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Published in:
Archives and Records: The Journal of the Archives and Records Association (Archives and Records)

DOI:
10.1080/23257962.2019.1567317

Publication date:
2019

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

Link to publication in Discovery Research Portal

Citation for published version (APA):
Emerging Trends in Archival Science

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<td>CJSA-2019-0010</td>
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URL: http://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/cjsa

It is no longer enough for the Archive to see its purpose as rooted in Sir Hilary Jenkinson’s moral and physical preservation of the record and the archival fiduciary function. This has been the central shift in archival discourse since roughly 1975 and is at the core of the emergence of today’s discipline of Archival Science. The irony is that whilst there has been a recognition that the Archive itself is a site of contention, with contentious and disrupting processes affecting how people create, manage and interact with records, it cannot be said that there is anything contentious about the field of archival literature at present. Outside of the usage of more and more extreme language – for example, Michelle Caswell’s call to dismantle ‘white supremacy’ ‘in archival studies and archives more broadly’1 – archival scholarship has settled into a form of cosy group-think most evidently displayed via its liking for terms such as ‘social justice’ and the ‘activist archivist’, and its general disdain for early 20th Century practitioners such as Jenkinson. The result is a consensus that the archivist must seek to right societal wrongs in which the Archive is held to be complicit. In other words, to be seen to be on the side of the angels – and there can be no arguing about what side the angels are on.

This new publication slots into this discourse. According to quotations from Caswell and Elizabeth Shepherd, it is a book that ‘pushes us to rethink archival roles and responsibilities’ and demonstrates ‘the value of archival thinking when applied to social justice issues’. This is a discourse that Anne Gilliland is certainly at the forefront of. Along with Caswell, she is probably the most prominent of the authors to operate in our subject area at present. In ‘Evidence and Exigency: Reconstructing and Reconciling Records for Life after Conflict’, Gilliland focuses upon displaced persons and the life-changing or life-threatening difficulties they can face in establishing their identities via documentation after fleeing conflict. For example, Gilliland powerfully illustrates how a ‘document or data point within a document’ being ‘incorrect, unreliable, inauthentic, or inconsistent with the same data point in another record may immediately result in the person presenting it being treated as a fraud or a security risk, often without recourse to an appeal.’ It is unsurprising, given her publishing experience, that Gilliland’s paper is the high-point of this collection. She provides us with an illustration of how high-level thinking and analysis can reinforce the work that archivists do and provides evidence of the value of efficient recordkeeping systems. As Gilliland states:

Records and recordkeeping processes – both those that are official and unofficial and those that are regular or irregular in their creation, form, and use – are integral to many of the complex challenges faced by refugees, asylum seekers, internally displaced persons, stateless persons, and returnees.

As a result, there is a need for:

trained records experts such as archivists to advocate for the degree of trustworthiness of the evidence produced and to help to identify, preserve, and introduce other possible sources of corroborating evidence or mitigating
circumstances during asylum process as well as in later interactions with bureaucracies in countries of resettlement or return.

Where there is a weak spot, it is found in the unnecessary section on post-truth which does not contribute to the narrative and makes some contestable claims. For example, Gilliland claims post-truth is an ‘astonishing perversion of…postmodern discourse’. This lets postmodernism off the hook and I would forward the work of journalist Matthew d’Ancona for a general counter-argument.

In Chapter 2, Aida Skoro Babic presents the reader with a case study concerning access to the archival records of the Military Courts of the Former Yugoslavia and the role of the archive in enabling the broader public and punished families to discover the ‘truth’ and what really happened in the time of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY). It does so by examining rights and the claims people make on records; discussing difficulties around provenance to provide for different access needs and conditions and outlining the complexities of archiving across nations and differing legislative environments.

Again, we see the power of the record as evidence in order to enable rights and identities to be reasserted in the aftermath of a conflict. It is a fascinating read on recordkeeping in this region and some of the challenges that emerge when faced with political, legal, and organisational change. Overall, it is probably best viewed as an illustration of these difficulties rather than as a setting-out of emerging professional trends. Babic is perhaps rather utopian to call for cross-country harmonisation of archival legislation and there is little new in advocating for archivists to understand societal evolution, to research into the historical background of the records so as to fully assist researchers in their work, and to have an awareness of user requirements and needs. Many archivists will consider that this is what they currently do, albeit under less pressing and pressurising contexts.

