

*The Archival Edge Revisited: Reflections on the Purpose of Archives in the Digital Era*¹

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I'd like to start by noting that over the past ten or fifteen years, I feel like I've been a wandering prophet, calling on archivists to pay attention to digital records. A friend expressed concern that my message was a bit too apocalyptic: if archivists don't step up to the plate, some other profession would replace us. And I firmly believe that letting others take on archivists' work could be a grave tragedy, because they may not share archivists' knowledge and values of records. I'm happy to say that I think the profession is making progress. Most archivists I meet are aware that they have to adapt to the future – well, actually, the present.

This group doesn't need that speech. You're doing the work. Moreover, it's likely many of you have more current experience working with digital records than me. Thank you for being willing to tackle a hairy problem, for taking risks, and for being creative.

Which leads me to a question, if not my standard stump speech, what to talk about? Today, I'd like to wax philosophical and ask, what is the purpose of archives? I've had some ideas running through my head the past several years. Teaching, reviewing the literature, talking to people, has got me rethinking my assumptions about archives. I may not have answers, but I have some opinions that I hope will be food for thought.

Nearly two hundred years ago, in 1838, Alexis de Tocqueville observed that in the still-new United States, historical records were in chaos. “No methodical system is pursued; no archives are formed; and no documents are brought together when it would be easy to do so. Where they exist, little store is set upon them.”² Not quite 200 years later, Gerald Ham asked his famous question, if appraisal is so important why must we do it so badly?³

Ham's challenge is buried in the end of his article, “The Archival Edge.” He calls on archivists to do the impossible: to step outside the mainstream, to get a liminal perspective from the edge in order to get a better sense of what was important, what needed to be preserved.

¹ I wish to acknowledge conversations about these ideas and comments on this paper several colleagues have offered me, including Mark Greene, Ken Thibodeau, Rand Jimerson, Paul Conway, Seth Shaw, and Amy Cooper-Cary. Not only are they brilliant, they are models of professional discourse, cheerfully – and respectfully – engaging, disagreeing, and exploring ideas. I also wish to acknowledge my students in Clayton State University's Master of Archival Studies program, who have reacted to, discussed, and provided many insights into my ideas.

I also wish to acknowledge two articles by Scott Cline that have informed my thoughts on archival ideals. “ ‘Dust Clouds of Camels Shall Cover You’: Covenant and the Archival Endeavor,” *American Archivist* 75:2 (Fall/Winter 2012), p. 282-296 and “Archival Ideals and the Pursuit of a Moderate Disposition,” *American Archivist* 77:2 (Fall/Winter 2014), p. 444-458.

² De Tocqueville, Alexis. *Democracy in America*, trans. Henry Reeve, with and original preface and notes by John C. Spencer, 3rd American ed. (New York: George Adlard, 1839), vol. I, p. 207. For a more complete discussion of the state of recordkeeping in nineteenth-century America, see William F. Birdsall, *The American Archivists' Search for Professional Identity, 1909-1936*, University of Wisconsin-Madison doctoral thesis, 1973.

³ Paraphrased. “The Archival Edge,” *American Archivist* 38:1 (January 1975), p. 5.
<http://americanarchivist.org/doi/pdf/10.17723/aarc.38.1.7400r86481128424>; checked 17 March 2016.

Where Ham called for archivists to think about appraisal, I want to ask a more fundamental question: why archives?, or put another way, what are archivists trying to accomplish through the process of acquiring, preserving, and providing access to records?

Here's my answer in a nutshell. I believe that the purpose of archives is to collect and provide access to records that document a complete, accurate, and authentic story of the past.

Frankly, I've been surprised at some of the pushback I've received when I've shared my thoughts with other archivists. One objection reminds me of archivists' reaction to the Jedi archivist, Jocasta Nu in *Attack of the Clones*. When Nu asserts that a planet didn't exist because it's not mentioned in the Jedi Archives, my friends and I tend to snigger a bit – they know archives don't have the resources to capture everything, that there are necessarily gaps.

