

Title: (Very, very tentative): Introducing Archives

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[Section One](#)

Introduction: (ca 10 pp) I see a short Introduction that explains the rationale and nature of the book. It would explain that it is a book about archives for a general audience, rather than a book providing archivists with an overview introduction to their professional knowledge and the issues therein. The Introduction would explain that it is also for archivists to be sure, but not in the sense of a primer or textbook on the latest techniques. There are many solid books on those matters. What we don't have and desperately need is a book that archivists can use to introduce their work to others -- the lay reader primarily. There really is no such book and there is a great need for one. The Introduction might note, for example, that almost every field of knowledge has such a book. The Oxford University Press has an interesting example -- its *Very Short Introductions* series. As of September 2014, it had 401 titles, ranging from Archaeology to Psychology, but none on archives, and none planned on archives among the 37 additional books to be published by May 2016. This might be excused for non-archivists, but oddly, even within the literature of our field, we do not.

The Oxford Press also expresses well the aims for its series that could also animate this proposed book. The press says its series "can change the way you think about the things that interest you, and are the perfect introduction to subjects you previously knew nothing about. Because of this, they have proven to be extremely popular with general readers, as well as students and their lecturers. *Very Short Introductions* are the perfect way to get ahead in a new subject quickly. Our expert authors combine facts, analysis, new ideas, and enthusiasm to make often challenging topics highly readable." I am aiming for a book along those lines of about 200 pages.

The absence of a book on archives in the Oxford series is a serious oversight given the now extraordinary breadth of the direct and indirect uses of archives. A great many of the fields the Oxford series discusses are using archives. Thus more and more readers from a very wide range of backgrounds would be interested in such a short introduction to our field. It would be a book archivists could draw from in conversations with the lay reader in order to introduce the history, animating ideas, knowledge, functions, aims, impact, key issues, and challenges (digital, especially, but not exclusively that) of their work and to point them to for further information. This would obviously be useful for students of all kinds as well, including, and especially, of course, student-archivists in Archival Studies programs. The book would also lead readers into the more specialized and technical literature in footnotes and bibliography should they wish to follow up on anything in that line, but it would not provide a systematic review of the latest literature, methods, or techniques. It would not be driven by a need to introduce the topics or

themes of the rest of the series, and although it would be in an American publication series, it would not be addressed primarily at an American audience, as it would draw significantly on international examples. Although the book would draw heavily on scholarly works, I intend it to be written in an accessible style, much like the style of the Oxford University Press's series *Very Short Introductions*.

The Introduction would also set up the basic thrust of the book: that archives are mysterious places for many people, off the beaten track, remote, invisible, often and easily misunderstood and caricatured. Yet they are increasingly important and key to society's central concerns for a host of reasons, and yet because of the lack of understanding of them, they are endangered just when strengthening them is needed most. The book aims to introduce readers to various new ways of thinking about archives that I hope will help make the case for them anew.

[First Chapter](#)

[First section of Chapter 1](#)

Chapter 1 (25 pp). This chapter would open the book with an overview of the contemporary lay of the land of archives -- in two parts. The first would begin to lift the lid on the often 'invisible' world of archives -- to show the variety and complexity of the landscape. That variety is seen in types of human archiving actions -- from personal to institutional; types of formal archival institutions, their sizes, ages, mandates/powers, position in relationships with museums, libraries, RM, sponsors; the types of records within them; their physical extents; services, basic functions, and the great challenges facing these archives, particularly but not only from the transition to digital communication. This part would be about situating today's archives for the reader.

[Second section of Chapter 1](#)

The second part would introduce the conventional ideas that shape the work of archives (especially provenance) and the public perceptions of archives (particularly in typical metaphors or caricatures -- as "guardian", "keeper", "bedrock", "resources", "mined", "unearthed", "buried", "dusty", "dead" records, "lost in archives", "discovered" there, "rescued from archives", "handmaiden of historians", "home" for records, "mirror of the past" etc, etc, which across time have also been expressed as von Ranke's "virgin", Jenkinson's "ox" and Schellenberg's "hewer of wood and drawer of water". These metaphors never really adequately described archiving, but were part of a kind of official ideology -- of the self-effacing, neutral, apolitical protector of the truth, who simply acquires what is *found* to archive, transcribes, copies, describes, retrieves, and keeps it in an undisturbed or static state. They suited an era of analogue records that eventually left archives to be an afterthought, left to archivists to attend to pretty much on their own, when their creators no longer really wanted the records, and the tiny band of archivists could find the time to get around to archiving them -- perhaps many years after the creation of the records.

The second section would briefly discuss how inadequately these conventional ideas portray archives and thus how unhelpful they are for addressing the challenges of making the transition to the digital age. It could conclude that the digital requires a different view -- based on acknowledgement of the premise that archives must be *made*, not just *found* -- and then to be kept 'alive' must be made anew time and time again by re-articulating and re-creating their value to new generations across time. The rest of the book is about the emergence and characteristics of the new thinking about archives that has come to the fore across the late twentieth century and its value for understanding archives and addressing archival challenges of various kinds, both for analogue and digital records.

