

The Effect of the Web on Archives¹

SYLVAIN SENÉCAL

RÉSUMÉ Ce texte aborde la notion de fonds d'archives dans le cadre de l'environnement Internet. Il présente d'abord la définition actuelle des archives ainsi que les limites qui sont imposées à cette conception par l'usage courant de la métaphore de l'organisme derrière le concept de fonds d'archives. Il relève ensuite les différentes définitions des archives qui opèrent dans la sphère Internet. Celle-ci semble dominée par le concept de réseau plutôt que celui d'organisme. Ces deux métaphores ne sont peut-être pas réconciliables dans la théorie archivistique. Cette situation force une réflexion en profondeur sur la compréhension même des pratiques archivistiques pour en maintenir la pertinence et l'efficacité dans cet environnement.

ABSTRACT This article addresses the concept of the archival fonds in the context of the Internet environment. It offers first the current definition of records as well as the limits this concept faces because of the common use of an organic metaphor to depict the archival fonds. It then addresses the different definitions of records evident with the Internet, a domain dominated by the concept of the network rather than that of the organism. These two metaphors are likely not reconcilable in archival theory. This situation prompts detailed reflection on our understanding of archival practises so as to maintain their pertinence and effectiveness in this environment.

Introduction

The emergence of the information highway has compelled archivists to face two fundamental questions: Who are the new creators of archival fonds? Within information networks is there such a thing as an archival fonds, conceived as a set of documents produced or received by an individual or corporate body in the course of their activity? The emerging new active and transformative communities of interest on these networks are difficult to

¹ This article is a revised version of a paper presented at the 28th Congrès de l'Association des archivistes du Québec. It was first published in *Regards et perspectives – une image en mouvement: actes du congrès / 28e Congrès de l'Association des archivistes du Québec, Château Mont-Sainte-Anne, 10, 11 et 12 juin 1999* (Sillery, 2000), pp. 102–12, under the title: “Les effets du Web sur les archives.”

define as social actors. Neither the concept of corporate body nor the idea of an historical subject seems capable of accommodating them. This challenge directly affects the archival discipline and its ability to enhance the value of the interpretation of the information found on these networks. The role accorded to archival science for social memory seems more elusive than ever in the context of this information highway. Indeed, this challenge has prompted a number of ideas on what archives are and their contribution to the management of knowledge.

The archival reading of documents proceeds through the identification of the agents who created and used the documents. The belief in the effectiveness of this contextualization of documents used to offer evidence of the authors' identities, which is related to an anthropocentric concept of history fundamentally governed by an organic metaphor, is at the base of contemporary archival theory. Consequently, the archival fonds comprises a comprehensive set of documents which social agents gather naturally and organically during the course of conducting their business.

The organic metaphor is a productive concept for archival science because it allows the development of an interpretive context based on the historical unfolding of a continuity of actions. This approach encompasses an interpretation of human experience located in a teleological horizon embedded in the discourse specific to a society. It assumes the continuous integration of experience and its re-insertion into various forms of collective memory necessary for the functioning of organizations such as societies.

At the same time, this way of thinking cannot provide a conceptual framework and an historical ontology that enable archivists to conduct work in relation to the phenomenon of different information networks, especially the Internet. It is increasingly difficult for archival science to develop a workable image of the corporate body when confronted by new modes of economic and social co-operation in cyberspace. The corporate body may not be the most pertinent element for interpreting and offering evidence of the historical dynamic implied by the networked information phenomenon. Has not human will, the rationality of actions, shifted to a different plane in this new sphere? The earlier serviceability of the organic image of information environments is in direct conflict with that of the network, which in an historical perspective, situates less an historical subject – now problematic – than a community of interest with a fluid ontological and epistemological status in an historical perspective.

This paper examines the definition of the concept of archives within the context of the phenomenon of the information highway. First, the current definition of archives is examined as well as the limits imposed by this definition, particularly the contemporary use of the organic metaphor to govern the archival reading of history. Second, the paper illustrates the various definitions of archives operating within the medium of the Internet. Finally, the paper exam-

ines how this notion of archives needs further elaboration within the domain of the information highway so that the mandate of archival science as social memory does not disappear along with the traditional medium of paper.

The Traditional Role of Archives

Two fundamental roles were assigned to archives historically. These roles constitute the foundation of archives and should guide us when researching genuine historical archives on the Web. First, archives *attest*, that is, they preserve documents in order to confirm that a transaction has taken place (proof value). This role determines the development of organizing and retrieval techniques for documents in the custody of the archivist. The second role is one of *providing evidence* of the life of an individual or corporate body (evidential value). This role is reflected by the development of descriptive and classificatory practices unique to archivists.

