

Artifactual Pluralism: The Relationship between Narrative and Artifactual Criticism

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Considerations of archival pluralism require acts of narrative and artifactual criticism. Archival goals of extending narrative boundaries often include an artifactual assessment. In this analysis archivists confront two essential questions. First, is the expression captured by record forms assigned archival validity/significance? And second, will preserving the new/expanded narrative require a reconceptualization of artifactual validity/significance? In cases of narrative expansion, where record expressions align with existing material norms, the archival intervention is more social than artifactual. However, in cases where the record expression of the reconceptualized narratives exists outside of artifactual norms, the archivist will be required to engage in acts of artifactual criticism to arrive at a workable strategy. Narrative pluralism is linked with artifactual pluralism.

This discourse can be traced to the founding era of the American archival profession. Early discussions of corporate memory preservation included argumentation regarding the validity of oral history as a documentary expression (Edmunds, 1952). Discussions of the validity of visual narratives included argumentation regarding the archival significance of photographs and moving images (Arbaugh, 1939; Brooks, 1940). Contemporary examples of this expression of archival thinking include Professor Bastian's argument that preserving community memory requires recognizing community standards of recordness (Bastian, 2009), and in Professor Sutherland's examination of, and argument for, gesture as a decolonial record (Sutherland, 2019).

In this paper I offer a discussion of the relationship between narrative and artifactual pluralism, provide a historical contextualization, and an examination of contemporary conceptualizations.

About the author:

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