Others dismiss the idea as some vestige of nineteenth-century positivism that runs counter to contemporary, postmodern ideas. In a nutshell, my friends argue that an archives can never be accurate (especially in telling a complete story), because people construct their own past. I'll own the critique that “complete and accurate” echoes a sense that with scientific analysis diverse people can come to a common understanding of the world.

In spite of those objections, some from friends much smarter than me, I'm sticking to my formula. First, let me stress “complete, accurate, and authentic” is an ideal. As an ideal, it has value as a guide star. Even more important, the guide star gives meaning to archivists' work, their role in society as custodians of meaning, and serves as a moral compass. My formula may not be perfect, but I would challenge someone dismissing it to suggest something better.

COMING TO TERMS

Given that my expression of archival purpose is short enough to be a tweet (with some room to spare), it's necessarily ambiguous. What, in fact, does “complete, accurate, and authentic” mean in more than 140 characters? Allow me to elaborate.

Record

Archives are primarily focused on records, as distinguished from libraries or museums and their collections of books or artifacts. The centrality and nature of records helps define, in my mind, the purpose of archives. Geoffrey Yeo offers an elegant and simple definition of a record as a “persistent [representation] of activities, created by participants or observers of those activities or by their authorized proxies.”^{4, 5}

⁴ Yeo, “The Concept of Records (1)”, p. 337.

⁵ I have not found a definition of ‘record’ that captures the nuances of all the ways the term is used in the literature, both practical and academic. I think Yeo comes very close, especially if the definition is understood to include a wide range of agents, actions, and objects. Ken Thibodeau, who has extensive experience working in federal recordkeeping and with electronic records, offers a

Yeo begins with an aspect of ‘recordness’ that I think is essential; records are persistent. The information they contain is fixed, is stable. What the record creator saw when the record was made will be essentially the same thing another person would see when referring to that record in five, fifty, or five hundred years.⁶

This notion of persistence or fixity is, in my mind, the “magic” of archives. It is an affordance that gives records and archives a quality of time travel by *objectifying* the past. The fact that the records do not change over time means that the future has a stable reference point to understand the past. Human memory is imperfect and can change over time, either through forgetfulness or an evolutionary recontextualization of the past based on subsequent events.⁷ Meanwhile, the record, as an object, has not changed.

This notion of a record objectifying the past is one reason that records may be submitted as evidence at trial. If the records meet certain conditions, they are considered reliable (in legal parlance) and are exempt from hearsay exclusion. The records must have been created at the time of an activity that was conducted on a regular basis, made by someone with direct knowledge of the activity, and created as part of a regular business process.⁸ The legal theory assumes that business records created under these conditions (and a few others) should be trusted because they reflect routine matters at hand when the record was created and, fixed at that time, the record would not be altered by subsequent matters.

Legal theory does not allow any and all records to be submitted as evidence. It recognizes that some records are not reliable, impartial traces of a routine activity.⁹ Rather their content may be biased in some fashion. Elizabeth Kaplan observes,

variation on Yeo’s definition: “a persistent piece of information that has a know relationship to an actor and action or activity.” Personal communication, 16 March 2016.

⁶ Records may be considered fixed, even if they change within limits. Photographs may fade, paper may yellow. In more extreme cases, duplication may result in greater loss; black-and-white microfilm of records may lose information encoded using color. The ephemeral nature of electronic records is forcing archivists to reconsider the limits of fixity and what it means in the context of long-term preservation. For example, format migration runs directly against the traditional notion of fixity as it substantially alters both the carrier and the software format. Ultimately, part of an archivist’s job is to understand the essential limits of what needs to be preserved and what can be lost. See Colin Webb, David Pearson, Paul Koerbin, “Oh, you wanted us to preserve that?!” Statements of Preservation Intent for the National Library.” *D-Lib* 19:1-2 (January/February 2013).

⁷ See W. Walter Menninger, “Memory and History: What Can You Believe?”, *Archival Issues* 21:2 (1996), 97-106. <https://minds.wisconsin.edu/handle/1793/45760>; checked 17 March 2016.

⁸ Wex (s.v. “business records exemption” (Legal Information Institute).

