Seeing Archives: Postmodernism and the Changing Intellectual Place of Archives

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Abstract

Archivists have begun to outline the general application of a postmodern perspective to archival work. Postmodernists emphasize the idea that there is no way to avoid or neutralize the limits of the mediating influences that shape our understandings of our worlds. This postmodern outlook suggests an important new intellectual place for archives in the formation of records, knowledge, culture, and societies. This article aims to contribute more fully to an understanding of how the postmodern view of communication and language throws light on the role of archivists in mediating, and thus shaping, the knowledge available in archives. It concludes with the suggestion that this understanding of the role archivists play will be pivotal in archiving the computerized record.

D uring much of the last century, discussion of the ways in which communication shapes human understanding and behavior has come to the center of attention in a variety of academic and other circles. Large swaths of intellectual landscape have been reshaped by the study of language, texts, and images, processes of communication such as inscription, transmission, preservation, personal and public memory and commemoration, and reading (or contextualization and interpretation). Such study has influenced various movements in philosophy from structuralism and post-structuralism to (most recently) postmodernism; given rise to new fields of inquiry such as semiotics, cultural studies, and media and communications studies; and begun to reorient older fields in the arts, humanities, and social sciences, such as linguistics, history, geography, and literary theory, as well as professions such as architecture, psychiatry, and nursing. There is hardly a

major field of intellectual activity that has not felt, and wrestled with, these influences.[1]

Although this development has profound implications for archivists, until recently it has received little of their attention. At the same time, the principal participants in the discussion have made little explicit reference to archives. In the last few years, however, the phase of the discussion most influenced by post-modernism has begun to lap the shores of archives in articles by a few archivists, social scientists, historians, librarians, and, perhaps most visibly, in Jacques Derrida's book *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*.[2]

Postmodernism and Archives

It perhaps comes as no surprise that postmodernism has prompted some to examine archiving. For centuries in the West, people have argued over the degree to which our understanding of reality is affected by the various means we have of engaging it—from our senses and intellectual make-up to the full range of recorded communications. Much of the discussion has centered on finding the most reliable media for conveying this understanding (such as the spoken word delivered directly from one person to another) or on finding ways around the limitations of these mediations so that certain knowledge can still be readily obtained (such as the added weight given to the spoken word of an

[1] See Lawrence E. Cahoone, ed., *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996) and Pauline Marie Rosenau, *Post-Modernism and the Social Sciences: Insights, Inroads, and Intrusions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

[2] Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression,* trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). Here is a list of some of the archival writings discussing postmodernism: Brien Brothman "Orders of Value: Probing the Theoretical Terms of Archival Practice," *Archivaria* 32 (Summer 1991): 78–100 and "Declining Derrida: Integrity, Tensegrity, and the Preservation of Archives From Deconstruction," *Archivaria* 48 (Fall 1999): 64–88; Rick Brown, "The Value of Narrativity in the Apppraisal of Historical Documents: Foundation for a Theory of Archival Hermeneutics," *Archivaria* 32 (Summer 1991): 152–57; Terry Cook, "Electronic Records, Paper Minds: The Revolution in Information Management and Archives in the Post-Custodial and Post-Modernist Era," *Archives and Manuscripts* 22 (November 1994): 300–28; "Archival Science and Postmodernism: New Formulations for Old Concepts," *Archival Science* 1, no. 1 (2000): 3–24; and "Fashionable Nonsense or Professional Rebirth: Postmodernism and the Practice of Archives," *Archivaria* 51 (Spring 2001): 14–35; Joan M. Schwartz, "'We make our tools and our tools make us': Lessons from Photographs for the Practice, Politics, and Poetics of Diplomatics," *Archivaria* 40 (Fall 1995): 40–74 and "'Records of Simple Truth and Precision': Photography, Archives, and the Illusion of Control," *Archivaria* 50 (Fall 2000): 1–40; Bernadine Dodge, "Places Apart: Archives in Dissolving Space and Time" *Archivaria* 44 (Fall 1997): 118–32; Verne Harris, "Claiming Less, Delivering More: A Critique of Positivist Formulations on Archives in South Africa," *Archivaria* 44 (Fall 1997): 132–41; and *Exploring Archives: An Introduction to Archival Ideas and Practice in South Africa,* 2nd. ed. (Pretoria: National Archives of South Africa, 2000); Tom Nesmith, "Still Fuzzy, But More Accurate: Some Thoughts on the 'Ghosts' of Archival Theory," *Archivaria* 47 (Spring 1999):136–50; Lilly Koltun, "The Promise and Threat of Digital Options in an Archival Age," *Archivaria* 47 (Spring 1999): 114–35; Eric Ketelaar, "Archivalisation and Archiving," *Archives and Manuscripts* 27 (May 1999): 54–61; Steven Lubar, "Information Culture and the Archival Record," *American Archivist* 62 (Spring 1999): 101–12; Francis X. Blouin Jr., "Archivists, Mediation, and Constructs of Social Memory," *Archival Issues* 24, no. 2 (1999): 101–12; and a series of articles in the November 1998 and May 1999 issues of *History of the Human Sciences,* most notably Richard Harvey Brown and Beth Davis-Brown, "The Making of Memory: The Politics of Archives, Libraries and Museums in the Construction of National Consciousness," *History of the Human Sciences* 11 (November 1998), 17–32.

eyewitness under oath in a court room.) Postmodernists emphasize in this discussion the idea that, despite such efforts, our means of communication are still quite limited in what they can convey, and, paradoxically, that they are much more powerful and central than we have assumed in forming whatever understanding we can achieve. A hallmark of the postmodern view of communication is that there is no way to avoid or neutralize entirely the limits of the mediating influences which, thus, inevitably shape our understanding. Our understanding, then, is not simply affected by such mediations, but is a product of them.[3]

