

The Case of the *Awgwan*: Considering Ethics of Digitization and Access for Archives

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Abstract

As members of the University of Nebraska–Lincoln (UNL) Libraries considered digitizing and presenting the campus humor magazine *Awgwan* online as part of efforts to chronicle the University’s history and invite study of these materials, questions emerged about the ethics and responsibility of placing the *Awgwan* online in a broadly accessible digital environment. Much of the magazine depended and traded upon negative and destructive depictions of women and people of color as a key part of its “humor.” What are our ethical obligations in treating such materials? This essay introduces and analyzes the *Awgwan*; considers the potential value in making the magazine broadly available electronically; and then explores some of the issues the magazine raises for practitioners in archives and special collections today, particularly as more institutions may consider placing similar materials from their collections online.

Keywords: ethics, digitization, archives and special collections

The Case of the *Awgwan*: Considering Ethics of Digitization and Access for Archives

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In November 1921, the *Awgwan*, the campus humor magazine of the University of Nebraska warned its readers, “*Awgwan* is under the eye of a censor. In case we are able we will try to get over 2.75% with a kick in it. Watch *Awgwan*.” This short message to readers of the magazine raises key issues related to the *Awgwan* in the early twentieth century. Censorship, or the threat of censorship and of suspension, was a concern for *Awgwan* staff throughout the 1920s. In fact, the magazine was suspended twice during the decade, and news of similar fates for other campus humor magazines was not uncommon in the *Awgwan*. The warning also demonstrates the way in which the *Awgwan* traded on references to popular culture for its humor and cultural critique. In this case, the editors liken their own potential censorship to the prohibition of alcohol in the United States. The 2.75% threshold indicated the maximum amount of alcohol that could legally be in a beverage at the time. The *Awgwan* recognized that it faced a similar threshold: if it exceeded a certain measure of what was considered permissible, it faced restrictions. The editors also expressed their motive to exceed the threshold, however, pushing the boundaries of what was allowed.

Today, the *Awgwan* raises new “threshold” questions: As members of the University of Nebraska–Lincoln (UNL) Libraries considered digitizing and presenting the magazine online as part of efforts to chronicle the University’s history and invite study of these materials, questions emerged about the ethics and responsibility of placing the *Awgwan* online in a broadly accessible

digital environment. Much of the magazine depended and traded upon negative and destructive depictions of women and people of color as a key part of its “humor.” What are our ethical obligations in treating such materials? This essay introduces and analyzes the *Awgwan*; considers the potential value in making the magazine broadly available electronically; and then explores some of the issues the magazine raises for practitioners in archives and special collections today, particularly as more institutions may consider placing similar materials from their collections online. In discussing these issues in relation to the *Awgwan* and within the context of other ethical considerations librarians and archivists face as they digitize and provide electronic access to collections, we recognize how this work may require us to decide between competing values, and we seek, ultimately, to advance the conversation around these topics.

The *Awgwan* first appeared on the University of Nebraska campus in 1913 and was part of a larger national trend of campus humor publications. The first university humor magazines in the United States emerged in the nineteenth century, at schools such as Yale and Harvard. From the end of the nineteenth century through the first half of the twentieth, such magazines thrived on college campuses. The explosion of these magazines coincided with two other cultural phenomena: a growing demand for humor among the middle class and the emergence of the university as a site for socialization, the latter which cultural historian Wickberg (1998) identifies as a “general reconstruction of the American university and its purpose” (p. 129). In his analysis of American humor, Mintz (1990) includes the more than “150 college humor magazines [that] flourished” during the 1920s as one reason the decade was so remarkable for American humor (p. 162). College humor magazines, and their particular brand of humor, were at the height of popularity in the 1920s. That the *Awgwan* was twice suspended during this same decade may be no coincidence; some of the same features that made campus humor magazines flourish also made them controversial. *In Sex and the University: Celebrity, Controversy, and a Student Journalism Revolution*, for example, Reimold (2010) identifies campus humor magazines as “the earliest sexual provocateurs” (p. 14).

