“The Gallery is Ephemeral”: Exploring the Intersection of Archival Practice and Technology in Artist-Run Initiatives

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ABSTRACT

Artist-Run Initiatives (ARIs) are grassroots art galleries and project spaces that support artists by providing space for creative expression, experimentation, and exposure. While culturally important, these non-institutional collectives exist in precarious circumstances, with limited access to funding, heavy dependence on volunteers, and uncertainty in securing permanent space. We are particularly interested in how these issues intersect with ARIs' uses of technology in archival practice. Through interviews with ARI committee members, our findings show intriguing perceptions of technological influence on archival practice, with concerns over reliance on cloud storage services, difficulties of digitising archival content, and how to present archived material on various digital platforms. We conclude with discussion on how future research might help support these communities to develop archival practices that are better suited to their practice.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **B7; Human-centered computing** → Human computer interaction (HCI); Empirical studies in HCI.

KEYWORDS

artist-run initiatives, archiving, digital archives, digitisation, community archives

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1 INTRODUCTION

Artist-Run Initiatives (ARIs) are grassroots art galleries and project spaces that provide space for creative expression and experimentation. Existing somewhat on the periphery of wider art practice, they reject the more formal structures and expectations of traditional art institutions, instead providing alternative spaces for exhibiting work and embracing experimental and non-traditional practice [13]. These initiatives are as unique as the artists who run them, with a wide range of organisational structures, use of space, ethos and motivations, curatorial intent, and programming. The value of these spaces is well-known within these communities themselves, and they are considered by some to be an important stepping stone between university-level and professional art practice, providing graduates in particular with an accommodating space to develop their work, outside of the market-driven commercial art world.

Despite their importance, these spaces often find themselves in precarious circumstances, with limited access to funding and reliance on volunteer effort and goodwill from the artist communities that they support [11]. This presents a consistent risk to their longevity, the potential loss of an extremely valuable resource, and the potential to jeopardise the rich history and documentation of artworks that have been built up over time. Increasingly, these issues overlap and are influenced by ARIs' use of digital technologies to support their activities: archives themselves may be largely digital, and technology plays a significant role in activities like organisation, coordination, and community engagement. This brings with it different forms of resources and challenges, yet the significance of the role that technology takes in these issues is perhaps less acknowledged, evidenced by relatively little research on this subject matter.

Our research therefore aims to establish an empirical understanding of how technologies intersect with the activities of ARIs. Specifically, this study focuses on archiving, which is an essential facet of not just art practice, but for the wider preservation of culture [36]. For the purposes of this research, we employ the term *artist-run initiative* as an umbrella term for a range of terminology used in existing literature, including artist-run space, artist-led space, artist-run gallery, and artist-run centre. Through interviews with nine ARIs in Scotland and North East England, our research begins to understand technology use in ARIs, providing a starting point to consider the difficult circumstances of these initiatives, reflections upon current uses of technology, and concludes with recommendations on how digital technologies and design-led interventions might provide opportunities to explore alternative interactions, strategies, or methods for archiving and documenting within these valuable institutions.

2 BACKGROUND

In the following section, we contextualise our study within the field of HCI by reviewing existing literature on artist-run initiatives and community archives, alongside discussion of HCI research that has previously explored these topics and intersected with these communities.

2.1 Artist-Run Initiatives

Artist-run initiatives are relatively small-scale, locally based, grassroots groups, normally led by and formed of a group of artists

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themselves. Through various activities, such as exhibitions, workshops and residencies, they seek to provide alternative space for artists – mostly those considered 'emerging' or otherwise at the early stages of their career – to create and present artwork, build their personal and professional networks, and contribute to increasing their overall visibility in the art world [32, 35]. By providing a space to create and exhibit work outside of the mainstream realms of galleries or museums, artists are able to embrace a more accessible culture of experimentation and learning that is perhaps not as well-served by larger conventional galleries. Alongside long-term commissioned exhibitions, ARIs have diverse programming which might include artist residencies, workshops, screenings, as well as archive shows where artists create new work from previous exhibitions.

The term *artist-run initiative* tends to be the most encompassing within a UK context, however other terms such as artist-run space, artist-led space, or artist-run centre are also considered correct terminologies, with use varying internationally. Historically, the philosophy of ARIs can trace its roots back as far back as the late 19th Century with the *Salon Des Indépendents,* a group of artists that sought alternative modes of exhibiting work in opposition to the rigid standards of the time through self-organisation of their own shows [38]. More recently, literature has examined the impact of specific ARIs throughout the 1960s and 1970s in places such as Geneva, New York and Budapest [13], demonstrating the distinct influence of each in their country of origin. Others provide more contemporary accounts of artist-run practice, through extensive indexing of currently operating spaces [32] or through autobiographical narratives of a particular initiative [35]. Academic literature has focused on the construction of unique cultures and identities within these spaces [10], their contributions to wider culture as 'alternative' spaces [19], and the advocation for drastic changes in policy in order to ensure these creative spaces can still exist in the future [11].