Postmodernists have been guided by this insight into communication to a multifaceted, wide ranging critique of modern philosophy and society. The modernist view, stemming from the rise of science and the Enlightenment, posited that rational, thus reliable, communication could be the basis of unlimited intellectual, material, and social progress. If, however, communication is sharply limited in its ability to represent the world, then confident assumptions about social, religious, and political truths and objectives are always in question. They are provisional constructs we make with the mediations we have, rather than certainties to seek or grasp. Thus the focus of our discussion should include how such constructions (archives among them) are made and shape our understanding.[4]

Some archivists have begun to outline the general application of this postmodern outlook to archival work.[5] This article aims to contribute more fully to our understanding of the how the postmodern view of communication throws light on the role of archivists as key mediators or constructors of the knowledge available in archives. This postmodern view implies that whatever improvement in understanding we may be able to achieve can only come from identifying and exploring as many of the mediating factors as possible, even those seemingly most remote from such previous study, such as archiving. Unlike prior efforts to recognize (but also mainly neutralize) such mediating factors, the postmodern outlook asserts that archiving should no longer slip so easily from sight. It also suggests that rather than simply attempting to overcome the mediation of archiving, its powerful effects ought to be examined.

The postmodern view of communication helps us to see archiving anew and, perhaps for many, to see it for the first time, since it is an activity that has typically gone on almost invisibly, even to those who often use archives. The postmodern

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[3] Cahoone, ed., *From Modernism to Postmodernism,* 14. Archiving, as the multifaceted process of making memories by performing remembered or otherwise recorded acts, transmitting such accounts over time and space, organizing, interpreting, forgetting, and even destroying them, produces constructions of some prior activity and condition. This article focuses on that part of the process in which archivists are engaged when performing the work described herein. For further elaboration of the concept of archiving, see Nesmith, "Still Fuzzy, But More Accurate," 145.

[4] Cahoone, ed., *From Modernism to Postmodernism,* 14.

[5] For general treatments of postmodern insights into archival work see, especially, the work of Brothman, Cook, Harris, and Ketelaar above. See also Schwartz, "Records of Simple Truth and Precision," for their application to photographs, and Nesmith, "Still Fuzzy, But More Accurate," for discussion of their relevance to the concepts of provenance, record, and archives.

outlook suggests an important new intellectual place for archives in the forma-
tion of knowledge, culture, and societies. It helps us to see that contrary to the
conventional idea that archivists simply receive and house vast quantities of
records, which merely reflect society, they actually co-create and shape the knowl-
edge in records, and thus help form society's memory. This implies that studying
the archiving process itself (and not just using archives in the familiar way to study
other things) is a vital aspect of the pursuit of human understanding. The study
of archives is no longer just the seemingly esoteric interest of a few archivists who
believe it makes them more effective on the job, or provides an underpinning for
professional culture, valuable as these internal pursuits may be.

Archiving has long been in the societal and intellectual shadows, in part
because documents and archives have usually been considered unproblematic
means of access to information. Users of archives invariably want to look
straight through archival institutions, their work, and their records, at some-
thing else in the past of greater importance and interest to them. Conventional
ideas about archiving reflect and reinforce this view. Archivists not only attempt
to acquire primary (or original) sources, or records, which are thus thought to
have special (even unique) integrity as means of access to the past; they believe
that providing information about the records' origin and respecting the origi-
nal order of their creation are essential to ensure that archiving is a neutral
means of communication of the recorded past. Traditionally, archivists have
opposed any intervention by archivists or others that would undermine the
physical and intellectual integrity of the records and cause the archiving process
to distort transmission of the original meaning and characteristics of the
records across time and place. Although this approach has brought archivists
an active role as guardian and preserver of records, it has also implied a rather
passive, incidental role overall, as the records' mere recipient and keeper. In
this role, archivists simply document or mirror the world around the archives,
and list, describe, copy, and retrieve the records and, thereby, the knowledge
already in them in a neutral, inconspicuous, and simply factual way.[6]

This archiving ideology is so deeply ingrained that it has been treated by
some archivists as if it were part of the natural order of human recording and com-
munication. Sir Hilary Jenkinson of the Public Record Office, the leading English-
speaking archivist in the first half of the twentieth century, maintained as late as

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[6] For these images of guardian and mirror, see Timothy Walch, ed., *Guardian of Heritage: Essays on the
National Archives* (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1985) and the
Public Archives of Canada, *Archives: Mirror of Canada Past* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972).
This is not to say that archivists today do not think of their work as intellectually demanding or that they
actually seek social self-effacement. Archival work is intellectually demanding and many archivists work
hard to improve public understanding of archives. Still, the ultimate aim for most is to step aside and
present archiving as a transparent conduit to the past, rather than an activity that shapes our under-
standing of the past. See, for example, Terry Eastwood, "Nailing a Little Jelly to the Wall of Archival
Studies," *Archivaria* 35 (Spring 1993): 232–52 and "What is Archival Theory and Why is it Important?,"
Archivaria 37 (Spring 1994): 111–13; and Luciana Duranti, "Reliability and Authenticity: The Concepts
and Their Implications," *Archivaria* 39 (Spring 1995): 5–11.

