

Accountability, History, and Archives: Conflicting Priorities or Synthesized Strands?*

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RÉSUMÉ Cet article explore la relation entre les différentes notions de l'archivistique qui mettent l'accent sur l'histoire, la mémoire et l'imputabilité; celles-ci, bien qu'elles fournissent des justifications différentes, doivent être intégrées afin d'appuyer la mission archivistique. L'article décrit comment l'insistance a récemment été mise sur l'imputabilité et pourquoi certains penseurs, particulièrement postmodernes, ont critiqué cette tendance comme étant trop bureaucratique et présentiste, portant atteinte aux objectifs à long terme de la mémoire, du récit et du patrimoine. L'auteur présente le concept de l'imputabilité historique, selon laquelle les documents rendent les organisations et les institutions responsables aujourd'hui pour leurs actions d'hier, que ce soit en termes moraux et (quelquefois) légaux. L'idée de l'imputabilité historique permet de faire la synthèse entre l'imputabilité, l'histoire et la mémoire et offre de nouvelles possibilités aux institutions d'archives de jouer un rôle clé dans la société.

ABSTRACT This article explores the relationship between the different notions of archives that emphasize history, memory, and accountability. While they provide different rationales for archives, they should be integrated in support of the archival mission. Included is a discussion on how the recent emphasis on accountability has emerged and on how critics, especially from a postmodernist view, have countered that this emphasis on accountability is too bureaucratic and presentist. It detracts from the long term goals of memory, narrative, and heritage. The paper explores the concept of historical accountability, in which records hold yesterday's organizations and institutions accountable for their actions today, both in moral and (sometimes) in legal terms. The idea of historical accountability provides one way of synthesizing accountability, history, and memory and new opportunities for archives to be seen as important relevant players in society.

What are the primary purposes of the archival mission? What focus or emphasis should archives and archivists take in promoting our institutions and holdings? Should it be the protection of its parent organization, the ensuring of the accountability of its leadership, or should the *raison d'être* for an archives be heritage, memory, and history? Are archival documents valuable as evidence

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of business transactions or as memorials of the past? These questions are indeed provocative. Most archivists would ultimately argue that serving both goals are clearly important, although more recently writers on archives have tended to focus on either one or the other, rather than bringing the concepts together in a balanced, integrated fashion. This has brought about a somewhat false dichotomy, with the pendulum of conviction swinging first to one side and then to the other. Regardless of the emphasis, accountability, memory, and history are served to varying degrees by archives programs and have all been traditionally seen as key purposes served by archives (both the records and archival institutions).

An attempt will be made here to synthesize the different archival strands of history, memory, and accountability to show that while they provide different rationales for archives, they do indeed interrelate and can be spun together to promote the importance of archives to individuals, organizations, and society. Included is a discussion on how accountability has become a pronounced focus for some archivists in recent years. As well, a brief overview will outline how other archival thinkers, especially those subscribing to the postmodernist persuasion, have countered that the emphasis on accountability has been too bureaucratic and presentist, and that it detracts from the long-term goals of memory, narrative, and heritage, goals which archives also must serve. In arguing for the importance of accountability in the archival mission, this paper suggests that archives also facilitate an historical as well as a present dimension to accountability. This notion of a union of two perspectives has not been clearly articulated in the recent literature. For the purposes of this paper, the concept of historical accountability is how records help to hold yesterday's organizations and institutions accountable for their actions today, both in moral and (sometimes) legal terms. It will be argued that this idea provides a synthesis between accountability, history, and memory, which can provide an additional profile and new opportunities for archives to be seen as important, relevant players in society.

Do the concepts of accountability, history, heritage, and memory, and their definitions suggest any interplay or overlap between them? In looking at the traditional *Oxford Dictionary* definitions of the words, the idea of a record or recording does appear in several of them. Extrapolating from this, a role for record-keeping and archives has a place in each of these largely complementary notions.

Accountability is defined as the ability or extent to which an individual or organization is bound to give account, or to answer for conduct or performance of duties.¹ An account is defined (for this context) as a report, narration, or description of an event. Merging these two definitions, the accountable person or organization, among other things, is responsible for providing a

1 All the definitions given are taken from *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* (Oxford, 1982).

record of his or her activities. This suggests that record-keeping and archives ensure accountability, an important role for record-keeping and archives.

In comparison, the *Oxford Dictionary* defines history more abstractly as “the course of human affairs and the study thereof,” or more concretely as “a continuous methodical *record* of important or public events.” While the latter concept is too limited for most historians, the presence of the words record or act of recording events in the definition suggests archives are close to the core of what history is. Heritage brings with it the concept of what is bequeathed to the present from the past. Memory’s definition is described as the human processes of retaining and recalling what has happened; its derivative, a memorial, includes the notion, again, of record or chronicle.

By their definitions, accountability, evidence, heritage, history, and memory are different concepts but have as a common element the idea of record creation or recording. Archives can thus be associated with all of these ideas, and, while at different times one or another of them can be the primary focus of archives and archivists, the overall institutional and professional mission ultimately must incorporate them all. The question is: how do accountability, evidence, history, and memory interrelate and where do they intersect? Are there new ways archivists should be looking at these ideas that we assume are central to what we do? Can the value of records as evidence for accountability have meaning in an historical context or is such a concept useful only in a present and future oriented analysis? Conversely, is history only about memory, heritage, a narrative of the past, or is it also an arena where individuals and organizations are scrutinized and evaluated for what they did and did not do? It is argued here that history, accountability, and archives can, and do indeed, intersect. This interrelationship itself is anchored in past Western thought and also in the archival literature. They are historically linked together, and they do serve and support one another.