Confirming a Transaction

One of the oldest and most fundamental functions of a document, basic to the Anglo-Saxon concept of “record,” is that it confirms an act. This corresponds to a definition of document as possessing an inherent proof value. The document allows the recording of acts and transactions; it confers on the document the role of record which entails the long-term preservation of the rights, privileges, and obligations linked to these transactions. In his book entitled *Histoire universelle des chiffres*, Georges Ifrah² offers 3000-year old evidence of the first archival “documents”: the Sumerians used hollow clay balls containing small objects representing particular quantities of items employed in a transaction. These balls carried seals, which could be broken at any time to verify a transaction’s account. Today, a document is still defined in the same manner: “That which is created and kept as evidence of agency, or individual, functions, activities and transactions.”³ Based on traditional definitions, a document is administrative if it offers proof. However, it can offer proof only if its production and use have met certain conditions. All of the conditions require that users of these documents know and recognize the validity of the method used to create the document.

The source of this confirmation becomes a social convention. Every object has the potential to be a document (from a clay ball to a piece of paper) because each can evoke a transaction. This evidential function does not have a

2 Georges Ifrah, *Histoire universelle des chiffres*, vol.1 (Paris, 1981), p. 240 and passim.

3 Australian Archives, *Report on the Development of a Documentation Standard for Commonwealth Agencies: Proposed Theoretical Basis for the Documentation Standard* (1995). Available on-line at: <http://www.aa.gov.au/AA_WWW/AA_Issues/DocStd/DocStd.html>.

direct link to the context of the transaction nor to the physical carrier of the object supporting the evidence. Rather, the proof function of a document inheres in the social conventions it reflects.

For a long period, in fact until recently, the archival essence of a document was related uniquely to proof. But the Sumerians' clay balls, apart from having value as proof of a transaction, can also be preserved to offer an account of a particular period. The anthropology and museology fields have long recognized the heritage value of artifacts. The same accounting balls, when presented in a museum, fulfill an evocative function; they are privileged witnesses to an era. They possess an *evidential value*. It seems to me that the idea of an evidential value within archival practice is relatively new and is the result of the introduction of the concept of archival fonds. Evidential value is now recognized in archival science as being at the heart of its mandate. A document becomes an archival document when it is contextualized in order to reveal its evidential value.

Evidential Value

The "archival" document exists because someone somewhere gives it evidential value. This value implies a cognitive act of representation of an individual or corporate body by the archivist – we must be aware of the representation the archivist creates of the creator of a fonds to explain which documents will be considered archival documents. Consequently, the archivist must preserve a body of documentary material that represents the life of the person or corporate body that first created or used the documents.

To the extent that the strategies used to represent the creator depend on the archivist's particular historical reading, no definitive formula has yet been developed to represent the *whole* of an individual or corporate body. The act of representing a person or corporate body is limited by the representation each archivist forms of them in his mind. Consequently, the archival object is fundamentally constructed. This construction is the archival fonds.

The Archival Fonds and the Historical Subject

In archival science, the fonds is a basic unit. The entire archival approach revolves around this concept. According to the Direction des archives de France, "an archival fonds is in effect the totality of items of all kinds that all administrative bodies, individuals, and corporate bodies have automatically and organically accumulated in order to perform their functions or activities."⁴

A fonds has five basic characteristics. In a seminal article on the subject, Michel Duchein reiterated and elaborated the ideas proposed in 1840 by Nata-

4 Direction des archives de France, *Manuel d'archivistique* (Paris, 1970), p. 23.

lis de Wailly, creator of the idea of the archival fonds. Based on this traditional concept, an organization must meet certain criteria in order to be identified as the creator of a fonds.⁵ The organization must:

- have its own legal identity;
- have a specific official mandate;
- have a defined level of responsibility;
- have autonomy; and
- have an organization chart.

The definition, with these five criteria, determines the representation of a particular corporate body as an historical subject. The use of an organic metaphor, which is always present in the definition of a fonds, attempts to make the historical subject come alive.

Judith Schlanger⁶ believes that the social sciences make various uses of the organic metaphor. The first use is purely rhetorical, as in “the social organism is ill,” allowing the discourse to progress. The second use is analogical in nature: “society is like an organism.” This analogy establishes similarities and serves primarily to attribute certain general characteristics to the entity (e.g., society) normally reserved for an organism (e.g., living, self-regulating, etc.). This second use also allows us to attribute in discourse various characteristics to society, for example.

