Abstract:

This paper explores the difficulties associated with doing institutional archival research on issues of sexuality. In the digital era, anxieties abound over the effects of new media on people’s abilities to control and manage their reputations. Frequently, these concerns are related to the creation and distribution of sexual images. Polaroid’s instant camera, developed in the 1940s, allowed ordinary individuals to produce images beyond the gaze of commercial developers, broadening opportunities for the creation of erotic images. This paper outlines my research experience in the Polaroid institutional archive where I explore the company’s response to the use of its products for the production of self-pornography. I explore the difficulties associated with doing archival research on topics companies are least likely to want made public. I discuss strategies for reading silences within archives as well as thinking about how the institutional curation of archives shapes the available information on historical sexual cultures.