

An Introduction to Archival Practices

When people ask me what I am studying in graduate school, I keep my answer vague—leaving it at I am working on my Masters. There are two reasons for this. First, the topic that I am studying has a very long title and people tend to get overwhelmed (or lose interest) before I end my sentence. Secondly, when I do risk it and share that I am studying Archives and Records Management, their response is along the lines of ‘oh, you’re in library school,’ and the resulting explanation of the differences between archives and libraries has become a memorized speech that tends to be met with confusion.

Now this may seem like a random rant so let me give a little bit of context. I am a graduate student at the University of Toronto’s Faculty of Information, iSchool in Toronto, Ontario, Canada I am working towards dual masters; a Masters of Information (MI) in Archives and Records Management (ARM) and a Masters of Museum Studies (MMSt). While the iSchool does offer Library and Information Science (LIS) as one of its MI concentrations, there are six other concentrations that have nothing to do with libraries. One of the most aggravating comments from people outside of the faculty—at least to me as an archivist in training—is that I am basically a librarian. To the average person that has little to no knowledge of the differences between librarians and archivists, calling them the same thing may seem trivial. However, the differences in the theories and practices of the fields are vast. My ultimate goal with this article is to explain archives and the archival profession as separate entities from that of Library Sciences.

In order to show how archivists are not librarians and how the two fields differ from one another, let me attempt to explain the basics of archival theory. As a precursor, this archival theory will be based on the Canadian archival tradition. Europe, Britain, America, and Australia,

as well as most every other country, have developed their own archival practices, but they are similar in many respects. Archives have been around since records were first kept. However, the field of archives, and the theory of archival science, is fairly recent in the scope of history.

The archival theory utilized today began one hundred twenty years ago with Samuel Muller, Johan Feith, and Robert Fruin, who wrote an influential book entitled the *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives*.¹ Their work in archival theory would become the foundations of the principles of provenance and original order. They started with their definition of archives as “the whole of the written documents, drawings and printed matter, officially received or produced by an administrative body or one of its officials...”² While this definition is limiting in today’s world and could not have anticipated digital documentation, it provides a stepping stone upon which archival theorists have built.

Archival tradition stands on the pillars of provenance, and respect of original. Provenance is the theory that the archives must be kept separate. Records should not be combined or mixed with the documents of other creators, or arranged based on their subject or chronology. The Society of American Archivists gives a nice definition of provenance; “The origin or source of something—Information regarding the origins, custody, and ownership of an item or collection.”³ The theory of respect of original order is that the records should be kept in the order that the creator put them in. Heather MacNeil conveys these ideas in a concise and easily digestible manner. She states that “Keeping the records of one creator separate from those of another is intended to preserve the unique identity of that aggregation, while keeping records in the order in which they were maintained by their creator aims to protect the integrity of the relationships between and among its parts.”⁴ These theories are the pillars that govern archives and are the main “rules” that an archivist follows. If these theories were followed in libraries

there would be complete chaos. For example, if George Lucas were to enter a library and donate all of his books, the librarian would obviously separate them and catalogue them by subject based on the Library of Congress system. However, if he walked into an archive and wanted to donate all of his records, the records would be kept in the order that Lucas arranged them. This arrangement is called a fonds. A fonds is “the entire body of records of an organization, family, or individual that have been created and accumulated as the result of an organic process reflecting the functions of the creator.”⁵ The archivist would put the records in archival folders with a general title, and then in boxes, which would be titled “George Lucas fonds,” which would be numbered. This is one of the defining elements that differentiates libraries from archives. If a user went into an archive that was arranged by subject matter (like libraries) and asked to see letters to George Lucas, they would have to look through every letter the library owned from people with the name Lucas, just to find “George Lucas—director.” Trying to enforce Library of Congress categorization on archives, or provenance on a library, would result in chaos and aggravation for the user.

Archivists may have their roots in the theories of Muller, Feith, and Fruin, but there have been several theorists to improve and refine the profession. Without going into a timeline of archival theory, I will attempt to explain the theories that have made the profession into what it is today. When most people think of archives, they mostly think of antiquated items that can only tell them historical information, and while archives do hold historical documents, their history is not as old as one would think. The archival profession is fairly new—it has not been around for hundreds or thousands of years. In fact the archival profession’s growth took off in North America around 1950.⁶ Before the 1950s, archival materials were kept by librarians and historians. From the archivist who kept records only for historians and the aristocracy, their role

shifted to include a broad range of services for a much broader range of users. One of the main roles of archivists today is to make records available for users in the present and for future generations of users to come.

