might institutions or individuals benefit from making available or withholding literacy from certain groups (Brandt, 2001)? These questions related to evidence, access, and ideology have origins in critical theory and critical literacy, so it is no surprise they intersect in generative ways with the key concepts and guiding questions of critical archival studies.

The founding directors' vision reflected their awareness of value as both something to be archived and as a constitutive force shaping the DALN's archival processes altogether. They created a space where self-representation became the record, where users' own evaluation of literacy and learning determined its place and worth in the archive. From the beginning, the DALN sought to capture people's experiences "at a time when literacy practices and values are changing in response to new digital modes of composition and communication" (Ulman, 2013). This nuanced conception of value—the engine of critical archival studies—set the DALN on a path to preserve peoples' literacy experiences while disrupting commonsensical views of those experiences' relationship to the realities that shape contemporary life: race, gender, class, sexual orientation, family, politics, and so many other perspectives.

The resulting literacy narratives advance the DALN's cause of crafting an alternative record of lived literacy:

It's that historical nature of the DALN that may be its greatest value for the profession because it's been going now for so many years. We have within the DALN traces of all these cultural movements that have happened in and around and in association with literacy. They are just fascinating: the Somali Diaspora, for instance, the Black Church and Civil Rights and literacy connection, LGBTQIA issues and the public nature of those issues, and then disability studies. (DeWitt, Selfe & Ulman, 2019)

The digital collection *Stories That Speak to Us* demonstrates the value of these historical records for crafting new stories. Exhibits in this ebook examine themes of "‘betweenity,’ scaffolding, digital divides, ethnolinguistic vitality, ludic literacies, black women's literacy narratives, the convergence of local and global discourses about literacy, feminism and digital literacy, and transnational ‘thirdspaces’ of literacy" (Ulman et al., 2013). These diverse approaches reveal how the values-based origins of the archive shaped its record. "Value is not an objective quality that exists outside of context," Caswell (2016) asserts, "but rather is inextricably linked to the mission and policies of the particular archival repository...Like ‘evidence,’ ‘value’ always exists for someone in a particular place at a particular time" (para. 16). As evidenced by the scholarship, pedagogy, and network of support that have developed around the DALN, it has particular value for those elevating the voices of marginalized and oppressed groups and disrupting the humanities more generally.

Beyond its content, the DALN's critical archival commitments are reflected in the processes that challenge prevailing archival constructs, especially those associated with provenance and curation. This is evident in several aspects of the DALN's design, protocols, and relationship with users. In terms of design, the DALN has relied on user-generated metadata and a tagging system to make submissions searchable. This reliance on self-representation, and the flexibility it requires, are consistent with the DALN's foundational ethos of building goodwill and establishing trust with user-contributors. This approach comes with the benefit of reflecting users' preferences; the cost is that users sometimes provide insufficient data to make the submission accessible. Likewise, inconsistency among tags—for example, Black vs. African-American or LGBTQ vs. queer—can make narratives difficult to find using the DALN's search algorithm. The result is a tension between participatory curation and usability that we address throughout the rest of this essay.

## The Ethics of Academic Curation

As well as an archive, the DALN is a classic public digital humanities project: it aims to connect academic research and public discourse in a digital space via shared resources. Its tensions are therefore also classic:

Though open to the public, it operates within academic spaces. Though oriented toward community engagement, it is rooted in academic structures. Though aiming for inclusivity, it reflects academic discourses. Negotiating the complicated ethical dynamics of such projects will be increasingly important to critical practice as archives continue to diversify.

In this section, we continue to follow Caswell's advice by examining provenance and representation in the DALN. Traditionally, provenance demands that archival records document the creation, collection, custody, and use over time, preserving the process as well as materials. This principle—through which “archival studies insists on the importance of the context of the record, even over and above its content” (Caswell, 2016, para 13)—is complicated for the DALN. Part of what makes the DALN an unconventional archive is that its contents rarely predate their collection. Most literacy narratives in the DALN (so far, at least) were created to be contributed; their provenance is relatively straightforward and predominantly academic, for good reasons but with consequences for public engagement. As the DALN grows, moreover, its reliance on user-generated representation poses challenges for provenance and usability that bear consideration for other archives.

