

“Don’t Trust Anyone Over the Age of 30”

Youth Empowerment and Community Archives

Don’t trust anyone over the age of 30. Jack Weinberg¹

Coined by student organizer Jack Weinberg during the height of the Free Speech Movement on the campus of UC Berkeley, this phrase has become inextricably linked with the political, social and cultural rebellion of the 1960s. At that time, this idea was not simply abstract; it manifested itself in day-to-day life. Young people built, created, led, educated, demonstrated, and envisioned a new world. Today, while this phrase is still culturally significant, many find it symbolic as opposed to an actual practice. In fact, even though access and availability to information has increased exponentially, we have a tendency to stereotype youth as “uninformed” and/or “untrained” and often are reluctant to provide them with leadership positions or spaces to empower themselves.

The internship program of The Freedom Archives, a small archive in the Mission District of San Francisco, is specifically designed to challenge the idea that youth are unskilled, politically naïve, and/or not yet prepared for knowledge production. Founded in 1999, The Freedom Archives contains over 12,000 hours of audio and video tapes which date from the late-1960s to the mid-90s and chronicle the progressive history of the Bay Area, the United States, and international movements. In addition to preservation, we actively create educational resources using archival materials in order to shape the

■ Nathaniel Moore is an experienced teacher and trained archivist. He currently lives in the Bay Area of California and works at the Freedom Archives preserving and disseminating progressive history and culture.

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future. Furthermore, by offering high school and college students opportunities to work directly with archival materials, create their own productions, and contribute to the archives with critical thinking and writing, we seek to shift the paradigm that youth are only affected by historical events to recognizing youth as being one of the main determinants of history and social change.

The History of the Freedom Archives

The thing the sixties did was to show us the possibilities and the responsibility that we all had. It wasn't the answer. It just gave us a glimpse of the possibility. John Lennon²

Although founded fifteen years ago, the true origin of the archives takes us back to the mid-1960s in the San Francisco Bay Area in California. At that time, the Bay Area was a Mecca of political thought, cultural and artistic creation, and alternative institutions. During that time period, young people from around the country were making robust contributions to shaping a new society within the United States. The civil rights movement galvanized many young people to challenge the social order of the United States, as inspiring and successful decolonization struggles in Viet Nam, Cuba and on the African continent vividly illustrated that a new world was possible. Women's Liberation and Gay and Lesbian movements were also underway, challenging "fundamental" assumptions on sexuality, gender roles and identity.

One way young people in the Bay Area were contributing to challenging the American empire and political repression was by producing radio programming dedicated to documenting and broadcasting the people's history. This programming often combined in-depth interviews and reports on social and cultural issues; activist voices from a number of social justice movements; original and recorded music, poetry, and sound collages. These radio programs had names like *The Midnight Flash*, *The Real Dragon*, *Comunicación Aztlán*, *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle* and, at least in the Bay Area, were mostly broadcast over KPFA and the Pacifica Radio Network, as well as KPOO in San Francisco. The other major component of the original materials is a rich assortment of programs from what became the Third World department at KPFA, some in Spanish, many in English or both, that reflected the resurgence of the Chican@ movement, of Central American liberation struggles, and very close connections to and coverage of the Salvador Allende government in Chile and its tragic overthrow by fascist generals in league with Henry Kissinger and the CIA. The vast majority of these programs were independently produced by collective groupings, all with a commitment to anti-imperialism, human rights, and highlighting marginalized voices and organizations unheard or distorted on establishment media.

The collectives that produced the weekly programs in and of themselves embodied multicultural diversity. Some had some professional radio experience—all shared a deep commitment to using the powerful tool of radio to educate and spur social change. The language was consciously anti-sexist and all stories rewritten to remove the bias of news wires, and to call nations, races, and liberation movements what they wanted to be called, rather than “terrorist,” “bandit,” “enemy,” or other derogatory terms used so frequently in the mass media. Of course, the social justice energy of the times contributed greatly to the programs—not only in reporting what was happening from an activist viewpoint, but also in the creative preparation of the programs, as ideas were debated back and forth in an intense atmosphere, working all day to broadcast first a half-hour then an hour at 6 pm every week. By the time they had gone off air, these programs constituted a record of over 30 consecutive years of activism and multicultural transformation, with exclusive *actuality*—living voices and field recordings—of a wide range of individuals, groups, and events regionally, nationally, and internationally. It is these recordings that would form the initial bulk of materials currently housed at the Freedom Archives.

The Freedom Archives Today

Preserve the past — illuminate the present — shape the future.
Freedom Archives’ motto

Today the hustle and bustle of Valencia Street is known more for its trendy restaurants, high-priced condos, and Google buses than it is for political organizing. However, tucked discreetly between storefronts is 522 Valencia, home of the Freedom Archives.