The relationship between archives and their value for evidence, for law and rights and justice, and for history and memory, is rooted in Western traditions and in the purposes of ancient and medieval archives. According to Luciana Duranti, archives in the Roman Empire were closely associated with perpetual memory and public faith. The latter concept is legal in nature, enshrining notions of reliability and authenticity for evidence. In some senses this could be considered to touch on accountability, although it is difficult to transfer completely this Western democratic ideal to Roman emperors.² In another seminal article, M.T. Clanchy outlined how in the later Middle Ages documents increasingly replaced oral witness as instruments for memorializing transactions.³ Even the *Bible*, a book which was central to the Western world-

2 Luciana Duranti, “The Concept of Appraisal and Archival Theory,” *American Archivist* 57 (Spring 1994), pp. 331–32.

3 See M.T. Clanchy, “‘Tenacious Letters’: Archives and Memory in the Middle Ages,” *Archivaria* 11 (Winter 1980–1981), pp. 115–25.

view until the last century (and still has considerable influence), concludes with a vision of the end of history in a climatic scene where books recording humanity's deeds are opened before God, the judge in a great reckoning and accounting.⁴ Thus in the Western mind, records have been linked to history, accounting, and justice. This relationship between justice and records continues to remain central even to those sharing postmodern precepts (as will be discussed later in this paper.) Since the French Revolution and the advent of modern archival institutions, the mandates of archives have included preserving records for history and memory, and for law and justice. Both the history/memory and legal/justice dimensions of archives have pertained to individuals and to institutions and organizations. Along with their historical role, archives developed into what Terry Eastwood coined "arsenals of democratic accountability."⁵

How and why did accountability recently move to centre stage as a rationale for maintaining archival programs, pushing to the sidelines the more traditional emphases on heritage and history? Over the last quarter century, archival institutions and the archival profession have had to respond and adjust to major changes and new developments. Some developments, such as the ever-expanding public interest in genealogy and the emergence of an active heritage lobby, have ensured archivists that history and memory will continue to play a central role in their day-to-day activities. However, many other changes have been pushing archival institutions and professionals alike towards redefining their roles as modern information managers and as agents of accountability. A variety of unrelated but parallel occurring influences over the 1980s and 1990s appear to have been driving this information management/accountability paradigm. Three major factors include: the proliferation of information technology and its resultant electronic record products; the phenomenon of organizational downsizing and restructuring, with its focus on savings and efficiency; and the emergence of a more cynical public, increasingly assertive in its exercise of individual and group rights (driven by revelations of past injustices and modern scandals in both the government and private sectors alike). There has thus been a groundswell of demand for greater accountability. For organizations, this accountability has meant a need to meet effectively and efficiently their mandates within the legal, cultural, and political climate in which they operate. For the public, this has meant a call for greater transparency, spawning the passage of freedom of information, protection of privacy, and other sunshine-oriented legislation, some of which has reached into the private as well as the government sectors.

4 The passage in question is Revelation 20:12.

5 Terrence M. Eastwood, "Reflections on the Development of Archives in Canada and Australia," *Proceedings of the 7th Biennial Conference of the Australian Society of Archivists Inc.*, Hobart, 2–6 June, 1989, p. 80.

These developments have given archives and archivists the potential for greater relevancy. While still maintaining their traditional role as the guardians of yesterday, archives and archivists have also had to become active players in meeting the information needs of today. For our archival institutions, this has meant adjusting our business processes and seeking additional resources to handle an increase in both the volume and the complexity of tasks. For the archivist, this has meant developing a greater professional identity through the de-facto requirement of formal archival education credentials and continuous post-appointment professional development.

The selling points promoting the relevance of archival and records programs to our parent bodies have thus shifted away from preserving history to risk management. Organizations can better protect themselves from litigation and embarrassment, reduce costs and inefficiencies, and comply more effectively with legislative requirements through the adoption of sound information management standards and policies. A sustainable archives program is justified as a resource for accountability protection and risk management. Many archival institutions are taking the lead in developing such information management standards for their parent governing bodies. And so they should be. The importance of records as sources of evidence of key functions, business processes, and information flows, and the risks entailed with loss, damage, security breach, or unlocatable records can provide the necessary impetus for systemic scheduling of government records, and compelling justification for increased archival resources.

Writers who advocate accountability rather than memory and history as the impetus for archives, argue that such a focus provides a stronger incentive for governments and private sector organizations alike to invest resources in designing records-keeping systems and records programs. Such systems and programs can be complex and costly to design and maintain. For government organizations information management is too often seen as not vital enough to its operations to warrant strategic prioritization, and thus attention is only paid to it when it is too late, when disaster, litigation, or scandal strikes. In the business sector, information management's connection to the bottom line is often invisible, and therefore it is also neglected until similar problems emerge. Much of the recent discussion on accountability in the archival literature has focussed primarily on the importance of having well designed record-keeping systems, (both paper and electronic), which facilitate accountability by keeping records in their context as evidence of business transactions. Such transactions should follow specific functions, meet legal requirements, and be the products of established business rules and procedures.⁶ Records kept accord-

⁶ For a discussion of the importance of the relationship of law, business rules, and record-keeping, see Wendy M. Duff, "Harnessing the Power of Warrant," *The American Archivist* 61, no. 1 (Spring 1998), pp. 88-105.

ing to such practices will help protect government and private sector organizations alike against risks or liabilities, promote them to society as law abiding, and demonstrate that they have integrity and responsibility. Dutch social scientist Albert Meijer argues that organizations require carefully defined structures and business processes, along with well managed information resources that are the by-products of those processes, to reduce uncertainties about how to account for actions.⁷

David Bearman, one of the most celebrated advocates for accountability as a motivator for records creation and record-keeping, declared that providing for accountability is “a simple shared goal” for archivists and records managers.⁸ In his well-known article *Archival Strategies*, Bearman described accountability as “helping to point to a larger social purpose which in a democratic society requires no further justification.”⁹ In other words, the accountability of institutions is a fundamental social value in a democratic society. This ethos increasingly applies to the private sector as well as to government. Business ethics, compliance with the laws, and corporate social responsibility can generate praise (and business) for firms, while the converse may generate adverse press and even boycotts. Therefore, along this line of thinking, sufficient resources for archival programs are more likely to be forthcoming if the rationale is the realization of accountability, rather than the preservation of history. This view presumes that organizational management generally views history and memory as backward looking, peripheral, and somehow less deserving of resources.

While there is much credence to this argument, writings from the late 1990s on knowledge management have given the history rationale some new life as well. Organizations have grappled with the loss of corporate memory due to downsizing, changes, staff turnover, and the lack of explicit documentation of programs, procedures, and activities. Documentation – and therefore records creation (and management) – is needed to convert knowledge that is tacit (in the heads and experiences of individuals) into knowledge that is explicit;¹⁰ in other words, the task is to transform knowledge, wherever possible, into recorded information from which others can benefit. This focus on organizational memory is often closely linked to its needs today, rather than for the traditional

7 Albert Meijer, “Anticipating Accountability Processes,” *Archives and Manuscripts* 28, no. 1 (May 2000), p. 55.

8 David Bearman, “Archival Data Management to Achieve Organizational Accountability for Electronic Records,” in Sue McKemmish and Frank Upward, eds., *Archival Documents. Providing Accountability through Record-keeping* (Melbourne, 1993), p. 215.