1947 that genuine archives "accumulate naturally." "They are not there," he added, "because someone brought them together with the idea that they would be useful to Students of the future, or prove a point or illustrate a theory. They came together and reached their final arrangement, by a natural process: are a growth you might say, as much an organism as a tree or an animal." On the same occasion, when describing the "new profession" which archivists in Britain had created in the twentieth century, Jenkinson extended his metaphor a little further—to suggest that archivists themselves were also among the animals. When commenting on whether archivists should do historical writing beyond their need to do the basic, factual administrative histories required for finding aids, Jenkinson said: "[The archivist] will almost certainly make from time to time interesting [historical] discoveries and must sometimes be allowed the pleasure of following them up, in off hours, himself. The appropriate motto seems to be . . . 'Thou shalt not muzzle the ox that treadeth out the corn': we must allow him . . . a few mouthfuls; while reminding him that his primary duty is to tread; and hoping that he will not, in the process, tread on any, or many, toes."[7]

Archival work has thus been thought to be most effective when it is unobtrusive or largely invisible. In effect, archivists themselves have adopted a strategy of self-effacement in their professional principles and discourse. Another good example of this longstanding tendency (and its natural and often agricultural metaphors) is found in the thinking of Douglas Brymner, who from 1872 to 1902 was the first head of what is now the National Archives of Canada. In a speech to historians in 1888, Brymner said that archivists are "men of letters who are not authors" and that the archivist "must not forget that he is only the pioneer whose duty is to clear away obstructions; the cultivated fields will follow." Brymner then characterized the work that he did in arranging the records by saying it was "purely mechanical" and required "no special qualifications." When it came to describing the records, he again stressed his modest role, saying that this task required only "a little more brain power" than arranging the records.[8] Whether as trudging "ox" or laboring "pioneer," the good archivist made possible the creative work of others, but did not confuse the archivist's role with (or "tread on") that of actual "authors."

This emphasis on the simplicity of archiving and the self-effacement of the archivist shares the longstanding assumption in the West that means of communication are neutral representations or mirrors of things as they really are or were. For much of Western history, language, for example, was considered to be "divinely ordained." As a result, there was not only presumed correspondence between words and the things to which they referred, but also, notes Paul Heyer, language was thought to be "a natural phenomenon having an underlying

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[7] Hilary Jenkinson, "The English Archivist: A New Profession" in *Selected Writings of Sir Hilary Jenkinson,* ed. Roger H. Ellis and Peter Walne (Gloucester: Alan Sutton Publishing, 1980), 238, 258.

[8] *Report on Canadian Archives, 1889* (Ottawa, 1890), x, xii.

conceptual congruence with the world." Although Enlightenment thinkers began to replace that idea with the view that language is a human creation, most still held that it was a passive means of communication. They believed that language and other means of communication were essential ingredients in human intellectual and social progress because they enabled the fruit of reason's searchings to accumulate. Still, observes Heyer, "media were seen as augmentative but basically neutral."[9]

It was not until the past century, observes historian Hans Bertens, that "the stranglehold" of this "representational modernity" loosened. Some philosophers and other scholars began to reject the view that communication is a largely inert instrument for the transmission of ideas and observations. They began to explore the idea that what we take for granted as clear reflections of reality is never separable from our means of communicating it—through reading, interpreting, expressing, recording, transmitting, preserving, and recalling. They argued that reality does not simply occur prior to and outside of our making and reading of its signs. Instead, our understanding of reality is powerfully shaped by the particular forms and media of communications in which we are immersed, and by our efforts to transmit ideas and experiences with them. They proposed that reality results from what we might call its *communicatedness*—or from the information that available and accessible means of communication can bear, and by the capacities, circumstances, and perspectives of human communicators. In other words, we know what we know through the lens of communication, with all its strengths, biases, and limitations.[10]

In our attempts to understand our experiences and environment, we must use language and various other means of communication. But our communications, in turn, are representations of those things, not exact and full reproductions of our experiences and environment in and of themselves. Communication is limited in its ability to convey truth by words and images because they are never exactly the same as what they report. Yet, because they are all we end up having from our interactions with what we encounter in life (as 'archives' in one form or another), they profoundly shape what we take to be real.[11]

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[9] Paul Heyer, *Communications and History: Theories of Media, Knowledge, and Civilization* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), 8, 40; Martin Jay, "Should Intellectual History Take a Linguistic Turn? Reflections on the Habermas-Gadamer Debate" in, *Modern European Intellectual History: Reappraisals and New Perspectives,* ed. Dominick LaCapra and Steven Kaplan (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 86, 105.

[10] Hans Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern: A History* (London: Routledge, 1995), 3–11, 242; Heyer, *Communications and History,* 8, 40; Jay, "Should Intellectual History Take a Linguistic Turn?" 86, 102, 105; and Hans Kellner, "Triangular Anxieties: The Present State of European Intellectual History", in *Modern European Intellectual History: Reappraisals and New Perspectives,* ed. LaCapra and Kaplan, 86, 105.

[11] For general treatment of these ideas, see Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism After Structuralism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982) and *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Roger Webster, *Studying Literary Theory: An Introduction,* 2nd ed. (London: Arnold, 1996); and Glenn Ward, *Postmodernism* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1997).

Derrida and 'Archivization'

Jacques Derrida, some of whose ideas on this subject I have just tried to paraphrase, maintains that this entire personal, social, institutional, and technological communications process is, in effect, an archiving process, or what he calls "archivization." Derrida explores this in relation to Freud's life and legacy in *Archive Fever.* He notes the powerful force of archival concerns and actions. This "archive fever" can be seen in: Freud's father's intense desire to pass on his Jewish heritage or 'archive' to his son; in Freud's 'archiving' purpose in psychoanalysis, which can itself be seen as a technique to reach back into long repressed unconscious memories for the ultimate origin in the 'personal archive' of mental illness; in Freud's and his family's and followers' strong will to perpetuate the true archive of his psychoanalytic discoveries; and in the passion of historian Yosef Yerushalmi to enter the conventional Freud archives of documents to understand thoroughly the origins and meaning of Freud's work in relation to Jewish history and indeed to shape its meaning and legacy by pressing beyond its constraints in a fictional interview with the dead master.[12]

