Chapter 2: Keep(ing) the archive dynamic

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Introduction: Dynamics as Characteristics of a Modern World

Our present times can perhaps best be described as dynamic: Increasing transnational relationships are the result of ongoing globalization, while a growing resurgence of white supremacist rhetoric has called international cooperation and democratic tendencies into question. A pandemic has pointed to greater multilateral cooperation but also revealed tense transnational relationships and caused a revival of nationalist rhetoric. Rapid digitalization reflects new technologies that have made communication and intercultural exchange more immediate than ever, but also highlighted disadvantaged communities around the globe. Social, economic, religious and cultural forces have changed certain values, attesting to a postmodern worldview that sees various interpretations of these dynamic times as equally justified. At the same time, this is a contested worldview.

Guidance in what has become an increasingly incomprehensible world is often found by consulting the past to understand why things have turned out the way they are. Seeking advice from records that can reconstruct the past of a nation or society, people turn to (national) archives where these are usually stored. They look for a past preserved in records they perceive as containing sound knowledge, an act that lends stability in dynamic times. Despite the solid appearance of archives – vast buildings – they are neither stable nor static. On the contrary, the archive is just as dynamic as the world that surrounds it, as will be shown in this chapter.

With reference to the dynamic nature of records, I argue, firstly, that archives are in fact inherently dynamic and, secondly, that power relations constitute another kind of dynamics active in the archive. Thirdly, I show why it is important for people working in and with the archive to consider and understand these dynamics in order to keep the archive dynamic.

I.   The Inherent Dynamics of the Archive: Records in Motion

For a very long time, archives were considered static and persistent claims that arose early on about archival principles are still sometimes seen today as undoubted truths.[1] Yet, a consideration of archival theory development with a special focus on the perception of records will show that archives are in reality inherently dynamic and why they will remain so.

Up until 1930, archives were usually perceived as buildings where records were stored and safeguarded by archivists. Primarily concerned with government and administrative records

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[1]   Michelle Caswell, J.J. Ghaddar, "'To go beyond': towards a decolonial archival praxis," *Archival Science* 19, no. 2 (2019): 77–78.

from older periods, archivists highlighted the need to preserve the original order that supposedly represented a one-to-one relationship between records and their creating organization. Once the administrative body had no further use for these records, they were collected and preserved in mainly centralized archives, where they offered immediate access to the past. At least this was the feature attributed to historical records in the positivist approach to historiography common at the time, when the first archival guidelines, such as the so-called 'Dutch Manual' or the major treatise on archival theory by Hilary Jenkinson, were produced.[2] But radical societal and political change soon rendered modern records more complex than those from the earlier periods referred to in the first guidelines. More intricate administrative structures in an increasingly globalized world led to a flood of documents entering the archive, now making selection indispensable. Records were (re-)defined according to their value, justifying appraisal of some and the destruction of others perceived as less valuable.[3] Theodore R. Schellenberg, for example, pointed to their secondary value, i.e., the subsequent use of the sources by scholars, as a key aspect to be considered in the appraisal process by the archivist. In the long run, this led to the fundamental recognition that archivists and their selection processes ultimately alter the sources, which in turn has serious implications for the writing and interpretation of history.[4]

The surge in global democratic tendencies after World War II altered the ways of dealing with the past and telling history. Beginning in the 1960s, scholars across disciplines with "a postmodern suspicion of the historical record"[5] reconsidered the notion that there is no unmediated access to the past. Rather, records allow us to see that certain people, usually those in power, perceived the world through a subjective lens. In other words, records represent only one possible interpretation of the past and are by no means neutral or innocent, but a product of their time.[6] They are representations of 'truths' deemed to be accurate at the time, but not necessarily valid today. By reinterpreting sources and retelling the past with multiple perspectives and narratives that were – in a postmodern sense – equally 'true', scholars adapted to social change and ultimately altered the sources, adding a new contextual layer of meaning to them by stating what they did not tell.[7]

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[2]   Terry Cook, "What is Past is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas Since 1898, and the Future Paradigm Shift," *Archivaria* 43 (Spring 1997): 20–26.