Despite their prevalence on college and university campuses in the United States, campus humor publications of the first half of the twentieth century have received little current scholarly treatment. Nearly thirty years ago, humor scholar Sloane (1987) identified the magazines as an area for research in the study of humor in the United States. According to Sloane, the history of these magazines is “a record of vitality—a chronicle of rambunctious invasions of sacrosanct territory in politics, social pretension, and sexual mores almost unrivalled in any

comparable literary genre” (p. 49-50). And yet, while there has been some discussion of national publications such as *College Humor* and *Life*, or of H. L. Mencken’s *American Mercury*—which can be seen as off-shoots of smaller, local campus humor magazines—the progenitors of these publications sit unexplored in university archives. Some of the magazines, such as the *Cornell Widow* and the famous *Harvard Lampoon*, have been featured in anniversary anthologies (Kaplan, 1973; Green, 1981), which include histories and overviews of the publications, but these reprintings feature little to no critical exploration or interpretation.

One challenge to the study of campus humor magazines is the accessibility of the materials. The publications were cheaply produced and ephemeral. They are not widely available today, particularly in complete or nearly complete sets and when compared to the accessibility of national humor magazines. University archives and special collections may provide one of few points of access. Therefore, in order to encourage study and analysis of the *Awgwan* as part of campus and college life in the early twentieth century, of middle class culture, and of humor studies, we set out to digitize and make broadly available issues of the *Awgwan*. In the course of this work, however, we realized that the digitization and publication strategy developed for other materials in the UNL University Archives is not sufficient for dealing with the *Awgwan* and its subject matter.

The Awgwan

Students associated with the college of journalism, fine arts, and general campus activities at the University of Nebraska developed the idea for their own campus humor magazine during the 1912–1913 academic year. The students had great ambition for the magazine, which they titled *Awgwan*. (To understand the title, imagine a student hearing an unlikely story from a friend. In disbelief the listener says, as an aside, “aw, go on—aw gwan—awgwan.”) The purpose of the *Awgwan* was to provide an antidote to the more news-driven options available for reading on campus. At the University of Nebraska, the *Daily Nebraskan* published a range of news stories, a campus calendar, reviews of activities, and sports articles. It mirrored standard daily newspapers but with the campus at its center. Over the years, several other publications had emerged to supplement options for news and entertainment. An early humor magazine, *The Arrowhead*, was established in 1899 and was published monthly until 1902. Student annuals, which began publication in 1881, had humor sections that were similar to the *Awgwan* and *Arrowhead*. For example, the 1912 annual included a humor section called “College

Life.” With these earlier publications and efforts as a backdrop, the *Awgwan* eventually became the longest running stand-alone humor publication at the University of Nebraska and represents more than three decades of student life on the campus.

Students published the first *Awgwan* on February 17, 1913, and meant it to be a semi-monthly endeavor. The first editorial, by editor Chandler Trimble, provided an outline of *Awgwan* policy: the magazine would focus on Nebraska, as Trimble believed students should be aware of the state beyond the university. He further noted that the articles would not always be to everyone’s liking and that the editors “expect a long line of subscribers after each issue to come to our office door and demand that we refund their money and stop their subscription to this scurrilous sheet” (p. 12). Indeed, the *Awgwan* had a tumultuous run on campus due to its content and to other campus publications created by its editors and staff. Publication of the *Awgwan* was suspended twice, once in 1923-1924, and again in 1929 (*The 1934 Cornhusker*, p. 96; *The 1935 Cornhusker*, p. 108). After resuming publication in 1931, the *Awgwan* continued until 1941. In 1941, it drastically changed its style and format, highlighting campus life through photographs. This change in format lasted for about five years, with the final published copy of the *Awgwan* appearing in December 1946.

Throughout these three decades, the creation and publication of the *Awgwan* resided in the hands of students. They initiated the original idea and operated the publication with a formal editorial board. Leadership positions such as editor, editor-in-chief, and business manager were often held by the same student for several years. Student staff were assigned to a position for a semester or entire year, and students often played multiple roles. Eventually, supervision of the publication of the *Awgwan* fell to a professional journalism fraternity, Sigma Delta Chi (SDC), which was based at the University. Even with this change in leadership the majority of content still came from the students (*The 1918 Cornhusker*, p. 310).