### **From Academic Provenance to Public Record**

The DALN's academic origins are reflected in its primary users: researchers, teachers, and students. Early activity naturally revolved around Ohio State networks, and subsequent growth has been supported by collection events in classrooms, at conferences, and within communities. This pattern of engagement has provided rich content and forward momentum for the DALN, but its academic bias may have had unintended consequences for public participation.

DALN directors Ulman and Selfe seeded their new archive with literacy narratives from the OSU community. Their choices reflected the project's emphasis on documenting literacies of underrepresented populations, as well as the resources at their disposal. In 2007, they partnered with Brenda Jo Brueggemann to interview Deaf and hard-of-hearing students and faculty (see [Brueggemann, 2013](#)), and in 2008, they collaborated with Beverly Moss, Valerie Kinloch, and Elaine Richardson on a series of individual and group interviews with local African American women leaders (see [Kinloch, Moss, & Richardson, 2013](#)). The results were fascinating, personal, and sometimes painful conversations that reflected the nuances and stakes of everyday literacy experiences. They offered a first glimpse at what the DALN could inspire, preserve, and share, quickly affirming the value of its historical record for those involved.

For that same reason, these early entries may be rather intimidating for other potential participants and therefore run counter to the DALN's inclusive mission. The faculty members who were among the project's first contributors were high-achieving members of an academic community, reflecting on challenges but also performing success. Their narratives also set a high bar for production quality. They were recorded in campus studios with professional lighting and equipment. Contributors were prepared and polished, and their interviewers were experienced qualitative researchers. Scheduling and equipment were managed by a research assistant, as were metadata and supplementary materials, including studio diagrams and transcripts. These and other collections were categorized as such and featured on the DALN home page, an affordance that was lost in the technological transition, and which we are now attempting to reinstate. Because of this academic support, the first entries in the DALN likely have better documented provenance than any that followed.

Similarly, large collection events offer manageable provenance but may compromise representation. For years, DALN volunteers have staffed collection stations at national and regional conferences, recording up to a hundred narratives at a time. While contributors and their stories are diverse in many ways, they are identifiable as professionals with advanced literacy accomplishments. On the other hand, their informal, often unplanned narratives are far less polished than those collected during the initial seeding phase. They're recorded on the fly, with a laptop and a microphone, surrounded by the bustle of a convention

center. This certainly doesn't diminish their value, and may well make the DALN more approachable for users. A real risk, however, is that such a busy collection scene can constrain and distract contributors from careful representational choices; it is much easier to persuade someone to sit down and tell a story than to stick around and create titles or tags.

As the DALN has grown, its contents have diversified thanks to teachers and researchers who gather literacy narratives from students and community partners. Pedagogical applications abound (Comer & Harker, 2015; Comer, Harker & McCorkle, 2019), often overlapping with community-based research, as in OSU's Literacy Narratives of Black Columbus project (Selfe & Ulman, 2019). The DALN's sponsorship of critical pedagogy is apparent in such work, which often prioritizes marginalized populations like refugees (O'Connor, 2019), basic writers (Newman, 2019; Reid & Hancock, 2019), or multilingual (Buck & Hawisher, 2013; Frost & Malley, 2013; Mina, 2019) and first-generation (Anderson, 2019) students.

Beyond a class assignment, these projects promote self- and community representation, reminding contributors "I am here," "We were here," and "We belong here," and thereby can have "a profound impact on those individuals and communities whose histories they document" (Caswell, Migoni, Geraci, Cifor, 2016, p. 16). As exciting as this history is, its provenance remains limited by the realities of collection. Because these narratives are so personal, teachers rarely require students to contribute them to the DALN. Submission therefore tends to happen individually, which decreases the likelihood of transparent provenance and consistent representation.