[3]   Cf. Cook, "What is Past is Prologue," 26; and the chapter on values of the archive.

[4]   Schellenberg discerned a primary value in records relevant to their creator and a secondary value attributed to their subsequent use by scholars; cf. Cook, "What is Past is Prologue," 27–29. See also Sue McKemmish, "Placing Records Continuum Theory and Practice," *Archival Science* 1, no. 4 (2001): 346–55; and the chapter on archives and their actor networks.

[5]   Marlene Manoff, "Theories of the Archive from Across the Disciplines," *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 4, no. 1 (2004): 14.

[6]   Cf. Giulia Battaglia, Jennifer Clarke, and Fiona Siegenthaler, "Bodies of Archives / Archival Bodies: An Introduction," *Visual Anthropology Review* 36, no. 1 (2020): 11–12. See also Manoff, "Theories," 14–16.

[7]   Ibid, 13; e.g., Michelle Caswell, *Archiving the Unspeakable: Silence, Memory, and the Photographic Record in Cambodia* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2014), 16–17. For a more detailed consideration of postmodern approaches in the archive, see Tom Nesmith, "Seeing Archives: Postmodernism and the Changing Intellectual Place of Archives," *The American Archivist* 65, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2002): 25–29.

This development and new media in the form of comic books, films and photographs that entered the archive as a result of the scholarly focus on society and everyday life, and the surge in electronic records following rapid digitalization has called into question the mere physicality of the records that archivists supposedly safeguard and has caused massive changes in the perception of records as a whole.[8] By the 1990s, archivists were actively debating established theories and practices, and gradually began to recognize the dynamic nature of records and incorporate this into archival practice. One approach is the so-called 'records-continuum-model', an ideal way of showing tendencies in the reconsideration of the nature of records and archival principles in general.[9] Instead of focusing on the fixed nature of records as earlier approaches concerned with their content and informational value were wont to do, this model focused on the intent and functionality of records, emphasizing their dynamic nature and thus the changes in meaning and use evoked by the contextualization of the records as pointed out above. Frank Upward, strongly influenced by international discourse, and Sue McKemmish suggested a model of interrelated concentric circles encompassing the stages through which records travel:[10] Records are *created* and show traces of contexts referring to social and organizational activity; they are then *captured* as evidence, meaning they are dis-embedded from their immediate context of creation and made usable for several purposes outside of the creating organization; records are *organized* into record systems as memory, and thus stored in an archive; lastly, they are *pluralized* as collective archives or memory, and (re-)used by archive users for multiple purposes.[11] The representation of these 'stages' in circles points to the notion that they do not proceed in a linear process and that not every single record travels through all stages, as studies using and elaborating on this model have been able to show.[12] But herein lies its strength. The circles are deeply intertwined and interrelated, rendering the context of the records multidimensional and ever-changing. Although the content and structure of a record may be fixed, "in terms of its contextualization, a record is always in a process of becoming".[13]

This seemingly complicated model, which can only be touched on here, focuses on one thing: the human activity involved in each of these processes.[14] As scholars have long since

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[8]   Cf. Cook, "What is Past is Prologue," 40–43. See also McKemmish, "Placing Records Continuum," 336–340.

[9]   Although this example alone is certainly insufficient to incorporate all of the newly defined approaches, e.g., the macroappraisal acquisition strategy, David Bearman's influential study on electronic records, the general reconsideration of provenance in Canada and Australia, and much more. For an overview, see Cook, "What is Past is Prologue," 30–43.

[10]   Cf. McKemmish, "Placing Records Continuum," 335–45. For a full consideration of the continuum-scholarship, see Heather Ann Soyka, "Records as Force Multiplier: Understanding the Records Continuum as a Framework for Examining the Role of Records in a Community" (PhD diss., University of Pittsburgh, 2015), 40–55.

[11]   Caswell, *Archiving the Unspeakable*, 12–13. Cf. McKemmish, "Placing Records Continuum," 335–36.