Student volunteers in positions of editors and contributors supervised the development of the periodical and solicited content from the student population on campus. Contributors-at-large were encouraged to contribute to the magazine through direct requests that appeared on the editorial pages, advertisements, and invitations published elsewhere. Much of the editorial content appears without a byline, but cartoons and other graphical contributions include the name of the artist. The majority of cartoon contributions, particularly editorial cartoons and general illustration cartoons, were created by University of Nebraska students on the *Awgwan* staff. The *Awgwan* also reprinted material from

a wide variety of student humor magazines published at other universities and colleges. These materials were incorporated into the *Awgwan* through sections with titles such as “Encore Numbers,” “Curtain Calls,” “Rescued From the Waste Basket,” and “Hand Me Downs.” Some issues were comprised entirely of content from other campus humor magazines. The *Awgwan* therefore also provides glimpses into the social and academic humor of other colleges and universities. In just two issues from 1920, for example, the *Awgwan* included material from the *Yale Record*, *University of California Pelican*, *Jack-o-Lantern*, *Chaparral*, *Columbia University Jester*, *Carolina Tar Baby*, and *Lehigh Burr*, among others (*Awgwan*, February 1920, p. 18; *Awgwan*, March 1920, p. 18).

University of Nebraska students were the primary audience for the *Awgwan*, and its editors sought to explore student life and express opinions about all aspects of the University. Certainly humor is one dimension of the *Awgwan*. Another is the position of privilege its creators and readers enjoyed as students in a university environment and as participants in the college experience. During the first three decades of the twentieth century, the nation’s population increased by 75%. At the same time, attendance at U.S. colleges and universities increased an astounding 400% (Levine, 1986, p. 68). The 1920 census revealed that the United States had moved from a rural to an urban nation. Cities had become the focus of economic, social, and intellectual growth leading to the rise of middle class urban professions, and these changes enhanced the prestige of a college degree (p. 69). As this culture of aspiration flourished in the 1920s, many also looked to college as a way to develop social contacts—even at the expense of the intellectual experience (Knoll, 1995, p. 75).

The amount and content of advertising in the *Awgwan* is one indication of this privileged audience. In addition to the clothing ads that appear in every issue, featuring the latest fashions for both men and women, advertisements encouraged students to purchase candies and chocolates, pens, stationery, typewriters, watches, and tobacco products. One advertisement for men’s clothes told would-be buyers: “They’re made to fit the mind, manner and figure of Smart-Dressing [sic] Fellows, their Value Scurries up – up – up Continually; it Teases attention constantly” (*Awgwan*, November 1921, p. 15). At the same time, students were bombarded by ads for bakeries, cafeterias, diners and grocers, barber and beauty shops, bookstores, cleaners, dance classes, jewelers and opticians, pharmacies, portrait studios, printers and engravers, and tailors. Advertisements such as these bring into focus certain aspects of student life and the construction of the college experience in the early twentieth century. The editorial and artistic content of the magazine brings other aspects of campus life into focus as well—and makes the attention to

status through material goods and commodities appear innocuous in contrast.

In particular, the magazine's depiction of racial, ethnic, and religious minorities, and of women or qualities gendered as feminine, demonstrate that the University of Nebraska college experience of the early twentieth century was a construct defined as white, western, "masculine," and Christian. Now, well into the second decade of the twenty-first century, as colleges and universities confront compliance with Title IX and with systemic racism and civil rights issues on our campuses, what responsibilities do universities and their archival repositories have in making available parts of our institutional histories—such as the *Awgwan*? On the one hand, such materials and histories are poised to play important roles in understanding cultural phenomena such as humor magazines and the role of humor more generally and in developing understanding of the complicated histories of higher education in the United States. Furthermore, it is important that institutions recognize these problematic histories and that we do not put forward only a positive face in the materials we make broadly available. On the other hand, the presentation of such materials makes immediately available materials of textual and visual violence which, particularly when shorn of contextualization and analysis, perpetuate the very systems we aspire to replace.

