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# Institutional and Community Collaboration to Support New Approaches to Digital Archiving: A case study of the University of Saskatchewan Library and PAVED Arts artist-run centre (Paper)

**Abstract or Résumé:**

Collaborations between traditional knowledge institutions and communities can have a significant impact on both partners when we look to the strengths each bring to a project rather than asking community partners to fit into established ways of working. This paper discusses my partnership as a researcher at the University of Saskatchewan Library and PAVED Arts artist-run centre leadership and how this project challenges the authority and utility of library standards. We propose a collaborative model that matches the infrastructure and technical expertise of the library with the contextual and historical knowledge PAVED has of their unique and locally important collection.

## 1. Introduction

Collaborations between traditional knowledge institutions and communities have the potential to significantly impact both partners when we look to the strengths each bring to a project rather than asking community partners to fit into established ways of working. This paper discusses how my research partnership with the PAVED Arts artist-run centre executive director, artistic director, and board members challenges the authority of traditional library standards for description and established digital projects workflows. Specifically, I discuss our negotiations about the utility and cost of creating metadata for digital cultural heritage collections. These discussions center on defining what the appropriate type of required and desired metadata is for each record that balances interoperability and systems constraints with the vision PAVED has for the digital archive. By building a reciprocal relationship with PAVED Arts and giving them appropriate tools, guidance, and access to the library's technical infrastructure, it is possible for them to do much of the hands-on work to establish a digital collection. This includes making decisions about what belongs in a PAVED digital archive, what metadata is necessary to be able to explore the collection in a way that make the content accessible and reflects the culture of the community that built it, and makes it easy for their community members to populate the archive with well-formatted metadata and digital objects.

While there are many obvious benefits for PAVED gaining access to the resources of the U Sask Library, the institution also benefits by gaining access to this locally and regionally important collection of contemporary media art created and exhibited in Saskatoon. It also benefits from the labour and knowledge PAVED is willing to contribute to defining and creating digital records to populate the collection. Their ability to activate their community to contribute rich

information about items in the collection is a unique opportunity that large institutions can rarely replicate.

## 2. Background

Growing access to user-friendly, free, open source technology has made creating a digital archive an accessible project for organizations outside of traditional cultural heritage institutions. While the tools to do this work are more accessible than ever, the costs of maintaining digital projects are often overshadowed by the initial investment required to set up a new system or do a large-scale digitization project. The reality that even a basic content management system requires regular maintenance and ongoing attention is not well understood. This problem is frequently compounded by the grant-dependent funding structures that non-profit and community-based organizations typically work within. This has certainly been the case for many artist-run centres in Canada (Lucky 2016). In particular, PAVED has invested in two separate digital archiving projects that ultimately failed to be able to be supported by their organizational and funding structures despite a strong interest and significant investments in time, money, and technical expertise.

Located in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, PAVED Arts is a not-for-profit artist-run gallery and production centre focused on photography, audio, video, electronic, and digital art. It was formed in 2003 with the amalgamation of two earlier artist-run centres and has since moved into a permanent location, owned by the centre. Despite a mandate that does not explicitly include archival work, PAVED has collected a substantial physical and digital collection consisting of video art on magnetic tape and DVD, photography on slides, and print and digital documentation and ephemera from the history of the centre. While this desire to build an archive is somewhat at odds with their official mandate, PAVED does have organizational objectives that focus on connecting with diverse audiences, contributing to the cultural community of Saskatoon, and exposing the community to professional art and artists (PAVED Arts n.d.). Building this archive also has meaning for the PAVED community of directors, board, staff, volunteers, and members. Developing an archive can be an identity building process (Caron and Kellerhals 2013; Stępniak 2013) and for PAVED Arts, the archive has multiple functions in addition to being a space to store documents safely. Past executive director Alex Rogalski described his idea of the collection as "a little bit for artists' research, a little bit for promotion, (and) a little bit for explaining our capacity" (Rogalski 2014). These goals are different from what a research library or archive is designed to do but are important for the community that had built the collection over the past fifteen years.