Within the UK, Edinburgh-based 57 Gallery historically pioneered the challenge to institutional hierarchies through their approach to collective practice and embracing of alternative methods; however, this is commonly mistakenly credited to Glasgow-based ARI Transmission, which continued to spread this influence after 57 Gallery's dissolution in the early 80's [6]. Despite this misattribution, Transmission is still considered one of the most seminal ARIs in the UK, having played an important role in Glasgow's cultural revival during the 1980s, as well as influencing other spaces throughout the country and beyond [6, 27]. Throughout its history, Transmission has exhibited the early work of notable artists such as David Shrigley and Martin Boyce, the latter winning the Turner Prize in 2011, demonstrating that artists who exhibit work in such places may go on to present work in larger spaces, eventually leading to considerable commercial success in art prizes and competitions.

This model and organisational structure are key to the core values and success of many contemporary initiatives. Self-organisation, a DIY motivation, and a desire to showcase the unconventional and experimental are what fundamentally separate these spaces from conventional galleries, museums, and other arts-based institutions, and allows them to champion these values. Two relatively recent publications articulate the importance of sustaining these practices, providing insightful perspectives into the artist-led experience both through autobiographical narratives and thought-provoking discussion [32, 35]. Therefore, there has been tangible resistance to the act of 'professionalisation' – the transformation from a grassroots collective to a more official, registered organisation – which many argue would fundamentally change the nature of these initiatives and what they can achieve. A statement released by Transmission Gallery after losing significant funding illustrates this well, with an explicit suggestion that funding bodies are increasingly reluctant to fund non-institutional spaces [44]: "Transmission believes that Creative Scotland have chosen to cut our funding because they are no longer prepared to invest in an institution that refuses professionalisation, and yet by virtue of its unique history operates at a scale comparable to more professionalised institutions". The vulnerability of arts and cultural funding in the UK has been continual since 2008 [48], and more recently the financial impact of rising inflation in the UK has led to higher living costs for individuals and operational costs for organisations.

Within academic literature, there are a handful of publications which explore the impact of ARIs. These include how unique cultures are constructed within these spaces [10], their contributions to visual arts and wider culture as alternative spaces [19, 30], their precarity within modern societal organisation [8], and the advocation for drastic changes in policy in order to ensure these creative spaces can still exist in the future [11]. Whilst these works offer great insight from the perspective of the humanities, HCI has yet to explore interactions with digital technologies within this space and to understand the impacts and challenges these might create. This is despite a long history between HCI and art practice that has had a profound impact [37], both through the inclusion of artistic techniques in research practice, and the tensions this creates within the discipline [25, 40]. Despite the overlap between these disciplines and the prominence of art within HCI practice, very little work has explored the communities in which artists themselves create work and collaborate, and the role that technologies play in creating, maintaining, sustaining, and perhaps nurturing them.

2.2 Archiving and Archival Practice within Communities

Despite the importance of archiving within contemporary art [36], documentation of how this is practised within ARIs is sparse. Shannon Lucky has documented the difficulties which artist-run centres in Canada face when archiving their collections [28, 29], proposing web archiving as a potential solution. Whilst noting the use of websites and social media by these spaces as 'public archives', Lucky acknowledges the precarious nature of archiving this content through platforms that may cease operations suddenly. In addition, a lack of expertise or experience in these spaces leads to archiving, digitally or physically, becoming a much more arduous and time-consuming process.

In this sense, we understand archival practice within ARIs to share many similarities with other types of community archives. When situated within communities, archival collections are likely to be set up, run, owned, and funded by the members of that community themselves, and may represent members of society who are otherwise under-represented or marginalised [3]. Studies of

community archives have demonstrated their benefit to autonomy, ownership, and the way they challenge to dominant methods through post-custodial practises [46]. Therefore, it is essential that these communities are able to retain their sense of identity, and how it is represented, through the control and ownership of archives themselves, rather than through an external party or other organisation [4]. In pursuit of retaining this ownership, combined with the difficulties of keeping a purely physical collection, the creation of digital archives is a desirable solution for small communities, allowing them to explore alternative and diverse ways of sustaining their heritage [16, 41]. Access to the internet has allowed communities to develop unique archival practices, such as through the use of social media platforms and other interactive technologies [34]. However, these approaches are not without their problems, particularly when there is a reliance on volunteers who lack the appropriate technical skills and unreliable sources for funding [20, 34], as well as the inherent obstacles that come with sustaining long-term engagement with designed technologies[42].