Looking ahead, we now recognize that provenance will be an ongoing challenge for the DALN in each of Laura Millar's (2002) categories of creator, records, and custodial history. While creator history is constrained by user choices at the point of collection, there are administrative opportunities to improve documentation of "physical management and movement of the records over time" and "transfer of ownership or custody of the records... and the subsequent care of those records" (p. 12-13). Indeed, the question of documenting *future* provenance seems even more pressing. As Caswell (2016) argues, "Provenance is not only about the past, but the future of the records as well; this approach to provenance includes all possible potential activations in its scope" (para 13). The DALN's contents are increasingly used, remixed, and circulated across the globe, raising the question: How can public digital archives like the DALN maintain records of how, where, and by whom curated materials have been used after they've been archived? As explored by other contributors to this special issue (e.g., McCracken & Hogan, 2021), such practical negotiations of provenance are inextricable from ethical issues of consent and custody in community archive projects.

## Toward Ethical Custodianship

This exploration of the DALN's negotiation of provenance reveals a pattern: as users become further removed from administrators, the record becomes more unruly. In addition to usability challenges, user-generated representation can make the provenance of artifacts inconsistent at best and invisible at worst. Meanwhile, as contributors become less connected to academic contexts, issues of custody and informed consent become more pressing.

Although digital archives sidestep one tricky aspect of custody—the original always remains with the owner—*open* digital archives require careful attention to intellectual property. Especially in the early days, when collection was often face to face, users completed literal paperwork: a typically dense IRB consent form, and then either a Deed of Gift or a Creative Commons license form. This process ensured informed consent as contributors understood their explicit role as potential research subjects. More subtly, this also encouraged users to view their narratives as a contribution to the archive, and therefore to sign the Deed of Gift. What this may have obscured, however, was that the DALN provided open access to those materials. By giving their narratives to the DALN, contributors were essentially giving them to the public domain under the custodianship of the OSU libraries.

When the DALN shifted sponsoring institutions, the new directors used that opportunity to more fully embrace a postcustodial approach—“prioritising community ownership, access and trust-building over assumptions of custody and control”—by removing the Deed of Gift option (Zavala, Migoni, Cifor, Geraci, & Caswell, 2017, p. 207). Contributors are now asked to select a Creative Commons license, a decision that requires them to consider how/if they’d like others to use their materials. From the perspective of informed consent, that intellectual property decision becomes even more important. When IRB protocols were in place, the directors could feel reasonably comfortable that contributors understood that their narratives may well be used in research. That assurance ended in 2018, however, when the federal government officially exempted oral histories from the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects in 2018. Without those protocols, projects like the DALN must shoulder that ethical responsibility: How do we ensure contributors fully understand what it means to contribute—and how they can navigate their participation accordingly?

Contributors’ ultimate control over their narratives is paramount. As a matter of policy, users may update submissions if they identify errors or wish to add information or metadata that improves its accuracy, availability, or context. Users may also request that their contribution be removed, with no questions asked. Under the current system, however, only administrators can edit or update entries; this constraint likely means few users choose to revise their representations, and it places more labor on overextended staff. Nevertheless, these options are essential to ethical curation, and future improvements will need to balance flexibility with stability. In the next section, we consider the role that digital infrastructure plays in the power dynamics of critical archives.

## The Ethics of Digital Infrastructure

Ultimately, the DALN strives to be a sustainable project, but what exactly does that entail? And how does that sustainability dovetail with the values enshrined in the project’s broader mission: supporting the teaching and scholarship that utilizes the archives, treating our users fairly and ethically, and preserving people’s accounts of literacy and learning in the early 21st century? As we earlier observed, the DALN is an academic project, subject to the constraints endemic to academic contexts, which includes those related to our digital infrastructure. The notion that simply having a functional, stable digital infrastructure automatically equates to a successful archival project is dangerously complacent, and so requires scrutiny.