Derrida maintains that these activities reveal how thoroughly entwined we are in the need to archive and to use archives. But he says we ultimately do so in order to try to transcend or bypass this technical substitute for reality in pursuit of "absolute presence of absolute life without any prosthetic, any techne, any archive." Yet Freud and the others cannot shake off the archive. The full transmission of and re-entry into past experience—or access to "the truth of the thing itself, pure and simple"—always eludes, as the ever present archiving process intervenes to limit and shape what may be understood. Derrida concludes that "the archivization produces as much as it records the event."[13]

Although in *Archive Fever* Derrida rarely mentions conventional archival institutions administered by professional archivists, his notion of archivization embraces their work. This work warrants much more attention, however, than he provides. How does this key facet of the process of archivization help 'produce the event' or, in other words, how does it influence the making of records which convey what we take to be reality, rather than merely reflect reality? This mediation of reality occurs as archivists interact with the broader process of archivization. Their personal backgrounds and social affiliations, and their professional norms, self-understanding, and public standing, shape and are shaped by their participation in this process. As they selectively interpret their experience of it, archivists help fashion formative contexts for their work, which influence their understanding of recorded communication and position particular archives to do particular things. This contextualizing of records and roles subtly

[12] Derrida, *Archive Fever,* passim.

[13] Unpublished transcript of "Archive Fever: A Seminar by Jacques Derrida, University of Witwatersrand, August 1998," 22. I thank Verne Harris for this document. *Archive Fever,* 16–17.

directs their principal goals and functions. It governs their selection of archival material; determines how they describe or represent it to make it intelligible and accessible; prompts their commitment to its indefinite retention and the special measures they take to preserve it over the long term; and, more openly now in the computer age than before, it drives their growing desire to influence the actual conception, literal or physical inscription, and management of records long before they enter archival custody.

Archivists cannot involve themselves in these ways in the process of archivization and with the records it creates without placing both in an interpretive context, which then affects what is available and accessible as archives. And, so, as they contextualize their records and work, archivists shape what may be known from archival materials. As these contexts themselves change, they change the records by altering how they are viewed, and thus also what "event" may be known with them, to use Derrida's word. Rather than being rendered inert in archives, records continually evolve. If they are to be preserved at all, they must change. Archivists help change or re-create them in order to preserve them.

A Canadian Example

We can begin to see archives in this new light by returning to Douglas Brymner. Although he downplayed his impact on the early development of Canada's national archives, his statements actually reveal his extraordinary influence. In 1888, Brymner positioned the fledgling archives in Canadian society when he articulated his inspiring "noble dream" for it. He said then: "My ambition aims at the establishment of a great storehouse of the history of the colonies in their political, ecclesiastical, industrial, domestic, in a word, in every aspect of their lives as communities. . . . It may be a dream, but it is a noble dream." Brymner wanted this new storehouse to be "the Mecca" for North American (not just Canadian) historical researchers. And when he described the supposedly modest work he had done in arranging the records, the way he described it actually shows that he had a profound impact on them. "Being entirely alone," he explained, "I had full scope to adopt any system I chose, without let, hindrance, or remonstrance. First, then, I adopted, as the foundation, the chronological order, so that the record of events might follow naturally, no matter who was the recorder."[14]

Brymner had virtually unimpeded power over an immense volume of very important early records, imposing on them his concept of natural and true foundations, as well as (when indexing them) what subject matter he thought they conveyed. Brymner and his agents scoured North America and Europe for records for the Canadian archives. He made complex choices, interventions, compromises, negotiations, and judgments, all in quite passionate pursuit of a

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[14] *Report on Canadian Archives, 1889* (Ottawa, 1890), xv, x, xii.

breathtaking "noble dream." The inspirational dreamer, however, portrays himself as a fairly minor figure, who was, at best, among "the men of letters who are not authors," or, like a mere clearer of land rather than productive farmer.[15] This perfectly captures the tension within the central archival professional myth: enormous power and discretion over societal memory, deeply masked behind a public image of denial and self-effacement.

I suggest that any work of archives-making *is* a type of authoring or creating of the archival records. What does it mean to author? Authoring means much more than inscribing with pen, keyboard, or camera. There are many acts of records creation that are not solely literal acts of inscription by an initial inscriber. The idea that archives play an authoring role is based on the view that a record is a meaningful communication, which means it is a physical object, plus an understanding or representation of that object. Some of what makes a record meaningful is inscribed in it by those who literally made it, but most of what makes a record intelligible lies outside its physical borders in its context of interpretation. Archivists, who do much to shape this context, therefore share in authoring the record.

Archives as Symbols Shape Records

The decisions which archivists make shape this meaning-making context significantly. For example, when a record is designated archival, it is assigned a special status. It is circled, framed, or privileged for a particular type of viewing, and often becomes a symbol of community aspirations or cherished values. The way archivists talk about archives, and the physical locations and often imposing architecture of archival buildings, which archivists help situate and design, shape the way these privileged records are represented and perceived. Brymner spoke of a nationalistic "noble dream" of creating an almost sacred site (or "Mecca") for Canada's public memory. This symbolism was not only an effort to direct public attention to these particular records above others, but also to provide Canadians and others with the overriding context for understanding what these archival records *are,* or how to view or read them. This mediates reality not only by affecting what we *can* know about the past, but also by saying that this is what we *need* to know about it.