The Chapter from Mario H. Ramirez ‘On “Monstrous” Subjects and Human Rights Documentation’ is a very interesting read although the narrative framing is at times, at least for this reader, uncomfortable and unnecessary. The reader can appreciate the central question raised in this article – that of whether or not human rights violations ought to be documented as a ‘means of creating agentive channels of accountability for victims and contesting impunity’ – without the extent of socio-political point-making on display here. Media outlets and NGOs (for it is these that Ramirez is really focusing on rather than archivists as traditionally understood) that seek to ensure that all sectors of society are documented, despite the inherent dangers that clearly accompany such action, deserve tremendous praise and for their work to be celebrated and publicised via chapters such as this.

The chapter from Jennifer Jenkins on ‘Archiving the Ephemeral Experience’ examines how to archive community events and lived histories but seeks to do so by moving beyond the types of records we may normally expect to find, even in a Community Archive, to capture ‘sense impression’ which ‘offers a pathway to accessing the past in non-traditional ways.’ Jenkins utilises various olfactory examples to advocate for the training of ‘archivists to be mindful of all sensory dimensions of cultural records...’ There is much that is admirable about the originality of Jenkins’ work and it can be
accepted that it may find its way into some niche recordkeeping practices and archival educational programmes.

We archivists have been good at facing inward, beating ourselves up for what we are not doing, yet struggling to outwardly advocate for what we are doing and the importance of it. In a time of increasing financial restriction and the Google-isation of the information landscape, this is not good enough. In the fifth chapter, Sarah Buchanan argues for archival advocacy to have an advanced role on graduate curricula. She does so via an empirical survey study of working archivists to identify what they do on a regular basis that could be characterised as advocacy. This seems like an eminently practical step that all educational programmes should consider so as to effect ‘positive change for both archival institutions and the archival profession.’ Chapters 4 and 5 made me consider, as an archival educator, how much a professional educational programme can do and what employers are looking for. Whilst many educational programmes will already believe that they are, whether overly or otherwise, equipping graduates with the necessary skills and the ability and confidence to advocate on behalf of the profession, it is clearly true that educators should always be looking to develop and enhance their curricula.

Finally, Erik A.M. Borglund and Lena-Maria Oberg examine appraisal and whether we can foresee the use of records in the near and distant future. Using ‘the foresight technology of scenario planning and the development of personas’, the authors present a model that they hope will reduce uncertainty around who will use the archive in the future and for what purpose. They admit that their work is not particularly viable at the present time but it is clear that some form of what they are discussing here is coming, albeit there may be concern at use being the predominant, or perhaps only, value for retention – models like this will be embraced by funders to advocate for the removal and destruction of records which are utilised less or not a lot. This chapter adds to the current conversations around AI and algorithms and increases archivists’ awareness of the technological landscape.

Overall, this book was read happily, was stimulating and displays the outward-facing, inter-disciplinary nature of Archival Science today. That this book exists and that it illustrates the ability and desire of practitioners and theorists to engage with the Archive and to consider it in relation to some of the big questions of our time is to be welcomed. Ultimately, however, the reader may be unconvinced that the book succeeds in documenting ‘emerging trends in archival science’. It is never clear quite what these trends are supposed to be, except perhaps for the social justice and activist narrative that characterises chapters 1-3 and which can hardly be termed emergent. It is, therefore, perhaps a stretch to suggest that many of the issues discussed within this book constitute a general direction of travel. Despite this, what this book does do is display interesting intellectual thinking and the power that can be found within the record, via effective recordkeeping systems, and the facilitation of user access. It helps reminds us what a powerful and important role we play for society and the lives of others. As such, it is a worthy addition to an expanding canon of archival theory and literature.

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1 M. Caswell, ‘Teaching to Dismantle White Supremacy in Archives’ The Library Quarterly 87:3 (July 2017) pp. 222-235

2 M. d’Ancona, Post-Truth: The new war on Truth and how to fight back (Ebury Press, 2017)