



Archival contexts

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ABSTRACT

Discussing archives as a cultural phenomenon entails viewing archives as epistemological sites rather than as sources. In the past two decades, this “archival turn” has been made in many disciplines. Anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, philosophers, cultural and literary theorists, as well as artists, have developed various “archivologies”. Historians, however, by and large upheld the primacy of documents as historical sources, maintaining the tenet “No documents, no history” coined 125 years ago, in 1897, by the French: archivist Langlois and historian Seignobos, and translated into Polish in 1912. However, understanding archives as a cultural, social and political phenomenon also entails shifting attention from the actual archival document to its contextual history, a history encompassing the why, who, what, and how of archiving, all determined by societal challenges and technologies.

KEYWORDS

archival science,
agency, archivists,
mediation, context,
digital processes

Konteksty archiwalne

STRESZCZENIE

Rozpatrywanie archiwum jako zjawiska kulturowego pociąga za sobą postrzeganie archiwów jako miejsc o wymiarze epistemologicznym, a nie jedynie jako źródeł. W ciągu ostatnich dwóch dekad ten „archiwalny zwrot” dokonał się w wielu dyscyplinach. Antropolodzy, socjolodzy, psychologdy, filozofowie, teoretycy kultury i literatury, a także artyści opracowali różne „archiwologie”. Historycy jednak w większości popierali prymat dokumentów jako źródeł historycznych, podtrzymując zasadę, iż bez dokumentów nie ma historii, sformułowaną 125 lat temu, w 1897 r., przez francuskiego archiwistę Ch. V. Langloisa i historyka Ch. Seignobosa, a przetłumaczoną na język polski w 1912 r. Jednak rozumienie archiwów jako zjawiska kulturowego, społecznego i politycznego pociąga za sobą również przeniesienie uwagi z samego dokumentu archiwalnego na jego historię kontekstową, historię opisującą dlaczego, kto, co i jak archiwizuje, a wszystko to w kontekście zmieniających się uwarunkowań społecznych i technologicznych.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE

archiwistyka,
władze archiwalne,
archiwiści, mediacje,
kontekst, cyfryzacja

Thousand years Poland and The Netherlands (Polska i Niderlandy. 1000 lat kontaktów) is the title of the book by Lucia Thijssen, published in 1992/2003¹. The book deals with Polish-Dutch encounters in a variety of social, cultural, political, economic, maritime, military, scientific, and religious contexts, and more². These stories couldn't have been written without access to archives.

The relationship between historical research and archives is the main subject of the first part of my presentation. Subsequently, I will discuss the agency of “archivers” who (co-) determine the meaning of archives. I will argue that understanding the archives as a cultural, social and political phenomenon entails shifting the attention from the actual archival document to its contextual history; that history follows the logic of archives as transactional and process-bound information. Understanding archives includes understanding the archival contexts: the why, who, what, and how of archiving, all determined by societal challenges and technologies. An archive is created and constructed by “archivers”. I will discuss how such mediation affects the archive and its users. I will also say a few words about Archives (with a capital A) as a cultural phenomenon, focusing on the relationship between community archives and mainstream archival institutions.

Images

One hundred and twenty five years ago, in 1897, two manuals were written, which later would conquer the world: the *Introduction to the study of history* by two Frenchmen, archivist Charles-Vincent Langlois and historian Charles Seignobos, and the *Manual for the arrangement and description of archives* by Dutch archivists Samuel Muller, Johan Feith and Robert Fruin³. Both manuals were published in

¹ L. Thijssen, *Duizend jaar Polen en Nederland*, Zutphen 1992, transl. *Polska i Niderlandy. 1000 lat kontaktów*, Zutphen 2003.

² I dealt with prince Janusz Radziwiłł (1612–1655) and his stay in The Netherlands in my *Documents as monuments*, “Archeion” 2011, vol. 112, pp. 51–63; Polish translation: *Dokumenty jako pomniki*, ibidem, pp. 37–47. Reprinted [in:] *Culture – Memory – Identities. Memory of the World Program and diversified perception of the past. Papers of the 4th International Conference of the UNESCO Memory of the World Programme, Warsaw, Poland 18–21 May 2011*, ed. W. Falkowski, Warszawa 2013, pp. 48–60.

³ S. Muller, J.A. Feith and R. Fruin, *Manual for the arrangement and description of archives. Translation of the second edition by Arthur H. Leavitt, with a new introduction by Peter Horsman, Eric Ketelaar and Theo Thomassen*, Chicago 2003.

1898 and became seminal texts for historians and archivists all over the world⁴. In 1912 Stanisław Zakrzewski (1873–1936) took the initiative and commissioned Wanda Liljen-Górkowa to create a Polish translation of the *Introduction to the study of history*. Kazimierz Konarski knew the Dutch Manual (in the French edition of 1910), and he referred to it in his seminal text of 1927 *On the issues of modern Polish archival science*⁵ as well as in his *Modern Polish archival science* (1929)⁶. Very recently (in 2021), the Dutch Manual has been analyzed thoroughly by Łukasz Nowak in “Archiwa–Kancelarie–Zbiory” (AKZ)⁷.