There is evidence of similar practices on a personal level, where prolonged use of websites and social media transforms them into de-facto tools for personal archiving [9, 26], and a shift in which the objects we inherit, the memories we create, and our collective histories are increasingly born-digital. This leaves us to contend with the potential long-term consequences of this [31], such as 'link rot', where older hyperlinks no longer point to an existing website, or the information once accessed through that link becomes inaccessible. Such occurrences of digital decay are considered aspects of the 'digital dark age' – a phenomenon that describes the impact of obsolescence on our ability to successfully preserve and retain access to digital data over long periods of time [24]. Avoiding this is imperative for libraries, archives, and museums, who understand the difficulties in preserving digital artefacts over a long period of time. These issues, combined with ongoing efforts across these institutions to digitise their physical collections [3, 27, 35], only increase the risk of further 'digital decay'. However, this problem is not unique to just large-scale or otherwise established institutions: small-scale, community-led archival projects, operating outside of conventional realms, will lack the resources, knowledge, and experience easily available to larger institutions, which are required to create, curate, and manage archives successfully. These circumstantial parallels between community archives and ARIs provide us with a helpful frame for our research.

There are many examples of HCI research situated in unique community settings, e.g. [22, 43, 45], with some work utilising archival content to develop methods of civic engagement within communities [12], whilst others have explored the importance of 'home-grown' digital archives for under-represented communities [15]. Adjacent subjects to archiving and archival practice, such as memory, heirlooms, and preservation, have been investigated, through the design of interactive devices that allow families to preserve digital artefacts, work through bereavement, and the inheritance of physical and digital artefacts [33]. Further to this, other work has explored the concept of digital legacy, and how existing digital systems and our interactions with them profoundly shape this [17, 18, 23]. However, these examples focus on an archival practice within a familial or individual context. To our knowledge, there are no works that explore archiving within ARIs.

3 METHODOLOGY

To explore these issues in depth, we have used an empirical approach, conducting a series of interviews with nine ARIs in the UK. The following section describes how participants for this study were selected, the interview process, and the subsequent thematic analysis of the interview data.

3.1 Participant Recruitment

Suitable ARIs were identified through a combination of internet searches and snowball sampling. We searched for 'artist-run initiatives', and variations upon this, including 'artist-led space' and 'artist-run space'. This, as previously mentioned, was due to variations in how such spaces choose to identify or describe themselves. In addition to these terms, we noted that 'DIY', 'non-institutional', and 'non-profit' were common terms used by ARIs to describe their activities on websites and social media profiles. As such, these terms were included as criteria in further searches to help further narrow down search results. Alongside this, we constructed a short list of characteristics that, though not exhaustive, were helpful in identifying organisations that fell into the scope of our study. These included:

- A focus on platforming 'emerging', 'early-career', 'graduate' or otherwise marginalised artists as part of their exhibition and events programming.
- An identified commitment to non-hierarchical practice or organisation.
- Multi-faceted use of exhibition space; for example, through the organisation of workshops, events, or other community projects.
- A focus on platforming local artists.
- A reliance on voluntary, unpaid labour, or otherwise precarious labour.

We focused on North East England and Scotland primarily to retain the option to visit sites and conduct interviews in person, although the majority of interviewees ultimately opted to be interviewed by videoconferencing. Considering regions outside of London was also interesting due to funding developments in the UK, in particular, the 'levelling up' policy for cultural spending on regions outside of London [49] and a proposed cut to Creative Scotland's funding [50] Further ARIs were identified through snowball sampling at the end of each interview. We utilised this technique to gain access to the interpersonal networks of ARI members and be made aware of otherwise 'hidden' or 'hard to reach' members of this community [7]. This helped to identify initiatives that otherwise did not appear in our initial search.

After this process, 29 potentially suitable ARIs were identified. We aimed for a heterogeneous group, ranging from small, relatively newly established collectives in remote locations, to larger, fully-fledged initiatives in cities. For this research, it was important to include diverse examples of ARIs, so that we could understand what collective and common challenges were, as well as ones that are more specific to each space, respective of their characteristics and environment. We emailed each ARI an invitation to interview, specifically requesting to speak to committee members or any other suitable chosen representative for that space. Each participant who agreed to be interviewed was sent a consent form

and an information sheet which informed them about the purpose of the study. In total, representatives from nine of the initiatives responded to interview requests. The study was approved by our institution's ethics committee, and informed consent was received from all participants.