[12]   Caswell elaborates the principle by referring to the social life of records approach that, according to her, makes it usable, exemplified by her study of Tuol Sleng mugshots. See Caswell, *Archiving the Unspeakable,* 14–22.

[13]   McKemmish, "Placing Records Continuum," 335.

[14]   Caswell, *Archiving the Unspeakable*, 13. Soyka describes the influence of Anthony Giddens's structuration theory on continuum thinking, which centres it around human activity. See Soyka, "Records as Force Multiplier," 48–50.

recognized, however, human activity is always subjective and "consciously or unconsciously influenced by cultural and social factors"[15], meaning that the contexts assigned to records are likewise always subjective. This has had profound implications for archival principles and practice: The concept of provenance, once referred to simply as the origin of a record, preserves the record's contexts and should be included in the description process in order to understand the subjective lens through which the record in question was initially created.[16] The concept of custody was redefined accordingly, since the archivist plays an active role in altering the records via subjective selection, description and cataloguing processes. As already mentioned, scholars who use records add a new subjective layer of meaning by interpreting them. And it has recently been said that the subjective contexts of the diverse record uses – ranging from evidence and background information for entertainment to education at exhibitions – must also be preserved[17]; in short, this calls for interrogation of the "semantic genealogy" of all the "social, cultural, political, religious contexts of record creation, maintenance, and use".[18]

The responsibility of the archivist, then, is to preserve these contexts, actively knowing that they are subjective, to carry their meaning through spacetime in order to make them accessible to a future society that, because it is ever-changing, will probably use them for different purposes according to their own (dynamic) needs.[19] This refers to a changed perception of the function of the archive as a whole and points to the power dynamics involved, which will be explored in the next chapter. But for now, one thing is important to notice: If records and their contexts are dynamic, as has been shown, then the archive, which is comprised of an ensemble of records, is by nature *inherently dynamic* as well. And if this holds true, archival theory and practice – as the short reference to the development of the perception of records illustrates – are also *inherently dynamic* and always subject to change because the world and its people are and will continue to be dynamic. Furthermore, this re-consideration of records was and still is an international, interdisciplinary endeavour, which it has to be, since society is multifaceted. As Terry Cook reminds us, "what is past is prologue"[20]: truths – even seemingly established truths codified in archival theories and principles – do not hold true forever due to the intrinsic dynamics involved in society, and should thus constantly undergo critical reflection in order to understand and adapt to these inherent dynamics of human activity, of which the archive is a product and at the same time a source for its analysis.[21]

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[15]   Eric Ketelaar, "Tacit Narratives: The Meanings of Archives," *Archival Science* 1, no. 2 (2001): 136.
[16]   Cf., for example, Cook, "What is Past is Prologue," 35–40.
[17]   Cf. e.g., Caswell, *Archiving the Unspeakable*, 20–25.
[18]   Ketelaar, "Tacit Narratives," 141.
[19]   Cf. McKemmish, "Placing Records Continuum," 346–50, and Ketelaar, "Tacit Narratives," 140–41.
[20]   Cook, "What is Past is Prologue," 43–49.
[21]   Cf. Grimsted who concludes her study of the ideological underpinnings of archival theories in Russia by stating: "Archives may well be perceived as a mirror of a society as well as a mirror of the past"; Patricia Kennedy Grimsted "Lenin's Archival Degree of 1918: The Bolshevik Legacy for Soviet Archival Theory and Practice," *The American Archivist* 45, no. 4 (Fall 1982): 440.