“No documents, no history” was the adage of the *Introduction* by Langlois and Seignobos, in their “Bible” of positivist historiography, the French answer to the strictly scientific approach of 19th-century German historiography. “Nie ma dokumentów, nie ma historii”⁸. This motto confirmed the important role of documents, and thus of archives, in historical research. Langlois and Seignobos analyzed the reasonings which lead from the inspection of documents to the knowledge of facts. They warned that physical facts and human actions cannot be “observed directly, they are all *imagined*. Historians – nearly all of them unconsciously and under the impression that they are observing realities – are occupied solely with images”⁹. Every archivist and every archive user should take this warning to heart.

What is the archive an image of? Both the Dutch Manual and Kazimierz Konarski advocated the principles of provenance and respect for the original order of an archive. Konarski wrote: “The most important property of the fond is its direct relation to the office from which it derives”¹⁰. In the same issue of AKZ

⁴ *The Introduction* was published in 1898 both in French and in English, and more translations would follow: Russian (1899), Japanese (1901), Greek (1903), Spanish (1913), Chinese (1933), Arabic (1977). The Manual appeared in 1898 in Dutch, in 1905 in German, followed by Italian (1908), French (1910), Bulgarian (1912), English (1940), Chinese (1959), Portuguese (1960) and Estonian (1998–2001).

⁵ CH.V. Langlois, CH. Seignobos, *Introduction to the study of history*, New York, London 1989.

⁶ K. Konarski, *Program prac wewnętrznych w archiwach nowożytnych*, “Archeion” 1927, vol. 1, pp. 106–124; idem, *On the issues of modern Polish archival science*, transl. and ed. B. Nowożycki, “American Archivist” 2017, vol. 80, pp. 213–229; idem, *Nowożytna archiwistyka polska i jej zadania*, Warszawa 1929.

⁷ Ł.P. Nowak, *Holenderski Podręcznik do porządkowania i opisu archiwów autorstwa S. Mullera, J. Feitha i R. Fruina z 1898 r. i jego późniejsze wydania*, “Archiwa – Kancelarie – Zbiory” 2021, vol. 12(14), pp. 89–109.

⁸ The original Polish translation said: “Niema źródeł, niema historyi”.

⁹ CH.V. Langlois and CH. Seignobos, *The Introduction...*, London–New York 1912, p. 219.

¹⁰ Konarski, *On the issues...*, p. 218.

that carried the article on the Dutch Manual, Hadrian Ciechanowski discussed development of the principle of provenance as a component of society's gradual rationalization in the 19th century¹¹. The Manual stressed that an archive will inevitably be an image (a reflection) of the administrative structure of the body that created it. The Dutch trio therefore instructed that the system of arrangement of an archive must be based on the original organization "which in the main corresponds to the organization of the administrative body that produced it"¹². The archive as it has been handed down is not an image of a historical reality, but rather of the historical reality as perceived or constructed by the archive creator. For example, judicial archives present the world as seen by each of the parties in a lawsuit, financial records serve to make reality calculable, and government records on people serve to make people recognizable as citizen and taxpayer. As the Spanish cultural entrepreneur Jorge Blasco Gallardo warns, archiving systems "have been modelling ways of representing reality, looking at reality and, very often, have built and designed reality itself"¹³.

The historian has to depart from the reality as perceived or constructed by the archive creator, and use his or her imagination to (re)construct the actual historical reality. This entails shifting emphasis "from the analysis of the properties and characteristics of individual documents to an analysis of the functions, processes, and transactions which cause documents to be created"¹⁴.

Agency of actors

Archiving is a cultural, social and political practice, influenced by societal challenges and by technologies; not directly, but through the agency of actors who act in a certain function, executing specific work processes in line with their

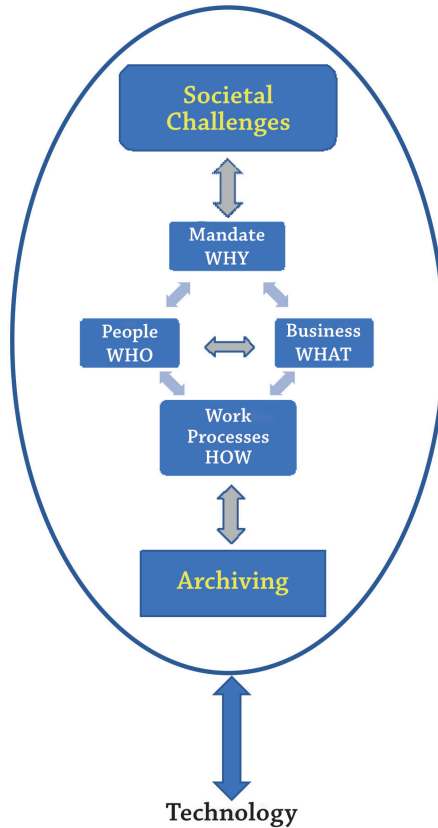
¹¹ H. Ciechanowski, *The principle of provenance as the principle of rationalization of archives*, "Archiwa – Kancelarie – Zbiory" 2021, vol. 12, pp. 49–65.