3.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

A total of 17 individual participants were interviewed from nine ARIs. This was due to some initiatives choosing to conduct their interview with a single representative of their committee, whilst others included their entire team. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the most appropriate method, as it was practical to conduct approximately one-hour-long interviews with the size of this study group. To guide our interviews, we chose to use a topic guide to facilitate a pre-determined line of questioning, whilst also allowing room for open-ended discussions to happen organically [1]. We structured our topic guide around three main areas of interest. Firstly, we aimed to gain knowledge of day-to-day activities, key responsibilities, and understand how success was measured, Secondly, we intended to build a picture of existing physical and digital archival practices and discuss any concerns each ARI may have with retaining their legacy. Lastly, we sought to understand any habitual or prevailing uses of technology and establish the challenges or opportunities these create. Interview lengths ranged between approximately 45 minutes and 1.5 hours. Seven of the interviews were conducted online through video conferencing software, due to geographical distance and the preference of participants, with the remaining two conducted in person. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

3.3 Thematic Analysis

After each interview was transcribed, a process of reflexive thematic analysis [5] was conducted by the lead researcher independently, with additional input from the co-author afterwards to develop and refine themes. Codes and themes were developed in an inductive and experiential manner, whilst examining the qualitative data set through the lens of critical realism, as we felt that this was the most appropriate approach for highlighting participants' individual and situated experiences. 345 unique codes were created from the dataset, through which overarching themes were developed. Both researchers then engaged in a process of refining these codes and themes, through reflection, discussion and subsequent reorganisation. This process occurred multiple times until both researchers agreed that thematic saturation was achieved.

3.4 Positionality Statement

As researchers, we acknowledge that our position is not neutral, or value-free. Our identities, beliefs, and backgrounds have a tangible impact on how we conduct research and analysis, and what we take forward with our research outputs [21]. With this in mind, we reflect on what each of us brings to this study, as researchers and individuals. The lead author, with a background in product design, has spent a considerable amount of time participating in various art and design-related cultural events and maintains close relationships with active members of the art community. Therefore, the first author brings to this study an awareness of the social, economic, and political circumstances that surround and define artist activity within the UK. The second author has a background in computer science and HCI, but has spent significant time working in art and design schools in close proximity to the forms of communities studied in this research. Both authors therefore approach this work from the position that cultural activities are fundamentally worthwhile and that supporting and preserving them is important.

4 FINDINGS

The following section presents our findings categorised under the three top-level themes identified through reflexive thematic analysis. These are: *Archival Procedures and Practicalities*, which discusses the multi-faceted responsibilities involved with maintaining archives within the context of ARIs, and the different ways that technologies mediate these experiences; *Access to Resources*, examining the assets that ARIs have at their disposal – specifically digital technologies – to understand how these are embedded in practice, and therefore influence on archival capacity; and finally, *Governance and Identity* discusses the ways in which working structures present additional challenges to day-to-day operations, and how and other external pressures are in confrontation with ARI identities.

4.1 Archival Procedures and Practicalities

> "The archive that exists on the website is, I think, something different to the way that it exists in hard drives on our computers. And the way that our physical archive exists is that some of them originated as physical things, objects, or files or whatever, and some of them are printouts, or physical things that came as digital things originally [. . .] there might be a digital work that is archived, and it stays digital, that we create a physical version of. The two sort of get interchanged between each other, which makes the project of archiving more complicated as well." [P13]

Archiving is a core activity for any arts organisation – not only does the practice allow their work to be preserved for future generations, but also creates a rich resource for practising artists to be inspired by, and even to create new work from [14]. However, this is also an area that poses unique challenges for ARIs in comparison to more established organisations, due to their more ephemeral nature. In this section, we discuss findings around the processes and practical matters of archiving for ARIs and the ways in which technology can both support these practices and present new challenges.

4.1.1 Frameworks and Processes. Existing literature has identified that being in a state of flux is an inherent trait of these organisations, and in our data, we can see that this manifests itself in various ways. Through a constantly changing membership, rotating committee roles, and in some cases, a complete shift in space, participants noted that establishing a consistent, long-term method for archiving proves difficult, as this exchange between two participants demonstrates:

> "That's the challenge of the model of coming and going [...] there's not always an established framework for,

okay, this is how people archive, and they made a system, how to do it." [P13]

"Or even if we came up with a framework, the next committee might just be like, no thanks!" [P14]

For some, this meant that archiving was extremely informal, to the extent that it might barely be recognised as such:

"We don't do anything to archive a show after a show. We have photos and stuff, we keep our posters, but we don't have 'this is exactly how we archive a show at the end of a show. . . this is what happened to the show, this is who was in it'." [P2]

Whilst participants did not go into detail about what an established 'framework' or 'system' looks like, they understood this as something essential to successful archiving, and that their lack of it leads to uncertainty. This exposed the difficulty of establishing such systems:

"I think because we don't do it, we don't know how to approach it. And it doesn't get finished [. . .] There's yet to be archived material." [P12]

In addition, archiving within artist-run initiatives may not conform to traditional expectations, prompting reflection on alternative methods of gathering, storing, and documenting information:

"Archives and collections might not necessarily look like anything that you would see traditionally. It might not be shelves upon shelves of books, and it might not be a glass cabinet full of artefacts. How else do you gather information? And then how do you store that, document it?" [P17]

4.1.2 Digitising. Common throughout interviewed participants was an awareness or desire to digitise their content. Much of what participants noted aligned with *The National Archives'* 'benefits of digitisation' — particularly access, searchability and preservation [2]. As one participant noted:

"We're really interested in trying to scan everything [. . .] the goal would be having it be digitised and publicly accessible. Because there's a really interesting resource of just an artist's activity for a lot of time and who was showing, what were they showing and what were they interested in. And I feel like [there is] a lot of knowledge held in that." [P15]

However, these desired benefits are not without difficulty. Participants acknowledged that digitising is an arduous and long-term process:

"Cataloguing it, and [...] digitising a physical material, it just all seems quite overwhelming. I wouldn't know exactly where to start or what the rules would be for, I guess, a space like this." [P12]

This mirrors previous concerns, described above, around proper frameworks and knowledge of process. In addition to this, collating information presented across various digital platforms, and making sure this stays consistent, is made difficult when relying on voluntary work:

"What's difficult now is that the majority of the information about a show after the show that's actively available will be the representation of it on the websites or on Instagram. And again, with a volunteer situation, upkeeping that doesn't always happen." [P6]

While the promise of digital archives was attractive to many ARIs, some participants questioned the purpose of this entire process—or recognised that digitisation alone was not a panacea for the challenges of archiving and storage:

"You want to value all the material, treat it with care, and keep documenting it and keep saving it. But on the other hand, you also want to look forwards and think – what actually is our time spent on?" [P14]

"What's the value, and how do you not lose the quality? Everything has been digitised, but how do you use 140,365 pictures that are now digitised? How do you make that actually useful as well?" [P9]

4.1.3 Custodianship and Ownership. Custodianship of archival material was understood between participants as a shared responsibility between members, rather than a designated role for one person:

"Because we're a public organisation, none of us have ownership – we're custodians of all of this information, and all of this material. It's quite a temporary thing [. . .] I guess we do have that responsibility of care over this digital archive, and all this information, and its whole history." [P17]

Some initiatives then, become partly responsible for looking after an artist's work, even many years after having worked with them:

"Some of them are people who we've kept a working relationship with all those years, and we are custodians to some of their archive, but we haven't seen them in 20 years." [P3]

When discussing ownership, ARIs prioritise ensuring the artists themselves retain full possessive rights over a work:

"We don't really keep any original artworks [. . .] the way we work with artists is not really how a commercial gallery would work with artists [. . .] we don't ever purport to have any ownership over the work. Even when it's work that we've commissioned or paid towards, it will always be first and foremost the artist's property." [P14]

4.2 Access to Resources

"We used to have everything on a big Google Drive, but we lost that completely. . . And it was really terrifying, because all of our accounts, all of our funding agreements, and everything was on the drive. All the documentation of shows, contracts, everything. And all of our emails and our kind of communication was just cut off." [P15]

Availability of resources is a considerable point of pressure for ARIs, and the ways that both physical and digital resources are utilised have a profound effect on archival capacity. Typical physical

resources encompass everything from the physical space an ARI occupies, to exhibition equipment such as projectors, speakers, or lighting, as well as printed promotional material. Digital resources we might consider include online productivity tools, cloud storage, and social media use, as well as the equipment used to access them, such as computers and mobile phones. In the following section, we discuss our findings which demonstrate the various uses and application of these resources within daily practices in ARIs, and the importance of maintained access to these resources.

4.2.1 Digital Storage. ARIs tend to inhabit otherwise unused spaces, often on a temporary basis (sometimes known as 'meanwhile spaces'). This means that an occupied space is not purpose-built, and ARIs adapt this space as needed. However, participants noted that a lack of available physical space means that the ability to store tangible, physical materials for an archive is more difficult, and leads to limitations in what can be archived. To alleviate this, the use of hard drives or cloud storage is common:

> "The very practical reason that we probably don't keep so much physical stuff is literally space. Like, you haven't seen the size of our office, it's like a cupboard, and there's like four people working in there [. . .] personally, I would love to keep a physical archive, but like, literally, where do I do that? So, it's all on external hard drives or the cloud. And that does make it less accessible, by its nature" [P10]

In the opinion of this participant, the accessibility of their archived material is compromised by making it digital. Viewing this archived material requires a device that can access data stored on the cloud, through an internet connection, password access to a cloud storage folder, or a device that is able to read data on a hard drive. These extra steps, whilst perhaps increasing security, are indeed *extra steps*. Additionally, cloud storage may reduce requirements for physical space, but these solutions are not without cost. Cloud storage services will require a subscription, especially in this use case where a significant volume might be required. This facilitates a constant monetary obligation to keep this storage and access to it, putting additional strain on an ARI's funding, which is already limited, and rarely gets allocated specifically to archival projects.

