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Archives, their Reception, and the Nature of Archival Reading

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Introduction

This paper offers an introductory discussion on how archives contain and disseminate information, considered within the context of what is hidden and revealed during the process of creating archival collections. Here, the view is put forth that archival collections can be conceptualized as works, and acts of archival access and use, as acts of reading. The archivist, in evaluating and making accessible archival collections, helps to determine what archival information will remain hidden, and what will be revealed, within a body of records, and how the user will read the archival work.

Archives can be described as assemblages. As objects, they are made up of bodies of records, structures for containing records, and structures for representing and facilitating access to records. They are also defined by policies and practices that determine how they are to be processed, appraised, arranged, and described. The creators of records and the archivist both contribute to the artifactual identity of archival collections. Creators generate the archival content, which is later augmented by the archivist's contribution of archival structures and interpretations, if the records are selected for retention within an archival repository. The records creator and the archivist are collaborators in the creation and construction of archival collections.¹

In considering the nature of hiddenness in archives, I offer the perspective that conceptualizing archival use as an act of reading can be helpful in positioning archives as works that are constructed and maintained so that they may be read. This perspective can also aid in better understanding the role of the archivist in constructing archival objects, and in facilitating archival reading and reception. This can allow for a consideration of what can, and what cannot, be read within archival collections.

Archives as Works

The archival collections that reside within an institution are defined by generative and creative acts. Records are generated by creators, and if they are acquired by an archival institution, will be processed, appraised, arranged, and described. During this process the archivist acquires, either through donation or acquisition, content that possesses archival potential, and sculpts it into an archival object if long-term preservation and retention is warranted. Archival objects can be conceptualized as archival works, a particular category of texts. This work is made up of the original records, but in addition, also includes the arrangement and description structures that are created by the archivist during the process of constructing the archival object. An archives, initially defined by the enduring values that merited its being kept and preserved, also becomes defined by these additional archival structures. The mark of the records creator, and of the archivist, are present in equal measure.²

Records with archival potential, once evaluated and processed by the archivist, become part of the archival work. A primary distinction that exists between an archives and the body of records from which it is generated is the nature of what structural characteristics are made visible, and which are left implicit. In the archival work, through the processes of arrangement and description, the

archivist reveals the material and content structures that exist within a body of records. These include the physical and intellectual relationships that cause individuals records to form an organic whole. In addition to this materiality, the records are also defined by their intellectual contents and their contexts. The physical objects contain accounts of events, activities, ideas, actions, and conditions. A critical aspect of the archival function is to reveal these narratives and characteristics to the user.

An archives, like a book, or a painting, is a physical object. And like the book, and the painting, an archives has a maker. An archivist works in records to create the formal archives that come to reside within his or her repository. Through appraisal, arrangement, and description, the archivist decides what qualities, characteristics, and relationships will be made most explicit and most visible.³

Primarily, the intention of the archivist is that the collections under his or her care will be used as evidence. The particular quality of this evidence will vary. Archives can be used for purposes of accountability, historical evidence, cultural value, and community empowerment. However, though the particular nuance of this use may vary, the communicative function in each of these instances of use is not unique. As objects, archives are valuable because they are capable of communicating information that can be used to create knowledge and meaning.⁴

An archival work, like any text, can be the subject of multiple readers and multiple readings, and can be used to generate multiple meanings and interpretations. The archival text is defined by its fluidity. Readers may present an archives with a multitude of questions, theoretical perspectives, and intentions. The dynamics of a collection may change as additional records, and related collections, are discovered or acquired. However, this fluid text does have its boundaries. The archivist works to construct an archival text that possesses hospitable contours, which allows for the containment of, and access to, records.⁵ In reading archival works, in addition to evaluating the evidence contained within the records, the user, whether consciously or unconsciously, engages with an account of archival practice, and interacts with mechanisms that contain and describe archival structures and contents.⁶

Archival Use as an Act of Reading

How is an archival work read? What is read when an archival collection is used? The records creator, and the archivist, both contribute structures and contents that influence the characteristics and form of the materials that make up the archival work. Records creators generate, compile, and destroy records. This influences the documentary characteristics of the material with which the archivist will work. The archivist is a scholar of documentary relationships. In gaining physical and intellectual control over records with archival potential, the archivist by necessity, reads, documents, and interprets relationships. These relationships are complex, and are artifactual, evidential, and documentary in character.⁷

Through understanding and documenting these relationships, the archivist obtains an understanding of the complexity that exists within bodies of records, which allows for usable archives to be constructed. The archivist's interpretation of the records creator's documentary structures, and the practicalities of physical arrangement, augments those already present within the documentation. Archival readers will interpret these structures as they navigate through collections, boxes, files, either analog or digital, and when they decipher the documentary and intellectual relationships that exist between artifacts.