¹² S. Muller, J. Feith, R. Fruin, *Manual...*, section 16.

¹³ J.B. Gallardo, *Ceci n'est pas une archive*, <https://revistafakta.wordpress.com/2013/12/17/ceci-nest-pas-une-archive-por-jorge-blasco-gallardo/> [originally published in: *Memorias y olvidos del archivo*, ed. F. Estévez González and N. de Santa Ana, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria 2010, pp. 11–19], accessed 1 July 2023.

¹⁴ T. Cook, *What is past is prologue. A history of archival since 1898, and the future paradigm shift*, "Archivaria" 1997, vol. 43, p. 47, repr. [in:] *All shook up. The archival legacy of Terry Cook*, ed. T. Nesmith, G. Bak and J.M. Schwartz, Chicago 2020, p. 259.

mandate and the actor's functions. In my book "Archiving people"¹⁵ I proposed the following model of the archival context:



Source: Own elaboration.

For example, we acknowledge the need for a constitutionally anchored armed force, felt by the society (mandate: why). This results in functions (what) performed by actors (who) via specific work processes (how/where/when). All this leads to archiving. Each of these interdependent components is time- and place-bound and influenced by technology¹⁶.

The Dutch society's changing views with regard to military service had an impact on the military's mandate and subsequently on its functions (the enlisting system), actors (governments, citizens, notaries, insurance companies) and work processes, leading to changes in archiving.

¹⁵ E. Ketelaar, *Archiving people. A social history of Dutch archives*, 's-Gravenhage 2020, pp. 19a, 275b, <https://archivistics.home.blog/2019/12/14/new-e-book/>, accessed 1 July 2023.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 275b.

In order to use archives as sources fruitfully, one has to understand them as a cultural, social and political phenomenon. Archives “are produced from culturally embedded expectations and conventions”¹⁷. For example, slave registers in the Americas didn’t include births; not out of carelessness, neither to keep them secret or for ideological reasons, but simply because registration only made sense when it was sufficiently clear that the child would remain alive¹⁸. In the New World, the colonizing powers had different cultural definitions of basic economic interests: taxing land (the English), or taxing people (the Spanish), or trading goods (the Dutch). These factors resulted in creation of different types of records: the English kept survey maps, the Spanish – censuses, the Dutch – commercial data¹⁹. These different record types reinforced the limited colonial gaze which focused on either land, or people, or goods. The archives are indeed not only a social and cultural, but a political phenomenon as well. For, as James Scott writes in *Seeing like a state*²⁰, “there are virtually no other facts for the state than those that are contained in documents”²¹.

To understand archives as a social, cultural and political phenomenon, as epistemological sites, one has to know the why, what, who, and how in order to assess what reality may be reflected in the archives. In the past two or three decades many disciplines have made an “archival turn”²². Anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, philosophers, cultural and literary theorists, as well as artists, all have developed various “archivologies”²³. They often give a prominent place to the document and not to the archives as a cultural, social and political phenomenon. However, one has to look up from the document, look through and beyond the document to the archiving context, or rather contexts (plural). The South African archivist Verne Harris calls this “an ever-unfolding horizon of

¹⁷ F.X. Blouin, W.G. Rosenberg, *Processing the past. Contesting authority in history and the archives*, Oxford 2011, p. 120.

¹⁸ M.R. Trouillot, *Silencing the past. Power and the production of history*, Boston 1995, pp. 26–27, 48, 51–53.

¹⁹ P. Seed, *Ceremonies of possession in Europe’s conquest of the New World, 1492–1640*, Cambridge 1995, pp. 188–189.

²⁰ J.C. Scott, *Seeing like a state. How certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed*, Yale University Press 1998.

²¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 82–83.

²² E. Ketelaar, *Archival turns and returns. Studies of the archive*, [in:] *Research in the archival multiverse*, ed. A.J. Gilliland, S. McKemmish and A. J. Lau, Clayton 2016, pp. 228–268.

²³ For example: K. Ćwiek-Rogalska, *Archiving in the face of erasure. The idea of the “Post-German” archive*, “Poznańskie Studia Slawistyczne” 2020, vol. 19, pp. 77–100.

context(s)", "an incessant movement of continual recontextualisation"²⁴. These contexts are shaping the action of the people and institutions who made and maintained the records, the functions the records perform, the capacities of information technologies to capture and preserve information at a given time, and the custodial history of the records²⁵.

In the colonial archives of the Netherlands Indies, anthropologist Ann Stoler was looking for information on relationships between white children and their indigenous nursemaids²⁶. She found it in numerous reports – classified as secret – concerning the political situation in the Netherlands Indies. At the time, government officials believed the colonial order to be threatened by what they labelled the "danger" of contact between white children and their nursemaids. Thus, the civil servants who created the records, and the colonial archivists who labelled and shaped contents and context of the archival documents, have at the same time labelled and shaped the relationship between children and their nursemaids. To understand the archive, one has to decode its various aspects; this requires, in Stoler's forcible expression, reading "along the archival grain", accepting even unethical, forbidden, illegal, evil or irrational recordkeeping.