The Business Records Exception comes from Federal Rule of Evidence 803(6): [Records of regularly conducted activity . . .] made at or near the time by, or from information transmitted by, a person with knowledge, if kept in the course of a regularly conducted business activity, and if it was the regular practice of that business activity to make the memorandum, report, record or data compilation, all as shown by the testimony of the custodian or other qualified witness The term “business” as used in this paragraph includes business, institution, association, profession, occupation, and calling of every kind, whether or not conducted for profit.

⁹ Note that all information relevant to a case is discoverable, regardless of whether it meets some formal definition of record or whether it is admissible under the business record exemption to the hearsay rule.

The archival record doesn't just happen; it is created by individuals and organizations, and used, in turn, to support their values and missions, all of which comprises a process that is certainly not politically and culturally neutral.¹⁰

Even so, I would argue that all records are, ultimately, an objectification of the activity that created them. They transform intangible, fleeting activities into something tangible. However, that objectification does not mean that we can avoid questioning the nature of the creating activity or the content of the record. It's important to note that Yeo's definition says *nothing* about the trustworthiness or value of the record. The heart of 'recordness' is its persistence, and fixing the trace on some medium is what turns the content into an object.¹¹

How we understand the records may change over time, to the point that a record we consider trustworthy today may be found questionable in the future. Even so, yesterday, today, and tomorrow, historians and others can use records as the same, persistent, fixed starting point. We may argue about the meaning and significance of the acts recorded, but those disagreements (or agreements) can be firmly grounded by studying this object from the past and looking for reasons to affirm or challenge its content.

Complete

To underscore what I hope is obvious, the notion of "complete" is relative to an archives' mission, whether it is an institutional archives focused on its parent or a collecting archives focused on some topic. The mission of the Jedi Archives may be to document everything, but archives not so far away and not so long ago generally have more modest goals.¹²

An archives' holdings can never perfectly document the story of the past. Many activities leave no records, no persistent traces. Years ago, university archivists considered what records they needed to acquire to tell a complete story of their school. When they shifted the focus of appraisal from records to activities, they realized that a central component of the academic endeavor was almost entirely missing. Teaching may have consumed more time than any other activity, but the archivists found little trace of the actual classroom experience because the activity left no record. They often had course descriptions, syllabi, and occasional lecture notes,

¹⁰ Elizabeth Kaplan, "We Are What We Collect, We Collect What We Are: Archives and the Construction of Identity," *American Archivist* 63:1 (2000): 147

¹¹ Note: the medium may be virtual, such as an electronic record on disk or tape. Tangible media have a number of affordances that make them more trustworthy than virtual media; ranging from the relative longevity of most tangible media, such as a paper, to the greater easy to detect unauthorized changes to the record.

¹² Some time ago, a colleague objected to 'complete' as an impossible ideal. I suggested 'comprehensive' instead, but to no avail. A colleague reading a draft of this presentation suggested comprehensive, in part because 'complete' has specific connotations in diplomatics, while 'comprehensive' is more closely aligned with the notion of resources. For the moment, I will continue with 'complete', as I think its non-archival connotations are closer to my ideal.

but no substantial body that documented pedagogical styles, the nature of teacher-student dynamics, and the like.¹³

When considering those activities that do create records, most colleagues I've talked with tend to dismiss completeness out of hand, given limited resources. Resources are always a factor, but the ideal challenges us what to do the best we can with what we've got. I'll stick by the notion of completeness, but not in the sense that archives must collect everything. Rather, archivists should begin by strategically collecting sufficient records that tell a complete story at the macro level. Appraisal techniques based on sampling and the fat file methods will lose many details. As such, those techniques necessarily result in gaps, but they can provide the future with a reasonable overview.

As an ideal, I believe that completeness is an important part of an archivist's job, to consider what is – and is not – being captured, to look for gaps in the story and seek records that can help fill that gap.¹⁴ Ken Thibodeau tells the story of a series received at the National Archives that contained only twelve records. On investigation, the archivists discovered that the staff creating the records didn't like the system and found ways to work around it, even as they did their jobs.¹⁵ In my experience, early automated recordkeeping systems were so inefficient or frustrating that they must be evaluated with a critical eye.