The traditional viewpoint of archival theory from Muller, Feith, and Fruin is that an archive is “an organic whole, a living organism, which grows, takes shape, and undergoes changes in accordance with fixed rules.”⁷ Therefore, the archive itself was created by people going about their everyday business without the thought that their work might one day have enduring value to a future society. This is another difference between archives and libraries. Authors write books so that people will read them; creators of archival documents create them through the affairs of their lives, and are then given value by someone else. Creators of archives do not create documents with the intention that someone will read it which in turn allows this organic nature of archives to occur. While this traditional viewpoint of archival theory has evolved, it is another stepping stone on the way to current archival practice.

Advancements in technology have led to many major changes in society, and this is also true for archives. Technology has led to a re-thinking of archival concepts, practices, and methods, and the role that archival institutions play in contemporary societies.⁸ Terry Eastwood has broken these changes down into three transformations. The first transformation is due to historical study evolving and historians using a wider range of archival materials. Hence “archivists find themselves performing a complex role as mediators between archives and different categories of users with different backgrounds and needs.”⁹ Archivists no longer sit behind their desk and bring historians records when they need them, now they interact with users, many of whom have never entered an archive before. Secondly, the relationship between current and historical records has changed. What records are administrative and still needed in

the running of government, institutions, businesses, etc., and what records are historical and ready to be transferred to the archive. This question is one that brings up disposition and acquisition of records and signifies which records have “enduring value and serve the manifold needs of society for access to the record of its past.”¹⁰

Finally the third transformation has to do with record-keeping practices. The rise of technology led to a massive number of records being created everyday. This meant that the archivists’ role in managing records, appraising records, and selecting those that are deemed worthy to be kept forever became incredibly difficult. Not only was it difficult to keep track of the paper documents that they were being bombarded with, the archivist now also had to deal with “born digital” records. Archivists preserve paper records by having them digitized. This makes fragile records still accessible to users without doing any further damage to the originals. However, archivists are working on how to adapt to the ever changing world of technology and making sure that records, such as cell phone images, are preserved as well. One of the biggest questions archivists deal with today is how to preserve digital records, such as emails, for future generations. It is not enough to choose one technology such as USB keys due to the fact that much like CDs, eventually USBs will become obsolete. If an archive has no way of displaying records for future generations, they cannot complete the tasks which they are designed to do.

Archives also differ from libraries in the way that archival materials are arranged and described. In libraries books are arranged and shelved based mostly on the Library of Congress system with a few still arranged by the Dewey Decimal System. Most books also come with their own description in the form of a summary that the author provides. Archives, on the other hand, are arranged and described in a much different fashion. Archives in Canada follow the *Rules of Arrangement and Description* (RAD) which follows a hierarchical construct. Geoffrey Yeo

states that “description should follow provenance. At its broadest, this principle requires records to be described in the first instance by reference to their origins and contexts, not their subject matter.”¹¹ As stated earlier, records are arranged based on respect for original order and provenance. Records are kept in the order that the creator had them, and if original order has been disturbed the archivist attempts to return them to original order if possible.¹² Beginning at the top records are arranged in levels; fonds, subfonds, series, files, and items. Each level is described according to the descriptive standard, RAD.

Archival materials are described first in the broadest sense with information about the creator and overarching information about what can be found within a fonds. The descriptions become more specific the further down the hierarchy with a single item being described lastly and having the most detailed information. Archival materials are described in a trickle down method. Information that is covered at the fonds level is not repeated further down the hierarchy. This means that information in a file level description only pertains to that file, it does not go into detail about the individual items, and it does not reiterate information from the series level. Describing records, and making these descriptions available online, makes archives much more accessible to users, which is a main objective of the archive and the archival profession.¹³ Online descriptions come with their own set of difficulties. The hierarchical approach of archives works best in a paper world, when we attempt to translate it to a digital format we are confronted with roadblocks. Yeo presents some of the questions archivists struggle with; how can adequate contextual information be given to users when their search result provides information across finding aids? How do we incorporate the different levels of description so that users find helpful information? How do we present the levels of description appropriately on a screen?¹⁴ Since its creation in 1990, RAD has undergone a revision to help answer some of these

questions as well as respond to some of the needs of the archival community.¹⁵ This revision and the continuous updating of archival theories and practices shows that the field is not stagnant and is as relevant today as it has ever been.