### Critical Negotiations of Practical Constraints

A thorough interrogation of the DALN necessarily involves examining the digital platform on which it runs, since this crucial material component shapes the collection and curation of the archive. As with any online archival project, the functionality of the DALN’s technical back end has encountered a number of practical constraints as it has evolved through the years. In the very beginning, the project launched utilizing an early version of DSpace, an open-source repository program aimed primarily at academic audiences (Figure 2). In one sense, this platform, given its intended users and old-fashioned design, functioned as a kind of gatekeeper.

In practice, on the other hand, the original DSpace platform was more inclusive than later versions that required university email addresses for uploading entries. The DALN team resisted updating the platform to allow people from the general public to submit without needing university credentials. Similarly, the project would eventually relax early submission guidelines in favor of a more capacious policy regarding contributors’ characterizations of literacy. Still, this compromise between DSpace’s repository and our transition to a cloud-based infrastructure made keeping the site up to date an issue. This affected usability, but also confirmed the DALN’s commitment to the kind of radical user orientation that characterizes the participatory archive framework outlined by Isto Huvila (2008).

Ultimately, the DALN's relationship with OSU would prove unsustainable, as budget and management restructuring at OSU Libraries in 2015 meant that we would lose their hosting and technical support by the end of the following year.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, and somewhat serendipitously, the project faced an existential dilemma that would make us rethink what the project could become: working with partners in the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning at Georgia State (CETL) led by project director Jaro Klč, we were already planning to develop a parallel version of the site that would better accommodate mobile devices. With the impending loss of OSU support, we decided to rebuild the entire site, updating the coding language, mirroring content to streaming services, and revising the look-and-feel (Figure 3).

This intentional transition has allowed the DALN to develop into the kind of digital humanities-based digital curation model for which Alex Poole (2017) advocates when he writes, "Digital curation in the digital humanities as in the sciences helps ensure long-term access, facilitates discovery, retrieval, use, and reuse, and maximizes the usefulness of the curated digital content" (2). With an overhauled technical infrastructure and added features that enhance accessibility, the resulting redesign is far more inviting and therefore useful to the public that we want to engage.