The trick, of course, is that it's impossible to fill gaps if you can't see them. Archivists working in isolation see the past from their individual perspectives. They are humans with biases and blind spots. Yet, there's no reason that archivists need work alone. Moreover, I would argue that it's essential that archivists *not* work in isolation. Rather, they should build advisory groups to help. The members should be chosen specifically for different perspectives they bring to the table.

The ideal for a complete story of the past challenges archivists to make conscious decisions about what they are collecting, rather than by chance or without consideration. When I taught appraisal, I told my students that a collecting policy should articulate what success would look like, an outline that includes as many facets of the scope of collections as possible. That outline is more bullet points of building blocks than a fully constructed synthesis. As important, that collecting policy must be dynamic. It should be reviewed and revised on a regular basis to reflect changing understandings and priorities. It's unreasonable to expect archivists to create a perfect collecting policy at the get go. Rather, time itself adds perspective – and refinements – of subsequent generations to that policy.

¹³ Personal recollection of a workshop on documentation strategy led by Tim Erikson, Helen Samuels, and Richard Cox, presented at Arizona State University, ca. 1988.

¹⁴ Jeannette A. Bastian. "Flowers for Homestead: A Case Study in Archives and Collective Memory." *American Archivist* 72:1 (Spring - Summer 2009), pp. 113-132.

¹⁵ Personal communication, 5 March 2016.

As an aside, let me acknowledge a practical aspect of completeness, although I won't address it here. If archives are truly complete, they will include information that is private or sensitive. Archives may never be able to acquire these records because the record creator would rather destroy them or keep them in private custody. Patron access to such material may be restricted by law and ethics, which raises the question of why acquire records if they cannot be used. I'll summarize my response by saying that, as professionals, archivists are frequently called to use their professional judgment to find an appropriate balance by two conflicting imperatives based on the specifics.¹⁶

Accurate

Where my call for archives to collect records that document a complete story of the past may seem impractical, my call for archives to be accurate is more controversial, in large part because it raises the question of who determines what's accurate.

The *SAA Glossary* defines accuracy as “the degree of precision to which something is correct, truthful, and free of error or distortion, whether by omission or commission.”¹⁷ The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines accurate, in relation to information, as “exact, precise; conforming exactly with the truth or with a given standard; free from error.”¹⁸

When I call for archives to be accurate, I am focused on the records as the objectification of history. Does the information they contain conform to the activities described? That's the rub. To what extent can records – or a collection of records – document an accurate story of the past? Let me note that I am speaking of accuracy as part of an archival ideal to document an accurate story of the past. Assessing the accuracy of a specific record is a different question. In some cases it is essential to capture individual records that are inaccurate to tell a larger story accurately. Records that contain errors of fact may have significant evidential value, revealing flaws in the process that generated the record, flaws that resulted in poor decision making. These inaccurate records help provide information about what went wrong and why.

Again, my belief that people can “know” the world echoes nineteenth-century positivism. If two people differ in their understanding of the world, they would conduct experiments to determine what was correct. The scientific method and its requirement that it be possible to replicate results to better understand the world, what is accurate, is an example of this positivist attitude that the objective world is knowable. A consensual understanding of the world results from observations that reduce uncertainty over time through the accumulation of additional information.¹⁹ While

¹⁶ For an extended discussion, see Mark A Greene, “The Messy Business of Remembering: History, Memory, and Archives.” *Archival Issues* 28:2 (2003-2004), p. 95-103. <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1793/45954> (checked 3 March 2016).

¹⁷ Pearce-Moses. *Glossary*.

¹⁸ *OED Online* (s.v. “accurate”). Oxford University Press (March 2016). <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/1283?redirectedFrom=accurate> (accessed March 21, 2016).