Beginning with its mascot, the *Awgwan* both traded on and benefited from racial and ethnic stereotypes. The first mascot of the *Awgwan* was the figure of an American Indian baby, shown without clothes, wearing a headdress and swinging a hatchet. After a year, the mascot became the figure of an American Indian adult male, depicted with a hatchet and holding flowers. In 1914, the mascot was again an American Indian child, in diapers and moccasins, holding paper and a pipe, while standing next to a feathered helmet and a quill in ink. The *Awgwan* mascot was the most visible, but certainly not the only attempt at rendering and describing American Indians in the magazine. Other examples—among dozens—include the use of the term "red skin" and a definition for Powhatan that references alcohol (*Awgwan*, October 1920, p. 17).

Black Americans were the target of this harmful humor as well. Many illustrations depict characters in blackface, exaggerate physical features, and frequently use "dialect" in dialogue and captions for Black individuals. Writers and artists frequently used dehumanizing words and terminology to reference Black men and women. Further, cartoons and jokes in the *Awgwan* depend on familiarity with Jim Crow laws and related social practices, and many jokes assume a universal preference for whiteness in order for their "humor" to "work." A cartoon drawing titled "Try Our New Complexion Clay" shows before and after instances with "before"

a profile of a man in blackface and the “after” a profile of a white man (*Awgwan*, November 1924, p. 18). A number of jokes from the mid-1920s center on the Ku Klux Klan and lynching (*Awgwan*, May 1925, p. 12; *Awgwan*, November 1925, p. 4). Additional content, sometimes called annual jokes, referenced Italian, German, Spanish, and Chinese stereotypes for their humor. For example, the *Awgwan* touted its “Annual Chinese Joke.” Some of this content was original, and some pieces were reprinted from other campus humor magazines. The January 1927 exchange number, for example, included cartoons depicting Sitting Bull and two men in blackface, taken from other universities’ publications (p. 22, 30). The magazine also reused artwork in a more subtle assertion about ethnic and religious identity. For example, an image from a cartoon in a December 1925 issue, ostensibly depicting two Muslim men, is reused the following month for another cartoon about Muslims. This reuse of imagery is a subtle but powerful expression about the sameness and interchangeableness of Muslim identities.

Women’s bodies and minds were similarly seen as fair game by *Awgwan* contributors. Throughout the 1920s, *Awgwan* content relating to women focused on appearance, intelligence, dating, relationships, finances, and attitudes towards women as students or “co-eds.” Many of the jokes about women revolve around their looks, weight, and attire (*Awgwan*, November 1924, p. 8). The many jokes on the length of women’s dresses were really expressions of sexuality, and what was seen as appropriate for men and women. The May 1921 issue, for example, celebrated that “Skirts are now so short that a man doesn’t have to deform himself by bending when he wants to enjoy the views along the street,” while another joke, a conversation between a freshman and sophomore, shows appreciation for apparel that “protects private property, and yet doesn’t spoil the view” (p. 13). In addition, a number of the jokes from this period depend on apparent violence toward women only to have the punchline demonstrate that it was not a woman that was being beaten, choked, or murdered, but an object such as a bottle of alcohol. Perhaps in an attempt to address the representation of women and to provide an avenue for their voices, one issue ostensibly served as a response to the way the magazine presented women in earlier numbers. The “Sweet Mama” number (March 1923) was “written and edited by University girls, under the direction of Carolyn Airy, associate editor of the *Awgwan*” (p. 1). Regardless of this distinction in contributors and editors, the contents of this volume are very much of a piece with earlier numbers, demonstrating how ingrained these social attitudes were.

For the majority of its publication, little documentation exists to show how students, faculty, and the administration regarded the *Awgwan*. For the most part, the content of the *Awgwan* went unchallenged, even when they appeared to “get over 2.75% with a kick in it.” The magazine had two gaps in publication, however, one in 1923–1924 and another in 1929. While no extant documentation points to the precise reasons for what later *Cornhusker* yearbooks called “suspensions,” the *Awgwan*’s content appears to have been at issue, as well as its relationship to other humor publications and student groups (*The 1934 Cornhusker*, p. 96; *The 1935 Cornhusker*, p. 108). In February 1923, for example, the same student fraternity that oversaw publication of the *Awgwan* produced its annual four page paper, the *Evening Shun*, as part of University Night, a student-sponsored social event. Leading up to the 1923 *Shun*, student publishers met with university administrators and faculty to make clear they would publish the *Shun* only if they could do so without censorship. Administrators agreed, and the students delivered the *Shun* for University Night on February 17, 1923. The publication featured commentary on students, faculty, athletics, Greek life, and campus activities. It mentioned students by name, and focused on issues of appearance, intelligence, relationships, and dating.