9 David Beaman, *Archival Strategies* (Pittsburgh, 1994), p. 8.

10 For an overview of organizational knowledge creation and related issues, see Chun Wei Choo, *The Knowing Organization: How Organizations Use Information to Construct Meaning, Create Knowledge and Make Decisions* (New York, 1998), esp. pp. 3–21, 110–14.

research paradigm archivists are used to dealing with. Therefore, knowledge management, while emphasizing memory, may fit more closely with accountability than with history, in that a lack of documentation and of institutional memory may lead to inefficiencies or leave organizations vulnerable when the auditors, discovery lawyers, or government inquiry teams come to call.

For David Bearman, Sue McKemmish, and like-minded archival thinkers (many from the Australian archival community), this focus has emerged in part, out of the challenges of electronic records, and in part because of some high profile scandals in their respective countries of the United States and Australia.¹¹ In their opinions, if today's archivists are to avoid being labelled as either redundant or irrelevant, they must be active players in the development of record-keeping systems, and not just passive recipients of documents which may well be unreadable or missing their evidential context by the time of archival transfer. Archivists need the ability to present themselves as not just curators of historic records but also as active players in modern information management, able to advocate successfully for their institutions and programs. Such support is achieved in this view through risk analysis and communications with the pertinent decision-makers about potential embarrassment or liability if records are not created or are not retrievable.¹² Archivists cannot ignore the power of these rationales and must recognize their importance if they are to be seen as vital, relevant, and active players in society.

In the archival literature of the last ten years, however, additional voices have also come forward, arguing that there has been too much emphasis on record-keeping systems, accountability, and evidence. Their concern is that what could be termed as "the right brain" of the archival mission – our cultural role in preserving heritage, and social memory – has been unfairly neglected, sidelined, and even de-valued. Canadian archivist Shirley Spragge warned in 1994 of an emerging "abdication crisis of archivists' cultural responsibility," a phenomenon she blamed on the diminished importance of history in the education of archivists in recent years.¹³ Spragge believed such an abandonment to be a denial of the Canadian tradition of total archives, which is built on a strong cultural and historical foundation. Archivists cannot forget the needs and wants of our traditional user publics, historians and genealogists, who want us to preserve what Carolyn Heald calls the "right stuff" – materials that

11 See David Bearman, "The Implications of Armstrong versus Executive Office of the President for the Archival Management of Electronic Records," *American Archivist* 56, no. 4 (Fall 1993), pp. 674–89 and also Sue McKemmish, "Recordkeeping, Accountability and Continuity: The Australian Reality," in Sue McKemmish and Frank Upward, eds., *Archival Documents*, pp. 8–26.

12 See also Richard Cox, *Managing Institutional Archives: Foundational Principles and Practices* (Westport, 1992), pp. 2–4, 30–32.

13 Shirley Spragge, "The Abdication Crisis: Are Archivists Giving Up Their Cultural Responsibility," *Archivaria* 40 (Fall 1995), pp. 173–81.

provide a tangible connection to the past, and memorialize and provide evidence of their ancestors and of yesterday's heroes and villains.¹⁴

Some prominent archival thinkers, at different times, have written extensively on the importance of both sides of this equation, reflecting the changing currents and tension between the dual mandates. In the mid-1980s, Hugh Taylor challenged archivists to adapt to new technologies and move away from the "historical shunt," towards modern information management (and now knowledge management). In his view this was essential if archivists were successfully to avoid irrelevancy and marginalization.¹⁵ Later on, however, Taylor cautioned archivists to maintain "a mindset under-girded by spiritual reality" so that archives might be seen not only as "legal and social evidence" but also as "material instruments fashioned by a culture bent of the survival of the whole creative process."¹⁶ For Taylor, the long-term preservation of the archival document still remains essential. In his later writing he suggested that a consequence of focussing only on accountability and modern information management is that the permanent retention of archival records may not be sufficiently valued, which would be an unacceptable compromise of the archival profession's mission.¹⁷

The writings of another leading archival thinker, Terry Cook, have also reflected this struggle for balance. In the early 1990s, Cook exhorted archivists to take advantage of new opportunities, arguing:

Perhaps as information professionals now entering a new electronic age, we will again reclaim our heritage (or birthright?) and again become central players in the world of corporate memory and documentary heritage. To do so we must stop being custodians of things and start being purveyors of concepts. We must stop serving and start directing ... stop rowing and start steering.¹⁸

At the same time, Cook also saw concerns for accountability as an opportunity for archivists to:

map through the information forest and rise above the information trees to create value-added knowledge in information systems and thus protect their institution's policy,

14 Carolyn Heald, "Are We Collecting the 'Right Stuff'?", *Archivaria* 40 (Fall 1995), p. 186.

15 See Hugh Taylor, "Information Ecology and the Archives of the 1980s," *Archivaria* 18 (Summer 1984), pp. 30–32, and later his "Heritage Revisited: Documents as Artifacts in the Contexts of Museums and Material Culture," *Archivaria* 40 (Fall 1995), p. 18.