Over the past 15 years, the Freedom Archives has become a national and international source of media of great interest to young people and students, but also to teachers, diverse community organizations and media outlets, filmmakers, activists, historians, artists and researchers. We regularly produce original documentaries and educational media for use within schools and as tools for community building. For example, our film *Cointelpro 101* has been featured in festivals, on campuses, in community venues, on satellite TV channels and on radio stations, as a way of building awareness of illegal and overreaching government repression against its own citizens.

Our collections include weekly news, poetry, music programs; in-depth interviews and reports on social and cultural issues; numerous voices from behind prison walls; diverse activists; and pamphlets, journals and other materials from many radical organizations and movements. These materials constitute a compelling record of 50 years of recorded sound, images and cultural diversity. The music/poetry mixes, production techniques, and sound

collages represent an innovative contribution to the art of radio and the radical cultural ambiance of “the 60s” and subsequent decades.

We’ve also designed and launched a sophisticated digital search engine that allows for increased access to our holdings through a less academic and more user-friendly exploration of our materials. The site is media-sample-driven, emphasizing a user-driven approach to searching our collections, and to make the site more fully accessible for younger generations, as well as those conducting academic-based research. Advanced users can still use Boolean search logic or comb through metadata, but all users now can use keywords, or simply explore our site by using visual and other media-based cues.

Thus, the Freedom Archives represents a departure not just in the materials it holds, but also in its deliberate reframing of the standardized and often non-participatory protocols, procedures, and practices of traditional archives.

Our Internship Program

Education is an important element in the struggle for human rights. It is the means to help our children and our people rediscover their identity and thereby increase their self respect. Education is our passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs only to the people who prepare for it today. Malcolm X³

Community outreach has always been paramount to the mission of the Freedom Archives. Youth interns have served essential roles since the founding of the Archives including integral involvement in the development of the cataloging system and the initial organization of the archives. Many young people have a great deal of curiosity about the fabled period known as “the 60s,” and the Archives brought some of this history to light in exciting ways. Although they were exploring materials that were politically and historically unfamiliar to them, the programs strongly resonated with them and this helped us to recognize and establish youth as the main audience of our work. The first intern project was the Vinyl Project released in 2003. This 12” vinyl record was the culmination of a large amount of research and audio editing and contains very short, dramatic, and historic sound bites for use by spoken word and performance artists, and DJs. It includes more than 75 sound bites that feature political and cultural figures of the past and present—such as Emma Goldman, Judi Bari, Assata Shakur, Black Panther Youth, Malcolm X, Ramsey Muniz, David Gilbert, Arundhati Roy, Noam Chomsky, Dylcia Pagan, Geronimo Pratt, Cherrie Moraga, and many others. These clips were chosen, edited and finalized by the interns.

Since 2003, the Freedom Archives has maintained an active youth development program that encourages engagement with historical materials and

provides media production training as well as fostering a love for progressive history. We have developed strong, cooperative, and effective partnerships and project-based connections with a number of youth organizations, local high schools, community colleges, and 4-year colleges and universities. The Freedom Archives internship program requires no prior library or media training and includes arrangements for high-school and college students to receive academic credit. All internships are shaped around the specific student, their interests and their goals for the internship experience. This aspect of the program is a key element of sustaining the initial spirit that generated the materials; a genuine desire to empower young people to explore, question, challenge and create their own narrative instead of learning to mechanically recite names and dates.

In addition to growth in detail-oriented organization, critical thinking and writing skills, all interns receive in-house training sessions before working with archival materials. Since our founding, the Freedom Archives has worked with hundreds of young people and has had relationships with MetWest High School, June Jordan School for Equity, Urban High School, the University of San Francisco, San Francisco State University, City College of San Francisco, San Jose University, Mission High School and many others.

1. Content

There is an overwhelming need for the young people of today to have access to non-filtered, non-biased educational resources that allow them to learn more about our recent history. In order to move forward as a society, young people need to know about and understand the aims, events, accomplishments, and setbacks of influential times in our history. The archives and projects growing from the collection can help satisfy a growing interest by youth of many cultures in these social and cultural currents, and can assist them in unearthing lessons of the recent past even as they raise new concerns of their own. Educational programs utilizing multifaceted audio and/or video resources can convey recent history to high school and college students in dramatic ways that cut through the stereotypical depictions of textbooks, the mainstream media, and commercialized mass culture.