The response to the 1923 *Shun* was damning: the Pan-Hellenic Council, representing 16 Nebraska sororities, rebuked it for its “attacks on women students,” its “vulgarity,” and its “slurs on the morality of women students” (Avery, 1923, Feb. 21). Meanwhile, Harold F. Holtz, Secretary of the Alumni Association, wrote to Chancellor Samuel Avery and declared that neither University Night nor the *Shun* represented “the things which the University of Nebraska stands for. It does not seem to me that the *Evening Shun* in its present form contributes one iota to the fun or jollity of the occasion, nor does it seem to me that such activity on the part of Sigma Delta Chi should be longer permitted” (Holtz, 1923, Feb. 20). Holtz continued, “I can see no reason why a publication which is essentially libelous in character and which is particularly offensive to anyone who has a great amount of respect for womanhood, should be allowed to appear again.” Others also condemned the *Shun* for its depiction of the “moral character” of women students at the University (Farnam, 1923, Feb. 17). As a result, the February 1923 issue marked the last publication of the *Shun*, and four years later, University Night itself was abolished.

The formal announcement from Sigma Delta Chi, the fraternity that published the *Shun*, announcing the end of the *Shun* appeared in March 1923. Two months later, in May 1923, the final issue of the *Awgwan* appeared, before an apparent 18-month break in publication.¹ There is not enough evidence to claim that the *Shun* incident was directly related to this hiatus in publication for the *Awgwan*, but the timing and other

1. We have not been able to locate issues of the *Awgwan* for the 1923–1924 academic year. Later Nebraska yearbooks refer to a suspension of the *Awgwan* in 1924. If issues exist from August–December of 1923, there do not appear to be extant copies. In any case, there was an extended hiatus for the magazine, for as little as one year and as much as eighteen months.

similarities are suggestive. The *Shun* was published by the same fraternity that oversaw publication of the *Awgwan*, and the criticisms of the *Shun* highlight key issues that also would have been at stake for the *Awgwan*. Notably, the criticisms of the *Shun* focused on its representation of the moral character of women in the student body. These criticisms did not take to task the problematic representations of women from a feminist perspective but rather were critical of the *Shun*'s implications that university women did not behave appropriately. At the same time, the final issue of *Awgwan* prior to its hiatus acknowledges support from students and faculty: "The students and alumni have backed the magazine to the limit and have been consistent boosters. The relations of the faculty, too, have been very gratifying" (*Awgwan*, May 1923, p. 9). The *Awgwan*'s publication gap during the 1923–1934 academic year remains a bit of a mystery, but its timing and the magazine's connection to the *Shun* provide at least a glimpse into what the reaction to the *Awgwan* and its content may have been on the campus.