II.   Records on the Move: Considering Displaced Archives and Power Dynamics

That the institution archive is indeed a product of its time and thus not stable can perhaps best be shown by the fact that records are not only in motion metaphorically, they are physically on the move, too. The complete archive of the German foreign ministry, for example, was transferred to the United States after World War II and hence displaced from its origin of creation. The Allies and Germany fought over the righteous ownership, a dispute that remained unresolved until the 1950s, when the first calls to return the files were answered but negotiations continued until the 2010s.[22] Similarly, many colonial administrations took records created in the colonies back to the 'mother country' after decolonization and numerous calls for repatriation have since been made. This is especially true for the once vast British Empire as well as for France and many other, mainly western states that deprived, for example, Indigenous peoples in Africa of their land and their history.[23] Since records as static objects cannot physically move on their own, the displacements and subsequent often long-term disputes over the righteous ownership point to the different values attributed to the archive and the power relations involved that caused the movement in the first place. These, too, constitute another kind of dynamics involved in the archive.

Displaced archives, defined as "removals that are arguably not illicit thefts but somehow legitimized or defensible by virtue of the fact of their being removed"[24], are evidence of the uneven distribution of power in the creation of records, archives, history and memory.[25] In the case of colonial archives, for example, the colonizers collected information on the colonized, incorporating their imperialistic and racialized view into the records at the moment of their creation, effectively silencing the colonized. They then used the records to confirm their perceived supremacy and their own identity as distinct from the colonized "other", as a number of scholars have already discovered.[26] Hence, they were of huge value to them. At the same time, by taking these records, the people they had colonized were deprived of the chance to engage with the records, prevented from holding the former colonial administration accountable for certain crimes and, especially, foreclosed the telling or retelling of history from their perspective. Consequently, the records are crucially important to them, too. The value of the records affects questions of national boundaries, which are increasingly being discussed and

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[22]   Astrid M. Eckert, *The Struggle for the Files: The Western Allies and the Return of German Archives after the Second World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 1–12.

[23]   In general, cf. James Lowry, "Introduction: Displaced Archives," in *Displaced Archives*, ed. James Lowry (Oxfordshire/New York: Routledge, 2017), 1–11. For a specific example of a displaced archive in a colonial context, see Todd Shepard, "Making Sovereignty and Affirming Modernity in the Archives of Decolonisation: The Algeria-France 'Dispute' between the Post-Decolonisation French and Algerian Republics, 1962–2015," in *Displaced Archives*, ed. James Lowry (Oxfordshire/New York: Routlegde, 2017), 21–40.

[24]   Lowry, "Introduction," 4.

[25]   This finds expression in Michel-Rolph Trouillot's concept of how silences become embedded in the archive, which he concludes is a result of uneven power relations, cf. Caswell, Ghaddar, "'To go beyond'," 76. For a short overview, see Caswell, *Archiving the Unspeakable*, 10–12.

[26]   Caswell, Ghaddar, "'To go beyond'," 77–79.

redefined, rendering such issues highly political, since they tend to revolve around who has the legitimate authority to interpret history.[27] The various contexts associated with the colonizers and the colonized complicate repatriation because different people attach different values to the records, using them as evidence or for purposes of memory and identity.[28] In many instances, the former colonizing countries justify solution delays with the security of the state and the protection of the records themselves, indicating in turn the perpetuation of old power relations.[29]

Numerous cases of displaced archives remain unresolved even today and evidence the power relations still at work within mainly national archives and how persistent they seem to be. There are even intranational claims, as in the case of Portugal, whose autonomous region of Madeira requested the central government "to transfer archival holdings to their local communities".[30] Hence displacement as such is characteristic of every archive. Centralizing a national archive can lead to the removal of sources from local communities, leaving the latter with no immediate access to consult them, to write their own history, and ultimately to form their own identity, which may well differ from the state perspective.

The centralized national archive model was developed during the revolutionary period in France and spread throughout Europe. It is frequently used to describe the heroic story of the creation of national archives as encompassing democratic accountability of the state, as Caswell says. However, Caswell and other archival scholars have since revealed the imperialist, nationalist and colonial underpinnings that were incorporated into the institution archive at that time.[31] James Lowry has pointed to the early infrastructure that served the state as a mechanism to control its people;[32] Eric Ketelaar noted that even archival buildings and their methods of surveillance and control are products of those earlier power relations at a time when archives were primarily designed, used and controlled by the government as a method of collecting information about its people and of holding them to account.[33] That this notion was likewise embedded in the records has already been discussed. Thus, imperialism, colonialism and racism prevail in archival studies to a greater degree than is usually recognized, rendering the heroic

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[27] Cf. Lowry, "Introduction," 5. The case of the files removed from Germany, for example, was in essence also about disputes over the interpretation of (German) history, see Eckert, *The Struggle for the Files*, 3.