2. Skill Building and Training

Skill development is one of the core components of the internship program. One of the primary strategies we employ to make sure youth are learning is by actually allowing youth to do work. Instead of elevating the knowledge and capabilities of researchers above that of young people, we allow youth to directly work with archival materials, decide keywords, write descriptions, digitize audio, edit audio, write blog posts, etc. Youth are given training, not only about how to handle materials carefully and what preservation involves—but also training on playing, caring for and evaluating reel-to-reel tapes. As they

receive training in audio production, they are tasked with digitizing media and pulling choice sound bites from those resources that can then be shared online. The decision to allow interns such a large role in generating content not only re-affirms our commitment to acknowledging youth as important producers of history but also re-iterates to our interns that they are capable and critical contributors not just to the archives but to society at large.

3. Empowerment

Encouraging and fostering youth involvement in knowledge production empowers them beyond the physical archive space and establishes a direct connection to the values and ideology behind the creation of the original materials. It also allows them to immerse themselves in the materials and use this relationship to propel their own political engagement, educational advancement, and critical thinking skills. The relationships we develop with youth are also essential for the staff of the archives. Without the fresh, creative, and imaginative ideas and perspective of our youth interns, we run the risk of losing touch with constantly evolving current movements for human rights and self-determination. Access to these historical materials also demonstrates powerfully to young people today that youth have always propelled social change and provides concrete examples of how they can make, record, and preserve history. The history that they create.

4. The Projects

As mentioned, there have been hundreds of high school and college-age youth who have interned at the Freedom Archives. Frequently as well, graduate students from around the country come to spend some days digging into topics and issues found in the Archives, as part of work on a thesis or research paper. Interns or former interns have also been directly involved in the planning for a production of our audio CDs and DVDs. Over the last several years, in addition to audio and video, a unique collection of rare documents has grown. Many of these have been scanned and are available for free download. To provide a sense of the many projects interns have devised and completed, here are just a very few examples:

- Using the Archives to design curriculum around how sterilization continues to be used as a weapon against women of color. The Archives has historical material and testimony on the sterilization of Indigenous and Puerto Rican women, often without their knowledge, as well the protests against this practice.
- A video and supplemental one-page leaflet containing step-by-step directions on how to locate and properly address a letter to a friend or loved one in a California prison. One of the central themes in the Archives concerns

prisons, the prison movement, the many prison rebellions that took place in the 1960s and 70s, and political prisoners.

- The digitization and editing of audio and video materials for our web version of the book *Out of Control: A 15 Year Battle Against Control Unit Prisons*. The web version of this book allows readers to view, read or listen to an archival material references in the text and, if you wish, download it to your computer.
- Created and produced a radio program about colonization, land struggle and identity in Hawaii. This program was produced by a native Hawaiian intern and culminated in his re-connection with his indigenous Hawaiian heritage and his grandfather's land on the island.
- Selected and digitized audio clips for our educational web page in conjunction with a community event we helped organize in Oakland in early May 2015, to mark the 40th Anniversary of the defeat of the US military in Viet Nam, entitled "The Spirit of Viet Nam Stronger Than the US bombs."

Conclusion

The world is yours, as well as ours, but in the last analysis, it is yours. You young people, full of vigour and vitality, are in the bloom of life, like the sun at eight or nine in the morning. Our hope is placed on you. Chairman Mao Tse-Tung⁴

As should be evident, our programs for and by young people are at the heart of the mission of the Freedom Archives. We believe it is a unique and strong program, offering both technical and impactful education and the chance to engage with exciting materials not found elsewhere, and for interns to create their own projects. What is more difficult to convey in writing are the many interchanges between young people, Archives staff, and other volunteers, as well as the moments of discovery when an intern comprehends, for example, what the war in Viet Nam was actually about, and the mass nature of solidarity activities in the US and around the world, as opposed to the meager paragraphs offered in typical history textbooks. At the same time, Archives staff continually learns from interns and encourages their comments on the program, the ways it could be improved, what they learned from it, and their more general thoughts on the work of the Archives and ways to reach out to more young people. We propose our program and practices as a template to further liberate archive and library spaces and empower young people to engage, learn, imagine, re-define, challenge, understand, and create history.

NOTES

- 1 Daily Planet Staff. "Don't trust anyone over 30, unless it's Jack Weinberg." *The Berkeley Daily Planet* 6 April 2000: <<http://www.berkeleydailyplanet.com/issue/2000-04-06/article/759>>. Online.
- 2 "John Lennon Interview." *Bill Lee Show*. KFRC RKO, San Francisco. 8 December 1980. Radio.
- 3 Malcolm X. *By Any Means Necessary*. New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970. Print.
- 4 Tse-Tung, Mao. *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*. Peking: Foreign Language Press, 1966. Print.