The Logic of Archives

In other words, one has to decode the logic of the archives – the system or set of principles underlying the arrangement of elements²⁷. Records and archives are "process-bound information", that is, information is generated by and linked to work processes²⁸. The information is structured and recorded by these processes. This is different from the logic of libraries and documentation centres that acquire and preserve books and other media which are not created and kept specifically

²⁴ V. Harris, *Ethics and the archive*. "An incessant movement of recontextualisation", [in:] *Controlling the past. Documenting society and institutions. Essays in honor of Helen Willa Samuels*, ed. T. Cook, Chicago 2011, p. 360.

²⁵ T. Nesmith, *Seeing archives. Postmodernism and the changing intellectual place of archives*, "American Archivist" 2002, vol. 65, p. 35.

²⁶ A.L. Stoler, *Along the archival grain. Epistemic anxieties and colonial common sense*, Princeton 2009.

²⁷ Following the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) "a system or set of principles underlying the arrangements of elements in a computer or electronic device so as to perform a specified task".

²⁸ T. Thomassen, *A first introduction to archival science*, "Archival Science" 2001, vol. 1, p. 374.

as evidence of work processes. Unlike mere data, information in the archives is transactional and process-bound²⁹. Consequently, we do not consider the archival document merely on its own, but within the context of the work process which created the document, and which gives each record its specific meaning within that context.

Archiving entails creating a document and linking it to a transaction, as well as other documents concerning that transaction, by some form of physical or virtual filing. The “archival bond”, or the interrelatedness between the records created and received in the course of a particular transaction, is an essential characteristic of archives³⁰. That applies to both public and private archives, although the Dutch Manual of 1898 stated that family archives are “a conglomerate of papers and documents”, they “do not form a whole [...] and lack the organic bond of an archive [...]”. The rules for ordinary archives, therefore, cannot be applied to family archives³¹. However, archivists from younger generations than the Dutch trio considered family archives to be a combination of personal archives in which the relation between the components is determined by family relations. In such family archives, official documents may be found as well, same as in the manuscript books in Polish-Lithuanian family archives of 17th and 18th century, which often contain not only *acta publica*, but also private documents³².

Including and Excluding

We must be aware of the fact that a family archive, like every archive, is a construction, built by including information as much as by excluding it³³. What did the family want to keep and what did they destroy? Think of sensitive

²⁹ G. Yeo, *Records, information and data. Exploring the role of record-keeping in an information culture*, Cambridge 2018.

³⁰ E. Ketelaar, *Being digital in people's archives*, “Archives and Manuscripts” 2003, vol. 31, p. 18, translated into Polish: „Cyfrowe życie” w archiwum dla ludzi, “Archeion” 2004, vol. 107, pp. 149–160.

³¹ S. Muller, J. Feith, R. Fruin, *Manual...*, section 3.

³² M. Matwijów, *Manuscript books. Collections of political life materials from the area of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania dating back to the 17th and 18th centuries in libraries, archives and museums in Poland*, “Knygotyra” 2021, vol. 77, pp. 171–202.

³³ M. Farrenkopf, A. Ludwig, A. Saupe, *Logik und Lücke. Formen der archivischen und sammelnden Konstitution authentischen Wissens*, [in:] *Logik und Lücke. Die Konstruktion des Authentischen in Archiven und Sammlungen*, ed. M. Farrenkopf, A. Ludwig, A. Saupe, Göttingen 2021, pp. 26–28;

correspondence, diaries, financial documents concerning a bankruptcy. “The archive” Peter Fritzsche writes “is the production of the heirs”³⁴. The family archive reflects the image that the family wishes to project of itself. That is very normal. Through their dealings with objects – furniture, art, photos, books, musical instruments, scrapbooks and also archives – people define who they are, or were or want to become³⁵. Such identification belongs to the “tacit narratives” of the family archive. “Archiving, how we archive and are archived constructs our lives, has consequences for our reality, constructs our gaze” as Jorge Blasco Gallardo writes³⁶. When describing or using a personal or a family archive, account should be taken of the construction of the archive that results from the self-image not only that of the archive creators, but also that of the descendants who may purge the archive, but save the rest or donate or deposit it at an archival institution. These self-images are formed in a social context that varies depending on time and place. This applies equally to public records: they too reflect the image that the creator wants to give of his or her organization or of him- or herself.

Social Archivalistics

Same applies to community archives whose collections of documents and other artefacts are determined by what the community considers of value for forming, re-creating and transmitting the sense of shared experience and therefore of shared identity³⁷. I would like to refer to Magdalena Wiśniewska-Drewniak’s recent book on Polish social archivalistics (*archiwistyka społeczna*)³⁸.

W. Füßl, *Überlieferungslücken, ihre Motive und Auswirkungen auf das kulturelle Erbe [...]*, ibidem, pp. 153–159; D. Thomas, S. Fowler, V. Johnson, *The silence of the archive*, London 2017.

³⁴ P. Fritzsche, *The archive and the case of the German nation*, [in:] *Archive stories. Facts, fictions, and the writing of history*, ed. A. Burton, Durham and London 2005, p. 185.