One of the areas that continues to change and adapt to the needs of the archival community is that of archivist/user interaction. In this manner, archives and libraries have similarities. However, unlike libraries, users of archives do not have complete access to any record on the shelf. Due to the sensitive nature of most archival records, a user has to request access to the materials. This is not a difficult process—most of the time a user simply has to ask the archivist and the materials will be brought to them. Another difference to libraries in regard to access is that the more access archivists give to their records, the more access users want. Since libraries do not restrict access in the same way, the user does not receive the same feelings when they are granted access to a book. The idea is not to keep information from users and to prevent their access, however, unlike libraries, archival reference questions take longer to answer as they tend to involve more research and archivists have to balance the access they give to users and the protection of the records.¹⁶ Ideally being able to “broaden the scope of reference and develop researcher services that actively encourage use” would make archives more accessible to users and make archives as user friendly as libraries.¹⁷ Archivists are working towards this idea in making arrangements and descriptions more accessible, adding reference services, and providing users with more information about the archive, its holdings, and how to use archives and their materials.¹⁸ In this manner, archives and libraries work as similar reference institutions, although due to the nature of their holdings, archives and libraries will not be able to function as one institution.

You may have heard the acronym LAMs or GLAMs; also known as Libraries, Archives, and Museum or Galleries, Libraries, Archives, and Museums. These acronyms signify the shifting theories and practices that have governed cultural heritage institutions for so long. In the past, these institutions have worked together and been incorporated into single institutions, as well as separating and being their own institutions. Today we are seeing these GLAMs re-converge and work together to bring a more holistic approach to their activities and interactions with their users.¹⁹ They have similarities and differences with one another and while they overlap in some instances they have each defined their roles and re-convergence may never successfully occur. The topic of LAMs and GLAMS can, and has, been covered in depth by many other scholars and I cannot do it justice in the frame of this essay. However, the convergence of these cultural institutions comes with pros and cons for each institution. Convergence is just one of the topics being discussed in today's archival forums, conferences, and journals across the world. Other topics that the archival world is focused upon include—but are by no means limited to—privacy and access in regards to the right to information and access to archival material, archives and social justice, the roles that archivists play in protecting the records while still providing access, and community archives.

In the coming years there will be continued debates and discussions about managing records in the current political, social, and economic environments, digital preservation of archival materials, and public programming in the archive. Perhaps through reading this essay you will become engaged in the archival world and be able to experience these changes first hand. I hope I have brought to your attention the basics of archives, archival theory, and archival practices. I also hope I have managed to convince you that archives and libraries are different institutions, and while they have similarities in some instances, they are major differences that

set them apart from one another. Now that you have a basic understanding of archives, I encourage you to utilize an archive, whether it is a national archive or a small-town one, and make use of the resources and knowledge that is at your disposal. Maybe you will find something you did not even know you were looking for.

ENDNOTES

¹ Terry Cook, "What is Past is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas Since 1898 and the Future Paradigm Shift," *Archavaria* no.42 (February 12, 1997).

² Cook, 91.

³ "Provenance," Provenance | Society of American Archivists. Accessed March 12, 2018. <https://www2.archivists.org/glossary/terms/p/provenance>.

⁴ Heather MacNeil, "Trusting Description: Authenticity, Accountability, and Archival Description Standards." *Journal of Archival Organization* 7, no. 3 (doi: 10.1080/15332740903117693, 2009): 89-107.

⁵ "Fonds," Fonds | Society of American Archivists. Accessed March 12, 2018. <https://www2.archivists.org/glossary/terms/f/fonds>.

⁶ Cook, 91.

⁷ Terry Eastwood, "A Contested Realm: The Nature of Archives and the Orientation of Archival Science," in *Currents of Archival Thinking*, ed. Heather MacNeil and Terry Eastwood. (Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited, an imprint of ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2017).

⁸ Eastwood, 10.

⁹ Ibid., 11.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Geoffrey Yeo, "Debates about Description," in *Currents of Archival Thinking*, ed. Heather MacNeil and Terry Eastwood. (Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited, an imprint of ABA-CLIO, LLC, 2017).

¹² Yeo, 91.

¹³ Ibid., 102.

¹⁴ Ibid., 103.

¹⁵ Sharry Watson, "Preface to the 2008 Revision," *Rules for Archival Description*. (July 2008 Ottawa).

¹⁶ Wendy M. Duff, "Archival Mediation," in *Currents of Archival Thinking*, ed. Heather MacNeil and Terry Eastwood. (Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited, an imprint of ABA-CLIO, LLC, 2017).

¹⁷ Ibid., 117.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Jeannette A. Bastion, "GLAMs, LAMs, and Archival Perspectives," in *Currents of Archival Thinking*, ed. Terry Eastwood and Heather MacNeil, 327-51. 2nd ed. (Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited, an imprint of ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2017).