Similar examples abound. Arthur Doughty, Brymner's successor as head of the Canadian archives from 1902 to 1935 (and who was, if anything, even

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[15] For more on Brymner's work at the Public Archives see Peter Bower, "The Colonial Office Group of the Public Record Office, London, with Particular Reference to Atlantic Canada," *Canadian Archivist* 2, no. 5 (1974); Ian E. Wilson, "A 'Noble Dream': The Origins of the Public Archives of Canada;" and Jay Atherton, "The Origins of the Public Archives Records Centre, 1897–1956," in *Canadian Archival Studies and the Rediscovery of Provenance,* ed. Tom Nesmith (Metuchen, N.J., and London: Society of American Archivists and Association of Canadian Archivists in association with the Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1993), 61–108.

more dynamic in building it than Brymner) spoke of the indispensable contribution of archives to "civilization" itself—as do many Canadian archivists today—when they cite his statement: "Of all national assets, archives are the most precious; they are the gift of one generation to another and the extent of our care of them marks the extent of our civilization." This high symbolic value of archives is also reflected in the location of the American National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) at the center of American civic life in the nation's capital city. NARA also displays the commanding motto "What is Past is Prologue." It currently represents its holdings as records of federal government actions that enable citizens to participate more fully in American civic life. Indeed, NARA wishes to shape American democracy and society. The Archivist of the United States, John W. Carlin, maintains that "If we do our job effectively, we will help rebuild the trust of the American people in democratic institutions." Carlin also attempts to author this view of the records by rejecting a hardy stereotype of the archives. "The National Archives," he writes, "is not a dusty hoard of ancient history. It is a public trust on which democracy depends." Like archives elsewhere, NARA has courted well-known and powerful political figures to obtain broader reach and greater impact for the way it wishes to represent its holdings. Mississippi Senator Trent Lott, after a visit to the archives' "magnificent building" to see the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, echoed Carlin's sentiments about the power of the archives to sustain "our democratic way of life." He went farther, however, in placing the democratizing mission of the archives in a striking nationalistic historical frame when he claimed that with the American Revolution "a new [democratic] way of life was born." Archivists and their allies help make and remake records through these sorts of representations of their meanings.[16]

This very act of placing certain records on the pedestal of national progress, sacred memory, civilization, history, culture, democracy, or societal necessity often raises records which were once thought quite ordinary to this new special status as "archives" or, for some records, even higher yet, as archival "treasures". For example, until fairly recently women's records were not represented as archival records by most archivists. This new recognition changed the context for understanding these records, and thus changed what they *are*. This transformation of current records into archival records and even "treasures"

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[16] For more on Doughty's nationalistic and decidedly *cultural,* rather than legal or administrative vision of archives, see Ian E. Wilson, "Shortt and Doughty: The Cultural Role of the Public Archives of Canada, 1904–1935," *Canadian Archivist* 2, no. 4 (1973): 4–25, and Wilson "'A Noble Dream'". For Carlin's comments see *Ready Access to Essential Evidence: The Strategic Plan of the National Archives and Records Administration, 1997–2007* (National Archives and Records Administration, 1996), 1–2. In light of the themes of this article, it is of interest that "essential" evidence is the government record only, and only the US federal government record. For Senator Trent Lott, see his "Powerful Documents Inspire a Nation," *The Record,* January 1998, 6. For the architectural symbolism of the downtown Washington D.C. National Archives building, see Walch, ed., *Guardian of Heritage.* For further reflections on archival architecture, see Theresa Rowat, "The Record and the Repository as a Cultural Form of Expression," *Archivaria* 36 (Autumn 1993): 198–204.

draws attention at different times to certain records over others. The destruction or exclusion of non-archival records "re-creates" the surviving records by repositioning them in the archives vis-à-vis related records, or by removing aspects of their context of interpretation. The records elevated to the status of archives then become the focus of the meaning-making or interpretive process, which in turn makes and remakes them.[17]

Archival Practice Shapes Records

These records are placed in special proximity to other records already declared archival and, ultimately, to many other records yet to arrive in an archives. Archives often extend the links among such records through inter-archives guides to local, regional, national and even international records, often around certain highly valued individual holdings, famous people, "trendy" subject themes, dynamic user groups' interests, and the more visible, exhibitable media of record. These are always selectively established relationships among records, which did not necessarily exist before archivists created them, and which continually change as these criteria do. In turn, these relationships foster particular interpretive possibilities (or views of what the records are) and diminish others, which do not receive such special treatment within the archives. The prospect of increasingly flexible and wide-ranging computerized versions of these representations and relationships will simply enhance the authoring role of archivists who will have more powerful means of creating these contextual patterns. The effort to determine what the record *is,* therefore, is an ongoing *process*—as this web of relationships and perspectives is redefined over time—and not something established by the initial inscribers of

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[17] The concept of the "pedestal" is borrowed from art historian Marianne Stanishevsky who uses it to discuss how objects we might not normally consider "art" are often considered so when placed on the "pedestal" of the art gallery or museum. See Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, "Ideas", "In the Eye of the Beholder", broadcast 16 June 1997, transcript, 10. Stanishevsky maintains that art galleries and museums shape how works of art acquire value and meaning: "To define a work of art: a work of art gains meaning and value if it circulates within the institutions of art. A work of art has to be made visible in some way. . . . It has to enter the institutions of art. If you make a work of art, you think it's a work of art, no one sees it, you don't tell anyone about it and it just sort of crumbles to dust, in a sense it's not art. It doesn't register in terms of meaning and value, in terms of the culture. So a work of art needs to sort of enter culture to gain its meaning and value, and you see that as a work of art increases in value through the years. . . . And it's the institutions that shape meaning." (pp. 11–12) Archival records can be viewed in a similar way. Shakespeare scholar Gary Taylor also throws light on this point. He notes that knowledge and culture are not simply the totality of what has been thought, written, and spoken, but "only the fraction that is remembered." The process of remembering involves a variety of "editors," as he calls them, who intervene to select what shall be recalled and undertake the many tasks required to communicate recollections across time and space. The various activities involved in this recalling change what is being remembered. Although Taylor does not explicitly mention archives, archivists are obviously among society's "editors" who, though, also virtually "invisible," help determine what shall be remembered and how it shall be transmitted. See Gary Taylor, *Cultural Selection* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 6, 122–25. For an example of the metaphor of archival treasures, see National Archives of Canada, *Treasures of the National Archives of Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992).