The third use is epistemological, when we state something like: “history is the progression of the life cycle of humanity, which is considered an organism.” We consider one of the organism’s characteristics (for example, that it is living) as advancing a particular discourse (its history). The organism is alive and it must unfold through time, creating consequently the possibility of its history.

Using the image of the organism in an epistemological sense raises the possibility of a subject, which in turn creates the possibility of a history through the unfolding of the life of the subject. This metaphor allows us to integrate and respect anthropology in a broad sense as well as to the consideration of human affairs as autonomous in their becoming and in their meaning. Thus, categorizing a fonds as the product of the organic union of the individual items created by an administrative body allows it to become an historical subject, the explanatory principle of the unfolding of history. Schlanger demonstrates well the defining role of the organic metaphor in the creation of a subject of history in discourse:

5 Michel Duchein, “Le respect des fonds en archivistique, principes théoriques et problèmes pratiques,” *La gazette des archives* 97 (1977), pp. 79–80.

6 Judith Schlanger, *Les métaphores de l’organisme* (Paris, 1971), p. 144 and passim.

Here the role of organic categories is to substantialize the support of change and consequently, to identify becoming as a force with becoming as a subject. The external and raw time of historical data becomes the internal time presiding over the demonstrations of the living. Scattering and hiatus become the inherent thread of a person's creation. Adding an organic substratum makes possible historical thought, everything remains to be determined from that point on: the scale and content of the historical subject, the nature and the significance of historical unfolding.⁷

I agree with Schlanger and would like to address the nature of the historical subject as it takes shape in the concept of the fonds. I would particularly like to show that identifying such an historical subject is not easy, for it develops out of the archivist's specific interpretation of how actions arise in society as well as how discourses on social practices ultimately establish the identity of such entities as historical subjects.

Consequently, I believe that archivists' notions of the historical subject depend on various factors that influence their interpretations. The first set of factors are ideological in nature and relate to the creator's basic function or location within the general regime of contemporary social and historical discourses. The second set of factors are social in nature and relate to the development of management models used to determine the very nature of the social actors and the forms of action available to them. Finally, technical possibilities, such as the expansion of the Web, compel us to reconsider the nature of the historical subject.

Ideological and Social Factors in the Creation of the Historical Subject

Considerations of historical interpretation are entailed in the archivist's perception of a particular person or corporate body. The archivist must also make important choices. Will the archivist give priority to the description of a fonds based on anticipated research interest or to provide evidence of the entity as a whole? Will the archivist opt for a more global representation – and for whom? For persons and organizations considered socially or personally significant? The archival value of these fonds depends on the archivist's interpretation of history.

Within an institutional framework, this issue appears as a reflection of a minimalist or maximalist vision of an archival fonds. The issue amounts to the following question: Does a division or branch meet the five conditions listed above in order to gain the "noble" title of creator of an archival fonds? The heart of the problem lies in determining if the entity possesses sufficient autonomy, that is, a scope of action of a truly significant subject in the repre-

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

sentations of the actions of an organization. The answer will reflect either a minimalist or maximalist vision of the historical subject. The answer is supplied by the archivist and the ideologically weighted conception of the socio-economic role of the archival fonds that he or she is attempting to create.

Obviously, there are variations to these conditions which serve as definitions. Nonetheless, from an operational perspective, the idea of the fonds in the organizational universe includes varying realities. Archival notions of the fonds have evolved concurrently with the refinement of ideas on the historical subject. As such, these ideas are subjected to ideological considerations. For example, the importance of ideology is apparent when one considers the interpretation of the fonds in the Soviet Empire.

Like Russian society generally, archival science already owes a considerable debt to the legacy of the former Soviet regime. The establishment of a maximalist (or in this case, ultra-maximalist) vision dates back to a June 1918 decree issued by Lenin creating a single archival fonds of documents from the regime established in the wake of the 1917 Revolution. This immense fonds contains all the documents created by the nationalization of state and civil institutions.⁸

An interpretation can also be minimalist and fluctuate based on the analysis of modern organizations and their constantly changing structures. The archival fonds is now seen as an interpretive reality, represented and analyzed as the relationship between a series of documents and continually evolving organizational context. This approach, initiated by Scott⁹ and elaborated by Bearman and Lytle,¹⁰ places the fonds at the centre of the arrangement and description of documents.¹¹

The evolution of Web technologies provides us with approaches that are radically new and which give rise to new models of social practice and cooperation. In fact, Web technologies and the emerging social practices they allow require that the archivist construct a new historical subject. The Web opposes the organic concept of a social body with the neuron network. Such a concept of archives is not yet present on the Web; we have yet to create an archival science that specifies a particular historical subject whose representation would inform a particular interpretation of its related documentary production. What can one make of the idea of archives and the archival creator, then, within this context?

