

Critical Work: Conceptualizing Archivists as Maintainers

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Abstract: The labor of continuity - so often the target of “disruptive” innovators - is almost always performed by the invisible and marginalized populations of a society. Maintenance studies, which has its origins in a number of fields including Science and Technology Studies, feminist care ethics, and performance art, seeks to counter the uncritical valorization of innovators by articulating and situating the performance of maintenance work within power dynamics of gender, race and class. I argue that this framework offers archivists an opportunity to reconceptualize their work, both within the profession as well as within society as a whole. Internally, professional discourse and funding is largely directed at technological innovation and “digital” archives, with little attention paid to labor that performs crucial maintenance of records, information, relationships, societal memory and accountability. Externally, archivists are often rendered invisible - and their work obfuscated - by narratives that focus on scholarly “discovery” as well as the verbizing of “archive” in popular culture. Maintenance studies offers archivists a potentially productive way of engaging with both of these conversations by linking them to a broader view of asymmetrical power relationships across professions in society. Theorizing archival work as maintenance allows us to examine the ways in which gender, race and class impact the division of archival labor, and perhaps to recalibrate our profession’s role in society as an alternative to dominant narratives which favor innovation while excluding maintainers.

About the Author:

Hillel Arnold leads the Rockefeller Archive Center’s Digital Team, whose mission is to facilitate broad and equitable access to and responsible preservation of materials in the RAC’s custody by providing technical leadership and expertise to staff in all program areas. This includes the implementation and maintenance of several open-source solutions which improve access to analog and digital archival materials, as well as systems supporting the preservation of these materials. He is also the outgoing co-chair on SAA’s Technical Subcommittee on Describing Archives: A Content Standard, and in the past has been a member of the Annual Meeting Task Force and co-chair of the Encoded Archival Description Roundtable. Previously, Hillel was a Project Archivist at NYU’s Tamiment Library/Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives; Digital Projects Manager for the Foundation for Landscape Studies; and Archives Assistant at the Woody Guthrie Archives. He holds an MA in History from New York University and an MLIS from the Long Island University’s Palmer School.