16 Hugh Taylor, "Heritage Revisited," p. 18.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

18 Terry Cook, "Electronic Records, Paper Minds: The Revolution in Information Management and Archives in the Post-Custodial and Post-Modern Era," *Archives and Manuscripts* 22, no. 2 (November 1994), pp. 304–5.

operational and legal health and its wider accountability in a democracy to its citizens.¹⁹

More recently, however, Cook has sought to bring back an historical heritage element into discussions on the archival mission. He has argued that the emphasis of David Bearman and others on valuing archives primarily as evidence of business transactions is too narrow a rationale to justify retaining taxpayer-funded public archives, which also must serve historical and cultural purposes.²⁰ Cook reiterated this call to a balance between accountability and heritage in a paper addressing the Australian records continuum model, given to the Australian Society of Archivists in 2000. Cook challenged his audience to ensure that this model of records creation and information management “manifests all archivists’ intentions as society’s remembrancers” as opposed to just focussing on the need to foster accountability and adapt to new technologies.²¹

This dialogue reminds us as early twenty-first-century archivists that in the end, despite our need to appear as relevant players in modern information management, we still have a calling to preserve actual records and documents, rather than just analyzing functions and developing metadata standards. The value of archival records as instruments and symbols of memory and as a connection to the past thus cannot be downplayed. Many archivists are undoubtedly aware that for our researchers, examining an original document that has its official form and contains seals and perhaps even the signatures of either a long-deceased relative or well-known historical figure makes for an almost mystical experience. Many will argue that even if the information can be preserved in an alternative microform or digital format for safer handling or easier remote access, the tangible connection to the past is not the same using a reformatted record as with an original. However, for many archival researchers – historians, the media, lawyers, government officials, and even genealogists – archives continue to be widely valued, often first and foremost, as evidence of what transpired, and occasionally, why it did. This evidence enables us to uncover, understand, and evaluate what yesterday’s government and organizational leadership and programs did, including decisions they made, transactions they conducted, or other actions impacting on individuals or society, for good or ill.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 315.

²⁰ Terry Cook, “The Impact of David Bearman on Modern Archival Thinking,” *Archives and Museum Informatics* 11 (1997), p. 29.

²¹ Terry Cook, “Beyond the Screen: The Records Continuum and Archival Cultural Heritage,” paper delivered to the Australian Society of Archivists Conference, Melbourne, 18 August 2000, p. 13. Found at <<http://www.archivists.org.au/sem/conf2000/terrycook.pdf>> (accessed 20 September 2003).

Archives not only aid in holding today's organizations legally and fiscally accountable to society, they also hold yesterday's leaders and institutions accountable, both in terms of morality and effectiveness. Did they do what they were supposed to do? Did they use the best methods and approaches? Did they breach ethics, ignore facts or concerns, or harm their publics (whether or not the publics were aware at the time)? The availability of archives is essential in enabling this evaluation process to occur. Such a process serves a society's need for the prevalence of justice, and the preservation of rights, and values. These processes are also vital to societies that are in transition to democracy or are coping with injustice and oppression.

In arguing for the value of archival records as tools of evidence for accountability, how does one respond to the challenges of postmodern thinking? In recent years, a number of archival thinkers have stretched us professionally by asking us to look more deeply and more critically at our philosophical assumptions on the nature of archives. In general, these writers argue that archival records are the products and by-products of particular structures, cultures, and systems, which have inherent biases, assumptions, and hidden agendas. Records cannot and do not capture the full essence of an event or situation and should not be viewed as simple representations of fact. Verne Harris, Brien Brothman, and others are correct when arguing that an excessive focus on business transactions, evidence, and accountability risks giving short shift to inherent biases and agendas influencing record creation, and to the value of memory. As Harris observes, "while it is self-evident that the record is a product of processes, it must be acknowledged that the process is shaped fundamentally by the record or more precisely the act of recording."²²

For Harris, positivist (or modernist) views of archives are simply too limited to capture adequately the complexities of human experience recorded in documents and the processes that trigger their documentation.²³ Brothman adds that while accountability, risk management, and evidence may be important, he challenges archivists to see records as multidimensional "cognitive memory artifacts," which document not only past occurrences but also the evolution of how the past, as a concept, developed and changed its meaning over time.²⁴

Can one acknowledge the validity of these points and still conclude, reasonably, that archival documents remain absolutely essential as evidence of the actions of their creators? This author indeed believes the answer is an unequivocal yes, with one key caveat. One must have a broader perspective on

22 Verne Harris, "Claiming Less, Delivering More: A Critique of Positivist Formulations on Archives in South Africa," *Archivaria* 44 (Fall 1997), p. 135.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 133.

24 Brien Brothman, "The Past that Archives Keep: Memory, History, and the Preservation of Archival Records," *Archivaria* 51 (Spring 2001), pp. 50–52.

the record as evidence. This includes a recognition of the social and ideological frameworks in which the creators flourished and an acknowledgement that records indeed cannot fully capture the multidimensional reality of human experience. This being stated, despite the need to account for the various inherent and systemic biases in large government or corporate bureaucracies, many of their records are nonetheless still routine, even unconscious recordings of transactions, which have value as evidence of what transpired. The extent and level of detail of what is and what is not documented in official records, is in itself evidence of the record creation and records-keeping culture. In totalitarian regimes, there is often a greater intentionality to what gets recorded, because of the effects of the repressive climate. However, even in such a context, the presence of either ideologically charged rhetoric or bland euphemistic bureaucratise in classified records documenting atrocities or repression, provide valuable evidence of whether a regime actually believed its rhetoric or the extent to which it attempted to cover its tracks.²⁵ These biases are factors to be sifted by prosecutors and historians alike in their efforts to use archives to expose culpability and to serve justice.

Few, if any, of the leading archival scholars writing on postmodernism, whether as apologist or skeptic, truly dispute the value records provide in terms of evidence and neither do they completely devalue accountability. Rather, they seek to encourage archivists to examine their philosophical assumptions regarding the nature of records and evidence in a deeper, more multi-dimensional way. They are also attempting to correct a perceived imbalance in writings about records and archives that ignores or omits their value for culture, memory, and storytelling. In providing commentary on postmodernism in the archival literature, Carolyn Heald, Heather MacNeil, Terry Cook, and Verne Harris, all reaffirm the evidentiary and evidential dimension of archives while simultaneously recognizing the biases documents contain and that their value for memory and narrative not be ignored.²⁶ For Harris the answer to the question of whether accountability or memory are the principle purpose of archives is “both/and, not an either/or.”²⁷ As Cook articulated to

25 See chilling examples of documents from Nazi Germany and the former Soviet Union in J. Noakes and G. Pridham, eds., *Nazism: A History in Documents and Eyewitness Accounts 1919–1945. Volume 2: Foreign Policy, War and Race Extermination* (New York, 1988), and in J. Arch Getty and Oleg V. Naumov, *The Road to Terror: Stalin and the Self Destruction of the Bolsheviks, 1932–1939* (New Haven, 1999).