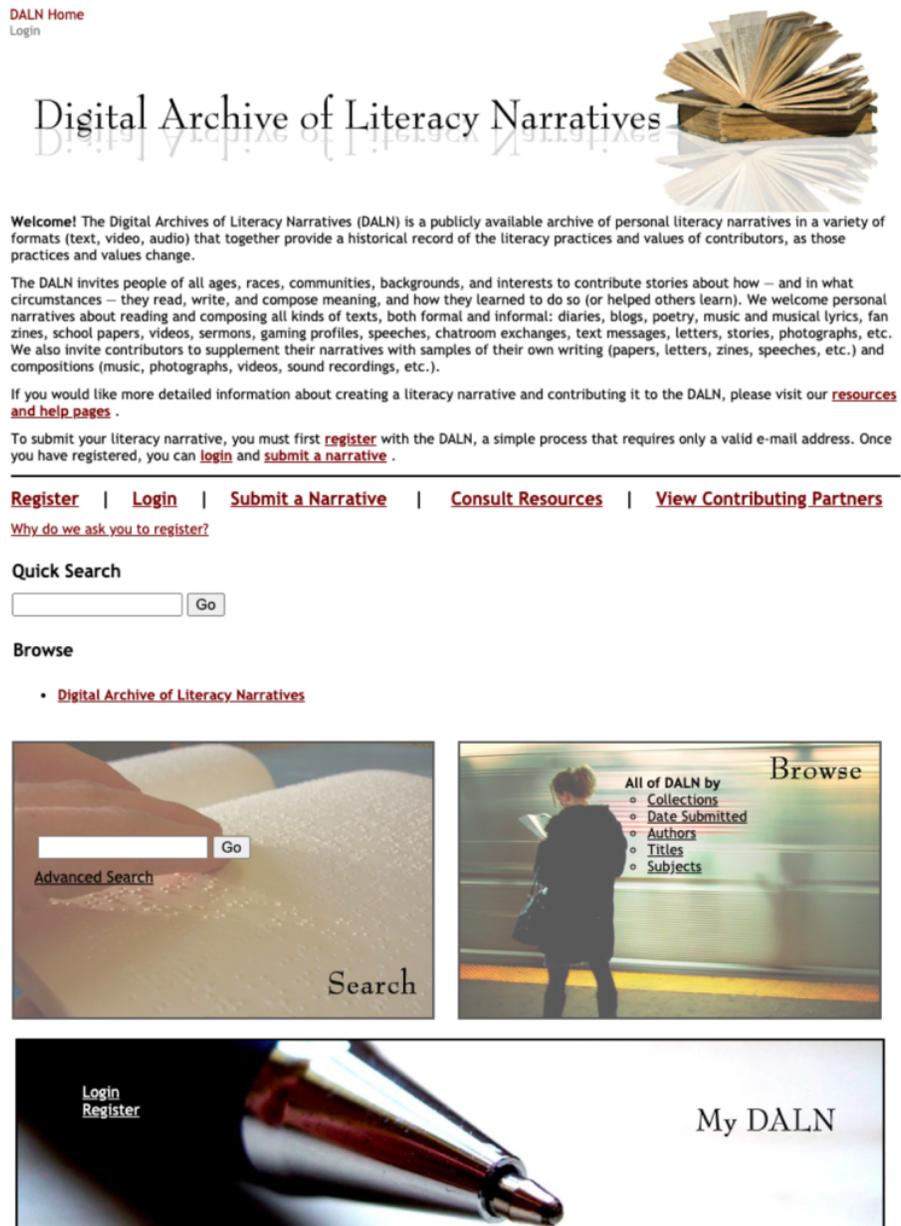
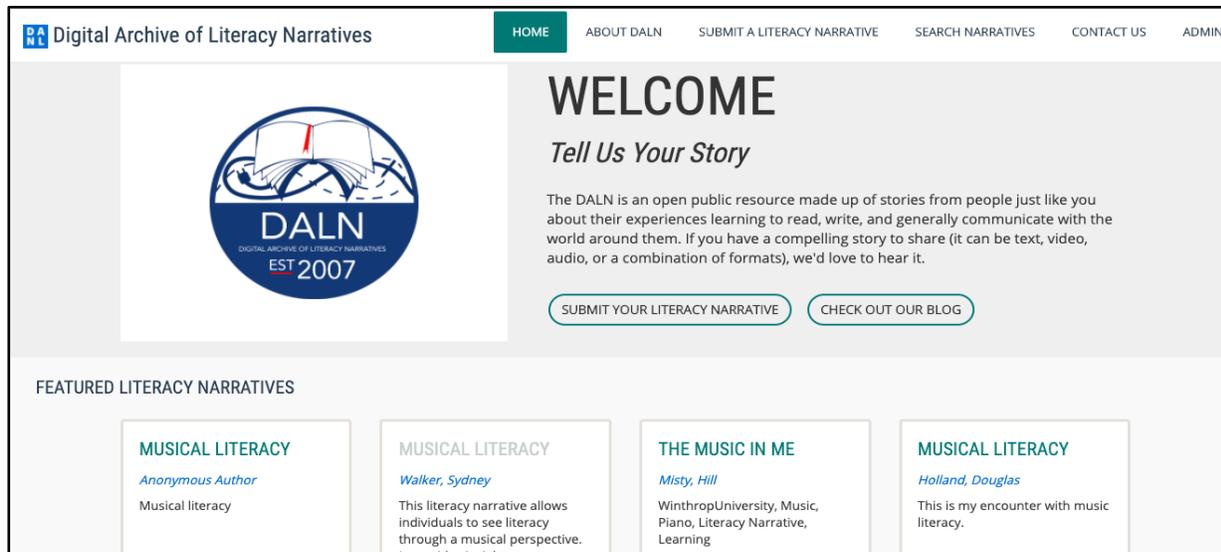


Figure 2: Original design of the DALN home page built on the DSpace platform.