³⁵ E. Ketelaar, *Cultivating archives*, “Archival Science” 2012, vol. 12, pp. 19–33.

³⁶ J.B. Gallardo, *Ceci n’est pas...*

³⁷ J. Bacia, *Unsere Geschichte gehört uns! Die Archive der Neuen Sozialen Bewegungen*, [in:] *Logik und Lücke. Die Konstruktion des Authentischen in Archiven und Sammlungen*, ed. M. Farrenkopf, A. Ludwig, A. Saupe, Göttingen 2021, pp. 272–274; E. Ketelaar, *Archives, memories and identities*, [in:] *Archives and recordkeeping. Theory into practice*, ed. C. Brown, London 2014, pp. 131–70. A shorter version with the same title appeared in *Records, archives and memory*, ed. M. Willer, A.J. Gilliland, M. Tomič, Zadar 2015, pp. 47–76.

³⁸ M. Wiśniewska-Drewniak, *Inaczej to zniknie. Archiwa społeczne w Polsce – wielokrotne studium przypadku*, Toruń 2019.

Community archives are a relatively new phenomenon. Besides independent community archives (“Freie Archive”, as they are called in Germany), mainstream archives are also endeavouring to connect communities to their collections. Many State and municipal archives have joined the community movement that began, some decades ago, in the United Kingdom³⁹. Archival institutions encourage people to upload their stories and digitized documents, photos and other artefacts, thus broadening the Archives’ societal terms of reference. This new archival practice of what chief archivist of the Open Society Archives Gabriella Ivacs calls “socialization of archives”, is, according to her, “an important issue not only for those people whose story might be otherwise excluded, but also highlights the positive role that memory institutions can play in building more cohesive societies based on democratic principles”⁴⁰.

A further strategy would be, as Beth Yakel suggests, to focus on building communities and participating in them⁴¹. One could envisage models, where mainstream archives and communities assume distributed custody of the communities’ memory texts. This might lead to a rethinking of the archival process by involving the communities as equal partners, as suggested by Shilton and Srinivasan⁴². In their model, the discussion concerning appraisal, arrangement, description and provenance, is taken to a community level. I believe that an archivist’s primary contribution to such a holistic endeavour is to defend and promote the uniqueness of archives/records within the larger framework of memory texts⁴³. This, however, does not preclude assigning a broadly conceptualized “archival value” to materials collected by community archives and

³⁹ A. Flinn, M. Stevens, E. Shepherd, *Whose memories, whose archives? Independent community archives, autonomy and the mainstream*, “Archival Science” 2009, vol. 9, pp. 71–86.

⁴⁰ G. Ivacs, *The pervasiveness of archives*, “LEA – Lingue e Letterature d’Oriente e d’Occidente” 2012, vol. 1/1, p. 478. See also A. Roeschley, J. Kim, *Something that feels like a community*. *The role of personal stories in building community-based participatory archives*, “Archival Science” 2019, vol. 19, pp. 27–49.

⁴¹ E. Yakel, *Who represents the past? Archives, records, and the social web*, [in:]. *Controlling the past...*, pp. 257–278.

⁴² K. Shilton, R. Srinivasan, *Participatory appraisal and arrangement for multicultural archival collections*, “Archivaria” 2007, vol. 63, pp. 87–101.

⁴³ J.M. O’Toole, *On the idea of uniqueness*, “American Archivist” 2007, vol. 57, pp. 632–58, repr. in *American archival studies. Readings in theory and practice*, ed. R.C. Jimerson, Chicago 2000, pp. 245–277; E. Ketelaar, *Documents as monuments...* pp. 55–56.

lacking archival uniqueness⁴⁴. For archivists this means preparing for a paradigm shift, which Terry Cook labelled “Community”, enriching “our own identity as archivists, transformed to be relevant actors out in our society’s communities more than proficient professionals behind the walls of our own institutions”⁴⁵.

Mediation

Seeing archives as a phenomenon is, as I said, necessary, but it entails a certain risk. A phenomenon is “a fact or occurrence that appears or is perceived esp. one of which the cause is in question” (OED). Archives, however, do not occur naturally or happen simply. Archives are constructed by “archivers”⁴⁶. *Archivers* are not only *archivists*, but also authors, clerks, registrars, antiquarians, record managers, keepers, curators, website builders, genealogists, and other users. In their own turn, each takes actions within cultural practices of creation, classification, filing, arrangement, etc. and, most importantly, appraisal, selection and destruction of archives. Each archiver participates in the recursive production and mediation of the archive, involving definition, selection, organisation, interpretation, representation and presentation. In other words: the production of the archive (or archive formation) throughout the continuum happens through interactions by a host of archivers. Each interaction leaves fingerprints which are attributes of the archive’s infinite meaning, each interpretation, as Derrida writes, is an enrichment, an extension of the archive⁴⁷. That is why the archive is never closed. It opens out of the future.

Until recently, archival theory, methodology and practice assumed that a record is unchangeable, that is, it retains the state in which it was created. Maintaining the original state of the document and the aggregation (file, series, fonds) to which it belongs was considered essential. Restoring the old order was

⁴⁴ M. Greene, *The power of meaning. The archival mission in the postmodern age*, “American Archivist” 2002, vol. 65, pp. 42–55.