¹⁹ Olivia Goldhil, “Many Scientific ‘Truths’ Are, In Fact, False. *Quartz* (13 March 2016). <http://qz.com/638059/many-scientific-truths-are-in-fact-false/>; checked 15 March 2016.

we cannot conduct experiments on the past, we can approach an accurate, consensual understanding of the world based on a consensus of records that reinforce each other by replicating separate observations.²⁰

By contrast, some notions of postmodernism run counter to that positivist belief that people can come to a consensual understanding of the world.²¹ Michael Fegan described postmodernism as questioning “Enlightenment values such as rationality, truth, and progress, arguing that these merely serve to secure the monolithic structure of modern . . . society by concealing or excluding any forces that might challenge its cultural dominance.”²² Fegan’s definition of postmodernism, which has been quoted in several articles, was posted to a discussion list that is no longer online or available in the Internet Archive. In fairness to him, it’s hard to assess his meaning without context, but for the moment allow me to take it at face value.

If we reject rationality, truth, and progress, what’s left? Do we embrace irrationality, lies and distortions, and whatever the reverse of progress is? Although a simplification, I understand that much of postmodernism assumes that people are so entrenched in their beliefs and perceptions that they construct their own reality. My call for archives to collect records that document a complete, accurate, and authentic story of the past, frankly, embraces rationality, truth, and progress and a belief that we can come to a consensual understanding of the world at some level.

Sometimes, a consensual understanding may be trivially obvious. Other times, it will be contentious and contested. We should always be skeptical of any consensual understanding, constantly asking questions. Even the trivially obvious may prove to be more nuanced on closer inspection. The pursuit of knowledge is an ongoing quest because we will never know what a complete, accurate, and authentic story of the past is. Even so, I believe those ideals keep us pointed in the right direction. We must look for records that can be used to replicate or discredit the stories of the world told in records so that we have some confidence in their accuracy. If we are not committed to reducing uncertainty about the world, we may be side tracked by conspiracy theories, propaganda, and ideologies based on fabrications and flawed evidence.

²⁰ Thomas S. Kuhn describes in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (University of Chicago Press, 1962) a process in which consensual understanding is replaced with a new, often radically different, understanding. His focus is not on the accuracy of the data, but how that data is understood. Often new data triggers a reinterpretation of existing data. Newtonian physics remains a reasonably accurate description of the physical world on human terms, although Einstein’s theories points to flaws in Newton’s formulae at relativistic scales.

²¹ As an aside, let me stress the phrase “some notions of postmodernism.” I use the term here as a foil to objectivism, but with reservation because it can mean very different things to different people. Elizabeth Kaplan observed “the definition of [postmodernism] can be as fraught with complications as the debate over postmodernism itself.” “ ‘Many Paths to Partial Truths’: Archives, Anthropology, and the Power of Representation.” *Archival Science* 2 (2002), p. 209. By contrast, Edward R. Friedlander describes “real postmodernism” as “a thoughtful study of the limits of scientific inquiry, the origins and perpetuation of unreasonable prejudices, and the ambiguities of language.” His essay is a reaction to what might be considered non-scientific, irrational, rhetorical excess, and he cites Fegan’s definition as an example. “Why I am no a Postmodernist” [webpage] (<http://www.pathguy.com/postmod.htm>, checked 8 March 2016).

²² Michael Fegan, 10 February 1998 posting to the Sociological Discussion Board, University of Arizona. Cited in Greene, “The Messy Business of History.” Fegan’s post as cited at <http://w3.arizona.edu/~soc/wwwboard/messages/33.html> (31 April 2005), is no longer active and not available through the Internet Archive.

Hilary Jenkinson firmly believed that archival records reflected past events accurately precisely because they were the result of a routine process. That routine made them impartial evidence of the past, which parallels the legal basis for admission of records as evidence I mentioned earlier.²³ Jenkinson argued against archivists selecting records for the archives precisely because it broke that impartial detachment from the past and altered the evidence by imposing the archivists' perspective.