the records once for all. Archives, in turn, are less about the static recorded product than they are about a dynamic process of recording.[18]

The archival practice of indefinite retention of these records favored as archives not only recognizes that this meaning-making is a process, but radically extends the meaning-making process to the maximum. Archivists even promote these changes in meaning when they tell new generations of sponsors and users of archives about the evolving relevance of the records to different times and issues. In other words, archivists, to underscore their impact again, have insisted on indefinite retention of archives, often against the views of others, and thus, consciously or not, have ensured that the records will be re-created in many ways across time. This archival time extension can have a tremendous impact on the meaning of the record. Indeed, given that archives impose a vast temporal extension of the meaning-making process, and that archivists intervene constantly to direct an often forgetful, neglectful society's attention to the records, archivists arguably have a greater impact on the evidence the record conveys than the initial or literal inscribers do. In other words, archives may actually make a greater contribution to the creation of the record than the inscriber.

During that time extension, archivists help establish further contexts of meaning for the records. Although archivists cannot read extensively the contents of the usually massive holdings of archives (a fact which, again, inevitably shapes how they represent the records), the archivists' distinctive way of reading is important, and often preliminary to readings by others at the archives. Archivists read the process of archivization for knowledge of the evolving and increasingly layered context of the creation of the records. In effect, archivists help author records by the very act of determining what authoring them means and involves, or what the provenance of the records is.

One of the key professional actions of archivists is establishing the provenance of records. Archivists have typically viewed provenance narrowly, as the single individual or family (for personal archives) or the particular office (for institutional archives) that inscribed, accumulated, and used a body of records. But the origin of records is much more complex, as many archivists have begun to conclude. It includes the societal and intellectual contexts shaping the actions of the people and institutions who made and maintained the records, the functions the records perform, the capacities of information technologies to capture and preserve information at a given time, and the custodial history of the records (which may result in many reorderings, winnowings, and even doctorings of them). A great many people, institutions, and influences (including the archives itself and its sponsors, donors, and users) may be involved in the origination of the records because their actions account for the records' existence, preservation, and characteristics when we encounter them in

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[18] For more on the computerization of archival research tools, see Ronald Weissman, "Archives and the New Information Architecture of the Late 1990s," *American Archivist* 57 (Winter 1994): 20–34.

archives. What an archivist decides to include or emphasize when constructing this provenance will help shape the meaning of the records and thus the reality they create for their readers.

In description and reference work, archivists, in effect, help decide what of this extensive and complex body of information about how the records came to be counts as meaningful context for launching readings of the records by archival researchers, or what contextual information counts as meaningful to an understanding of the evidence. That is a considerable power, and one that can influence readings by others at the archives, now and across time. Yet archivists do not always agree among themselves on what counts as necessary context. They have described records in different ways at different times. The archivists' particular assumptions, personal interests, and available research time for gaining understanding of this process will shape their own creation of contextual meanings. Also, archivists may not be aware of certain relevant contexts in which to describe the records (as insights into these matters change over time). It is doubtful whether there will ever be a professional standard or consensus that could entirely govern a process this complex and knowledge this subjective. And even if there were, it would still shape it one way or another. So, consciously or otherwise, archivists help to fashion various interpretive possibilities, and thus various records.[19]

To the extent that an object (or record) can be known at all, it can only be known over time, as it goes through these processes of contextualization and re-contextualization, and more of its relationships with other records and actions are understood. The Gettysburg Address sheds light on this. Sociologist Charles Lemert points out that the address meant different things to different people when it was given in 1863. No doubt Southerners, especially, had a dim view of it. Some Northerners thought it "a flop." Even Abraham Lincoln was reported to have been disappointed with it initially. It gained greater meaning over time and in light of changing perspectives. Lemert concludes that the meanings of the Gettysburg Address, like those of all recordings, "are *deferred*. We get them after the fact, with some work, if at all." In a nutshell, what Lincoln said has evolved from what for many was at best a few brief and uplifting "dedicatory remarks," as they were then billed (and he was but one of several speakers that day), to a sacred American text—*the* Gettysburg *Address* (not *a* Gettysburg *talk* or *a* Gettysburg *fireside chat.*) Even the names archivists and others choose to give a record privileges its meaning.[20]

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[19] Taylor, *Cultural Selection,* 122–23.

[20] Charles Lemert, *Postmodernism Is Not What You Think* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 46 (emphasis original); Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words that Remade America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 34–40. Interestingly, Wills notes that Lincoln was trying to reinterpret the American Constitution to argue that it was the basis of a nation in which equality of men was recognized. Wills comments that Lincoln "altered the document from within, by appeal from its letter to the spirit. . . ." (p. 38). For the idea that meaning making is a process, see also Steven Connor, *Postmodern Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, second edition, 1997), 142–43 and Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction,* 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 11–12.

Archives shape records by being one of the primary ways societies "defer" such namings, meanings, and meaning-making processes to other times. The deferral opens records to new meanings and new relevance as circumstances evolve. Often archivists explain and thus foster this change. Bill Russell did so in his excellent study of records administration in the Canadian Department of Indian Affairs. At the turn of the twentieth century, the department approached Canada's national archives to house its archival records. The department wanted the records kept as evidence of Aboriginal peoples' progress toward civilization through assimilation under the guiding, protective hand of the "White Man's Burden." Because archives defer meanings of records, we do not now think that these records are primarily evidence of that. (Indeed, many would argue they are mainly evidence of quite the opposite, as they now often serve as evidence in the numerous lawsuits Aboriginal people have brought against the department for violation of treaty and other rights at that time.) We understand, of course, that the department had a different view then, which is certainly part of the evidence the records convey, but the department (or records creator) is not in sole control of what the record means, or, in other words, what the record actually *is*.[21]