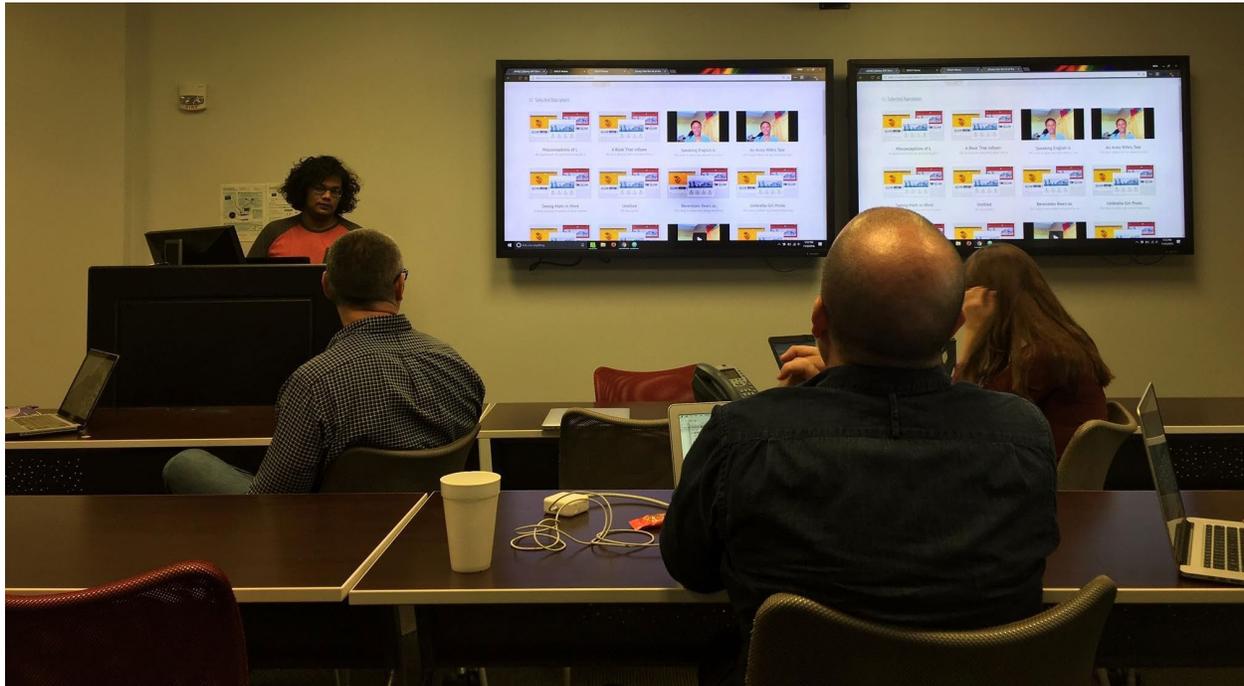
*Figure 3: Redesign of DALN home page by Slalom Developer Erica Troge.  
Built using AngularJS in March 2018.*

Working with Student Innovation Fellows in CETL at Georgia State was a rewarding experience in many respects, including the chance to work closely with undergraduate students in ways that valued their own skills and expertise. This process was not without its complications, however. Primarily, the ebb and flow of our funding sources during this development phase made it difficult to work steadily towards our target, and so development has proceeded along a path of more modest, incremental milestones. When our small pockets of grant funding and departmental reimbursements run out, we have relied on out-of-pocket funding to advance the project and keep the lights on. Such budgetary scrambles, we suspect, are all too familiar for our fellow archivists.

Financial constraints also mean the DALN tends to rely on volunteer labor and free resources when available, which raises ethical questions about how to add value to those people's experience to avoid exploitation. In the case of Student Innovation Fellows, for example, we regularly encouraged them to talk about their work in front of local audiences for professionalization purposes (Figure 4). With funding secured through GSU's Department of English,<sup>2</sup> the fellows joined us on a panel at the Computers and Writing conference in 2017, giving them the experience of presenting at a national academic conference. At other times, we were met with pressing deadlines, such as having the site functional in time for the 2017 Conference on College Composition and Communication, our field's large national conference, where we annually conduct our main collection event. At the advice of the project director, we decided to reach out to the professional web development company Slalom to correct persistent bugs and build additional functionality, compromising our vision of having the site be entirely developed by students.