## 3. Project Overview

This multi-year collaborative project has involved several types of data collection and community-engaged participatory research with various facets of the PAVED community. The central tenant of this project focuses on mutually beneficial and reciprocal collaboration between academic and community partners that results in greater knowledge exchange, pooled resources (including labour), and inclusive project scope (Williams 2015; Langley, Gray, and Vaughan 2006; Pellen and Miller 2005).

In January 2017, we hosted a community consultation event that coincided with a site-specific exhibition about the history of PAVED created by the founding executive director Tim Dallet. We invited former and current board members, directors, and employees to dinner and facilitated conversation about the past and future of PAVED and what developing the archive could mean for the community. We documented these discussions on posters hung around the gallery posing questions about the purpose of the PAVED archive, what you would like to do with an online archive, and what it should contain. We also made oral history video recordings with attendees about their relationships with the centre and what it means to the local artist-run community.

During this event, the project team learned that two collections of digitized video art and artist talks were saved on hard drives stored at the centre. This new information led to a summer project to remediate the content on these drives – one, a collection of Filemaker Pro documents from 2003 and the other an Omeka project from 2013. We converted these files to MP4 and generated basic metadata to prepare them to be imported to the U Sask library digital asset management system.

Over the summer of 2017, a talented intern at PAVED led the organization of the physical archives that were housed in file boxes in a storage closet at the centre. Creating a rudimentary finding aid document listing what is in each numbered box has enabled us to retrieve documents to digitize for the online collection. Taking the time to explore the physical collection also gave us a much clearer idea about the scope of the materials that had been collected and where there were gaps in the records.

There was a leadership change at PAVED in late 2017, a common occurrence in non-profit organizations, and new board members brought fresh energy and focus to the project. After several community consultations to bring the new members up to speed we are entering the final stages of defining descriptive metadata fields to facilitate discovery and designing a digital deposit form so members of the PAVED community can contribute to the collection without requiring extensive systems training while we can guide the creation of metadata by establishing data entry controls.


## 4. Discussion
This experiment in collaborating with a local cultural organization very different from the U Sask Library has revealed challenges and opportunities for both groups and has helped inform the design of future service offerings for researchers and collaborators at the University.

Understanding the motivations for PAVED to engage in this work and the context for their past failed digital archive projects helped the entire team define a scope for the project that is sustainable in both the short and long term. As a result, we are working with MODS records in the library-maintained Islandora digital asset management system to remove the need for PAVED staff to invest in new, potentially resource-heavy systems. The modular collection infrastructure allows the library to give PAVED their own Drupal website interface to their collection that they can design and customize while the records also become part of the Library's

extensive local cultural heritage collection and are maintained in our established digital preservation workflow (University of Saskatchewan Library n.d.).

Integrating with the existing library DAMS has also allowed us to choose which metadata fields are necessary for basic retrieval and identify opportunities to create contextual and thematic descriptions appropriate for the goals of this collection. For example, the current board members are excited to use the media types that make up the PAVED acronym name (photography, audio, video, electronic, digital) as categories they can then use in their educational programming and promotional materials.

Approaching the creation of descriptive metadata as a flexible opportunity, rather than a pre-defined practice, has also presented a way to challenge the deficiencies in traditional description standards. The PAVED community includes social justice activists, journalists, Indigenous artists, and community organizers who found description standards like Library of Congress subject headings either did not include the language they use to talk about their work or they included antiquated or offensive language. Empowering the PAVED community to develop a set of tags and descriptive techniques for their own work adds rich contextual information that library cataloguers would not be able to capture on their own.

This process of subverting traditional description standards to create space for contextual, community-created descriptions will lead to interoperability challenges with other collections, but retaining the MODS format will help to temper this issue. More importantly, this community generated description speaks to the concerns and history of the PAVED community and reflects their values, concerns, and culture in a way that library standards cannot.

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