[Second Chapter](#)

Chapter 2 (25 pp). This chapter would explore the emergence since the late twentieth century of the new thinking about archives that is challenging conventional ideas about them. It would offer a broad overview of these ideas. I see it emerging in the growing awareness across late twentieth century that means of communication shape what we can know and thus society. This has resulted in part from the electronic (television, radio) and digital communication revolution. It has arisen from the ideas of communication historian Harold Innis and communication theorist Marshall McLuhan (in the 1950s and 1960s), and thereafter among critical theorists, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, postmodernists, and growing interactions with Indigenous peoples across the world, which are also prompting new ways of thinking about what a record is and how to understand its meaning. This new awareness was also emerging among archivists too, sometimes influenced by the more prominent thinkers (for example, Hugh Taylor's debt to McLuhan) but also even before some of the well-known theorists of this new thinking about communication make the case more prominently. These ideas move away from the longstanding view that communication is largely unproblematic, a transparent means of conveying information, or where it is clearly not so, that it can be made so one way or another and often without too much difficulty. The archives and conventional ideas about archiving discussed in chapter 1 have emerged on the basis of that assumption about communication.

[Third Chapter](#)

Chapter 3 (25 pp). This chapter would examine in more detail from an archival perspective how the new thinking discussed in chapter 2 affects the first great object of an archivist's attention -- records, and how we (that is anyone, archivist or not) understand them to pursue archival purposes. It would do so by exploring the varieties of new scholarship on records and how we think about them as a result. This new broadly based scholarship has flowed across the late twentieth century out of the ideas outline in chapter 2. There have been studies of a wide variety of means of communication, including by archivists. The thrust of this interdisciplinary work has been to stress the importance of expanding our understanding of the context of the creation of records or

the history of the records, as the primary response to the challenges created their problematic nature. The lay reader may be particularly interested in knowing that this contextual knowledge (rather than content information in the record) is the basis of archival work -- and that it is the best basis of pursuit of content information. This contextual approach does not solve all the problems of archives by any means, but it goes farther in that direction than reluctance to do so. Reluctance is no escape. It, too, is a contextualization that must be contended for in the current intellectual climate, rather than assumed to be tenable.

The chapter would outline the various broad dimensions of the history of records brought forward now in these various literatures -- archival and non-archival. They range from increasingly complex societal and institutional provenances (including pan-societal/global, pan-institutional and individual) to the characteristics of recordkeeping, the materiality of records, and their various individual forms, genres, and conventions of representation, and their societal power and impact. The digital record simply adds to this complexity with even more complex and varied histories, forms, technological bases or materiality, which reinforce the idea that these histories must be understood as fully as possible for archival work to be done well, and thus for users of archives and society generally to be served well by archives, whether with digital or with analogue records.

[Fourth Chapter](#)

Chapter 4 (25 pp): This chapter would focus the new thinking about communication on a key phase in the history of records -- the history of archives. It would also show how the new thinking about communication has spawned a new broadly based scholarly interest in the history of archives. In effect, we are seeing the emergence of a new archival history itself, or one that moves beyond the conventional view of archives as "guardian" of records or "mirror" of the past to one that sees archiving actions as means of communication, a force shaping records and their uses and thus knowledge and society. They show that archives are bound up in the social and political contexts of their time, and that indeed, the new history of archives is not simply about the history of archival institutions as such, but of broader and varied societal-archival processes within which those institutions are established and function.

The new archival history is being written by various scholars, including archivists (the ICHORA movement, University of Michigan's Sawyer seminar, recent special issues on archival history in *Archival Science*, and the work of Patricia Galloway on the history of the Mississippi State Archives, are examples of the interdisciplinary character of this work). Their work shows that because archives can now be more clearly seen as important forces shaping records, knowledge, and society, we can see why they are more openingly the focus of political and other contestation over their powers and the resources to undertake their work, and why this will likely result in an even greater struggle over control of archives in the digital age. The general reader and archivist

reader alike can benefit from this new understanding of archives and its implications, which will be the focus of the remaining chapters.

[Fifth Chapter](#)

Chapter 5 (25 pp). The message of chapter 4 will be driven home by chapter 5, which itself will also throw light on another key aspect of the new thinking about archives. The increasing centrality of archives to the formation of knowledge concerning society's principal contemporary concerns is amply displayed in the extraordinary expansion in the uses of archives across the late twentieth century. Few in society seem to be aware of these increasing uses of archives and thus this aspect of new ways of thinking about the role of archives. Records and archives are shaping knowledge and society profoundly (from their role in a wider variety of academic work than ever before to climatological, medical, and other scientific research, and to environmental protection, filmmaking (whether dramatizations or documentaries), television and radio broadcasts, literary and artistic work, economic activities such as tourism, urban renewal, book publishing, and advertizing, the news media, a host of human rights and social justice concerns, the genealogy boom, and so on.