⁴⁵ T. Cook, *Evidence, memory, identity, and community. Four shifting archival paradigms*, “Archival Science” 2013, vol. 13, p. 116, repr., [in:] *All shook up...*, p. 466. See also J. Zavala, A. Allina Migoni, M. Caswell, N. Geraci, M. Cifor, “A process where we’re all at the table”. *Community archives challenging dominant modes of archival practice*, “Archives and Manuscripts” 2017, vol. 45, pp. 202–215.

⁴⁶ E. Ketelaar, *Tacit narratives. The meanings of archives*, “Archival Science” 2001, vol. 1, p. 133.

⁴⁷ J. Derrida, *Archive fever. A Freudian impression*, The University of Chicago Press 1996, p. 68.

a basic principle of archivistics, codified in the Dutch Manual. However, the Australian records continuum model dispenses with the invariability of records and archives. A record is always in a “state of becoming”. Due to the reiterative passage through the dimensions of the model, the document always acquires new meanings.

Archivers make a value judgment at every stage of a document’s life, to support decisions like: which traces are to be documented, which documents would become archival documents by capture in a recordkeeping system, which archival documents cross the functional boundaries of the organization and of the self, in order to provide collective memories, which archival documents are to be selected and deemed worthy of transfer to Archives (with a capital A)?

In the digital world, value judgments underpin the decision regarding the preservation mode even before the documents are created. In fact, the appraisal process begins with the design of the recordkeeping system when one determines which documents are to be captured, that is: accepted by the system and thus becoming records. Moreover, digital records cannot be left on the shelves for years, waiting to be appraised. Therefore, at the front-end one has to decide which records have to be kept in the system, and which records can be disposed of later, either through destruction or by transferring them to another system. “Archiving by design” means that when designing the information systems that support work processes, one has to take into account the sustainability of the information resulting from the work processes. Organizational and societal requirements play a role in assessing the function and value of records for accountability, evidence and memory. This applies to paper and digital records equally.

Some people assume that in the digital age appraisal of records (what to keep, what to destroy) is no longer necessary, because of the unlimited storage capacity and searchability of digital media. That is, however, a myth. Permanent storage and permanent access require enormous resources: buildings, staff, energy, constant upgrading and migration of software and hardware, etc. Every terabyte less as a result of appraisal represents a saving on these annually recurring costs⁴⁸.

Appraisal is one of those interventions which co-determine the archive’s meaning, because the archive after appraisal is not the same as the archive before

⁴⁸ Geoffrey Yeo discusses various options of keeping everything digital and minimizing appraisal of digital records: *Can we keep everything? The future of appraisal in a world of digital profusion*, [in:] *Archival futures*, ed. C. Brown, London 2018, pp. 45–63.

appraisal. Appraisal has been deemed “the fine art of destruction”⁴⁹. Since the 1980s archivists have been debating how to perform this art. The terms of that debate about selecting archives have generally been the archivists’ needs and concerns. There have been exceptions, for example in Spain, where architects, anthropologists, geographers, historians and other specialists are involved in the *evaluación*⁵⁰. When I was the National Archivist of The Netherlands, we started – after heated debates with historians and activists concerning appraisal – submitting all draft appraisal schedules to a review by experts appointed by the Royal Dutch Historical Society. The procedure has changed slightly since then. Now, Dutch historians, sociologists, political scientists and others are involved by the National Archives in identifying the “hot spots” in recent history: events and issues which have led to a remarkable or intensive interaction between government and citizen, and which should be documented in the records. Moreover, each working group that is to draft a schedule has to include an outsider with expertise in the area of the relationship between citizen and government and the importance of public records for that relationship. Every draft schedule is put up for public notice, and comments from the public are invited.

Not only in appraisal, but in all processing of archival materials “archivists preside over what ultimately forms the archive”⁵¹. “Archivists continually reshape, reinterpret, and reinvent the archive. This represents enormous power over memory and identity”⁵². Indeed, the historical record is created as a result of mediation by the archivist. Whether or not the archivist works in State Archives, in local archives, special archives or community archives, he or she mediates between the archives and society, through arrangement, description, providing access and reference service, preservation and digitization⁵³. Let me discuss each of these practices of mediation.

⁴⁹ W.K. Lamb, *The fine art of destruction*, [in:] *Essays in memory of Sir Hilary Jenkinson*, ed. A.E.J. Hollaender, Chichester 1962, pp. 50–56.

⁵⁰ R. Alberch Fugueras, *Los archivos entre la memoria histórica y la sociedad del conocimiento*, Barcelona 2003, p. 117.

⁵¹ F.X. Blouin, W.G. Rosenberg, *Processing the past ...*, p. 143. See also J. Bunn, *Frames and the future of archival processing*, [in:] *Archival futures*, pp. 66–77.

⁵² J.M. Schwarz, T. Cook, *Archives, records, and power. The making of modern memory*, “Archival Science” 2002, vol. 2, p. 2.