I can't decide if I'm misreading Jenkinson, if English bureaucrats in the early twentieth century were impeccable models of good behavior, or if he was naïve to think that the record creators would never destroy anything that might be embarrassing (or worse). To that point, Ciaran Trace's article "What is Recorded is Never Simply 'What Happened'" describes factors that counter any notion of the record creators as impartial.²⁴

In part, I agree with the postmodern assertion that our understanding of the world is limited by our biases and cultural blinders. However, I believe that people have, in large part, a shared experience of the objective world. I also agree that the records, individually, are not perfectly accurate. But, I believe that records, when taken together, can document an accurate understanding of the past. Looking at specific activities using records from different series provides different perspectives, and helps us triangulate a reasonably accurate understanding of the past, if imprecise in some details. The reality that as humans we have imperfect knowledge of the world is obvious. However, what is more interesting is how we can overcome those limitations and get perspective to see that the world is not flat – as it would appear – but round.

The ideal of accuracy is important because it helps archivists find the middle ground, to find records that reflect activities as they happened. In 1944, George Orwell wrote an essay that argues the adage, history is written by the victors. He told of German radio lying to its listeners, telling them of devastating air raids in London in 1941 and 1942. In fact, the Luftwaffe was in Russia at the time, and the English knew those bombings did not take place. Yet Orwell makes the amazing statement, "If Hitler survives, they happened, and if he falls they didn't happen."²⁵ My call for accuracy is a call to acquire records that counter malicious revisionism, while supporting on-going, deeper understanding into the past.

²³ *A Manual of Archive Administration: Including the problems of War Archives and Archive Making* (Clarendon Press, 1922), p. 12, passim.

²⁴ "What is Recorded is Never Simply 'What Happened': Record Keeping in Modern Organizational Culture." *Archival Science* 2 (2002), p. 137-159.

²⁵ "As I Please," a regular column in the Tribune. (<http://alexpeak.com/twr/hiwbtw/>, checked 8 March 2016).

Authentic

My call for archives to acquire records that document an authentic story of the past is a bit tricky, as it's essential to distinguish authentic records from an authentic story of the past. Authentic records are generally described as those that are what they purport to be, that are genuine, not counterfeit, and free from corruption.²⁶ Although a bit of slang, the best definition of an authentic story of the past might be, "it's the real deal." It may be easier to use an extreme example to illustrate what authenticity is *not*. Raimund Goerler recounts Robert Flaherty's documentary film of Samoan life, a follow up to his very successful *Nanook of the North*.

His film, although accurate, had no drama and as a result had little entertainment value. To rescue the film from financial disaster, the producers insisted on adding a prologue and retitling the film. Released as *The Love Life of a South Sea Siren*, Flaherty's revised documentary opened with scenes of chorus girls in grass skirts. Shortly thereafter, Flaherty fled Hollywood.²⁷



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Flaherty's film certainly meets Yeo's definition of record. It is "a persistent representation of activities created by participants or observers of those activities." However, those activities were a performance different from what the film purports them to be. Although presented as a documentary, the film is not an authentic representation of Samoan culture, a fact that no doubt triggered Flaherty's reaction. It's a pastiche, with a prologue that is a falsehood, a fabrication, presented as though it were fact.

Recent, public discussions of symbols of the Confederacy in the South can provide a more nuanced example. On one side, many people see the stars-and-bars flag and statues of Confederate leaders as their heritage, something to be revered. At the same time, others see them as symbols of oppression, things to be reviled. Which is authentic? Who decides?

When I call for archives to acquire records that document an authentic story of the past, I am calling on them to focus on the facts of people and activities. *The Love Life of a South Sea Siren*, in isolation, is a fraud because it is not what it pretends to be. However, looking at the film in the context of other records that give background on the production, the film can be understood, ironically, as an authentic fraud. It is not an authentic documentary, but is of part of an authentic body of records of how Hollywood creates and markets films.

²⁶ Pearce-Moses, *Glossary*.

²⁷ Raimund E. Goerler. "Archives in Controversy: The Press, the Documentaries, and the Byrd Archives." *American Archivist* 62:2 (Fall 1999), p. 307–324.

²⁸ Nicola Smith. "A Lost Documentary Restored." *Valley News* (3 October 2014). <http://www.vnews.com/lifetimes/13788446-95/a-lost-documentary-restored>

Similarly, the archival ideal of authenticity is not a question of how symbols of the Confederacy are framed. Rather, the archival ideal is to build collections of records that provide raw data that demonstrate a variety of framings in context.