[28] This aspect will be more thoroughly discussed in the chapter on values of the archive. For a short consideration of archive values, see Lowry, "Introduction," 1–2.

[29] Cf. e.g. Eckert, *The Struggle for the Files*, 4–5. See also Ketelaar, who speaks about the perpetuation of these arguments within archival institutions, which are thus still exerting (imperial and colonial) power by surveillance, rituals and discipline. He characterizes these arguments as "rationalizations of appropriation and power"; Eric Ketelaar, "Archival Temples, Archival Prisons: Modes of Power and Protection," *Archival Science* 2, no. 3/4 (2002): 221–238, especially 235–36.

[30] For ongoing disputes cf. James Lowry, "Disputed Archival Claims: An International Survey 2018/2019. Report to the International Council on Archives' Expert Group on Shared Archival Heritage," International Council of Archives, accessed March 19, 2020, https://www.ica.org/en/disputed-archival-claims-an-international-survey-20182019, 5–38. For the Portuguese case cf. 13–15, quote 13.

[31] Caswell, Ghaddar, "'To go beyond'," 77–78.

[32] Lowry, "Introduction," 2.

[33] Ketelaar, "Archival Temples," 221–238.

story of the archive a myth that calls for deconstruction and consequently consideration of the history of the institution itself.[34] As the examples of displaced archives show, power in the archive is dynamic rather than stable. Sources such as the Nazi files, originally used to identify certain groups of people for extermination, were later used to hold the regime accountable for war crimes and continue to be used to make sense of the past and construct societal values, distancing society from the crimes committed. Power has shifted from the state to the people, a manifestation of dynamic processes around the world, many of which led to (developing) democratic tendencies. Today, this justifies the existence of archives. They have undergone a sea change from a juridical-administrative institution centering the state to a socio-cultural model where society and thus public use and public policy take centre stage, making it possible to hold governments accountable.[35] That being said, certain circumstances, notably access, are a prerequisite.

As Michelle Caswell among others has claimed, a theoretical consideration of these problems is no longer enough. Action is needed in what she calls a "radical decolonial praxis", in order to change these power relations.[36] The latter are currently stable in some cases and, with reference to the first part of this chapter, arguably incapable of accurately representing a dynamic society now aware that access to cultural heritage relates to human dignity and human rights.[37] Consequently, archivists bear a heavy social and democratic responsibility. Instead of being passive keepers of both records and a position of power, given that they once held sway over the records and their subjects, archivists must use this power to empower others by providing *access*, the key to finding solutions to displaced archives.[38] Access distribution or the sharing of copies occasionally offered solutions by embracing social dynamics such as electronic records. But the complex contexts and values assigned to records in these disputes make solutions complicated endeavours and indicate the need for a case-by-case evaluation that can only be achieved by action. As a first step, the context of records that have physically travelled needs to be considered theoretically, for example by defining displaced archives in scholarly unison across disciplines, but also by changing practices: The archivist's neutral custodial role should be redefined as a postcustodial role that sees the constant shift in their meaning rather than their physicality as the most important aspect of the records they preserve. Since custody "only serves an archival purpose in the long term if it accommodates the people and events to whom the records relate as well as the collective memory that the records foster"[39],

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[34]   Caswell, Ghaddar, "'To go beyond'," 78.
[35]   Cook, "What is Past is Prologue," 43–44.
[36]   Caswell, Ghaddar, "'To go beyond'," 71–85.
[37]   Ketelaar, "Archival Temples," 230–31.
[38]   Lowry, "Introduction," 6–8; Ketelaar, "Archival Temples," 238. Jeanette A. Bastian therefore argues for making access an integral part of the concept of custody and discusses a postcustodial role in detail; Jeannette A. Bastian, "Taking Custody, Giving Access: A Postcustodial Role for a New Century," *Archivaria* 53 (Spring 2002): 76–93.
[39]   Bastian, "Taking Custody," 91.

archivists need to understand that they are no longer required to protect the record for state purposes, but rather as an obligation to society.