⁵³ N. Bartlett, *Past imperfect (l'imparfait). Mediating meaning in archives of art*, [in:] *Archives, documentation, and institutions of social memory. Essays from the Sawyer Seminar*. ed. F.X. Blouin and W.G. Rosenberg, University of Michigan Press 2006, pp. 121–133.

Processing archives begins with the seemingly neutral operation of packaging and repackaging. In the digital world, the OAIS model allows for repackaging a Submission Information Package (SIP) into an Archival Information Package (AIP). In the paper world repackaging often entails removing the documents from their original containers and putting them in acid-free archival boxes, reformatting the “stuff” from the muniment room, basement or attic⁵⁴. No longer can the archive be read in its original state. Reading the archive involves, *inter alia*, what Peter Horsman has termed physical reading: deciphering what the little holes in documents, the folds or the pink tape, the binding and rebinding, reveal about the file’s history⁵⁵. Alas, often these traces have been removed by ordinary housekeeping procedures.

The arrangement of an archive should, to the extent possible, respect the original order and the context in which the documents were created and used for their primary purpose. The same applies to description, that is, creating a representation of a document. However, arrangement means more than just mechanically identifying and restoring original order and a representation of a document is more than just recording the document’s reflection. Both are what American Scott Cline recently called “translations” from one form to another⁵⁶. They are interpretive and creative acts, making a finding aid a political statement⁵⁷, which effectively shapes the archive⁵⁸. “These processes”, Jennifer Meehan writes, “are not neutral or objective; rather they are situated within specific sociocultural, professional, institutional and individual contexts”⁵⁹. Every representation is biased “because it reflects a particular world-view and is constructed to meet specific purposes”⁶⁰. The problem is that many archivists

⁵⁴ V. Lane, J. Hill, *Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going? Situating the archive and archivists*, [in:] *The future of archives and recordkeeping. A reader*, ed. J. Hill, London 2011, pp. 10–11.

⁵⁵ P. Horsman and E. Ketelaar, *Archival history*, [in:] *Encyclopedia of archival science*, ed. L. Duranti and P. C. Franks, London 2015, pp. 53–58.

⁵⁶ C. Scott, *The archivist as translator. Representation and the language of context*, “American Archivist” 2022, t. 85, pp. 126–145.

⁵⁷ E. Yakel, *Archival representation*, “Archival Science” 2003, vol. 3, p. 20. See also R.C. Jimerson, *Archives power. Memory, accountability, and social justice*, Chicago 2009, pp. 309–314.

⁵⁸ J. Douglas, *Toward more honest description*, “American Archivist” 2016, vol. 79, pp. 26–55.

⁵⁹ J. Meehan, *Arrangement and description. Between theory and practice*, [in:] *Archives and recordkeeping...*, p. 81.

⁶⁰ W.M. Duff, V. Harris, *Stories and names. Archival description as narrating records and constructing meanings*, “Archival Science” 2002, vol. 2, p. 275.

do not realize this and that most users, as Elizabeth Yakel observed, are “largely unaware of the invisible archival role and responsibility behind the data they are using, particularly in a networked environment. Thus, they may see the role of the archivist as essentially preserving the data or perhaps managing the information, but not as having anything to do with knowledge creation”⁶¹.

This is changing with the advent of Archives 2.0, an approach in which archivists use technology to become more user-centred, by inviting user contributions and their participation in describing, commenting, and reusing collections⁶². In Archives 2.0 there are multiple “archivers”, but do they share the authority – traditionally vested in the archivist and the archival institution – which endows the archive with trustworthiness, reliability and authenticity? Authority, as Elisabeth Yakel writes, “is a major issue that is both at the center of, and challenged by, Archives 2.0”⁶³. She envisions archives developing into “a social structure characterized by a shared approach to governance, authority, and concern for sustainability of the communities” forming around the records⁶⁴. This may also enhance “archival autonomy”, a concept recently proposed by Australian scholars. They define archival autonomy “as the ability for individuals and communities to participate in societal memory, with their own voice, becoming participatory agents in recordkeeping and archiving”⁶⁵.

I have explained how the archive is constructed through appraisal, arrangement, and description. Another form of mediation is providing access and reference service to users⁶⁶. Both are constrained by legal, political, cultural and professional norms. Archivists cannot change the legal access rules, but they have a certain leeway in applying the rules. A 2007 study on restrictions on access to national archives in Europe found that some Archives differentiate between researchers in terms of enabling access to restricted material. In these countries,

⁶¹ E. Yakel, *Thinking inside and outside the boxes. Archival reference services at the turn of the century*, “Archivaria” 2000, vol. 49, p. 152. See also F.X. Blouin, W.G. Rosenberg, *Processing the past...*, pp. 147–150.

⁶² *A different kind of web. New connections between archives and our users*, ed. K. Theimer, Chicago 2011, p. 338.

⁶³ E. Yakel, *Balancing archival authority with encouraging authentic voices to engage with records*, [in:] *A different kind of web...*, p. 78.

⁶⁴ E. Yakel, *Balancing...*, p. 95; E. Ketelaar, *Archives as spaces of memory*, “Journal of the Society of Archivists” 2008, vol. 29, pp. 9–27.