26 See Carolyn Heald, “Is There Room for Archives in a Postmodern World?” *The American Archivist* 59, no. 1 (Winter 1996), p. 100. See also Heather MacNeil, “Trusting Records in a Postmodern World,” *Archivaria* 51 (Spring 2001), pp. 36–47. Also Terry Cook, “Fashionable Nonsense or Professional Rebirth: Postmodernism and the Practice of Archives,” *Archivaria* 51 (Spring 2001), pp. 27–28.

27 Verne Harris, “Law Evidence and Electronic Records: A Strategic Perspective from the Global Periphery,” paper delivered to the Australian Society of Archivists Conference, Mel-

the Society of Australian Archivists: “without reliable evidence set in context, to be sure memory becomes counterfeit or at least transformed into forgery, manipulation, or imagination. Without the influence of and need for memory, evidence is useless and unused.”²⁸

It is the opinion of this author that the latter is definitely the lesser of the two evils. Our archival institutions are full of records that may not be used, but nonetheless document key organizations, individuals, or activities and should be preserved, both as evidence and as memory. It is our hope that all our holdings will be of value to some user on some occasion, although anticipation of use or the lack thereof is not a primary appraisal criteria. The only value in retaining what is counterfeit, manipulated, or forged would be to preserve it as evidence of a distortion that reflected the political, social, or personal culture or circumstance in which the document creator existed.

One arena in which issues regarding postmodernity, evidence, accountability, and memory are closely intertwined is in the scholarship of the new social history. Many of its academics consider themselves postmodernist in their thinking and frequently incorporate leading postmodern thinkers in their writings. Nonetheless, at the same time, they retain an evidence/accountability framework in their use of archives and their historical writings. Many of these historians accept the assumptions regarding archives held by Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and like-minded thinkers. In Foucault’s framework, records are active instruments of social control used by society and its organizational structures and institutions to marginalize non-conformists.²⁹ Archives should not be seen as neutral products of processes and transactions, but intentional recordings that serve those in control. The irony is that while the same researchers agree that systems, institutions, and their record by-products are inherently biased, they remain strong advocates for the preservation of vast quantities of records, especially bureaucratically created case files. In part, those lobbying for a fuller archival preservation of case files are motivated by a concern that the voices of the files’ subjects, which may not be heard anywhere else, might otherwise be lost for history. However, a parallel objective of these efforts is also to ensure that what Lawrence Veysey termed “representativeness in evidence” is retained, so that scholars have a complete and statis-

bourne, 18 August 2000, p. 18. Found at <<http://www.archivists.org.au/sem/misc/harris.pdf>> (accessed 20 September 2003).

28 Terry Cook, “Beyond the Screen,” p. 5.

29 For an overview of Foucault’s views on the purposes of institutional power see Michel Foucault, “Truth and Power,” in Paul Rainbow, ed., *The Foucault Reader* (New York, 1984), pp. 60–66. For an overview of Derrida’s thought and its relations to archives see Brien Brothman, “Declining Derrida: Integrity, Tensegrity, and the Preservation of Archives from Deconstruction,” *Archivaria* 48 (Fall 1999), pp. 65–83; also Verne Harris, “On (Archival) Odyssey(s),” *Archivaria* 51 (Spring 2001), pp. 8–9.

tically valid record for analysis, rather than only a limited sample of a few isolated narratives.³⁰ In other words, these historians still place value on evidence and sources to support their arguments. It is generally doubtful that the historical discipline is yet prepared to accept a thesis or paper consisting entirely of the writer's personal narrative or opinion on the impact of systems on individuals, without the record evidence to substantiate the thesis.

Building on this point, another irony is that a number of these postmodern researchers extract, pool, and analyze case file data using arguably modernist, scientific methodologies such as quantification.³¹ This methodology is valued as it purports to give greater weight or supporting proof concerning the validity of their hypotheses. In the preface to *On the Case*, an anthology of recent writings in Canadian social history based on case file research (and much of it influenced by postmodernism), several historians cautioned archivists about the destruction or sampling of case files for volume reduction and economizing, arguing that not only will voices and stories be lost, but also what survives will be a fragment, useless for statistically-based research and fragmented or insufficiently representative to serve as historical evidence for their theses.³²

Underpinning this need for detailed documentation of the experiences of individuals under institutional or other controls is an element of justice and a demand for moral, if not legal accountability. Having confirming evidence as to what was done to people strengthens the case for the need to acknowledge past wrongs, and in some cases to create new laws or provide appropriate compensation. Underpinning this is an accompanying sense that values indeed exist by which yesterday's organizations can be evaluated. One may question whether judging yesterday's officials by today's standards is realistic or fair. Yet one cannot escape the fact that issues of justice, rights, and values are central in many historical writings, and their authors strongly hold to these values as de facto absolutes (which is ironic for postmodernists who reject the concept of absolutes). Historians of every stripe often act as a form of prosecutor, with archival material serving as critical sources of evidence. The work of archivists, from appraisal to descriptive representation, facilitates these evaluation processes and furthers historical accountability.

30 Veysey as quoted in Tom Nesmith, "Archives From the Bottom Up: Social History and Archival Scholarship," *Archivaria* 14 (Summer 1982), p. 10.

31 For an important early discussion on researcher requirements for case file research and quantification see G.J. Parr, "Case Records as Sources for Social History," *Archivaria* 4 (Summer 1977), p. 6.

32 Franca Iacovetta and Wendy Mitchinson, eds., *On the Case: Explorations in Social History* (Toronto, 1998), pp. 4–5. For another view on the usefulness of sampling to researchers of social history see also Leonard Rapport, "In the Valley of Decision: What to Do about the Multitude of Files of Quasi Cases," *American Archivist* 48 (1985), p. 180, and pp. 186–87.

Archival records have received greater public attention in recent years by their ability to provide new details, to shape new perspectives and questions, or reinforce older ones. Challenges to traditional perspectives on individuals, events, social and economic developments, even whole systems and ideologies, have been facilitated through the availability and use of archives. Archival records can reveal complicity and compromise or they can exonerate and reflect heroism, leadership, and justice of corporate citizenship. They can cut across ideologies and assumptions, both confirming and challenging our notions of what happened and why in their context. Historical writing, utilizing an increased breadth in the volume and variety of archival sources, further assists in the shaping of these perspectives. This reinforces the centrality of archives and archivists in these processes (even if this centrality is not always appreciated by historians).