The catalogue is the primary key to access.[40] Its record descriptions facilitate finding the records required, whether in a physical or electronic environment. Preserving the various contexts of the records was a first step in this direction, albeit they sometimes preserve the power dynamics involved by including western cultural prerequisites: the written word remains dominant, although some cultures preserve their history orally; language barriers between former colonizers and those they colonized, for example, should be effectively countered in the description process; finally, electronic distributive access needs to consider whether or not Internet is available in the first place. In short, a postcustodial role takes into account all aspects of the record creating communities.[41] This can only be achieved by actively engaging with the communities in question, whether it is to understand their view of older records and incorporate their voices into history or to actively create new sources by including them in the description process. This is what alternative conceptions of archives, such as community or participatory archives, have recently tried to do. By engaging with Indigenous people and distributed electronic access, they have in some cases successfully altered the relations of power, making them dynamic and thus more representative of modern times.[42]

Conclusion: Keeping the Archive Dynamic

Records in a dynamic format such as electronic records have the power to open up new avenues to the archive, but they also carry risks: issues related to ownership of the records vis-à-vis the server concerned and who ultimately has the power to delete them is just one example.[43] Archivists are bound to protect these records, confirming their role as safekeepers – not for the state, but for a broader, international society, enabling it to hold the state accountable if the need arises. Even democratic states, as the recent resurgence of nationalistic and white supremacist rhetoric reminds us, are not stable. On the contrary, they are subject to change and thus require the active engagement of their citizens. The archivist's societal role, then, and that of people who engage with the archive in order to educate others about the past and furnish society with knowledge, is highly political and should be recognized and embraced as such.

The various contexts of the records – their creational, custodial, management and usage history – must be studied thoroughly and preserved in the description, because they will not be considered accurate forever and could well be challenged by a future society that has the power

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[40]   Lowry, "Introduction," 8.
[41]   Bastian, "Taking Custody," 80–81, cf. 91–92.
[42]   For a detailed study with examples of participatory archives, including and using participatory description, see Lauren Haberstock, "Participatory description: decolonizing descriptive methodologies in archives," *Archival Science* 20, no. 2 (2020): 125–138. For a thorough consideration of community archives and how they change access possibilities, see the chapter on values of the archive.
[43]   Manoff, "Theories," 13.

to impose different requirements on the archive according to its needs. Much the same is true for archival theory and practice, which constantly need to be reconsidered in order to ask questions of power and its function within the archive. All of the real and potential changes mentioned here are certainly not the last of their kind. Since the world is dynamic, they are a mere precursor of what is still to come. Such considerations must therefore precede the selection process in the archive, extending the archivist's role from simply a safekeeper to an active creator of sources outside the archive, as well.

Consequently, only if archivists and users of archives are aware of these dynamics, can they – in an interdisciplinary, international and intercultural endeavour – succeed in making the archive a place that adequately reflects our modern times, thereby extending the archive into the future. If the role of the archivist is to remain relevant, the archive as a subjective product of human activity needs to engage with current dynamics, actively embracing and incorporating them into archival work. Only by preserving the meaning of the past as we see it in the present, with all its subjective implications and interpretations, will future generations be able to do the same and in turn adapt to dynamic processes we cannot even imagine yet, again preserving the meaning of the past for the future. This approach makes the archive and its meaning infinite – but it can only be achieved by considering and embracing the dynamic roles of the people who work in and with the archive.

What needs to be done, then, is to keep communicating, to keep engaging, to keep questioning established theories, practices and truths, to keep adapting to the dynamics of modern times; in short, to do one thing: keep the archive dynamic!