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Review of Archival Futures

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Caroline Brown, ed. *Archival Futures*. London: Facet, 2018.

For a profession primarily in the business of the past, archivists have long been obsessed with assessing how technology and larger societal trends will shape our professional future. At least sixty articles referencing the “future” have been published in the primary association journals for the major archival organizations in the United Kingdom and Ireland, United States, Canada, and Australia since 1939. Half of those have been published just since 2000. In 1955, Sir Hilary Jenkinson gave a presidential address to the Society of Archivists (UK) titled “The Future of Archives in England” in which he discussed the larger societal changes that would affect the nature of archives and archivists alike.¹ Three years later, American archivist T. R. Schellenberg gave a talk at the Society of American Archivists’ annual meeting titled “The Future of the Archival Profession.” His observations of the current state of technology and proliferation still ring true, as he noted, “The future work of the archivist is determined by the character of the materials with which he will have to deal.”²

Archival Futures is the most recent addition to the body of literature on archival futurism. Published in 2018, the volume consists of nine essays, along with an introduction, from a variety of authors tackling the broad theme of “What does the future portend for archives?” Most of the authors in this volume address the impacts of technological trends on archives, including big data, blockchain, artificial intelligence, the decreasing costs of storage space, and the challenges of preserving the internet. The majority of the authors are academic lecturers or professors in the United Kingdom and Australia, with two authors from Canada and one from the United States.

The first chapter, by Kate Theimer, entitled “It’s the End of the Archival Profession as We Know It, and I Feel Fine,” concerns archival disruption and is adapted from a plenary address Theimer gave at the Association of Canadian Archivists’ 2016 conference. The essay is based on the work of Richard and Daniel Susskind, who suggest that technology’s disrupting effects on professional authority end in “externalization,” in which formerly exclusive professional work is made more accessible to the public. For example, one can now use tax preparation software instead of hiring an accountant. Theimer asserts that this is already happening to archives (pointing to the number of people using online digitized collections without setting foot in a reading room), but that change does not mean the end of archivists—though our roles and professional identities will be radically altered. Theimer envisions that archivists will continue to surface the untold stories of marginalized communities, and that we may work not for single institutions but across institutions based on topical areas.

Chapters 2 and 3 both invoke issues of trust and authenticity. Chapter 2, “Whose Truth? Records and Archives as Evidence in the Era of Post-Truth and Disinformation” by Luciana Duranti, discusses the role that records play in a “post-truth” world. Duranti argues that institutions that were formerly the arbiters of trust have been displaced by technologies such as blockchain, stating, “These institutions have been sidetracked by the internet and technologies like

¹ Hilary Jenkinson, “The Future of Archives in England,” *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 1, no. 3 (1956): 57–61, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00379815509513613>.

² T. Schellenberg, “The Future of the Archival Profession,” *American Archivist* 22, no. 1 (1959): 49–58, 53 (quotation), <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.22.1.9847r03011555688>.

blockchain are increasingly taking up their authenticating function” (22). She argues that the technology is “mostly used for land records, financial records and health records” (23) but does not provide any specific examples of institutions that have been displaced by blockchain, or on a practical level, how this would impact records repositories beyond general predictions of disruption. Duranti rightfully acknowledges that technological advances combined with cultural changes mean that even if “duty to document” legislation is passed for public entities, there are few avenues to enforce a mandate to create and preserve records.

The topic of blockchain technology reappears in chapter 3, “The Future of Archives as Networked, Decentralised, Autonomous and Global,” in which Victoria Lemieux considers the potential impact of decentralized, networked technologies on archives. One of the main examples cited in the essay is an InterPARES project dedicated to the preservation of “expiring digital signatures” and codenamed “TrustChain” (39). Stating that archives traditionally derived their authority from centralized hierarchical forms of knowledge and arrangement, Lemieux concludes that because decentralized technology is poised to create such significant changes, “archives and records professionals therefore must engage deeply with the computational to prepare for the future of archives” (43).

In chapter 4, “Can We Keep Everything? The Future of Appraisal in a World of Digital Profusion,” Geoffrey Yeo asks, “Can we—should we—try to keep everything, as many computing specialists now suggest?” (45). Citing the plummeting costs of storage for big data, Yeo argues that cost no longer drives retention decisions—and therefore we should embrace the previously anathema idea of total retention. While Yeo notes that privacy laws pose a barrier to such a policy, he does not acknowledge that total retention would also bring significant legal liabilities to institutions in many settings. Yeo argues that archivists should shift our sense of appraisal more toward “determining what records should be created . . . than with determining what records should be selected for preservation” (56). Echoing Lemieux’s admonition that archivists should evolve or risk marginalization, Yeo concludes, “We should not underestimate the intellectual and practical challenges these changes will bring, but investigating and embracing them must be the way ahead for the records profession as it faces the digital deluge of the 21st century” (58–59).