Russell obviously did not literally write these departmental records, but he, like other archivists, "wrote" all over and around them in published articles like the one discussed above, and in findings aids, other guides, letters to researchers, and, perhaps most of all, in the spoken guidance offered to colleagues and researchers on the existence, value, links between, and meanings of records. Over time this commentary by archivists adds layers of contextualizing gloss to the records themselves, in what may seem like invisible ink, since the integral and formative relationship of the commentary with the records is usually not seen and, indeed, is typically considered to be quite separate from them. It may well be impossible, however, to separate completely the original records from the gloss. The two may well merge imperceptibly to create new (blended) versions of the record. Since few researchers can simply plunge into the vast amounts of archives and just start reading without this guidance, the archives and the recorded reality researchers actually see (for better or worse) are largely the ones constructed for them by archivists. As philosopher Gary Madison explains, "To read a text is, in effect, to produce another text. Reading is writing. This is what is called *interpretation*. There is never any end to it."[22] Thus archivists, as readers of records, help to "write" or create the records.

Although archivists do not literally inscribe the records, they can influence the record inscription process itself. Consciousness of the archival destination of a record may shape its initial inscription. What is usually seen as the effect of

[21] Bill Russell, "The White Man's Paper Burden: Aspects of Records Keeping in the Department of Indian Affairs, 1860–1914," *Archivaria* 19 (Winter 1984–85): 50–72.

[22] Gary B. Madison, ed., *Working Through Derrida* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 1 (emphasis in original).

record creation—the archives—can in fact be one of its causes. The archives can be a kind of co-author and one of the origins of records—even at the point of inscription. This can be the result of archival laws and policies which make known to records inscribers in a given institution and jurisdiction that certain of their records will be maintained as archives. An example of how awareness of archives affects records inscription is available in Kenneth Woodward's study of how the Roman Catholic Church decides who should be made a saint. Woodward recounts an interview with a physician employed by the church to examine claims of miraculous cures by someone who might thereby merit sainthood. Woodward reports that the physician defended the integrity of his work by saying "we work very exactly because we know that our work will be stored in the archives. And the Vatican Archives don't lose a thing." Woodward adds that the doctors "are acutely aware . . . that they are writing for history as well as for the moment."[23]

A similar example is found in Anne Gere's study of American women's organizations at the turn of the twentieth century. Recordkeeping in these organizations, says Gere, was done "with a conscious awareness of its historical import." These women knew their activities were changing the history of women and the United States. They wanted to "historicize themselves" through recordkeeping to inspire greater commitment to their cause. Gere notes that one organization's secretary said she recorded the minutes because of her "intense regard for the future reputation of the members of this club. . . ." "Who knows," she added, "that this small and seemingly insignificant checkered [minute] book may not be resurrected in some future age, carefully read and examined."[24] Thus many of these women's organizations established their own archives to keep their records. If archivists succeed in their central common project of making archives familiar, integral parts of both their sponsoring institutions and their societies, archives would then be, more obviously than they now are, an originator of the records, because people will inscribe them with the archival prompt (or threat!) more clearly in mind.

Implications for the Computerized Record

While this influence on the initial inscription of records has always been an implicit consequence of the very existence of archives (despite the archival

[23] Kenneth L. Woodward, *Making Saints: How the Catholic Church Determines Who Becomes a Saint and Who Doesn't* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 197. I thank Peter Wosh of the New York University graduate program in archival studies for this reference. For a seemingly mundane aspect of archival influence on the inscription of records, see David Walden, "The Tax Credit System: Blessing or Burden?" *Archivaria* 18 (Summer 1984): 84–90. Walden notes how the inducement of tax credits to donors to Canadian archives of private manuscripts prompts them to create such records. Oral history, when undertaken by archivists for archival purposes, is, of course, a striking example of their involvement in the literal inscription of records.

[24] Anne Ruggles Gere, *Intimate Practices: Literacy and Cultural Work in U.S. Women's Clubs, 1880–1920* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 50.

culture of neutrality and self-effacement), it is becoming a much more explicit
goal in the computer age. This shift represents a significant change in the way
most archivists see archives and in the way others may come to see them as well.
Leading archivists think that the impact of the archivist on the inscription of
records must increase dramatically if archiving is to adapt to the computer age.
Archivists today discuss the challenges of archiving on "the wild frontier" of the
computer age in much the same way Brymner spoke of archiving in the late
nineteenth century, when referring to himself as a land-clearing "pioneer".
Transient, highly mutable, technology-dependent, and difficult to manage,
electronic records are said to need transformation into a "settled landscape" of
orderly records making and keeping and archival control.[25]

A major departure from Brymner's outlook, however, is the increasing
awareness among some archivists of the influence they must exert in order to
help cause the creation of computerized archival records. Unlike archiving
before computing, archiving in a computerized communications environment
must be a highly visible, strongly supported activity, or electronic records sim-
ply cannot be maintained as archives. The constant technical support required
to manage computerized communications means that archives can no longer
expect to salvage old records long after their inscription or avoid intrusion in
the records-creation process by waiting for them to come to the archives long
after the records inscriber has no further need of them. Records inscribers and
the inventors and manufacturers of computer technologies have introduced
computers with very little concern either for short-term or archival record-
keeping. Archivists therefore have been warning that to protect archives in the
computer age a conscious decision has to be made to do so, and made even
before records are inscribed.

This has resulted in ambitious efforts by archivists to try to direct the future
development of computing by defining in exhaustive detail for information tech-
nologists, software engineers, and records inscribers the archivists' view of the nec-
essary features of a record and of sound record-making, recordkeeping, and
archiving strategies.[26] In its emerging response to these concerns and initiatives,
NARA has stated that it aims not only to perform its traditional role of protector
and provider of federal government archival records, but now also to focus more
of this effort on the "essential evidence" that documents "the identities, rights, and

[25] John McDonald, "Managing Records in the Modern Office: Taming the Wild Frontier," *Archivaria* 39
(Spring 1995): 70–71.