One additional complication we encountered during this process is that our roles became increasingly destabilized, or at least multifaceted, as the development proceeded. We were no longer "just" archivists or administrators, quietly maintaining a stable site. As we began taking on other roles—from clients to project managers to usability testers to tech support to consultants for aspiring archivists pursuing digital collections of their own—our relationship to the broader DALN community became fragmented, radically context-dependent. While a surprising development for us, this is a phenomenon well understood in critical archival studies. Take, for instance, the taxonomy Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor (2016) provide of the four key archival relationships: between archivist and record creator, between archivist and record subject, between archivist and user, and between archivist and larger community (p. 33). Our shifting positions

revealed the complexity of archive-public relations of each kind through, among other considerations, communication style, support documentation, and promotional materials.



*Figure 4: Wasfi Momen, GSU Student Innovation Fellow, presenting his first redesign of the DALN's interface in July 2016. Also present at this meeting: Jaro Klc, Director of GSU's Strategic Initiatives and Development; Brennon Collins, Associate Director of GSU Center for Instructional Effectiveness, and Shakib Ahmed, GSU Student Innovation Fellow.*

## Collaborative Interface Design and User Experience

Having made it over the redesign hurdle mostly intact—recognizing there is more work to be done—we arrive at a point where we can critically analyze the DALN site and anticipate how we might move forward with future infrastructure development. The new design enables critical archival practices in some respects, but with costs in others. While the original version of the site offered limited customization, revisions improved not only aesthetics but also usability, accessibility, and rhetorical “stickiness” (i.e., we wanted to entice users to hang around the site for a while). For example, the new inclusion of streaming content allows users to access archival materials within the browser without having to download them. Some critical features were lost in the transition, including the aforementioned collections of narratives from Deaf/hard-of-hearing persons, African American professors, and others. While targeted keyword searches would locate many of these submissions, a crucial part of the provenance of those original curated collections is now missing. Consequently, we want to reinstate this feature to not only recover established collections of artifacts but also build “official” thematically curated groupings moving forward.

A project such as the DALN operates dialectically, a dance between top-down administrative practices and emergent bottom-up practices of participants. As this case has shown, their user-generated representation is a fundamental but complicating tool for critical practice. A chorus of critical archive scholars express the significance of extending real agency to users, among them Nikki Henningham, Joanne Evans, and Helen Morgan (2017), who contend that “An ethics of care requires archivists to build frameworks that give individuals and communities degrees of archival autonomy—participation with their own voice and

degrees of control over their archival representation rather than having to cede it all to an institution” (104). Caswell (2016) likewise advocates for a reciprocal dynamic between archivists and users:

In other words, archivists should invite users, as well as outsiders to the archival process, to participate in archival description using language, categories, systems, and standards that are meaningful to them... [A]rchival representation should be an ongoing collaborative process that welcomes diverse input, not an end-product (such as a finding aid) that presents an authoritative or definitive voice. (para 20)

The characteristic unruliness of the DALN’s contents arguably opens up a space for understanding archives more broadly, as Ulman argues in the video foreword to *The Archive as Classroom*:

An example would be metadata. Not all of the metadata fields are required . . . right . . . so some entries are more richly annotated than others, and what I’m fascinated within the collection is how students and teachers turn those constraints into opportunities, into ways to ask unique questions or to reflect on the nature of archives, some of which are more formally organized—and some of which are less—and how you deal with messiness in information. (DeWitt, Ulman, & Selfe, 2019)

The move to cede some power to users for describing, tagging, and licensing their own content can result in a messy, uneven collection, which stands in tension with usability and findability, arguably among the most essential characteristics of a participatory archive (Huvila, 2008, p. 25). Consequently, the participatory nature of the DALN presents complications for accessibility as well as usability and findability.