The *Awgwan* resumed publication in November 1925. On the surface, little appears to have changed with the publication, though it made rhetorical gestures over time that suggest it was aware of the perpetual "threshold" it was up against. In March 1927, for example, the editors wrote, "we plan to run no scandal sheet. Nothing will ever be printed that is meant as slander. Nothing will be found in our columns that suggest immorality" (*Awgwan*, March 1927, p. 9). Such statements, however, did not apply to the magazine's presentation of racial and ethnic minorities, nor to its presentation of many women's-related topics. In fact, very little seems to have changed in the *Awgwan* despite this proclamation, and the magazine ran without major interruption until 1929. In 1929, however, an unknown controversy again brought the magazine to a halt. Neither the *Awgwan* itself nor university administrative records indicate the exact situation that shuttered the *Awgwan*, but various resources hint at the underlying reasons. The *Cornhusker* yearbook references the suspension, indicating that the Student Publications Board abolished the magazine due to "alleged obscenity," while the *Daily Nebraskan* described the suspension as the result of "questionable material" (*The 1930 Cornhusker*, p. 110; *Daily Nebraskan*, November 26, 1929, p. 110-111). A year later, in November 1930, Sigma Delta Chi sought to reestablish the *Awgwan*. They made several assurances, if their request was approved: they would secure subscriptions, secure advertising, and "recruit a sufficient number of responsible, capable applicants for staff positions" (*Daily Nebraskan*, November 13, 1930). The Student Publication Board was in favor of the *Awgwan*'s return, if it was on sound financial footing (*Daily Nebraskan*, November 20, 1930). Three months later, in February 1931, the *Awgwan* again appeared on the University of Nebraska campus with the sponsorship of Sigma Delta Chi. The magazine continued publication until 1941, at which time it was dramatically reinvented to focus on a photographic representation of campus life. The final issue of this new *Awgwan* appeared in December 1946.

The Bigger Picture

Regardless of how its contemporaries viewed the *Awgwan*, and how much of the material its original audiences found either innocuous or objectionable and why, we recognize much of the magazine's content today as racist, sexist, xenophobic, classist, and participatory in maintaining power structures that benefitted a select few and oppressed many more. While these qualities make the magazine deplorable on many counts, it nonetheless has value for research—in some cases because of these very issues with the magazine. There are, then, important reasons for making sure it is available for study: it has value for humor studies—including studies of the ways in which humor has served oppression, or made oppression more palatable to dominant cultures or to those in power—for histories of American magazines, for understanding the functions and dysfunctions of higher education in the United States in the first half of the twentieth century, and, more locally, to both broader and deeper understanding of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, among other possible research angles. As a result, a complete run of the *Awgwan* is preserved and made available in physical form on site in the reading room and has been for decades, similar to other equivalent publications at other institutions and archival repositories.

Recognizing its research value and as part of larger initiatives to digitize the history of the institution, we recently set out to provide digital public access to the materials, with the goal of encouraging broader research use of the *Awgwan*. We began digitizing the *Awgwan*, and in the process examined the magazine in more detail than we had opportunity to do in the past. The work of digitizing, in which we manually turned pages and oriented the magazine for each overhead scan, led us to see, at scale, the magazine's prejudices, biases, and oppressive and destructive rhetoric—both textual and visual. As we digitized issues and discussed what we read and observed, we became increasingly uncomfortable with the idea of making widely publicly available digital content full of such messages, which could be easily and broadly circulated via the Internet either without context or with ahistorical context.

There perhaps appears a tension in our reluctance, a tension between values of access and the role of archives—to provide access to the historical record without regard to content—and our desire to create some barriers to the circulation of the *Awgwan*'s pernicious messages, particularly those messages shorn of context. The idea of providing access to the historical record without regard to content, however, may be more easily adopted within the environment of the in-person reading room, where there are inherently barriers to access as well as various points at which researchers must pause and think. As Dalglish (2011) puts it,

In the pre-Internet days, the fact that a collection was, in the legal sense, available to any member of the public did not mean that it was in fact easily accessible by all the public. There were physical barriers to access such as the location of the archives, the retrieval process, the willingness and skill of the archivist, and the perseverance and knowledge of the researcher. There were exceptions, such as exhibitions and published collections of archival material. However, for the most part archives were accessible only within the archival institutions. (p. 70)

Furthermore, in the reading room model, there are pause points in place, such as reading research rules, registering, requesting materials, and seeking permission to publish. Barriers to entry (such as the financial cost of travel) and these administrative processes can make the use of archives impossible or inconvenient enough to discourage all but the most serious researchers. While these barriers were not necessarily constructed to limit certain types of use, limitations to use certainly emerged as a consequence.

