

Archives

By Andrew Lison, Marcell Mars, Tomislav Medak, and Rick Prelinger.
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As long-term practitioners or readers of archival studies well know, there is a persistent tendency by nonarchivists to discuss “archives” as remote or overidealized Platonic sites, far removed from mundane things such as labor, sweat, or workday politics. It is gratifying to report that *Archives*, by Andrew Lison, Marcell Mars, Tomislav Medak, and Rick Prelinger, only half succumbs to this tendency.

Archives is the latest release in the copublished In Search of Media series by the University of Minnesota Press and meson press. The series is edited by Götz Bachmann (Leuphana University, digital cultures), Timon Beyes (Leuphana University, sociology, management, politics, and philosophy), Mercedes Bunz (King’s College London, arts and humanities), and Wendy Hui Kyong Chun (Simon Fraser University, School of Communication). In their introduction, the editors declare that the series will feature “interventions” by at least two authors on different sides of the Atlantic, with the goal of understanding the ways in which media “set[s] the terms [in] which we live, socialize, communicate, organize, do scholarship . . . as well as the ways in which media impacts and changes these terms” (p. vii).

Despite its compact size (112 pages print; 97 pages PDF), *Archives* is capable of causing remarkably divergent reactions, largely due to its inexplicably connected second chapter (discussion follows). The text is broken up into three sections: an introduction by Andrew Lison, a long reflective essay by Rick Prelinger, and a position piece by Marcell Mars and Tomislav Medak.

As *American Archivist* readers will be most interested in Prelinger’s reflections, this review will largely focus on his remarkable contribution. Interested readers can find a longer, more free-form version of this review available on Twitter.¹

To judge by his faculty profile, Andrew Lison, who is assistant professor of media studies at the University of Buffalo, does not have a background as an archivist. Yet (refreshingly!) his introduction, “Contesting ‘The Archive,’ Archives, and Thanatarchy,” is well grounded in archival studies literature, recognizing the labor of archivists as well as identifying the work of several prominent archival and information studies scholars, including Miriam Posner,

Julia Flanders, and Safiya Umoja Noble, among others. He notes particularly the imbalance of labor between a scholar who uses an archives for an hour and the countless hours of (specifically feminized) labor that goes into making those resources available.

In positioning the two essays by Prelinger and Mars and Medak, respectively, Lison argues that they “reimagine the potentiality” of archives during a time of institutional collapse and corporatization of “the digital distribution of knowledge, situating them in opposition to these unsettling trends” (p. xvi). Though he begins by acknowledging Michel Foucault and *The Archaeology of Knowledge* as a “high water mark of poststructuralist interventions in archival theory,” he does not fall into a “metaphoric inflation” of the archive as a “hypothetical wonderland.”² Instead, he argues that “archivists, scholars, and theorists” will have to cooperate to “address the suffocating effect of stockpiled history” especially “if archives are to remain much-needed sites of contestation against the current wave of global reaction, which threatens to erase the past not in order to move forward, but to repeat its abominations anew” (p. xx).

As a historian and archivist, I might dispute the characterization of history as “suffocating,” though Lison’s call for collaboration and cooperation among all three groups is well-taken. All four authors share the characterization of archives as locations of tradition and history.

The essay “Archives of Inconvenience,” which takes up the majority of the text, is contributed by Rick Prelinger, professor of film and digital media at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and the founder of the Prelinger Archives and Library. Prelinger’s essay is perhaps best characterized as a reflective analysis, blending anecdotes, media history, academic analysis, and conversations with other archivists on Twitter. Adopting the editor’s language, Prelinger characterizes his “intervention” as a “mediation modulated by provocation” (p. 3), which is to say that he is “mediating” between scholars and archivists. His first provocation (to academics) positions *archives* as “real” places, where “collecting, preservation, access, and archival labor” occur, in contrast to *the archive*, which is an “overtheorized,” vague, and “undemanding construct,” invoked by the “critical disciplines as they interact with history and memory” (pp. 4–5).

For nonarchivists, Prelinger’s provocation occurs when he asks if “the archive” and “archives” can be reconciled, if connections could be drawn “between academic, artistic, and archival labor” (p. 6). He proposes that “we [academics] might listen harder to the people who perform archival labor” and “reframe it as cultural work and research in its own right,” rather than as simple wage labor (p. 6). For readers who are practitioners, Prelinger offers a utopian wishlist from academia that would solve nearly all archival problems—suggestions include effortless metadata collection, magical data corpora, fully permeable repositories, automatic archival networks, and so on (pp. 7–8).