⁶⁵ J. Evans, S. McKemmish, E. Daniels, G. McCarthy, *Self-determination and archival autonomy. Advocating activism*, “Archival Science” 2015, vol. 15, p. 347.

⁶⁶ See R.C. Jimerson, *Archives power...*, pp. 314–319.

the director of the Archives can enable access with special conditions only to professional researchers or scientists, but not to members of the general public⁶⁷. As the Council of Europe stated however liberal the access rules prescribed in legislation may be, the actual access to archives depends primarily on the facilities and on the human and financial resources which an archives service possesses for the preservation and the processing of its holdings⁶⁸.

Indeed, the availability, logistics and quality of the reference service to a large extent determine what the user retrieves from the archive, and that quality may differ between institutions, and even between reference archivists within the same institution⁶⁹. There are still archival institutions where access to the finding aids is restricted or where access is only granted if the user complies with certain conditions, including paying a fee. The Principles of Access to Archives promulgated by the International Council on Archives in 2012, state “The equal right to access archival records is not simply equal treatment but also includes the equal right to benefit from the archives.”⁷⁰ However, in recommending to minimize operational constraints on access, the Declaration acknowledges that such constraints do exist⁷¹.

As with the other archival functions, Archives 2.0 is also changing our notions of access. Archival temples guarded by archontic powers are being replaced by virtual spaces of memory, maintained by communities of “archivers”. Access to archives is enabled through access to the Internet and thus governed by the rules (or rather the absence of rules) of the Internet, as well as its search and retrieval practices. Archival documents are downloaded from the Internet to be copied, used, reformatted, abridged, photoshopped, etc., resulting in a (re)constructed archive.

⁶⁷ J. Valge, B. Kibal, *Restrictions on access to archives and records in Europe: A history and the current situation*, “Journal of the Society of Archivists” 2007, vol. 28, pp. 193–214.

⁶⁸ Recommendation No. R (2000) 13 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on a European policy on access to archives, <https://rm.coe.int/16804cea4f>, accessed 1 July 2023.

⁶⁹ Ćwiek-Rogalska, *Archiving...*, pp. 77–78.

⁷⁰ Principles of Access to Archives, http://www.ica.org/sites/default/files/ICA_Access-principles_EN.pdf. Spanish version: http://www.ica.org/sites/default/files/ICA_Access-principles_SP.pdf, accessed 1 June 2023.

⁷¹ In Antoinette Burton’s “Archive stories” researchers recount their experiences with various gatekeepers guarding the access to the archives: eadem, *Archive stories. Facts, fictions, and the writing of history*, Durham NC 2005. See also E. Ketelaar, *Archival temples, archival prisons. Modes of power and protection*, “Archival Science” 2002, vol. 2, pp. 221–238.

Reconstruction of the archive also occurs by way of preservation and digitization. These seem to be mere technical processes, but they involve appraisal and mediation. Not only appraising which documents are to be restored or digitized and which are not. Archivists must also take decisions on mediation, concerning the technologies to be used. Any restoration of a document changes its current “look and feel” and risks obliterating material traces from the past⁷².

When digitizing a document, archivists have to decide on the image capture technology and settings, on image manipulation with editing software, on image export to printers, websites, etc⁷³. Thus, digitization creates various layers of mediation between the original and the user or viewer of the digital representation. The decisions taken at each of these layers have to be documented so that we can answer questions like: “What are the effects of decoupling a text from its physical carrier? What does it mean for a work, a text or a book to be digital, and how are users to make sense of the many different kinds of digital offerings available?”⁷⁴

Conclusion

I have demonstrated that understanding archives as a cultural, social and political phenomenon entails shifting the attention from the actual archival document to its contextual history. That context encompasses the why, who, what, and how of archiving, all determined by societal challenges and technologies. The mediation (agency) of “archivists” leads to the constructedness of archives. Archivists and users of archives should be aware of that constructedness⁷⁵.

⁷² A. Rekrut, *Material literacy. Reading records as material culture*, “Archivaria” 2003, vol. 60, p. 36.

⁷³ Eadem, *Reconnecting mind and matter. Materiality in archival theory and practice*, Manitoba 2009, <http://hdl.handle.net/1993/3161>, accessed 1 July 2023. See also C. Jeurgens, *The scent of the digital archive. Dilemmas with archive digitisation*, “BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review” 2013, vol. 128, pp. 30–54, <https://doi.org/10.18352/bmgn-lchr.9348>; B. Mak, *How the page matters*, Toronto 2011; eadem, *Archaeology of a digitization*, “Journal of the Association for information science and technology” 2014, vol. 65, pp. 1515–1526; A. Galey, *The Shakespearean archive*, Cambridge 2014, p. 86.

⁷⁴ M. Deegan, Sutherland K., *Transferred illusions. Digital technology and the forms of print*, Farnham–Burlington 2016, p. 145.

⁷⁵ A slightly different version of this paper was presented at the 4th International Congress of Polish History (session “Archives as a Cultural Phenomenon”), Kraków, 21 October 2022. Some parts of this essay (especially the section “Mediation”) reproduce portions of my *A dualidade*

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