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Archives in liquid times

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Jaarboek 17

edited by

Frans Smit, Arnoud Glaudemans, Rien Jonker

Samenvatting

Archives are a reflection and a result of

what happens in society. This means that they also (re)present society's changes and dynamics. Today, archives are undergoing fundamental changes in every aspect that one might think of. Digitisation and globalisation are turning our world upside down and reshape it. The same applies for archives, the archival profession and archival science. Therefore, in the entitling of this book, we decided to follow the metaphor of sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (2006), who characterized contemporary society as being in liquid times. By this he meant that present-day (western) society is in such a state of dynamics that it is difficult to get a grip on life. All foundations are shaking. In our opinion, Bauman has a case in stating that it is the main feature of the period we are now witnessing and are living in. That is why you are now reading a book that has the title: "Archives in Liquid Times".

This book is inspired by several motivations and convictions. First, the editors are convinced that discussions and debates about archives in the digital age should become part of the broader discourse on information quality. This discourse should take place on several levels, for example on fundamental, conceptual and ethical issues. Our observation is that this integration is hardly happening. Archives and the archival community are in danger of being marginalised and 'doomed', when - and because of - losing connection to debates about for example the ethics of the internet and the development of data science. On the other hand, archival science's rich and detailed knowledge of the nature and function of records is hardly considered in fields like information science or philosophy. Building bridges between communities dealing with information quality is not a mere luxury - it is a necessity.

Our conviction is that paradigms and concepts that formed the basis of recordkeeping in the analogue world have lost their central place. Attempts to create a new paradigm or a new overall concept on archives in the digital information society have not yet been convincing. This reflects our liquid times, which the archival profession is also going through. The recent, extensive publication by Monash University tries to cover as much as possible research developments in the "Archival Multiverse" (Gilliland, McKemmish, Lau, 2016). In our view this multiverse itself is subject to radical changes regarding its own context, its subject matter, and its relevance to society.

Maybe we are all in the new landscape that Alessandro Baricco (2006) has described in his socio-cultural critique "I barbari". In his account we are witnessing a mix in which all former boundaries between for example high and low culture and between fields of research fall apart. Most importantly he argues that present-day society is not interested in "Why?" questions anymore, but only in "How?" questions. His Barbarians surf their network all the time trying to find correlations without wondering about a reason or explanation of their environment. This network is essentially very liquid.

Several years ago, the editors of this volume concluded that, as professionals and experienced practitioners, they were getting a little lost. In their daily work, they could not derive enough grip and guidance from their own archival silo of concepts and methods anymore. They were also curious if these might be found elsewhere. Therefore, they decided to try to open their doors and look for new answers. They decided to make this journey in the unknown by trying to connect to the information philosophy of Luciano Floridi. The next step was decided upon during a lengthy discussion over some excellent Belgian beers at the ICA-congress in Brussels in 2013: we should produce a book on Information Philosophy and Archives. Our efforts have resulted in this publication. We hope it will be beneficial to academics, students, professionals and everyone else who is interested in disciplines like information philosophy, archival science, library science and data science. Its main emphasis however, still lies on the function and relevance of archives, and on how to keep and curate a necessary quality and accessibility of information - in between all other information professions in this digital age.

The contributions in this book are now summarised in the order in which they are published in this edition. The first and second chapter are by **Geert-Jan van Bussel**. [The first chapter](#) ^[4] is an overview of archival theories and their philosophical foundations, including modern digital diplomacies and the concept of the records continuum. [In his second contribution](#) ^[5] Geert-Jan van Bussel presents a new theoretical framework for the archives in organisational context, based on a pragmatic approach. The “archive-as-is” is a part of Enterprise Information Management (EIM). In this framework the value of information, and the ensuing criteria for quality of records play a central part. The theoretical framework is positioned between modern diplomacies and the records continuum.

Rienk Jonker's [essay is a theoretical exploration](#) ^[6] in which concepts of Luciano Floridi and concepts from archival theory are linked. It introduces an information model and a new definition of an information object. In this way a framework can be established that can be both of use to the archival professionals and community, as well as to disciplines like information philosophy and information theory.

