Collective Memory and its Importance in Archives

Introduction

Throughout the course of their existence, archives have been used as a source of truth and as a window to the past. By providing this gateway, archives have the ability of instilling memories within archivists, researchers, and donors of the material. There has been debate over the years on how important of a role memory plays in archives and whether or not archives can be considered memories, vice versa. The articles listed below discuss the author’s opinion on memory within the archives and how the author’s believe memory is changing the archival profession. Overall, archives and memory are co-dependent on one another and that it is difficult in having one without the other.

Annotations

Annotation: This article is different from the others in this annotated bibliography because it factors in the appraisal of archival records and how archives play a role in constructing memory. Terry Cook explains how appraisal and the acquisition of records done by archivists essentially shape the future of the heritage of the records. Only what is collected leaves its history with the researchers using the materials. Cook addresses the fear that some archivists have that it is not their responsibility to focus on the future and that they are not constructors of memory rather, that is a historian’s job yet Cook believes that archivists are, “active agents in constructing social and historical memory” and he uses this article to explain why.


Abstract: What is our past and how do we know it? The authority of archival documentation as the foundation for our knowledge of the past has come under question. Increased interest in cultural studies and in new concepts of heritage has made archives not only a place of study but also the object of study. Some scholars are arguing that archives are not neutral parties in the process of exploration of the past. They may, in fact, be complicit in fostering certain perceptions based on institutional definitions and particular concepts of the state. Questions are also raised about the role of the archivist as a mediator between what has survived and what we know. How are archivists to respond to these new questions?

Annotation: In Blouin’s article, he mentions how an archive or piece of information can instill different memories in people depending on their experiences. For example, a plantation can instill fond memories for the people that owned it but could instill painful memories for those
who were slaves. Blouin divides his article into parts in order to discuss the power memory has in the archives, the role of mediation that the archivist has between themselves and their archives, and the growing impact social memory has on the archival material. Overall, the article addresses the importance of social memory within the archival world and how it is changing the role of archivists and archives as a whole.


Abstract: Does “the past” take on different meanings in the contexts of history and memory? Does the answer to this question have any bearing on archives? This article answers affirmatively to both these questions. Its main argument is that ascribing a distinctive meaning to “the past” in the framework of memory enables the development of a perspective on archival work that enhances the value of old records to contemporary organizations and society. The arguments unfold over the course of three sections. The first section argues that that certain elements of the Australians’ record continuum are more compatible with the idea of societal and organizational memory than the records life cycle, and further, that, on an archival reading, the records continuum is a more coherent temporal concept than the records life cycle. The second section draws on research from several disciplines to argue that, within the framework of memory, alluding to the past simply represents another way of talking about the present. The third section deploys ideas from the first two sections to propose ten conceptual, organizational, and technological issues that deserve attention with respect to long-term records preservation programmes.
During the days before and after the twelfth of December, time comes to a full stop, and instead of pushing us toward a deceptive tomorrow that is always beyond our reach, offers us a complete and perfect today ... Time is no longer succession, and becomes what it originally was and is: the present, in which the past and future are reconciled.

Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*

In a memorable seminar, right after Richard Nixon died, Derrida drew a memorable distinction between kinds of death. He said (and I’m paraphrasing), “the headlines last week said, ‘Nixon is dead. Richard Nixon has died.’ Tomorrow when you pick up the paper you will not see that headline that Richard Nixon is dead.”

“In Essay in Imagetext: An Interview with W.J.T. Mitchell,”

*Mosaic* 33, no. 2 (June 2000)

The past is never dead. It’s not even past.

Gavin Stevens, in William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun*

**Annotation:** This article “…focuses on the significance of the memory function and conditionally brackets history’s past from the analysis.” This enables us to develop our own individualized notion of time and of the past, simply by using the past within the confines of ‘organizational’ memory. This specific approach entails the dissolution of the contrasting relationship between memory and archives, enabling us to conclude that archives may be adept at social and organizational memory workings. Memory Archivists generally direct their interest toward past remnants that can potentially tell something about one’s cognizance and social identity. History Archivists direct their interest toward the restoration of records for the purpose of constructing a linear timeline about the past. The past, of course, that keeps being referenced
is not too dissimilar to our present, which makes this approach a postmodern one. The importance of archives is vital to understanding social, cultural, and political present-day methodologies.


**Annotation:** Throughout Randall C. Jimerson’s book, he discusses the power archives have a memory even though Jimerson believes they are not memory itself. Jimerson talks about the relationship between history, memory, and accountability and how that is impacted by archives. The book contains a whole chapter dedicated to the constructing of memory. Jimerson takes the opinions of archivists such as Luciana Duranti and Terry Cook in order to describe the interaction archivists have with the construction of memory. The book is not trying to argue that archives are memory but rather discusses how memory and archives and if they have an effect on one another.


