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Review of Archives in the Digital Age: Preservation and the Right to be Forgotten by Abderrazak Mkadmi

Lydia Curliss

University of Maryland at College Park, lcurliss@umd.edu

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Abderrazak Mkadmi. *Archives in the Digital Age: Preservation and the Right to be Forgotten*. London: Wiley, 2021.

Introduction

Archives in the Digital Age: Preservation and the Right to be Forgotten attempts to broadly describe the current state of digital archival management practices. Throughout the book, the author delves into different concepts related to the lifecycles of archival documents, as well as the influence of big data, digital humanities, and social science methods on the archival field. While this book promises through its title to examine preservation in opposition to the right to be forgotten, it is not until the final chapter that the author really engages with this concept, and even then, in a limited scope.

The book aims to describe archival concepts and then build upon them with examples and use cases. In Chapter 1, Mkdami broadly defines multiple ISO (International Organization for Standardization) standards related to digital archival practices. He describes archives, particularly the “document,” and digital archives. He also conceptualizes the different steps and practices within the digital lifecycle related to archival processes of the “document.” In Chapter 2, the author goes into detail particularly about the methods and strategies employed by archivists working within digital contexts, emphasizing key computer technologies, software, and systems. In this chapter, Mkdami explicitly points to ISO standards, particularly ISO 14641, which covers electronic document management, ISO 14721 or the OAIS (Open Archival Information System), and ISO 19005, known as the PDF/A. In Chapter 3, the author describes and defines the field of digital humanities, emphasizing certain technologies in its history that have influenced and affected digital archival practice. Chapter 4 goes into some detail about big data and the influences and challenges it presents to current and future archival practices. Chapter 5 describes the conflict between big data and people’s right for their information to be forgotten. Overall, the focus of the book is more on the implications of digital technology on archiving and archival practice, especially for corporate and governmental contexts, than on the right to be forgotten.

Strengths and Critiques

A strength of this text is the descriptions and definitions related to ISO standards, digital practices, and some of the digital technologies employed in digital preservation and management. In particular, the book pulls from French and European examples that give a broader international context especially for those who are interested in understanding non-U.S. perspectives on these issues. Each of the chapters provide several helpful charts and diagrams that demonstrate these processes, methodologies, and technologies of digital preservation. For the reader who is interested in implementing some of these practices or interested in international standards related to archiving, one would not have to look any further.

One of the book’s most interesting points is in Chapter 4 when the author goes into depth about big data processing and preservation, especially in relation to the protection of personally identifiable information (PII). The author notes that one potential way to incorporate greater privacy in data management is to employ blockchain technology as the primary process. The author describes in detail the process of blockchains, noting the features that could make it a good

solution for big data management, as well as the history of its creation—particularly in relation to economics and cryptocurrency. This provides some compelling solutions to the challenges facing the preservation and management of digital archival documents and data. However, it presents some notable concerns. One of the main obstacles to implementing blockchain technology in digital archival practice is that it would require widespread verification and agreement on processes, as well as reliance on software that may be out of reach financially and technologically for many archival institutions.

The main critique of this text is in the fact that while the author talks broadly about digital preservation and management, many of the applications discussed are narrow in context. For example, many of the use cases, regulations, and contexts are primarily from French perspectives. While this is what the author is most acquainted with, it does bring into question the applicability or usefulness of these concepts outside of French and other European contexts. Additionally, the discussions around legal regimes or frameworks leave out the legal implications of these concepts in different locations. This seems like a misstep, as legal issues are contextual, and the non-differentiation makes it hard to know what laws are relevant in the U.S. The lack of examination of the differences between laws, regulations, and standards also causes some confusion throughout the text.

Another challenge of this book is its emphasis on business or governmental archives at the expense of other important kinds, such as local and community archives and the archives of educational institutions. By not explicitly stating what types of archives are under discussion, and by generalizing and using very technical business terminologies, the author might make it difficult for practitioners and students to fully understand how the concepts relate to their institutions.

Preservation vs. the Right to be Forgotten

While the author develops a good argument for the preservation practices and challenges in the digital era, the concept of the right to be forgotten is only barely touched upon. This concept is not new to the archival field, and in fact, the issues around erasure of records or information on the internet have been a significant topic in European law since 2014.¹ It is not until Chapter 5 that the author points to the first legal concepts of this idea within French legal precedent, with the rights for users to determine what happens to their personal data. While big data is an important context for the right to be forgotten, Mkadmi leaves out other contexts where this concept may be applied, such as cultural materials, personal papers, or other related archival documents.

As the author addresses, one of the main concerns around the right to be forgotten is a legal one. In Jasmine E. McNealy's 2012 law review article, she describes the balance legally between newsworthiness and the cost to an individual when information is not removed from the public eye.² Researchers have also approached this issue in other contexts. De Baets's 2016 article describes a historian's perspective in relation to the European Commission's proposed policy, eventually determining the right to be forgotten has the possibility of rewriting history in ways that

¹ Ashley N Vavra, "The Right to Be Forgotten: An Archival Perspective," *American Archivist* 81, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2018): 100–11.

² Jasmine E. McNealy, "The Emerging Conflict between Newsworthiness and the Right to Be Forgotten," *Northern Kentucky Law Review* 39, no. 2 (2012): 119–36. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2027018>.

could be harmful for future records.³ This topic has also been explored, especially among BIPOC communities who have throughout history continually had their histories erased and have fought for the rights to be in control of their own information and stories within archival records and practice.⁴ However, Mkdami does not mention any minority or BIPOC communities or the implications of digital preservation for them.

These concepts have also been an ongoing topic in digital humanities, information science, and data literature since the rise of the internet and digital spaces. Christine Borgman initially addressed many of these infrastructural concerns and needs in her 2007 book *Scholarship in the Digital Age: Information, Infrastructure, and the Internet*. This book at the time was prominent in influencing digital humanities and by extension archival practice, as well as addressing the incoming “data deluge” expected with increasing internet use.⁵ While Mkdami builds on these concepts by talking about big data and related preservation, this is not a new concept. Additionally, while his discussion of preservation provides a great amount of depth, the book would have been stronger had he interwoven more continuously the concept or dichotomy of the right to be forgotten.

Conclusion

While this book has a narrower scope than one would assume from its title or marketing copy, it has the potential to be useful for the right audience. In general, this text would be a useful resource for a student or archival practitioner interested in gaining introductory knowledge to some of the concepts and policies around digital archival practices. Additionally, this could provide a useful resource for someone on the more technical side who is engaging with or creating an archival system designed to deal with big data or long-term preservation. In both cases, this book would be more useful for those in European or other international settings rather than a strictly U.S context. While this book may not provide an especially deep discussion of the right to be forgotten, it does provide a useful starting place for that conversation, especially as it pertains to big data and personal data. Though none of the concepts within this book are particularly novel, it would provide helpful introductory information to someone less familiar with these topics.

³ Antoon De Baets, “A Historian’s View on the Right to Be Forgotten,” *International Review of Law, Computers & Technology* 30, no. 1-2 (2016): 57–66. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600869.2015.1125155>.

⁴ Joyce Gabiola, Gracen Brilmyer, Michelle Caswell, and Jimmy Zavala, “‘It’s a Trap’: Complicating Representation in Community-Based Archives,” *American Archivist* 85, no. 1 (March 2022): 60–87. <https://doi.org/10.17723/2327-9702-85.1.60>.

⁵ Christine L. Borgman, *Scholarship in the Digital Age: Information, Infrastructure, and the Internet* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).