Building collections that document completeness and accuracy require archivists to have skills to assess the extent to which the activities and events conform to the objective world. Authenticity requires something even more difficult. Archivists must ask if the records are accurate, an intentional distortion, or merely erroneous? Are the records authentic, can they be trusted as a persistent representation of what really happened? Or, do the records purposefully skew events to conform to some ideology?

Which again raises the question, why would archivists acquire records that are not authentic, that are clearly skewed? And the answer is guided by the ideals of complete and accurate. *The Love Life of a South Sea Siren* represents an aspect of how commercialism is a driving force in Hollywood. The attitudes of those who would frame the Confederacy in terms of romantic ideals is as much a reality as the beliefs of those who see it as a repressive feudal system built on slavery.

For archivists, the question is not which understanding of the past is right or wrong. As individuals, archivists may have strong opinions about the past, but I believe that the ideal calls them to strive for a professional neutrality when they assess whether the records document a story that is authentic, is genuine and conforms to the past. That means that archivists must collect a variety of perspectives.²⁹

The ideal of neutrality distinguishes archivists from historians. Mark Greene observed that “History is interpretation.”³⁰ In my mind, neutrality echoes records’ objectification of the past. To the extent a record is created as a trace of some activity, rather than as a narrative that interprets the action, it makes no judgment about the activity. The same record can potentially take on different meanings when interpreted by others after the fact, but it remains persistent, a fact in itself. I believe the archival ideal of neutrality calls on archivists to respect the records as objective traces of the world and focus on that aspect, always looking for the facts rather than seeking to interpret them.

To be neutral, to be impartial, as I noted earlier, is nigh on impossible because individuals are often unaware of their biases. Kelly D. Kietur posted on the Archives and Archivists list, “Bias is implicit in everything; neutrality is a myth.” She continued with a quote attributed to Myles

²⁹ While completing the paper, a colleague notes that Hilary Jenkinson and Terry Eastwood used the word ‘impartiality’. That may be a better term and will be considered in a re-write. See Terry Eastwood, “Jenkinson’s Writings on Some Enduring Archival Themes,” *American Archivist* 67 (Summer/Winter 2004), p. 42. “Impartiality is Jenkinson’s word for the character of truthfulness archives have because the force of having to conduct affairs causes them to speak to the matter at hand, not to posterity.”

³⁰ “The Messy Business of Remembering: History, Memory, and Archives.” *Archival Issues* 28:2 (2003-2004), p. 95-103.

Horton, “Neutrality is just following the crowd. Neutrality is just being what the system asks us to be.”³¹

Even so, I believe that striving for professional neutrality – being self-reflective, resisting following the crowd – is essential. We start by acknowledging our personal biases as well as cultural blinders we are not fully aware of. We constantly challenge ourselves to understand what factors motivates our decisions. Are we telling a genuine story, warts and all, or are we constructing a story that spins the past into something more palatable?

When I call for archivists to acquire records that document an authentic story of the past, I’m calling on them to question whether their collections provide future users the information they need. Striving for collections that are complete and accurate can serve as a check on whether we are approaching the past with as much neutrality as we can muster.

By way of counter example, Bill Maher describes the “Disneyfication” of history, telling stories of the past that are selective rather than authentic, “evocations of the past [that] are part of an escapism that at the least assists the distraction of citizens away from the problems of the present and, at the worst, may be creating a mythical harmony to quiet dissent from conformity to current political and economic norms.”³²

Many writers have addressed the relationship between historians and archivists, especially as regards professional training.³³ Historians (and others) weave together information in archival records to synthesize an interpretation, to tell a story that helps us understand the past. By contrast, archivists acquire records that document the past, leaving the interpretation of the records to others. If archivists are to consider whether their collections are complete, accurate, and authentic, they must have some sense of the story of the past. Using neutrality as a guide star can help archivists walk that fine line, focusing on documenting facts as completely and accurately as possible, constantly looking for gaps and errors, to ensure that the records are authentic and as faithful to the activities as possible, rather than seeking records that emphasize one story over others.