**Abstract:** Archives are repositories of memory, providing reliable evidence for examining the past. The four types of memory—personal, collective, historical, and archival—interact in complex and sometimes baffling ways to enable one to understand the past and to draw lessons for it. Archival memory is a social construct reflecting power relationships in society. Archivists and manuscripts curators play the important role of mediator in selecting records for preservation and
providing research access to such collections. By recognizing and overcoming the bias toward records of powerful groups in society, archivists can provide a more balanced perspective on the past, and enable future generations to examine and evaluate the activities and contributions of all voices in one’s culture. Archives thus serve an important role in identifying and preserving the documentation that forms one’s historical memory.

**Annotation:** In this article, Jimerson talks about the four types of memory and how they interact amongst each other as well as how they interact within the archive. He breaks the article up into sections that discuss the different types of memory: collective, personal, archival, and historical as well as how they interact amongst each other in particular when it comes to formulating memory. According to Jimerson, “memory may be contained in archives and manuscripts, preserved because of their value as fixed and unchanging sources for corroborating or challenging personal memory.” Finally, Jimerson discusses just how powerful archives can be as well as his opinion on archives as constructed memory.


**Abstract:** This article traces an alternative to the evidence/memory dichotomy in archival discourse by highlighting the nexus between archival ideas about the nature, value, and use of records as viewed and imagined through the lens of an archival concept of evidence as a relation between record and event. This article then explores how “the archival nexus” provides a different framework for understanding the various meaning-making processes surrounding archives both within and outside the archival repository, and for rethinking the role of the
archivist and the position of the archival discipline with regard to other disciplines that explicitly address and engage with the archive.

**Annotation:** In this article by Jennifer Meehan, she focuses on the “archival nexus” and how it is changing the dichotomy of evidence and memory in the archives. Meehan cites authors that are specialized in archival practice and memory such as Terry Cook. Unlike the other articles, Meehan’s article addresses the views of the record creator and the record user as well as how these different views can affect the dichotomy of evidence/memory as well as how the nature, value, and use of the records affect the archival nexus. Meehan divides the article into sections that discuss the evidence/memory dichotomy, a different idea of evidence, and the archival nexus. Overall, the article encourages for there not to be a divide in terms of memory and evidence as well as acknowledges that archives are handled differently in theory than they are in practice.


**Abstract:** This article serves as the general introduction by the guest editors to the first of two thematic issues of Archival Science that will explore the theme, “archives, records, and power.” Archives as institutions and records as documents are generally seen by academic and other users, and by society generally, as passive resources to be exploited for various historical and cultural purposes. Historians since the mid-nineteenth century, in pursuing the new scientific history, needed an archive that was a neutral repositories of facts. Until very recently, archivists obliged by extolling their own professional myth of impartiality, neutrality, and objectivity. Yet
archives are established by the powerful to protect or enhance their position in society. Through archives, the past is controlled. Certain stories are privileged and others marginalized. And archivists are an integral part of this story-telling. In the design of record-keeping systems, in the appraisal and selection of a tiny fragment of all possible records to enter the archive, in approaches to subsequent and ever-changing description and preservation of the archive, and in its patterns of communication and use, archivists continually reshape, reinterpret, and reinvent the archive. This represents enormous power over memory and identity, over the fundamental ways in which society seeks evidence of what its core values are and have been, where it has come from, and where it is going. Archives, then, are not passive storehouses of old stuff, but active sites where social power is negotiated, contested, and confirmed. The power of archives, records, and archivists should no longer remain neutralized or denied, but opened to vital debate and transparent accountability.

**Annotation:** Schwartz and Cook here explain that archivists have the power of controlling records that can affect memory. The recollection or recreation of the past through the use of archival research does not just refer to the continued reliance of stored information, but it also refers to the creation of a mutual cultural understanding that combines different notions together. Schwartz and Cook believe that archive appraisal is impacted by the archivists themselves. With this impact on memory, archivists decide on the appraisal value and what to preserve based on memory and cultural framework. The article also provides various definitions for the word “archives”. It is divided into sections that discuss extrapolating archives, archival “science” and archival truth, archives of power, and the power of archives. Schwartz and Cook believe archives are our memories and works to prove the importance of memory in archives.

**Abstract:** This paper examines the practical and theoretical problems that confront archivists and historians today. Because of the information overload in our world and of the complexity, diversity, and fragility of supporting media, the way archivists are now choosing archival records retained, are radically changing. The paper summarizes the latest thinking that is revolutionizing the way archivists do their work. It also clarifies the present strategy of the National Archives of Canada insofar as public records are concerned.

**Annotation:** In this article, Jean-Pierre Wallot discusses how collective memory affects the future of archives at the National Archives of Canada. Wallot believes in order to know history the person must “relive” the past. He emphasizes how important it is to understand the past and how it is more than just studying one aspect but understanding how all aspects come together to form history known today. The article mentions that the main challenge for archivists is to, “structure a future to the historical experience of our time.” This is because; working for tomorrow ensures the continuity of memory. Wallot believes archivists “hold the keys to collective memory”. An archive is about the past and the repository is a house of memory and while he is focused on the past. The article’s goal is to present how important preserving the past is to our memory which will provide answers for the future.
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