8 Irina Karapetians and Robert Nahué, "Problèmes et défis de l'archivistique russe actuelle," *Archives* 30, no. 1 (1998–99), p. 64.

9 Peter Scott, "The Record Group Concept: A Case for Abandonment," *American Archivist* 29, no. 4 (October 1966), pp. 493–504.

10 David A. Bearman and Richard H. Lytle, "The Power of the Principle of Provenance," *Archivaria* 21 (Winter 1985–86), pp. 14–27.

11 Luciana Duranti, "Origin and Development of the Concept of Archival Description," *Archivaria* 35 (Spring 1993), pp. 47–54.

Conceptions of the Internet and Archives

There are three perspectives we can use to broach the problem of the Internet and, subsequently, the archival significance of the Web (not to be confused with the archival issues on the Web).

The Technical Perspective

We can look at the Internet from a technical perspective, that is as a computer network governed by a series of standards that define various modes of communication and means of exploitation of information (tcp/ip, html, etc.). It is here that computer science reigns supreme. People who work in the information technology field see the Internet as a network that enables the installation and functioning of a series of particular computer applications. These applications in turn are fed by globally-distributed data.

In this perspective, information is equivalent to a data stream that can be produced, distributed, and destroyed, or *archived*. With this perspective a new concept of archives takes hold on the Internet and throughout the world of informatics: the *archiving of data*. Internet archives amount to a particular quantity of preserved data. The ultimate preservation of data would be to preserve everything, something that is conceivable in the not too distant future.

According to Michael Lesk,¹² the Web is increasing tenfold every year. There are approximately 12 000 petabytes of data available on the Web including cinema, images, broadcasting, sound, telephony, and text. Based on various figures available for sales of storage space, by the year 2000 there will be the equivalent of 300 petabytes of memory for each PC sold throughout the world. This will allow the preservation in digital form of the entire global production of information; it will be possible to preserve the personal documentary production of all individuals (their writings, videos, family pictures, etc.). Some consider this possibility very intriguing because it means, for example, that historians could have access to all the information possible on a renowned individual. Lesk however questions the usefulness of such a preservation method:

Whether it is worthwhile is another question: are we better off having all possible information and giving it the most sketchy consideration, or having less information but trying to analyze it better? Computers do not use log tables, and chess computers have dictionaries of opening and endgame positions but not whole games. We need to understand our ability to model more complex situations to know how to make best use of stored information.¹³

12 Michael Lesk, "How Much Information Is There in the World?," *Time & Bits: Managing Digital Continuity* (1998). Available at: <<http://www.ahip.getty.edu/timeandbits/ksg.html>>.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

The preservation of all data is the logical result of computer archiving. It is a vision whose illusory aim is the ultimate capture of all reality, a vision wherein everything is saved in order that everything is known. This proposal amounts to nothing less than that we save everything produced in order to make reality utterly transparent. This seems to me like an unduly hasty dismissal of those conditions that influence and continue to influence the production of data, a disregard of the economic and cultural domination that some producers of information exert over others. It is the triumph of absolute quantity over the reading, the interpretation, and the incessant murmur of multiple discourses throughout the world. It reflects the predominance of the management of quantities of data (produced, stored, destroyed, recalled) over the management of content. If archiving is a storage technique, it is certainly not a conduit of evidence of historical subjects.

In 1997, the computer company Alexa widely publicized its gift of “archives” to the US Library of Congress.¹⁴ The gift was composed of forty-four magnetic tapes representing the entire contents of the Web for January and February 1997. However, the impossibility of supplying the search and analysis tools required to read such a volume of data prompted an arrangement whereby the gift was presented as a computer sculpture: an arrangement of four computer screens on which the Web images of the two-month period unfolded at high speed. Using touch-tone screens, visitors can freeze the stream of information for a few seconds, long enough for viewers to see a few images. Thus, the ultimate function that such an archives serves is as a technological spectacle attesting to its own functioning. Any notion of content disappears.