Public digital access is intended in part to diminish these and other access barriers, including those emerging out of financial, information privacy, and other concerns. For many intents and purposes, public digital access is a very good development, but we must also think critically about ethical implications and professional values beyond only widespread access. The paramount question, according to Dalglish, is “whether we can in theory make available online any and all materials which we can legally make available in our public reading rooms, and if not, why not, and on what basis do we limit access to material online which we would make available in our reading rooms” (p. 72). Dalglish identifies two particular ethical dilemmas for archivists in making materials available online: privacy and “inappropriate material” (p. 73). Even in cases where an archive would be within its legal rights to make certain materials available online, would it be violating ethical norms with regard to privacy, for example?

On the issue of privacy, Robertson’s (2016) recent response to Reveal Digital’s digitization of the lesbian porn magazine *On Our Backs* (1984–2004) shows why privacy considerations might impact librarians’ and archivists’ decisions about making material available online, even if there are no legal barriers to doing so. In the case of *On Our Backs*, Robertson argues that consenting to appear in a print magazine is not the same as consenting to have your photos appear online (n.p.). Furthermore, the fact that the first decade of *On Our Backs* predated widespread use of the Internet--to say nothing of the twenty-first-century world wide web and related technologies--means that there could have been no expectation or assumption on the part of the photographic subjects that their images would circulate freely

and widely in the way that inclusion on Reveal Digital's site now facilitates (Robertson, n.p.). Are Reveal Digital and holding institutions within their legal rights to make the materials available? The answer seems to be yes, but we can and should question whether they are acting responsibly and ethically.

To Dagleish's dilemmas, we also would add the ethical considerations at play in digitizing and making accessible materials for which there are extra-legal ownership issues. In this regard, there has been some sustained discussion and action surrounding ethics of digital access of Indigenous cultural heritage materials. Writing in the *Journal of Western Archives*, Kimberly Christen (2015) writes, "The colonial collecting project was a destructive mechanism by which Indigenous cultural materials were removed from communities and detached from local knowledge systems. Much of this material remains today not only physically distant from local communities, but also lodged within a legal system that steadfastly refuses local claims to stewardship of these materials" (p. 2). As archivists and others begin thinking about digitizing these materials, they must be aware that digitizing and providing for access and use has the potential to become the most recent act of colonization. Christen and others have argued that blind adherence to the ethos of the current open access movement privileges a predominantly white and Western perspective on intellectual property over the knowledge and cultural practices of the creators (Christen 2015; Genovese, T. R. 2016). This situation led Christen and other team members to develop both the Mukurtu content management system (mukurtu.org), which "allows [Indigenous] communities to define levels of access to and and circulation of their digital heritage materials" (p. 5), and the *Local Contexts* project (localcontexts.org). *Local Contexts* supports Indigenous communities in managing their cultural heritage within digital systems and digital culture, and it offers educational and technical resources. One of its projects is Traditional Knowledge (TK) labels, a mechanism that allows "Native, First Nations, Aboriginal and Indigenous communities to add existing local protocols for access and use to recorded cultural heritage that is digitally circulating outside community contexts" (localcontexts.org tk-labels). For users outside these communities, visible TK labels offer an "educative and informational strategy" for learning about ownership, sharing, and access practices, and the many local contexts that inform the circulation of Indigenous cultural heritage materials.

While these concerns related to Indigenous materials, as well as the *On Our Backs* example, are significantly different than those involved in public digital access to the *Awgwan*, they begin to demonstrate the range of ethical considerations, particularly with regard to privacy and to ideas of ownership, in digitizing and making openly accessible archival collections and holdings. Dagleish identified also an ethical dilemma related to what he calls "inappropriate" or "unacceptable" content. For Dagleish, this is "material that might offend, distress or concern members of the community who have no direct

connection with the material” (p. 73) and material that “may . . . be perceived as distasteful” (p. 77). Of course, all of these terms—“inappropriate,” “unacceptable,” “distressing,” “concerning,” “distasteful”—represent subjective measures. The types of materials that raised questions of propriety and acceptability among Dalglish’s colleagues were those that document, either textually or visually, human nudity, dead bodies and dismembered body parts, sexual acts, and deaths and accidents (p. 78). Similarly, in a 2013 article on digitizing the student publication *Salient* at Victoria University Wellington, Sullivan identified images of “graphic violence, death, and nudity” as the impetus for questions about “what is appropriate to display online and what will offend researchers.” These discussions suggest that it is documentary, graphic depictions of the human body and its physicality that are at the core of what users and others might deem “inappropriate.” With the *Awgwan*, we confront a different range of issues: the material is signifying rather than documentary, art rather than—or as well as—record, and the depicted bodies and minds are not those of real human beings. Nonetheless, in thinking about making the *Awgwan* publicly available online, the question that has emerged for us as key is: should the magazine’s systemic racism, sexism, and other systems of oppression affect how we make the materials available online, and if so, how?