In his contribution, **Geoffrey Yeo** concentrates on several theoretical perspectives, most notably on speech act theory (or philosophy). [His essay](#) ^[7] considers how notions of ‘information’ might relate to a view of record-making and record-keeping that take account of speech act philosophy. It concludes that records have both social and informational roles. Speech act theory reminds us that records are not mere information objects or containers of facts, and it affirms that records do not simply dissolve into interpretation. At the point of inscription, a record and an action are interlinked: assertive, directive, commissive, or declarative. [In their article](#) ^[8], **Arnoud Glaudemans** and **Jacco Verburgt** address the topic of today's archival transition from analogue to digital, by discussing and comparing Jacques Derrida and Vilém Flusser. Derrida stresses that, traditionally, an archive is largely defined by what he calls domiciliation, involving a hierarchical and centralized gathering and structuring of information. According to Flusser, the realm of digital, algorithmically processed, information consists of what he calls technical images, which impose a shift from discursive (or textual) to dialogical (e.g., hyperlinked) information. This shift would make the traditional, centralized structure of the archive gradually obsolete, not from a Derridean ‘deconstructivist’ perspective, but from a techno-functionalist perspective. The discussion results in raising some theoretical and practical questions regarding the present-day archive, including the operational functionalities that need to be built into the digital for reasons of accountability.

The two following contributions are by **Wolfgang Ernst**. [The first essay](#) ^[9] is inspired by Michel Foucault's ‘L'Archéologie du Savoir’. It explores media archaeology as a cross-disciplinary field of inquiry, that consists of a radically material and mathematical approach to the study of cultural change, memory, and knowledge tradition, and even the very category of time itself. [The second essay](#) ^[10] concentrates on audio-visual information. Archives, today, can be re-defined in terms of negentropic systems. How can not only material traces and textual documents, but temporal expressions (or movements) themselves be preserved for future historiographies? Ernst's answer lies in discovering, reflecting and techno-mathematically realising new options of flexible access.

Fiorella Foscari and **Juan Ilerbaig** [reflect on the basic concept of context](#) ^[11]. They use a semiotic approach in which they provide insights that point to an expanded and more dynamic view of text-context relationships. Rhetorical Genre Studies (RGS) offer a set of concepts and analytical tools that shed light on the social context of records creation and use. By looking at intertextual relationships in the archives, archivists can develop a better insight as to the mechanisms involved in the choices made by record creators and users; an insight that in turn elucidates context as a situated construct.

[The following chapter is a reflection](#) ^[12] by **Charles Jeurgens** on the position of recordkeeping in the digital age, and on accountability and transparency in view of the current data-flood. He argues that the present and mainstream views of appraisal in the recordkeeping community should radically change. We should focus on understanding and managing the assemblages between data and the processing mechanisms (for instance algorithms) in situated practices.

Anne Gilliland's [essay is about metadata](#) ^[13]. It puts the concept of metadata in historical perspective. In the past decades the concept has had a profound influence on archival theory. The essay raises fundamental questions about the relationship between records and metadata, about metadata practices and standards and about their ethical implications.

Another basic concept in archival theory: provenance is [the subject of the essay](#) ^[14] of **Giovanni Michetti**. Provenance in the archival domain has moved from a simplistic one-to-one relationship to a multi-dimensional approach. It is now being understood as a network of relationships between objects, agents and functions. Any lack of control over provenance determines some uncertainty which in turn affects trust in digital objects, so we will have to develop new ways to approach and ascertain digital provenance.

Frans Smit reflects on another basic concept in archival theory: authenticity. [His essay gives](#) ^[15] an overview of how this concept is used regarding archives. He argues that to gain a better understanding of the authenticity of records in a digital environment, it is necessary to redefine the nature of records and their context. He uses the concept of hyperobjects, originating from ecological philosopher Timothy Morton, to gain a better understanding of records in a data-immersed society, and as a starting point to rethink the way authenticity of records in such an environment can be asserted.

Information ethics is the [central issue of the essay](#) ^[16] by **Martijn van Otterlo**. He explores the ethics concerning digital archives from the perspective of data science, and with an emphasis on the role of algorithms. Ethical principles, about access, have been formalised and communicated in the form of ethical codes, or: codes of conduct. This last topic brings us from the intended, human archivist in physical domains to the intentional, algorithmic archivist, of: algivist, in the digital domain. Which codes of conduct should be made for the latter, and how to implement them?

The book concludes with interviews in which two internationally renowned scholars. [Archival theorist](#) ^[17] **Eric Ketelaar** and [information philosophe](#) ^[18] **Luciano Floridi** share their reflections on the subjects raised in this book. The interviews mainly concern the nature (and future) of records, the (digital) ethics concerning archives, and the role that the various professional communities on information should play nowadays.

URL <https://oapen.org/search?identifier=641001> ^[19]

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