This recognition that publicly available does not necessarily mean accessible highlights why archival administrators must constantly test practicalities with theory, and vice versa. For participatory archives projects like the DALN, that will mean developing new strategies: How can archivists encourage contributors to make representational choices with other users in mind? What infrastructural tool would make collaboration more visible and viable? Again, we find ourselves navigating an unruly territory... but now, thankfully, in dialogue with other critical archivists.

## Conclusion

Critical archival studies challenges practitioners to disrupt the stability, continuity, and organizational logic of our records. As we have learned with the DALN, doing so certainly allows for greater transparency, but it also invites a higher standard, especially when it comes to considering the project in relation to other archives. For thirteen years, the DALN has evolved to maintain open orientation while also providing a reliable record that prioritizes users and takes seriously their needs. However, writing this article has shown us that we can and must do better, especially when it comes to acknowledging the inherently ethical nature of negotiating the logistics, material constraints, and community of archival projects shaping the DALN’s future growth. Doing so means facing tough questions about the archive’s future: How will future users reinterpret records of peoples’ experiences with literacy? How might administrative decisions in the present impact how future archivists acquire and digitize literacy narratives?

The DALN is clearly not alone in confronting these challenges. The case of the DALN suggests an area in need of more attention in critical archive studies—namely, other unruly archival projects with unstable resources—that complicate conventional definitions and practices, often in the service of social justice. As Jessica Pauszek (2021) notes in her contribution to this special issue, the most important work in archival studies begins where deficit and instability meet choices about preservation and curation. “I *need* to tell a story about materiality,” she writes, “about the precariousness of building archives...when there is no archival space, no archivist, little money, and sometimes not even the belief that your working-class writing

is worthy of publishing, let alone preserving” (p. 145). Pauszek’s work with the *Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers* (FWWCP Digital Collection) reminds us that archival labor for the purpose of preserving the past is not enough. How we fund, organize, and envision the work around archives must acknowledge the ideological tensions silently underlying decisions about what is worthy of preservation in the first place.

Archivists increase our chances of engaging more directly and ethically with these tensions when our work advances critical understandings of provenance, specifically its future orientation. For the FWWCP Digital Collection, this means embracing the “ever-changing, infinitely evolving process of recontextualization” (Caswell, 2016, para 15), an act that translates into increased transparency, access, and discoverability. In line with this nuanced view of provenance is the Australian Women’s Archives Project (AWAP), a post-custodial and born-digital archive. Despite their differences, the AWAP is also an example of how an expanded and critical conception of provenance creates opportunities for reframing relationships between archivists and communities: “It points to archivists being responsible for providing an infrastructure that facilitates community recordkeeping and archiving activities, to overcome barriers to discoverability and access” (Henningham, Evans, & Morgan, 2017, p. 103). Other born-digital, post-custodial archives like the [American Prison Writing Archive](#) and at least two COVID-19-related archives—[Life in Quarantine: Witnessing Global Pandemic](#) and [projectcovid19.org](#)—underscore the increasing importance of expansive views of provenance for the archival community at large.

Among many lessons, critical archival studies teaches us that we can no longer consider the DALN independently of other archival projects. Patterns of similarity and difference among archival projects become evident when we consider the challenges facing these initiatives collaboratively and comparatively. Though it may be convenient to blame the distinctiveness of an archive’s infrastructure or location—even its contributors—for precarious functionality and restricted representation and access, such traditional views of archival labor oversimplify the political, social, and cultural contexts in which they operate. In this unsettling historical moment, and in hopes of an empowered future, archives and the communities they engage are well served by such critical evaluations.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> A more detailed account of the initial development of the DALN can be found in H. Lewis Ulman's (2013) "A Brief Introduction to the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives (DALN)," at <https://ccdigitalpress.org/book/stories/chapters/introduction/>.

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