Literature review: This assignment consists of a short paper (1000-1200 words) discussing three journal articles on a topic of your choice. The readings should not duplicate any on the syllabus, but they can relate to topics you have chosen for discussion question reports. The paper should provide a critical assessment of the articles and not just describe what the authors say.

Respect des Fonds, Provenance, and Original Order: Archival Practice in the Digital Environment

Among the most important tenets of archival practice is the avowed commitment to

Respect des Fonds, Provenance, and Original Order. These three principles taken together are the foundation for the descriptive and arrangement practices developed by the archival community in
the last century and are intended to preserve the integrity of documents *in toto* as handed to the archivist, to maintain the organic development of the documents as they were created by the author(s) and to guarantee that the order remain intact to allow the relationships among the documents to naturally and fully be reflected without interference or artifice. As technology has rapidly developed the need to manage the increasing volume and form of electronic records, the changes in scholarly and research practices and the demand for digital access to electronic and paper archives have lead to a debate about the usefulness and appropriateness of these principles in the digital environment. Anne Gilliland-Swetland’s “Utility of the Archival Paradigm in the Digital Environment” (Gilliland-Swetland, 2000), Jane Zhang’s “Archival Representation in the Digital Age” (Zhang, 2012), and Kate Theimer’s “Archives in Context and as Context” (Theimer, 2012) share many views on the impact of technology on traditional archival practice yet each presents slightly different case for the approach to be taken.

Gilliland-Swetland’s “Utility of the Archival Paradigm in the Digital Environment” (Gilliland-Swetland, 2000), begins by reaffirming the importance and imperative to preserve the integrity of archival fonds. “Ensuring the integrity of information over time is a prominent concern in the digital environment because physical and intellectual integrity can easily be consciously or unconsciously compromised and variant versions can easily be created and distributed.” (Gilliland-Swetland, 2000) However, the discussion immediately moves to translating traditional practice into digital forms “Attempts are often made to implement digital versions of procedures traditionally used in record keeping and archival administration. Such attempts include establishing trusted servers or repositories that can serve as a witness or notary public” specific examples of digital libraries” (Gilliland-Swetland, 2000). There is little discussion of how this is done and whether the new practice has any bearing on the arrangement
and description of paper archives. Gilliland-Swetland asserts that development of the Encoded Archival Description (EAD) schema does support best practice in arrangement and order “A hierarchical, object oriented way of describing the context and content of archival collections, can be a flexible metadata infrastructure for integrating descriptions with actual digital and digitized archival materials within an archival information system. It can also be mapped into other metadata structures such as MARC.” but only insofar as it supports the interoperability of records among museums, libraries and archives and not as a means to support the basic tenet of archival description and arrangement.

Jane Zhang presents a much more developed argument in “Archival Representation in the Digital Age”. Zhang breaks down the distinction between what she terms “Archival Provenance Representation, Archival Order Representation and Archival Content Order” (Zhang, 2012) in order to demonstrate provenance and access points (Finding Aids structured and presented using EAD) can be combined with non-provenance access points – subject access. “Representation of topical content of archival collections is critical for archival information discovery, understandably even more so in the digital environment.” (Zhang, 2012). The article goes on to discuss a case study of three web presentations of archival materials. Zhang notes that the pluralization of access points (provenance and non-provenance) “makes archival content representation more complementary than supplementary. When they are listed along with or in place of archival order representation, the role they play is no longer secondary or additional.” (Zhang, 2012). Zhang sees this as positive with a caveat. Subject access is useful but the presentation of archives in context with adherence to the basic tenet of is essential. Web architecture seems to be a good facilitator to display and access archival provenance representation, at least, at the collection level. Each collection can have its own unique digital
identifier. Collection description and other contextual information can be nicely displayed at or linked from the home page, easy to browse” (Zhang, 2012)

She describes the situation in her conclusion as a “digital compromise” - archival materials can be conveniently represented at the collection level in digital format (the Prominence of Provenance), especially in Web environment, capable of providing contextual information on record provenance. Within this provenance-based collection, archival order and content take some new forms in digital archival representation. The original order of archival records can be adopted to facilitate online search and navigation. However, its role seems to be less crucial and less irreplaceable.” (Zhang, 2012)

On a more lyrical, and slightly more critical note, Kate Theimer argues in “Archives in Context and as Context” (Theimer, 2012) that there is substantial value in adhering to the tenets of archival practice and that perhaps the new discipline of digital humanities in their quest for subject and non-provenance access have broadened the term “archive” inappropriately. “And so I, a tourist from the country of Archives, visited the foreign land of Digital Humanities and quickly realized that something a bit odd has happened to my treasured national heritage.”(Theimer, 2012) She goes on to say “it is not the adoption of the term by digital humanists that is noteworthy, but that its meaning in certain contexts has been altered by scholars, many of whom have experience working with archives as traditionally defined. And yet it is these scholars who have chosen to describe the collections they have created as archives” (Theimer, 2012).

Theimer strongly defends the value and context of archives. She asserts that adherence to archival principles separates archives from other sorts of collections. “These aggregates are
maintained using the principles of provenance, original order, and collective control. These qualities taken together — preserving groups of primarily original, unique materials, which are maintained using the principles of provenance, original order, and collective control — are the bedrock of the practices of archivists.” (Theimer, 2012)

Theimer argues that there is a place for digital collections but that these do not carry the professional commitment that are inherent in archival practice. She concedes that digital collections might someday become archives when they survive as the creation of a single entity and not “about” a single entity. “If digital humanist Linda Tompkins creates a digital collection of materials related to John Ruskin, do these materials not constitute “materials created or received by a person, family, or organization, public or private, in the conduct of their affairs and preserved because of the enduring value contained in the information they contain or as evidence of the functions and responsibilities of their creator?” The archival response would be probably yes, but then they would be the archives of Linda Tompkins, not the John Ruskin Archives.” (Theimer, 2012)

Theimer acknowledges that original order is problematic by quoting Pearce-Moses “A collection may not have meaningful order if the creator stored items in a haphazard fashion. In such instances, archivists often impose order on the materials to facilitate arrangement and description. The principle of respect for original order does not extend to respect for original chaos” (Peace-Moses, 2005) but that this is independent of technological challenges faced with electronic archives and electronic access to analog materials. She does not see that “digital” is a special case that requires disregard for practices that have obvious benefit.
Anne Gilliland-Swetland, Jane Zhang and Kate Theimer are each committed to the principles and discipline of *Respect des Fonds*, Provenance, and Original Order. While Gilliland-Swetland provides a good overview of the state of technology developed by and for the archival community such as EAD, she takes no strong position on how this affects pertinent issues of presentation and representation. Zhang provides a measured approach that attempts to find value in the middle ground by acknowledging the usefulness of content digital representation and access in combination with hierarchical and ordered series but concludes It is expected that more studies will be developed to further investigate digital archival representation challenges as digital archival collections are growing and will continue to grow.” (Zhang, 2012). Theimer rounds out the discussion – and in my opinion, saves the day - with a passionate and compelling argument that digital is not identical with archival and “that the role of archives (the kind that archivists manage) as custodians of a particular kind of context can be appreciated.” (Theimer, 2012)