Archivists as Custodians of Memory

Maher described archivists as “guardians of the ‘true’, or at least a truer, past that can only be discovered through examining and digesting both textual and nontextual documents.”³⁴ He continues,

³¹ “Re: Bergis Jules #blacklivesmatter voices was [archives] What inspires. . . .” Posted 11 August 2015.

³² William J. Maher, “Lost in a Disneyfied World: Archivists and Society in Late-Twentieth-Century America.” *American Archivist* 61 (Fall 1998), p. 259. The essay was Maher’s presidential address to the Society of American Archivists, presented at the annual meeting in Orlando, Florida.

³³ See Richard Stapleton, “Jenkinson and Schellenberg: A Comparison,” *Archivaria* 17 (1983), p. 75-85. William F. Birdsall, “The Two Sides of the Desk: The Archivist and the Historian,” *American Archivist* 38:2 (April 1975), p. 159-173.

³⁴ Maher, p. 261, 260.

Archivists preside over the past so that others may examine it; that is, that our mission is not to interpret the documentary record or limit it to one set of meanings. We should hold fast to the luxury that our goal is to manage the documentary record for use by others who will form their own opinion and picture of the past.³⁵

I passionately believe that archivists play a critical role in society as custodians of the past, paying attention to what needs to be remembered into the future. I believe that archivists have a privileged perspective because of the essential nature of records as objectifications of past activities. As such, I believe that archivists have an ethical obligation to consider the completeness, accuracy, and authenticity of the records they acquire.

My thoughts on what it means to be custodians of the past are ideals, which Scott Cline describes as “a conception of something that is perfect, especially that which one seeks to attain; a person or thing considered to represent perfection; something existing only as an idea.”³⁶ I’ll be the first to say that completeness, accuracy, and authenticity are unreachable ideals. However, I will not say that they are useless or impractical. To the contrary, ideals serve as a guide star, they inspire, they give us both purpose and direction.

Further, I’m concerned that if we perceive something as impossible, we’ll abandon it, without thinking about something to take its place. Unless we take time to reflect on our purpose, our actions and our collections will be random, little better than the state of American records de Tocqueville found in the nineteenth century.

Even as our ideals serve as guide stars, they also provide us with a liminal perspective. Imagine looking at ourselves, not from the trenches where we work, but from the position of that guide star. Ham’s reference to the archival edge comes from a line by Ed Finnerty, a character in Kurt Vonnegut’s *Player Piano*.³⁷ When someone suggests Finnerty, an eccentric nonconformist, see a psychiatrist, he replied:

He'd pull me back into the center, and I want to stay as close to the edge as I can without going over. Out on the edge you see all kinds of things you can't see from the center. . . . Big, undreamed-of things – the people on the edge see them first.³⁸

That notion of liminality is very much part of the monastic tradition, which explains – in part – why I think about it with a religious fervor. Monks withdrew from society to give themselves a better perspective on the secular world. In the same way, I think archivists should, at some level,

³⁵ Maher, p. 262.

³⁶ “Archival Ideals and the Pursuit of a Moderate Disposition,” *American Archivist* 77:2 (Fall-Winter 2014), p. 446.

³⁷ Ham, p. 13.

³⁸ Kurt Vonnegut. *Player Piano* (Rosetta Books, 2010), p. 84.

distance themselves from the reality they are documenting so that they can have a better perspective, to better assess if their collections are complete, accurate, and authentic.

I'll conclude by reiterating my assertion that it's essential that the archivists be able to articulate a moral compass that guides their actions. Me, I'm sticking with my belief that archives should acquire records that document a complete, accurate, and authentic story of the past. I won't argue that it's the best articulation of archival ideals. You may disagree. In fact, I hope you do, and I invite you to send me your comments. In many ways, the real value of the ideals is not the particulars of complete, accurate, and authentic. Rather, the real value is in thinking through those ideals, their implications, where they may be right or wrong, and how they could be better.

DRAFT