There are many good recent examples of historical works that have made extensive use of often newly available archival sources to facilitate the evaluation and judgement of the governance of the past. Examples from twentieth-century political and diplomatic history (the author's personal historic interests) include Denis Winter's *Haig's Command*, which masterfully uses Canadian and Australian archives to fill in gaps in British high-level documentation on the First World War. Winter argues convincingly that the original British official history of the war was based on a heavily sanitized, distorted, and incomplete record.³³ Howard Margolian's *Unauthorized Entry*, effectively uses immigration records to suggest that despite some high-profile failures, Canada's Department of Immigration was more rigorous than it has been given credit for in screening out war crimes suspects.³⁴ Steven Hewitt's *Spying 101* used archives brought to the surface using access legislation to expose the systematic surveillance of students on Canadian university campuses by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.³⁵ A noteworthy non-Canadian example includes Haynes and Klehr's *Venona: Decoding Soviet Espionage in America*, a recent exposé confirming the existence of widespread Soviet espionage in 1940s United States, which makes use of newly released archives from Russia and from the American intelligence community.³⁶ These examples reflect the fact that writers on both the political left and right have at times felt vindicated, and at other times been put on the defensive, by new revelations from

33 See Denis Winter, *Haig's Command: A Reassessment* (London, 1992), esp. pp. 1–8 for an overview of his thesis and methodology.

34 Howard Margolian, *Unauthorized Entry: The Truth about Nazi War Criminals in Canada 1946–1956* (Toronto, 2000), pp. 3–4.

35 Steve Hewitt, *Spying 101: The RCMP's Secret Activities at Canadian Universities, 1917–1997* (Toronto, 2002), esp. pp. 4–15 for an overview.

36 See John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr, *Venona: Decoding Soviet Espionage in America* (New Haven, 1999).

archival records. The impact of such new archival evidence must be contextualized with who is writing the history, and what their agendas might be. Still, the use of archival documents in historical writing are a primary means by which historical accountability is served.

Public scrutiny via the writings of historians and the media is not lost on our records creators. While much of records creation is routine and unconscious, governments and organizations nonetheless do seek to control what is committed to record, whether that record survives, and when, if ever, it becomes subject to public scrutiny. Sometimes the most revealing and valuable archives are those suddenly bequeathed to a successor, without much transition planning. This is especially true for the archives of unexpectedly upset totalitarian regimes, captured intact, and suddenly opened to a previously unimaginable comprehensive scrutiny. Notable examples include the capture of Nazi Germany's records by the Allies in 1945, the sudden collapse in 1991 of the Soviet Union and the emergence of a democratic Russia, the capture of Cambodia's Khmer Rouge prison files by the invading Vietnamese, and the Kurds' seizure in 1991 of Iraqi secret police and military records documenting Saddam Hussein's brutal Anfal campaign against them.³⁷ As such governments are by their nature totalitarian and tolerant of no dissent, the records they created were never intended for public viewing and scrutiny by the ordinary citizens of their countries. The archives will often be intact and meticulously detailed. When such archives suddenly come under the control of liberators en masse, delicious opportunities become available for international prosecutors and historians alike, as the raw materials become available for holding individuals and systems accountable for perpetrating hideous crimes.

In many other cases though, records creators do get some opportunity for succession planning, which includes preparing their legacy, and cleaning house. Verne Harris has described in detail how the outgoing apartheid gov-

37 For some excellent and diverse examples of how archives impact on memory of past oppression see Erna Paris, *Long Shadows: Truth Lies and History* (Toronto, 2000). For German archives see the forward to William Shirer's 1961 classic *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany* (New York, 1985 reprint), pp. ix–xiii. For Russia and Eastern Europe see David Remnick, *Lenin's Tomb: The Last Days of the Soviet Empire* (New York, 1994), pp. 510–12, and Tina Rosenberg, *The Haunted Land: Facing Europe's Ghosts after Communism* (New York, 1996), esp. pp. 71–74, 88–90, 214–16, 289–99. Translated examples of many such documents are in the *Bulletin of the Cold War International History Project*, available online at <http://wwics.si.edu/index.cfm?fuseaction=topics.home&topic_id=1409>. For examples on Cambodia see Dawne Adam, "The Tuol Sleng Archives and the Cambodian Genocide," *Archivaria* 45 (Spring 1998), pp. 6–27. For the Iraq example see Bruce P. Montgomery, "The Iraqi Secret Police Files: A Documentary Record on the Anfal Genocide," *Archivaria* 52 (Fall 2001), pp. 69–99. These two examples, and the importance of archives in the documentation of genocide, are also covered in the Pulitzer prize winning Samantha Power, *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide* (New York, 2003), chapters 6 and 8 respectively.

ernment in South Africa destroyed considerable quantities of records while managing the transition towards true democracy.³⁸ Many archivists will be familiar with stories about defeated governments or disgraced cabinet ministers seeking to stuff the shredders faster than one can wave the existent archival legislation. Organizational leaders and bureaucrats are at times willing to risk considerable public wrath and bad press in covering up activities to avoid more significant accountability. The words Heiner Affair, Watergate, Iran-Contra, Enron, Canadian Blood Committee, and the Somalia inquiry are virtually synonymous with actions of erasure, deletion, and shredding.³⁹ The latter two Canadian examples are particularly notorious in that the destruction of records took place after they had been formally requested through a key mechanism of public accountability – Canada’s *Access to Information Act*.⁴⁰ The minimal sanctions under such legislation fail to act as a sufficient deterrent against unauthorized records destruction. In the absence of any government commitment to imposing stiffer penalties for such actions, in too many instances officials will continue to decide that the risks of exposure outweigh any potential consequences that might be the resulting fallout from attempts to eliminate permanently any record trail.

In terms of our efforts to promote both present-day and historical accountability, these circumstances pose a serious challenge for archivists. Archivists depend ultimately on legislation that has significant authority. The paradox is, of course, that those who ultimately are or will be held accountable by what records we acquire and preserve are the ones who issue such authority. There are even greater challenges for archivists working in the private sector, where there are fewer regulatory requirements for long-term archival preservation and even fewer opportunities for records to come under external scrutiny. Despite these limitations and frustrations, archivists still need to continue to

38 Verne Harris, “They Should Have Destroyed More: The Destruction of Public Records by the South African State in the Final Years of Apartheid, 1990–1994,” in Richard Cox and David Wallace, eds., *Archives and the Public Good: Accountability and Records in Modern Society* (Westport, 2002), pp. 201–28.