The Content Perspective

The content perspective is the second approach to the Internet. It views the Internet as a series of sites, each with specific content. At the heart of this paradigm, archives are seen through the “archives” sections of Web sites. The archives are considered as the primary works of a person, unique products that are characteristic of a site or of an organization (e.g., past issues of a newspaper, lists of new releases, specific documents put on-line since inception, etc.). This sense of archives is more limited than that accepted by archivists. It is the individual’s or the corporate body’s principal works or creations that are at issue here, not the whole of their documentary production. From this perspective, not all documents produced have archival interest.

Consequently, the content perspective of archives is not unique to the Web. Rather, it can be found in more traditional environments often associated with the documentation rather than the archives field. We see numerous learned

14 See <<http://www.wired.com/news/news/culture/story/15615.html>>.

journals titled *Archives* (e.g., *Philosophical Archives*, *Theatre Archives*, etc.) whose mandate is to document the thought of those working in these fields.

The content perspective is strictly oriented towards the specific contents of documents under discussion, towards their informational value. The perspective is linked to historical subjects insofar as it is their “works” that are considered. On the Web, such works consist of the contents of certain documents that may be subject to intellectual property rights (e.g., documents whose contents are economically viable and exploitable). The link between marketability and the constitution of archives is a determining factor in possibly establishing long-term retention projects for these documents.

Lyman and Besser note that for television archives:

Early television broadcasts were live and not recorded; when they were recorded on videotape, the tape was often re-used soon thereafter; when the videotape was archived, it was discovered that tape itself decays, and must continuously be re-recorded onto new physical media to refresh its content. The costs of preservation of the history of television are only now becoming acceptable, as secondary markets develop for its intellectual property.¹⁵

The stakes in such archival content are economic, not cultural. How can historical archives, as we define them, position themselves in this market paradigm in which they are increasingly implicated? Is it a question of communicating, exploiting, and financing appropriate archives? In this scenario, these models do not rely on a global approach to archives nor on cultural legislation in order to evolve. One of the major impacts of the Web on archives, then, is economic, and can be seen in the new models of archival activity unfolding globally.

The Work-Space Perspective

The third perspective, which the contemporary archival community finds most interesting, views the Internet as a specific and co-operative work-space. It presents archivists with a new kind of ontology, a new historical subject that challenges them to conduct research on the identity of the creator of an archival fonds. This article does not presume to offer new categories; that is left to those more competent in the genre. However, one thing is certain: from a pragmatic perspective, it is pointless for archivists to discuss the subject of the Web as if it were some undifferentiated monolith. At the same time, however, archivists gain little by trying to understand the nature of specific communi-

15 Peter Lyman and Howard Besser, “Conference Background Paper,” *Time & Bits: Managing Digital Continuity* (1999). Available at: <<http://www.ahip.getty.edu/timeandbits/ksg.html>>.

ties of interest found on the Internet. These communities are evolving and no one knows where they will be tomorrow. According to Lyman and Besser:

Thus digitized documents are created from printed originals – as a mean to create new value by expanded access. But new social and organizational contexts made possible by digital documents are still emerging, only suggested by terms like Virtual community and Distance education. In this sense, the organisational contexts that are responsible for digital documents remain to be defined and founded.¹⁶

In any case, what is important is the ontology in which communities function. The use of the Internet for economic purposes seems to imbue these communities of interest with a unique meaning or identity. But how does one characterize these new corporate bodies emerging on the Net, and responsive, at least in part, to a profit motive?

The New Historical Subject

According to Pierre Lévy the new modes of communication offered by the Internet allow the establishment of new relationships: "... the structuring of cyberspace authorizes an unmediated communication on a large scale that we believe constitutes a decisive step towards new and evolving forms of collective intelligence."¹⁷

One must however define the nature of this common consciousness. Ignacio Ramonet suggests that these new technological conditions make the system global, permanent, immediate, and immaterial; all functions are organized in relation to these criteria. Ramonet observes that the power base has shifted from the traditional political realm to the financial realm with a corollary belief in a global market. "We find ourselves without an historical subject to oppose these trends. How can one impose order on a world exploding from all sides?"¹⁸

Thus, a particular collective intelligence is emerging within this global networking phenomenon. We must observe that this network is partially structured around the economic logic that is typical of a specific kind of administrative rationality, one that is giving rise to a new collective subject which challenges traditional archival thought about the notion of a creator of the fonds.

This collective subject features a limited ontology. It is determined by the computer languages in use, and the capacity of different actors' computer

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 7.