Prelinger's provocation for archivists is far more complicated. Beginning with nitrate film, which is incredibly flammable and dangerous, he asks if physical objects have a "right" to exist. Although one might assume a digital archivist like Prelinger would respond in the negative, his answer is far more nuanced and sprawls across the rest of the chapter. By the time he concludes that "the turn to digital revalidates the analog" and hopes that "analog-digital hybridity" (p. 19) remains permanent, he has carried the reader through a variety of personal anecdotes, a microhistory of nitrate film, and vignettes on archival labor, all in a style that cannot be adequately captured in a review. Prelinger's essay is a beautiful, timely, important, and highly recommended experience.

Unfortunately, my reverie was immediately punctured by research associate Marcell Mars and doctoral student Tomislav Medak, both at the Coventry University's Centre for Postdigital Cultures. Although I would describe their essay, "System of a Takedown: Control and De-commodification in the Circuits of Academic Publishing," as a position piece, it could also be described as a diatribe against copyright, a justification for "Illegal Yet Justified" (p. 61), civil disobedience, or an indictment of academic publishers and MIT paired together with a eulogy for programmer and activist Aaron Schwartz. The Mars/Medak chapter does not seem to connect to Prelinger's essay in any discernable way.

Furthermore, Mars and Medak's arguments are completely lost in their insincere, uncritical, and deeply ableist embrace of "schizophrenia" as an interpretive framework. While I understand that their use of a disability is meant to be metaphorical and to represent their feelings about capitalism, its presentation is offensive and reductionist. Their use of "schizophrenia" originates from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, which proposes "schizophrenia" as the only logical reaction to capitalism and the modern world.³ This teleological model of history has been called "fatally flawed" by Anthony Elliott, who points out that portraits of schizophrenia reveal a world not of euphoric celebration, but of disintegration, fragmentation, terror, and emotional devastation.⁴ Deleuze and Guattari fail to consider the pain and emptiness of the psychotic experience. As such, their account cannot provide any moral criterion.⁵

Mars and Medak's view of archives or libraries, if this essay is meant to present one, is wholly individualistic and organized around principles of chaos and illogic. Those principles are anathema to the very ideas of archivy, knowledge organization, and information studies.

Beginning with the third word in their essay (after two long epigraphs), the authors repeatedly bludgeon the reader with the words "schizophrenia" and "schizoid" (pp. 48, 49 [twice], 50 [twice], 51, 53 [twice], 54, 55, 64 [thrice], 65). The result is to overwhelm any discussion about archives, which are mentioned in passing on page 53 in the phrase "the world of catalogs and archives." In preparing this review, I read over this essay several times and am still unable to

determine what exactly it has to do with archives: it does not focus on them in *either* the professional or the academic sense.

The rest of the essay is a cacophony of niche terminology and phrases (e.g., “mediatic,” “hybrid meta-space,” and “hyperproletariat”) that serve to paper over the authors’ logical leaps in their self-congratulatory encouragement of academic piracy. It is ironic that they do not consider their own privilege and positionalities in publishing in an open access monograph.

While Mars and Medak’s follow-up is disappointing, the first two chapters of *Archives* are a worthy endeavor; especially for archivists and readers who have not felt themselves and their work represented in discussions about “the archive.” This review cannot evaluate *Archives* within the In Search of Media series, but it seems to me that Mars and Medak’s chapter may have found a better home in a volume about scholarly communication or copyright. Interested readers may find the entire text available for free in open access format on meson press’s website.⁶

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NOTES

- ¹ The Twitter thread is available at <https://twitter.com/brimwats/status/1193269607118888963>, captured at <https://perma.cc/F7R5-GZJ3>.
- ² Michelle Caswell, “‘The Archive’ Is Not an Archives: On Acknowledging the Intellectual Contributions of Archival Studies,” *Reconstruction: Studies in Contemporary Culture* 16, no. 1 (2016), <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7bn4v1fk>.
- ³ I realize that this is an oversimplification of Deleuze and Guattari’s argument, but I think it is a fair distillation.
- ⁴ Anthony Elliott, *Psychoanalytic Theory: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (London: Red Globe Press, 2017), 159.
- ⁵ Elliott, *Psychoanalytic Theory*, 159–61.
- ⁶ Available at <https://meson.press/books/archives>, captured at <https://perma.cc/GXQ4-5L7K>.

Leading and Managing Archives and Manuscripts Programs

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The examination of management of archival and manuscripts repositories is tenfold that of leadership, with writings specifically about leadership