39 Many of these instances are well known. For overviews see Chris Hurley, “Records and the Public Interest. ‘The Heiner Affair’ in Queensland,” in Cox and Wallace, eds., *Archives and the Public Good*, pp. 293–315. For records issues around Watergate, see Stanley I. Kutler, *Abuse of Power: The New Nixon Tapes* (New York, 1997), pp. xiii–xxiii. For Iran-Contra see David A. Wallace, “Implausible Deniability: The Politics of Documents in the Iran-Contra Affair and its Investigations,” in Cox and Wallace, eds., *Archives and the Public Good*, pp. 91–114.

40 Some discussion of these examples are in Jay Gilbert, “Access Denied: The *Access to Information Act* and Its Effect on Public Records Creators,” *Archivaria* 49 (Spring 2000), p. 103. The section of the Somalia Commission examining records issues in Canada: Department of National Defence, *Somalia Inquiry Report*, 1997. Executive Summary Found at <http://www.forces.gc.ca/site/Reports/somalia/VOL0/V0S21_e.a.sp> (accessed 20 September 2003).

develop standards, encourage record creation, and sound organizational records management to increase the likelihood that records of enduring value will be eventually preserved in archives. Archivists can outline to the organizations they serve the risks of embarrassment and bad press today, and of individual notoriety in the future, if the rules are not followed and if records are intentionally destroyed to avoid accountability. At the same time, archivists must acknowledge that despite their efforts, they have rather limited control over the quality of what records are actually created and what records will be bequeathed for long-term accountability and history.

It certainly goes against classical Jenkinsonian archival theory to suggest that the archivist dictate or even indirectly influence what aspect of the business process is recorded and in how much detail. The dilemma is that in this digital age, to promote accountability and to ensure that there will be a meaningful historical record of our times, archivists have little choice but to be proactive in ensuring that records are created to document key business transactions. However, in thinking of history, there has been to date little discussion in the literature outlining explicit requirements for what and how much is to be recorded. Some writers have pointed out an irony that a result of our demand for greater public accountability in relation to record-keeping may well be that a poorer record is left for history, as more business that is deemed sensitive is done “off-the-record” or over the telephone.⁴¹ Many government archivists (including the author) have certainly been queried by officials in a ministry as to whether or not records such as telephone logs, must be created. Often such a question is accompanied by a second question: if such records end up in a public archives, will they also soon be appearing as newspaper headlines? Archivists must assume the records creators that this will not be the case.

In a similar vein but in a different context, statisticians and privacy advocates are also concerned about the impact of public scrutiny on the quality of records creation. Senior bureaucrats at both Statistics Canada and the Canadian Privacy Commissioner argue that the release today of ninety-two-year-old census records means that citizens today will minimize, omit, or answer dishonestly critical demographic questions, fearing what their descendants may learn about them in a century. Thus these federal agencies believe that to ensure that an accurate, meaningful census is available to today’s government statisticians and analysts, perpetual confidentiality of these records must be

41 Jay Gilbert, “Access Denied,” p. 103. Also see Ian E. Wilson, “You Must Remember This,” address to the Professional Development Forum Technology in Government Week, Ottawa, 27 October 1998, p. 5. For an American example see Don W. Wilson, “Presidential Records: Evidence for Historians or Ammunition for Prosecutors,” *Government Information Quarterly* 14, no. 4 (1997), pp. 346–47.

promised to the public.⁴² The irony is that a distorted census record will also be of lesser value to historians and genealogists, the very people who are the most vocal advocates of greater openness of historical census records. It is a stretch to imagine that greater openness may actually undermine government accountability (assuming government needs accurate census data for policy development and resource allocation) and a meaningful historical record. It all depends on how much, in the end, governments are prepared to take risks in balancing its present immediate operational needs with the need to satisfy today's public regarding yesterday's record and to protect them from the scrutiny of future generations. It may depend on how much it thinks today's citizens care about their posthumous privacy. For the sake of history and for ensuring that there are future users of archives, it seems completely unreasonable to expect that the privacy of every individual be protected for all time.

The ironies and the paradoxes regarding the impact of public scrutiny on records creation are indeed real issues for archivists and historians alike to ponder. It is certainly difficult to imagine, and even more so to advocate, that any archivist or historian, committed to accountability and freedom of inquiry, should oppose freedom of information laws or seek the closing of all records for a century in the hope that a more candid record will be created for historians. This would certainly go against the commitment of archivists to making records available. In addition, few in the historical profession would want to limit the possibility of comprehensive scholarly analysis to events, persons, or phenomena that are more than a century old. The need to ensure that parent bodies know of the risks of having inadequate documentation should be coupled with an assurance, reluctant as some may be, to provide it that heir records can be kept secure and confidential, disclosed only as per pertinent legislation or per agreements. Archivists must walk a fine line in facilitating the trust of today's governments and organizations so a meaningful record will be created and preserved, while simultaneously ensuring that those records are eventually open to scrutiny, to the arena of history and memory. The task is not easy and requires commitment, professionalism, and resolve.

Another plane where accountability, history, and archives have intersected, especially in recent years, pertains to questions on the addressing of past injustices. The surfacing of such issues trigger accountability mechanisms and have put archives in the spotlight of the media and the legal community alike. In Canada, there are the well-publicized records issues surrounding war crimes, the compensation of Japanese Canadians (covered in *Archivaria* by

42 See Statistics Canada's submission to the Expert Panel on Access to Historical Census Records, 6 January 2000. Available online at <<http://www12.statcan.ca/english/census01/Info/chief.cfm>> (Accessed 21 September 2003).

Terry Cook and Judith Roberts-Moore)⁴³ and the cases of First Nations people displaced and abused in church-operated residential schools as part of a century long government assimilation strategy. In Ontario, archives were central to front page stories relating to the surviving Dionne sisters' efforts to obtain compensation from the provincial government, and investigations by prosecutors, defence lawyers, and law enforcement agencies into unsolved homicides, miscarriages of justice, and the abuse of wards in juvenile correctional facilities.⁴⁴ These issues have, at times, led to the creation of entire programs within archival institutions to facilitate legal discovery processes, manage service demands, and minimize any embarrassment that today's governments might suffer from the actions of their predecessors. The sensitivity of these issues aside, the efforts of governments today to acknowledge historical wrongs and their attempts to correct them in the interests of justice, make them appear accountable, bringing them positive esteem in the public eye.