Archives & Special Collections and affiliated initiatives at UNL have faced similar concerns with other digitization projects, including with the online access and crowdsourcing of University of Nebraska yearbooks (yearbooks.unl.edu) and *Civil War Washington* (civilwardc.org).² In the case of the yearbooks, the FAQ page includes a question about offensive materials and what readers should do if they find such material. The response cautions, “Materials in the transcription project are historical. As such, they may contain racial or sexual stereotypes that are inappropriate by today’s standards. They have been retained in order to fully represent the materials in their original context. If the offensive text is not in the original but occurred during the transcription process, please email us” (n.d., n.p.). UNL archivists and other members of the project team determined that this was an appropriate strategy because the majority of content in the yearbooks did not feature highly problematic depictions of racial and ethnic minorities or of women. In the case of *Civil War Washington*, project directors added a disclaimer to one section of the site, which features medical and surgical cases from the Civil War. In this cases, the materials fall under the category of potentially objectionable items dealing with human bodies identified in Dalglish. On the index of these cases, the disclaimer reads, “This section contains graphic descriptions and images of war injuries. Users are advised that they may find some of this material disturbing” (Lawrence, Lorang, Price, and Winkle, n.d., n.p.). Both of these statements are articulated once, on single pages of their

2. Authors of this essay have contributed to and directed Nebraska Yearbooks and *Civil War Washington*.

sites, and simply announce that users may find material problematic.

Certainly one approach to presenting the *Awgwan* online would have been to follow this model; however, we identified two problems with this approach in this particular cases. First, a single message articulated once on sites with thousands of items and pages provides no guarantee—or even a reasonable expectation—that people will see the message. Certainly, the message could be repeated on every page, but our second problem with this overall approach is that a disclaiming message is the wrong rhetorical strategy, because it emerges out of pseudo-legal impetus rather than ethical or educative concerns. Our goal is not to cover our bases, but rather to make the materials broadly available online in an ethically responsible fashion. At this time, we believe doing so requires both context and teaching, not only access. Therefore, our own decision at this point is not to make the *Awgwan* available online until we can provide important contextual and teaching materials. Certainly, the act of deliberately not releasing this material, which from a technical perspective is largely ready to go, makes us uncomfortable. But, providing access stripped of context and critical engagement makes us equally uncomfortable, if not more, so. To be clear, this decision is not made in any way with the idea of protecting our institutional history but emerges out of our concern that we not facilitate the work of oppression by elevating voices and ideas such as those from the *Awgwan* in an uninformed, uncritical, and decontextualized environment. Exactly what an informed, critical, contextualized environment would look like for the *Awgwan* is not something we have pursued in earnest, in part because we are now also grappling with whether to spend the limited amount of time we have for creating digital collections on the *Awgwan*.

This situation has prompted us to do some soul searching and to confront issues that are not easy or pleasant, but neither is history nor the documentation of that history easy or pleasant. Ultimately, we aspire to an access model that honors the archival mission and the value of historical records, but we also recognize that archives are not apolitical, and archival acts and information processes are not neutral. For a magazine that was consistently pushing against the threshold of what was permissible and raised concerns of censorship in its own time, we want to be attune to such issues today. We also, however, want to think critically about the voices we amplify in our digital collections, particularly given the ways in which digital materials circulate and also with attention to the voices that have historically been silenced—whether silenced in relation to the records that were created and kept or in how those records have been curated and the degree to which they have been made findable. By talking openly about the *Awgwan*, the tensions in treating the magazine, and our intentions—original and current—we hope to prompt further, continued conversation about the range of ethical considerations, and ethical obligations, in digitizing archival materials.

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