4.2.2 Funding and Constraints. Limitations in funding may lead to archives being in an undesirable state of organisation, which creates more work. Archives become less and less of a priority when more important requirements need to be met as part of an initiative's remit, which is mainly holding exhibitions. This is especially prominent in the current arts funding landscape and amongst rising operating costs.

> "I know that's not good and it's not ideal, but you're kind of forced into that because of the way your funding works. Like no way do you have the spare time to develop an archive, which I would love to do because I want to be here in 50 years' time and do a retrospective. The thought's there and the dream's there, but we literally just don't have the capacity or the money. We're worrying about, can I pay the electricity bill this month?" [P10]

With the ability to create coherent physical archives restricted due to funding limitations, it is understandable that turning to digital alternatives appears desirable, with participants already using a variety of digital tools to their advantage.

4.2.3 Use of Websites and Social Media. It was clear throughout our interviews that ARIs utilise a variety of digital tools available to them, and free-to-use or otherwise low-cost tools were especially desirable:

> "When we set up the first time, we used the tools that were available to us then and tried to be quite savvy. So, at the time, Facebook was the thing to use. We used a Mr. Site website. We had a WordPress site that we could do ourselves. So even digitally, we were thinking about what's free? What's something that we can learn how to use or be easy to use? So that I would say is the artist-led way, right? You kind of find the things that you can do the cheapest way possible with the biggest impact." [P16]

These included popular social media websites, alongside more conventional means of spreading messages and communicating with their audience digitally:

> "So, there is an Instagram, there's a Facebook – we have a website, we have a Twitter, an email, and a Mailchimp where we send out emails. We have a monthly newsletter that lets all of our members, people who were in past committees, and supporters know what's going on every month." [P1]

The use of websites and social media results in their use not just as a tool for promoting a space and communicating with an audience, but as the digital embodiment of an ARI. One initiative, which held exhibitions at short notice in an unconventional location, considered its Instagram account to be crucial to the preservation of its space:

> "That was what brought it into existence, you know, to be able to communicate with people, and also be kind of forced to have a sort of voice. it wouldn't have happened if we didn't have Instagram" [P8]
>
> "Yeah [. . .] because the whole format of the gallery is ephemeral. The Instagram is kind of the only thing that is consistent or is constant". [P7]
>
> "Yeah, it glues it all together." [P8]

Another participant discusses the benefits of using social media as part of ARI practice, and how this benefits the space and artists through increased visibility, as well as expanding their audience through networking, and overall accessibility:

> "People can see the work that they're not physically able to be in the space for, and I feel like that does benefit people again, just to cast a wider net, getting their name out there. And then, that's also beneficial for us as a gallery space, as we have had people emailing, being like – 'we've heard about this show, we didn't get to see it but like we'd love to link up or come and see a different show, what's going to go in your space

> next month’ – and that’s important for us as well to show work in our space.” [P1]

Beyond a communicative tool, the use of websites and other digital platforms allows some ARIs to use these as digital companions to physical archiving:

> “Our website’s just been reorganised by someone we know who does web development as part of his practice. That is quite a well-organised archive of what we’ve done going back through the years. It’s quite an easy, simple, quite accessible format”. [P17]

However, not all participants expressed an entirely positive experience with their digital archives, expressing that digital equivalents facilitate an experience that feels disconnected:

> “I’m not a website expert by any means, but I know sometimes when you’re searching the archive, it can feel a bit clunky. It can be hard for people who have come to it externally to understand the connection between projects, and see the thread running through, because it’s just a collection of separate web pages. So, I think that’s a problem we know about, and we know there’s probably a better way of doing it, but it’s having the resources and the expertise to do that and to manage it in a specific way.” [P10]

4.2.4 Use of Collaborative Digital Tools and Cloud Storage. Alongside the use of social media platforms and websites, our data showed that ARIs make use of collaborative digital tools as part of their workflow, such as cloud storage platforms for storing important administrative documents. However, this use was characterised by a distinct lack of trust:

> “We use the cloud because it’s useful when you’re collaborating on things, which obviously happens a lot. But if something goes wrong with it, you basically lose everything. Yeah, I don’t know how I feel about Google having control of it.” [P10]

Whilst using cloud or hard drive-based forms of digital storage might alleviate some problems in terms of limited physical space, they create their own issues. Over-reliance on these systems leads to essential data and other information being tied up in these systems, behind walls of passwords and other login credentials – more administrative effort and anxiety for committee members:

> “The thought of Google holding all this stuff [...] you’re completely reliant on them giving you access or keeping it for however many years you need them to keep it for. And within arts organisations as well, if you have a turnaround of staff, what happens to the passwords, and who has access? It just becomes difficult.” [P5].