Chapters 5 and 6 consider how traditional archival practices hold up in contemporary recordkeeping environments. Jenny Bunn, in “Frames and the Future of Archival Processing,” asks how previously proposed solutions to the enduring problems of archival processing have framed archivists’ attitudes toward records. These enduring problems include the tradeoffs between human and automated processing, and processing that treats records as objects versus information. In “Access Technologies for the Disruptive Digital Archive,” Sonia Ranade calls for practitioners to rethink how access to digital archives is provided. Digital archives should be conceived of as major data sets, she argues, and this possibility allows users to work at scale across fonds: “Recognising that digital archives are also data opens up the potential to compute over archival collections” (83). Ranade further observes, “We must embrace a range of disruptive technologies to build and provide access to an interconnected knowledge-base about our records” (92).

A deep engagement with archival ethics grounds chapter 7 by Barbara Reed, Gillian Oliver, Frank Upward, and Joanne Evans. In “Multiple Rights in Records: The Role of Recordkeeping Informatics,” the authors focus on how informatics can inform complex societal recordkeeping functions. The authors use a hypothetical case study of children in out-of-home care (i.e., orphanages or foster care), and how care leavers (those who experienced out-of-home care in childhood) can access records about their life experiences. This essay asserts that informatics builds on the Australian records continuum model, as it “connects recordkeeping practice to currents of social thinking” (103). This is an exceptional essay in the volume, examining a very real societal issue—the abuse and marginalization of vulnerable children—and considering how recordkeeping affects one’s lived relationships with institutions.

Chapter 8 by Michael Moss and David Thomas, “The Accidental Archive,” attempts to tackle one of the more complex questions in archival theory and practice—the archival nature of the internet. The authors open with this pugnacious provocation about the founder of the Internet Archive: “Brewster Kahle dreamed he could archive the internet, but in this chapter we will argue that he will wake up one day to find that the internet has archived him. Far from being an object that is archived, we will argue that the internet is itself an archive, but one which does not conform to the rules of archiving as we know them” (117). Stringing together a dizzying array of quotations from archivists, journalists, and scholars from various disciplines throughout the essay, Moss and Thomas arrive at the conclusion that the internet is an archive but is itself not capable of being archived with existing tools, because it is “constantly metamorphosing” and “too big and elastic,” and because “we are all inside the internet and it is hard to imagine how such an all-embracing organism could be captured” (121).

The final chapter of *Archival Futures* is ominously titled “The End of Archival Ideas?” In what is perhaps the most provocative essay in the volume, Craig Gauld draws on the work of philosopher Robert Rowland Smith by arguing that the “Age of Archival Ideas” has ended, having been eclipsed by the “Age of Information” (138). Gauld proposes that an “Age of Archival Ideas” largely flourished from the 1970s to the 1990s, and that all work since then—particularly in the realm of social justice and democratization of archives—has simply built on ideas originally formulated by such archival thinkers as Terry Cook, Verne Harris, Jeanette Bastian, and others.

It is reasonable to assume that technological change would be a major theme of any work on archival futures since it has such great bearing on the format, proliferation, and preservation concerns associated with records. In fact, looking at the literature on archival futurism, the very first article in the *American Archivist* with the word “future” in its title, from 1939, concerned the preservation and reliability of motion-picture technology.³ The shift from the printed record to the electronic record is arguably the most seismic shift in the history of the archival profession. But it is not just technology that charts the future. Social, political, and cultural shifts also shape the archival record and how archivists engage with the world around us.

Despite the allure of new technology, any meaningful consideration of the future obliges us to turn our gaze from the technical concerns about archival practice and the changing nature of

³ Dorothy Arbaugh, “Motion Pictures and the Future Historian,” *American Archivist* 2, no. 2 (1939): 106–14, <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.2.2.7kv56p4206183040>.

records to broader questions about the relationship among archives, archivists, and larger society. While *Archival Futures* considers the technical challenges of the future archival record, it does not adequately contextualize the role of archives within the future cultural, legal, or social landscapes. Examining these relationships demands looking at archival institutions, that is, archivists' workplaces. Archival institutions are dramatically affected by larger social and political forces. With a few minor exceptions, such as Gauld's reference to the "perilous financial situation" of public archives in the United Kingdom (145), most of the authors do not confront how the forces of neoliberalism have either destroyed funding for the staffing of galleries, libraries, archives, museums, and recordkeeping (GLAMR) institutions, or disincentivized institutions from hiring archivists (who, after all, rarely are centers of revenue creation). Perhaps Theimer's suggestion of archivists' working across institutions will become more prevalent—not due to lofty ideas of reconceptualizing our work but as part of the casualization of labor and the rise of the gig economy. As universities are gutted by years of falling investment in higher education, will they band together to hire one regional higher education archivist instead of several separate university archivists? It is hard to take seriously predictions of the archival future that do not acknowledge and grapple with the larger social, political, and cultural forces that affect the institutions employing archivists. If the biggest challenge we face is blockchain and large data, perhaps the future isn't so scary after all. From where I stand, with colleagues who have student loans far in excess of what their salaries can reasonably pay back, the future feels a bit more existentially bleak.