The chapter will outline such uses and argue that as a result the archival stakes for society are higher now than ever before. Archives are central, not remote, powerful, not neutral, engaged in knowledge creation, not simply document preservation, and the digital record will create even more opportunities for the usefulness of archives, if the promise of greater accessibility that the digital holds out is fulfilled -- whether for the born-digital or digitized record. And whether it holds out will depend heavily, I think, on whether society is well informed about these proliferating uses of archives, which depends on how well archivists can inform them and marshal the now much wider range of users of archives as allies in making the case for archives of all types to be better supported or established where needed. How well archivists do so is thus crucial to address the born-digital challenge. One might well argue that making this case successfully is *the* archival challenge our profession now faces. Why? If we do not succeed in making the case for born-digital archives, I believe that we will not only continue to see large gaps in our holdings, but others will eventually come along (probably sooner than later) with solutions to the problem that are presented as far cheaper, simpler, and even profitable for records creators.

[Sixth Chapter](#)

These new uses of archives not only illustrate a key feature of the new thinking about archives (that their role is far, far more valuable than ever before thought or experienced) but they also increase the urgency of the need for the new thinking and examining its implications for archival work and the identity of the archivist, which are the subjects of chapter 6. If records have such complex histories and varied uses (seemingly limited only by imaginative thought), and records

and archives thereby now have an impact on knowledge and society greater than ever before, how should the various aspects of archival work (or the functions of the archivist) be understood? What knowledge is needed by the archivist to do it? What is the distinctive professional identity and work of the archivist? This chapter is about how the new thinking shapes answers to these questions.

I will try to recast our understanding of the functions archivists perform -- from appraisal through preservation -- as features of the overall history of the records. The thrust of these reformulations will be to suggest that in all the major steps archivists take they are participating in the ongoing re-creation of the records. They are *making* records and archives more than simply keeping them and that if they are to be kept at all, they must be continually *remade*. Every action an archivist performs -- from establishing an institutional mandate through to digitizing a body of analogue records shapes the context in which the records can be understood and thus the knowledge that may be obtained from them. These actions or processes remake records over time primarily by recontextualizing them, in ways that give them new meanings, thus potential uses. It seems to me that to survive and then hope to flourish in the current intellectual and political climate, archives will need to seek out ever more new uses of records through imaginative (and collaborative with potential users) re-creation of the records as useful for this or that key human need.

This is in fact what many such new researchers are looking for, as they are not familiar with the characteristics and histories of archival records, or how they are organized and maintained and why. In oceanography, for example, which has made increasing use of older archives in the last two decades, researchers were confronted by unfamiliar and partial sources of information that required careful assessment. “This entails,” they said, “undertaking a provenance of the primary source material designed to establish why it was generated, by whom, by what methods, and how and why it was preserved.”¹ Here these oceanographers are appealing for as full a history of the records as they can get -- from its initial inscription through archiving actions. Here they are on the archivist's now expanding contextual ground. This does not dismiss the original purpose of the record, as that remains very valuable, but that is often seen as simply one purpose when there are many motivations behind its creation, which if understood would increase its usefulness, and it is often seen as the overriding purpose, which can limit its value for other purposes. A more thoroughgoing understanding of the evolution of the records through the many hands that have controlled or used them -- from initial inscribers and custodians on to archivists and researchers in archives would enhance its status as evidence of various acts and its chance of being located for and applied to an ever widening array of new uses. Archivists would then build their identity around and be seen more clearly by others as key knowledge creators, rather than simply keepers and retrievers of records. And they would be making, remaking, and changing the records as

¹ David J. Starkey, Poul Holm, Michaela Barnard, eds., *Oceans Past: Management Insights from the History of Marine Animal Populations* (London, UK: Earthscan, 2008), p. 2

contextualist historians of them in order to preserve them -- for without that constant expanding repurposing society may well not see the point of making the considerable investments needed to sustain digital archives, and let those for aging analogue archives wither.

[Seventh Chapter](#)

Chapter 7 (25 pp). This chapter would explore how this new thinking could be brought to bear on related key issues facing archives that have not yet been discussed in the book. The thrust of the book is that records and archives are deeply embedded in their societies. They arise from and (increasingly) affect them. If archives are not inherently peripheral to societal life, and simply cannot be considered so any longer if they are to meet the various challenges they face, such as the born-digital one, what are the implications of that for their interactions with society? If archives affect knowledge and society, should archivists focus on developing a societal vision of some kind to pursue or resist? If so, what one(s)? If archives are inherently political, meaning that their goals cannot be reached without some political/legal action, should archivists enter that realm to achieve their social goals, and if so how? Are there appropriate political alliances, partnerships with users, and legal actions? What shape should public advocacy take? What priorities should it have: providing general information about archives? targeting new user groups? seeking to expand the number of archives where archival coverage is poor (business, some government levels)? What skills might it require, such as greater media skills? If archiving is seen as more of a societal-archival process, what new formal kinds of 'participatory archiving' activities should be undertaken? If archivists are knowledge creators, how do they interact with related knowledge professions that also hold key aspects of the overall human 'archive', particularly libraries, museums, and historic sites? And what are the implications for ethics, whether in more fulsome accountability for our work, or our societal and even political stances, if archivists do have an impact on knowledge and society? And what are the implications of all of this for archival education?

[Conclusion](#)

Conclusion (5 to 10 pp) Summing up.

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(to follow)