4.3 Governance and Identity

> “I think all the different spaces have very different curatorial interests. And I think that’s quite nice. So, it’s not like we’re competing for getting the same artists to show or something. I feel like everyone has their own voice and so do we. So, in that way, I feel like we sit nicely amongst each other.” [P15]

Evident throughout our interviews was an advocacy for ARIs distinct characteristics, and making sure this identity is retained through methods of organisation and practice. In this section, we discuss the various considerations ARIs make concerning their governance, as well as ruminations on the importance of identity. Whilst this might not directly involve any digital technologies or archival processes, matters of governance and identity impact these activities indirectly.

4.3.1 Institutional Obligations. Despite existing outside the realm of conventional art institutions, there are still administrative expectations put on ARIs, such as when applying for funding, which is becoming increasingly labour-intensive for small groups to achieve:

> “We had a funding meeting recently, that was talking about how they want to have more monitoring for organisations internally, about net zero goals, fair work structures and all that, which is something that we agree with – but it is hard for a small organisation like this one to do all the things we do already, plus then have the more institution size monitoring [...] I would find it hard to fit that to how we currently work.”[P14]

This requirement for ‘institution size monitoring’ could be perceived as a push for ARIs to closer align with the standards and structures of established arts institutions – and that over time, an ARI will inevitably become an institution eventually:

> “Someone from the Arts Council said to me early on, that we do this for a few years and go somewhere else. And that is kind of the expectation. It’s quite rare to stick it out for a long time, because basically, you can’t get past a certain point unless you become this institution.” [P3]

4.3.2 Identity and Independence. Participants were passionate about resisting this expectation to eventually become larger institutions in order to ensure their existence. In addition to this, participants expressed scepticism in handing over their archival material to larger institutions. Whilst this might reduce workload and remove burdens of space, participants felt that passing over archival material would lead to the loss of some autonomy and control:

> “If we didn’t tell the story, no one else is going to tell it for us. There’s quite a few people, who are quite happy to foreground themselves in the narrative, and rewrite history. The history you’re talking about is actually our history.” [P3]

Retaining control of archives was important to some participants, as they felt that transferring control of their archival content to an external organisation would result in a loss of autonomy:

> “I don’t know if centralising these things are good either, handing them off to larger institutions like that. I feel like it’s important that we decide like what’s valuable.” [P12]

5 DISCUSSION

Our findings have identified unique challenges that ARIs face with regard to archival practice and how these challenges intersect with their use of technology. These include reflections on procedures and processes, the availability of resources, and complexities surrounding governance. In the following section, we expand upon our findings and discuss how we might respond to some of these challenges, both through opportunities for further research and in the design of technologies to better support ARI activities.

5.1 Articulating Digital and Physical Archival Modalities

The challenge of accurately presenting archival content across two different modalities – physical and digital – and the difficulty this creates during archiving and when making curatorial decisions was apparent across our interviews. Participants were particularly aware of the significance of how their archive is presented and accessed, and how this might change how it is perceived and understood by those that interact with it. In addition, participants acknowledged disparities between archival content that was accessible physically, but not digitally, and vice-versa. As born-digital artefacts become much more common, combined with a pursuit to digitise archival content, we must consider how ARIs might appropriately articulate the connection between physical objects in an archive, and their online or digital equivalent.

Previous HCI work has explored this area, demonstrating how archival practice is made more complex with regards to passing down technological artefacts and heirlooms [23, 33], as well as how our increasing use of digital technologies on a day-to-day basis creates important questions regarding our digital legacy [17, 18]. Whilst these issues have begun to be explored in a familial and individual context, we are interested in exploring what these processes and interactions might look like in a community context, and whether these two separate modalities could be brought closer together, or otherwise interacted with in novel ways.