[26] For David Bearman's and the University of Pittsburgh's work in this area see, his *Electronic Evidence:
Strategies for Managing Records in Contemporary Organizations* (Pittsburgh: Archives and Museum
Informatics, 1994), 294 and Wendy Duff, "Ensuring the Preservation of Reliable Evidence: A Research
Project Funded by the NHPRC," *Archivaria* 42 (Fall 1996): 28–45. For a similar project at the
University of British Columbia (UBC), see Luciana Duranti and Heather MacNeil, "The Protection of
the Integrity of Electronic Records: An Overview of the UBC—MAS Research Project," *Archivaria* 42
(Fall 1996): 46–67; For an Australian example, see Sue McKemmish, Glenda Acland, Nigel Ward, and
Barbara Reed, "Describing Records in Context in the Continuum: The Australian Recordkeeping
Metadata Scheme," *Archivaria* 48 (Fall 1999): 3–44.

entitlements of citizens; the actions for which federal officials are accountable; and the effects of those actions on the national experience." In selecting archival records, NARA will not only attach "*particular* importance" to records bearing "essential evidence," but also attempt to "ensure that government creates such evidence." To do so, the archives promises "to clarify the kinds of records that the law requires federal agencies to create and maintain" and "to contribute to the design of recordskeeping systems." In Derridean fashion, NARA will try to ensure that certain vital events in American life are "produced" through documentary means.[27] This anticipated degree of conscious involvement in the very conception, purpose, inscription, form, primary ordering, and then selection of records for retention means that NARA, like many other archives, is seeking greater opportunity to shape understanding of the work and impact of its sponsor than ever before.

NARA's sweeping societal aspirations are very far from conventional archival theory's effacement of the archivist's role in records and knowledge creation. The computer age and postmodern insights have stood such traditional assumptions on their head, and made the archival role more visible than ever before. However, some leading advocates of this kind of ambitious archival intervention in records making and managing have seen it as a reassertion of conventional archival roles, rather than a dramatic break from them. The University of British Columbia's electronic records project (1994–97) ultimately sought to change radically societal "record culture" as a means of "guaranteeing" the reliability and authenticity of electronic records. That project's more broadly based (international) successor—the InterPARES project—began with that goal, but appears to have abandoned it, although not the conventional archival theory behind it. A leading member of both research teams, Heather MacNeil, writes, "Assessments of the integrity of a record cannot be made in any absolute sense, but, rather, in relation to the purpose the record serves in the environment in which it has been created, maintained, and used. . . . The assessment of authenticity operates within a framework of probabilities, rather than certainties."[28] Both the UBC and InterPARES projects have attempted to identify the ideal features a document should have in order to maximize confidence in its integrity as evidence of the actions of its initial, literal inscribers. And both projects, like others like them, are hoping these prescriptions will influence societal recordmaking and record-keeping behavior. Yet, the numerically small, little known, and poorly understood archival profession will not likely have much influence on societal behavior with current records.

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[27] *Ready Access to Essential Evidence,* 7 (emphasis in original), 2, 8. The Australian Society of Archivists makes the goal of ensuring that archival records "are made" a key part of its professional mission statement. See *Archives and Manuscripts* 27 (May 1999): 1.

[28] Duranti, "Reliability and Authenticity," 9; Duranti and MacNeil, "The Protection of the Integrity of Electronic Records," 47, 56, 63; Heather MacNeil, "Providing Grounds for Trust: Developing Conceptual Requirements for the Long-Term Preservation of Authentic Electronic Records," *Archivaria* 50 (Fall 2000): 70, 73.

These and other electronic records projects have done much good work on clarifying various features of ideal records creation and management practices, but their limitations prompt another emerging strategy for dealing with the electronic age that some leading archivists also see. Archivists should, of course, apply as much pressure as they can to improve the culture of record-making and recordkeeping, but society will probably move toward better electronic records management in response to other factors, such as operational priorities, cost avoidance, and risk management calculations. This movement is now underway, regardless of archival efforts. The decisions made in a society about its records will also probably fall short of the ideals archivists outline, in part because their implementation will be deemed too costly or unnecessary. The records that archivists will actually inherit and have to work with will, therefore, be much like many of the ones they have had to deal with in the past—limited in volume, reflecting great variety, lacking complete integrity, and carrying many meanings. As archival educator and electronic records specialist Margaret Hedstrom points out:

> There is a great deal that archivists and [software and hardware] designers can do to build electronic archives that are accessible and usable, but archivists must be cautious about placing all the functionality into the archival system itself. Adequate descriptive information and techniques like time/date stamps and encryption, can be employed to prevent alteration of records. But archivists need to launch a parallel effort to teach the users of electronic archives how to be discriminating and skeptical consumers of digital information. Archivists need to educate the next generation of scholars and the general public how to approach digital evidence with a questioning mind about how it was generated, why it was preserved, and how it might be interpreted. Until most members of society feel as comfortable with electronic evidence as they do with traditional forms of documentation, archivists will have a responsibility to help users evaluate, understand, and interpret new documentary forms.[29]

Since few in a society will probably follow all the detailed archival prescriptions for sound records management, no matter how excellent they are, this critical reading or research and interpretive strategy by archivists seems more likely in the long run to be the one relied on most to carry archives into the electronic future, as it has carried past archives to the present day. This critical reading of the history of the record by archivists can now be seen as their principal contribution to the records' creation. Seeing archives, then, means seeing archivists anew—as visible, active, agents in the construction of this history and the societal knowledge it shapes.

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[29] Margaret Hedstrom, "How Do Archivists Make Electronic Archives Usable and Accessible?" *Archives and Manuscripts* 26 (May 1998): 15.