As I read *Archival Futures*, I was concerned by how serious political issues were treated—when they were addressed at all. Perhaps the most glaring omission from the authors' visions of the future is any meaningful engagement with climate change. Yeo is the only contributor who acknowledges environmental issues, commenting that "although high-performance computing and large-scale digital preservation have sometimes been viewed as environmentally unsustainable, computer scientists are actively developing new ways of reducing the environmental impact of technology" (52). But even this reduces the serious issue of the carbon footprint of large-scale computing to a single sentence, overlooking the massive body of literature on the questionable sustainability of modern computing, absent any massive decarbonization efforts.⁴ The authors who repeatedly invoke blockchain do not address the significant environmental impacts of the technology.⁵

There is often a "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" mentality prevalent within archival literature that warns archivists to learn the latest technology or risk extinction, which combines with the magical thinking that links professional development to employment stability. Unfortunately, this attitude is on display in many chapters in *Archival Futures*. But if, as we are so often warned, technological innovation will eventually replace much human labor, perhaps we should pivot from thinking that we can outrun the proverbial steam engine and ask instead what a workers' struggle within an archival future looks like. Is dignified and well-compensated archival labor possible if we are under pressure to work at scale with labor displacing

⁴ Wei Deng et al., "Harnessing Renewable Energy in Cloud Datacenters: Opportunities and Challenges," *IEEE Network* 28, no. 1 (2014): 48–55.

⁵ Jon Truby, "Decarbonizing Bitcoin: Law and Policy Choices for Reducing the Energy Consumption of Blockchain Technologies and Digital Currencies," *Energy Research and Social Science* 44 (October 2018): 399–410, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2018.06.009>.

technologies in a neoliberal world that does not prioritize funding public goods? At what point will we be complicit in laying ourselves off with the tools of automation?

Contrary to Gauld's claim that the "Age of Archival Ideas" has ended, I would argue that we are in a golden age of ideas—but that they are less about archives and more about archivists. Much of the work on the meaning and future of archival labor has appeared in American nonacademic venues, and much of it is written by new professionals, many of whom are archivists of color.⁶ While perhaps this explains its invisibility to the academically situated authors of *Archival Futures*, I would like to think that more than anything, the vibrant work on archival labor shows that the future of archival ideas is still flourishing—but it mostly exists outside of the gatekeeping boundaries of academic archival theory.

As noted above, many of the essays in *Archival Futures* conclude that archivists must embrace technology or risk even further marginalization from professional claims to recordkeeping authority. But given how search engines perpetuate stereotypes of people of color, how social media promotes violence against women, and how big data extends the potential for surveillance, we must ask whether we risk seriously compromising our archival ethics by uncritically embracing technology as a way of securing our future professional stake. While some of the authors acknowledge such ethical conundrums, the majority exhibit such credulousness, at times bordering on tech utopianism, that it suggests they have not examined the ramifications of the solutions they admonish their professional colleagues to embrace. This puts them at odds with many others in the profession; some of the richest literature on information ethics right now is coming out of archival studies as well as related fields of library and information studies.⁷

The archives profession is arguably unique among professions in that archivists aim to privilege the rights of those in the unknown future as often as we privilege the rights of those in the present. This sense is reflected in Schellenberg's comment on public records that "the property of the people must be faithfully preserved by its official custodians so that it may be used by future as well as by present generations."⁸ *Archival Futures* assures us that the future is likely full of technological change for archives. Ultimately, if we are to retain any credibility and trust,

⁶ Stacie Williams, "Implications of Archival Labor," On Archivy (blog), April 11, 2016, <https://medium.com/onarchivy/implications-of-archival-labor-b606d8d02014>; Stacie Williams, "All Labor Is Local," S. Williams (blog), November 13, 2016, <https://medium.com/@Wribrarian/all-labor-is-local-344963e33051>; Bergis Jules, "Confronting Our Failure of Care around the Legacies of Marginalized People in the Archives," Medium (blog), November 11, 2016, <https://medium.com/on-archivy/confronting-our-failure-of-care-around-the-legacies-ofmarginalized-people-in-the-archives-dc4180397280>; Jarrett M. Drake, "Archivists without Archives: A Labor Day Reflection," Medium (blog), September 2, 2016, <https://medium.com/on-archivy/archivists-without-archives-alabor-day-reflection-e120038848e>.

⁷ Jessica Vitak et al., "Identifying Women's Experiences with and Strategies for Mitigating Negative Effects of Online Harassment," in *Proceedings of the 2017 Association for Computing Machinery Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing, CSCW '17* (New York: Association for Computing Machinery, 2017), 1231–45, <https://doi.org/10.1145/2998181.2998337>; Safiya Umoja Noble, "Google Search: Hyper-Visibility as a Means of Rendering Black Women and Girls Invisible," *InVisible Culture* 19 (2013): 1–23; Bergis Jules, Ed Summers, and Vernon Mitchell, Jr., "Documenting the Now White Paper," 2018, <https://www.docnow.io/docs/docnowwhitepaper-2018.pdf>.

⁸ T. R. Schellenberg, *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1956), 231, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015071452539>.

we must hope that archivists won't lose sight of their professional ethics and values along the way.