5.2 Developing Strategies to Support Non-Institutional Archival Practice

It was clear from our findings that archival practice varied greatly between ARIs. Whilst some participants talked of their physical archives, and their attempts to digitise them, others talked of the fractured, unorganised, and distributed nature of theirs, and their efforts to put them in order. To circumvent these difficulties, some advocated the use of social media, using Instagram as a kind of 'alternative' archive, with the application layout allowing content to be presented chronologically, and in an easily accessible manner. Previous research supports this, having demonstrated how social media has effectively become a personal archival tool for individuals, albeit without sufficient awareness or planning of long-term preservation strategies [9], and the potential consequences of this. Within HCI scholarship, there has been some work that has examined this paradigm, suggesting guidance for how to design social media that considers these future archival needs [47]. However, we must still consider the precarious nature of relying on these platforms, acknowledging that social media platforms and accounts are in no way permanent, and may undergo dramatic changes that make them unfit for purpose, or even cease to exist in the long term. Further work could examine how prevalent the use of social media and other online platforms are as archival tools within these communities, and to further understand to what extent these are used.

Beyond the use of social media as archives, we might consider other ways in which ARIs can be better supported in creating archives that are non-institutional, through alternative approaches, strategies, and the design of tools to support this. While existing technologies have been appropriated for the purpose of archiving, they are not designed with ARIs' varied forms or archival practice in mind. Future research might work with these organisations to imagine technologies that meet their unique needs and speak to the DIY, non-hierarchical and non-institutional nature of their practice.

5.3 Navigating Precarity and Building Resilience

Alongside the influence of various technologies, our research also found various instances of uncertainty that impact archival practice within ARIs. Our findings demonstrate how funding was a consistent uncertainty, with participants expressing how securing long-term funding was difficult and that budgets tend to be stretched thin, with money allocated to only the most essential obligations. This leads to archiving being deemed much less of a priority than other tasks, creating archives that were unorganised, incomplete and in some cases, inaccessible.

It was also clear from our findings that space and environment are uncertain. Whilst some participants have occupied the same premises for a number of years, this does not necessarily mean permanence. During one interview, we were told of how one ARI, despite being given their space in-kind by a local housing association, was suddenly forced to find another space after a reassessment of assets. Another ARI lost their space entirely due to planning and development and has since become a 'nomadic' space – operating through online events and temporary use of other spaces. Whilst some may argue that ARIs are inherently temporary and short-lived, we reflect on how this is largely influenced by factors that are out of their control, more so than a decision that has been made by the initiative themselves.

With this combination of circumstances, we consider how we might develop strategies and tools for ARIs to navigate and build resilience in the face of precarious circumstances and be better prepared to respond to situations that present significant administrative and logistical challenges. Finding new ways for ARIs to demonstrate their value within the communities they are situated may be a possible strategy for building resilience, and established institutions, such as libraries, museums and universities are in a position to collaborate with ARIs to provide them with the knowledge, resources and expertise they might otherwise be missing to achieve this.

On the other hand, we suggest that the nature of precarity within ARIs is something inherent to their identity, and that eliminating this may fundamentally change the nature of their practice. As previously discussed, there is a distinct opposition to spaces becoming institutions [39, 44] and the suggestion that this is an inevitable outcome. Aligning with intuitional methods of archiving could be

seen as part of this transformation. We consider the importance of exploring methods of archiving that might be flexible and reactive to the fluid circumstances of ARIs that are not so strongly bound or influenced by traditional institutional structures. We might consider how we could approach the design of tools that consider and nurture these precarious circumstances so that ARIs might continue to challenge these expectations and find ways of expressing the value of their grassroots origins without needing to sacrifice them to survive.

5.4 Limitations

Finally, we acknowledge that our research only highlights a part of the wider picture of ARIs and is not intended to paint a comprehensive picture of their activities. It is limited primarily in terms of geographic scope to ARIs based in North East England and Scotland. It is reasonable to assume that challenges faced by ARIs will be similar across the UK, with some variation across the regions (due to, for example, local funding conditions). Internationally, there may be much greater variation. However, this research intends to create an initial understanding of the way that the broad challenges faced by ARIs overlap with technology; providing firstly a more nuanced understanding of the benefits and drawbacks of increasing technology use, but also possible directions for future research and design work to better support ARIs.

6 CONCLUSION

This study aimed to explore archival practices in ARIs and to understand in what ways these intersect with technology. To achieve this, semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine ARIs in the UK, with subsequent thematic analysis that sought to deepen understanding of this topic. Through this work we contribute empirical evidence of a multitude of issues relevant to archival practice within ARIs, collated into three distinct themes that help to categorise these insights. We hope that in discussing these insights, we have communicated potential opportunities for HCI researchers to examine how digital technologies, as well as other important external factors, are closely intertwined with archives within ARIs. and how we might approach designing appropriate responses to this that support better archival practice, as well as exploring alternatives.

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