Another accountability trigger, which can have an impact on archival programs and resources, is public demand for the release of closed archival records, to erase doubts about official versions of history. In the United States, public pressure for full disclosure of records relating to the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, based on lingering doubts about the government's official conclusions, resulted in legislation releasing a broad spectrum of records. Other recent American declassification efforts triggered by public controversy have focussed on documentation regarding the fate of Holocaust victims' assets, military medical experiments on human subjects involving radioactive materials, and allegations of US government complicity in coups and human rights abuses in Latin America.⁴⁵ Some of these initiatives

43 See Terry Cook, "A Monumental Blunder: The Destruction of Records on Nazi War Criminals in Canada," in Cox and Wallace, eds., *Archives and the Public Good*, pp. 37–65; Judith Roberts Moore, "Establishing Recognition of Past Injustices: Uses of Archival Records in Documenting the Experience of Japanese Canadians During the Second World War," *Archivaria* 53 (Spring 2002), pp. 64–75.

44 See Ian E. Wilson, "Remembering the 20th Century," address to the Ontario Systems Council Meeting *Beyond the Millennium*, 8 December 1998, p. 4. For records issues and compensation relating to the Dionne quintuplets see Ellie Teshler, *The Dionnes* (Toronto, 1999), pp. 60–61, 276–77, and 310–14. For an overview on the abuse in training schools issue in Ontario see Darcy Henton with David McCann, *Boys Don't Cry: The Struggle for Justice and Healing in Canada's Biggest Sex Abuse Scandal* (Toronto, 1995).

45 For an overview of the Kennedy assassination records program, see the NARA Web site link <http://www.archives.gov/research_room/jfk/background_jfk.html> (accessed 14 September 2003). For issues relating to records on Holocaust assets and war criminals, see NARA's Inter-agency Working Group <<http://www.archives.gov/iwg/index.html>>. For discussion on archival records and US Cold War radiation experiments, see Eileen Welsome, *The Plutonium Files: America's Secret Medical Experiments in the Cold War* (New York, 1999). A searchable database of declassified records is available at the Argonne National Laboratory Web site at <<http://hrex.dis.anl.gov/>> (accessed 6 October 2003). For Latin America, see the US Depart-

required the establishment of special programs at NARA. In Great Britain there has also been a demand for more openness, culminating in the 1990s Open Government initiative and in the passing in 2000 of Freedom of Information legislation. As in the United States, British records have recently been released on a number of sensitive and controversial issues, including the role of various intelligence agencies in the Second World War, and the circumstances surrounding the abdication of King Edward VIII.⁴⁶ These initiatives not only brought significant media attention to archives, but also provided a public relations opportunity for the relevant governments, even though it meant releasing some sensitive and potentially embarrassing records.

For archivists and historians, high profile issues and the need to placate public calls for greater openness and accountability can be a mixed blessing. Often the greater profile and growing user base are not supported over the long term by additional dollars and staff and once the issue diminishes in priority, resources get directed elsewhere. Such situations also mean that other issues that are also important for government accountability and the writing of history may not get the attention they need. In devoting resources to today's hot issues, other worthy archival tasks that may prove important for tomorrow's public and for future accountability, are neglected. While archival resources are concentrated on what is currently under the spotlight of lawyers, the media, and the office of the minister (or chief executive officer), donated fonds remain unprocessed and inaccessible, finding aids remain in obsolete paper-based formats, important preservation and exhibition projects are postponed, and deadlines for responses to requests under the access and privacy legislation become nearly impossible to meet. Many archivists undoubtedly will identify with the frustration and potential embarrassment that might ensue for their institutions, including complaints to the minister from stakeholder groups or bad press. High profile accountability issues, while providing opportunities for archives, can also serve as a double-edged sword. Managing these challenges is a difficult balancing act with usually all too limited staff resources.

These concerns aside, all these issues provide opportunities for archives and archivists to gain greater profile before a public that demands evidence, values

ment of State FOIA Web site for records dealing with human rights abuses in Chile, Argentina, El Salvador, and Guatemala, <<http://foia.state.gov/>>. Also of interest are the Central Intelligence Agency archival releases relating to covert action programs in Guatemala 1954 and Cuba 1960–1961. See <<http://www.foia.cia.gov/>>. Another excellent non-government Web site for declassified US government documents on many issues, is the National Security Archive at George Washington University, <<http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/>>.

46 See examples on UK Public Record Office Web site. On intelligence matters see <http://www.pro.gov.uk/releases/nov2002_mi5/intro.htm> for MI 5 document releases, and <http://www.pro.gov.uk/releases/may2003/soe_list.htm> for releases of Special Operations Executive records. For records releases regarding the Edward VIII abdication, see <<http://www.pro.gov.uk/releases/abdication/list.htm>>.

trust, and wants our governments and institutions to be increasingly responsive, not only to today's activities but also to yesterday's. The archivist is often at the front line of accountability in the eyes of our publics – we may be the first point of contact and may not always be seen as sympathetic individuals but rather as being part of “the system,” “the government,” or “the institution” that overlooked issues, and, therefore, in their eyes, in fact are complicit with it. We archivists ourselves will be held increasingly accountable, whether to our parent organizations for the recorded information management advice we give, or to our various stakeholders for appraisal, preservation, and reformatting decisions we make, and the rationales we provide for them. Given the long-term impact on our decisions, both on individual and corporate rights and on the writing of history, archivists today will be held accountable by tomorrow's users, who depend on our making well formulated, professional decisions that can stand the test of time. Indeed we are vital players, not passive observers, of the relationship between history, memory, and accountability.

In conclusion, an historical perspective on accountability adds one more dimension to the accountability paradigm in archives. In preserving records today, we provide the means for today's organization to be accountable both today, through best practices, and tomorrow, through history. Historical accountability gives another dimension to issues of context and memory. It can have an impact directly on the long-term perceptions of individuals and organizations. Archivists indeed have a challenge ahead in ensuring that we can preserve the necessary record. However, there are many opportunities here to increase continually the profile of our profession and archival institutions to our management and publics alike.