Archival reading includes an engagement with the physical structures that order and contain archival objects and documentary relationships. This type of reading can be described as one that evaluates the archival collection as a physical object. These structures contain and support the content contained by the records. An archival reading includes an assessment of archival content, and archival structure. The two cannot be separated from one another.

In using an archival collection, the reader engages with the records creator and the archivist. The creator generates the content in the form of records, and then the archivist determines to what extent they warrant inclusion within an archival repository. Both parties influence what is included and excluded from an archival collection. Archival reading consists of evaluating what is present, and what is absent, from an archives, both in terms of structure, and in content.

An archival reading begins with engagement with the collection's representation.⁸ The finding aid documents the collection, the actions of the creator in generating the records, and offers an account of the archival work, including the archivist's choices in creating containment and descriptive structures. What the finding does not tell, what it does not reveal about an archives, or about the choices that were made in its arrangement and description, is as important as what is described. In creating usable archives, decisions to exclude, remove, and destroy are necessary ones. This is most explicit in our considerations of appraisal and acquisitions, but it is also a critical aspect in our considerations of what aspects of a body of records to include, and exclude, through description. What does the archivist choose to reveal? What information remains hidden? What factors influence how the archivist addresses these questions?⁹

Archival use as a reading practice is made up of multiple readings of the elements that come to form the archives that resides within repositories. Records, documentary relationships, and archival structures determine how an archives functions as a mechanism for communicating evidence. Archival content cannot be accessed without engaging with the archival structures that contain and describe the sources themselves. The structures of containment and representation, though designed to augment records, are not secondary to them. The archival work is made up of records and documentary and archival structures. These influence what a collection will communicate, and also what it will not communicate.

The Nature of Archival Reception

Archival practice is defined by its concern with the evaluation and consideration of values. Because archivists make decisions about what should remain with an archival collection, what should be described within a finding aid, and how the documentary structures of a collection should be represented, they ensure that there are usable collections. In order for collections to reveal themselves and the information that they contain, they also must withhold information. Not all archival information can be made usefully explicit.

How can archivists determine to what extent their collections effectively communicate what they contain? How can archivists evaluate the degree to which their practices assist in communicating their collections' values? Positioning archives as works, and archival use as an act of reading, might be one possible approach for evaluating how effectively, or ineffectively, a collection fulfills its function. Conceptualizing our collections as works, and our users as readers, also requires that we conceive of our collections as objects that will be received, rather than simply accessed. This places emphasis on the communicative power of archival collections. Asking to what degree a collection is able to communicate its contents, its relationships, and the role of the archivist in its construction, can aid archivists in evaluating what information collections could possibly communicate to archival audiences. The evaluation of communicative value can serve as a

measure for evaluating the integrity and usability of archival collections.

Conceptualizing archival use as reading, and archival access as reception, also positions the archivist as an active agent in mediating the relationships that exists between the archival works and archival readers. The records creator generates archival content, the archivist creates archival structures and interpretations, and from this, the reader creates knowledge and meaning from archival information. The archivist helps to structure what will be read and influences how the user will perform his or her reading practices. Considering the active role of the archivist in constructing these objects places emphasis on considering the nature of what is hidden within collections, and what they should reveal.

¹ For a discussion of the concept of the assemblage as it relates to information objects see Bernd Frohmann, *Deflating Information: From Science to Documentation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004): 264.

² Wendy Duff and Verne Harris, "Stories and Names: Archival Description as Narrating Records and Constructing Meanings," *Archival Science* 2 (2002): 263-285.

³ The author acknowledges Dr. Richard J. Cox for introducing this perspective on archival practices and archival objects.

⁴ James M. O'Toole and Richard J. Cox, *Understanding Archives and Manuscripts* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2006): 40-43.

⁵ Duff and Harris, *Stories and Names*: 279.

⁶ D.F. McKenzie, *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999): 13-14.

⁷ O'Toole and Cox, *Understanding Archives*: 87-107.

⁸ Elizabeth Yakel, "Archival Representation," *Archival Science* 3 (2003): 1-25.

⁹ Heather MacNeil, "Picking Our Text: Archival Description, Authenticity, and the Archivist as Editor," *American Archivist* 68 (Fall/Winter 2005): 278.