¹⁷ Pierre Lévy, *Qu'est-ce que le virtuel?* (Paris, 1998), p. 111.

¹⁸ Ignacio Ramonet, *Nouveaux pouvoirs, nouveaux maîtres du monde* (Montréal/Québec, 1996), p. 22.

applications to connect and name a very particular universe of functionality. Emergent collective subjects such as this can take the form of different communities of interest. For example, the manufacturing or automotive sector and various sub-contractors are related in a vast spider's web that facilitates the creation of production cycles with optimum partners under current economic and even political circumstances.

This integration and networking among organizations is vast and complex, and amplified by the opportunities that current modelling techniques and standards offer. For example, the OAGIS 6 model and its Open Architecture Group variants lead to the sequence of activities of ERP (SAP, Baan, JD Edwards, etc.) or to the Workflow Management Coalition Standards which standardize the representation of the sequence of activities necessary within a production cycle to ensure the appropriate sequence of transactions.

These standards enable different organizations to communicate among themselves via their Web applications, especially to conduct certain kinds of transactions automatically. This in turn leads to the development of production circuits that go beyond an organization's traditional boundaries and result in the emergence of broader, more polymorphic productive entities.

Generally speaking, the universe of action described and made operational encompasses production processes extending across organizational lines (production, sales, management of orders, billing, transportation, accounting, and finance). It forms a restrained subject ontology. The language involved in the OAGIS standard, for example, has nineteen verbs and forty-two nouns; computer applications can then signal ninety-two separate requests such as "Get Credit," "Transfer Item," or "List Purchase Order." The requests are themselves organized into forty-two scenarios or business processes in which organizations are involved via their respective computer applications. These can involve a series of specific requests whereby, for example, a factory can receive goods from a storage facility or a ledger can be modified by an accounts payable entry.

The possibility of creating productive entities that are globally networked, and which permit the substitution of each of the elements, foreshadows a new historical subject, one whose structure is increasingly complex, more so than those encompassed by current archival models.

These communities of interest are not entirely devoted to economic pursuits. Many have a strong cultural foundation. In the long run, archival institutions, for example, will become much more interlinked within this workspace. If the conception of archives as particular content on the Internet entails a new model for archival management, then the opportunities for collaboration on the Web have a largely political impact on the structuration of archives. The Web will increasingly affect the political *raison d'être* of archives; in fact, increasing networking among archives will have an enormous political impact.

On the other hand, the Internet's decentralizing effects are forcing a questioning of the geographical centralization of archives. Modern-day archives can be disseminated globally, and then reunited virtually around central interest points. The result is a major political impact on the organization of government archives, their ownership, and their control by an authority whose democratic basis is territorial. This phenomenon of centralization has an obvious administrative impact; it challenges the centralized management model of archives common among government jurisdictions.

Renewing Archival Thinking

We must ask ourselves why a concept of archives, based on a particular historical subject, is not found on the Web. I believe that such an historical subject, as defined through the notion of the archival fonds, is not the historical subject we currently find on the Web. The prevailing methods used by large global networks and the practices used by new communities of interest engender a new operating concept of the historical subject that demands a renewal of our archival thinking.

The very idea of community implies an amalgamation of corporate bodies. Do such corporate bodies still exist? Who is responsible, who decides, on which basis, and why? There are no questions of this nature in archival science. Born of pragmatic considerations on documentary organization and emanating from the historical field, archival science has always considered its role either from the point of view of administrative effectiveness or as complementary to the historical discipline, with a supposed interpretive neutrality.

Still, questions remain. Does a society's memory revolve only around those belonging to it? If yes, around which individuals? Unfortunately, the selective nature of social memory has yet to reveal its operating principle. If individuals are not the principal driving force of the historical/social representativeness of archives, then maybe their social discourse is.

Beyond the actual archives themselves, can one find their representativeness – the message – in the archival *reading* of the document of a particular era? In other words, we cannot tackle the archives of the twentieth century – presently structured around social actors – without the user understanding the processes of social action as governed by administrative discourse. Beyond this, however, users must also understand the meaning of “corporate body,” a modern-day community of interest, and its legitimacy, its power, its ability to influence the world. The user must grasp how the actions of a given body came to be legitimately considered as representing society at any given time.

As social practice, archival science itself is steeped in this ontology. Inevitably, the analytical framework used by these social actors reveals something of this social discourse, whether it is consciously applied or not. The user must possess knowledge of this framework in order to understand the archives

themselves and their reconceptualization within a renewed discourse. Awareness of today's social discourse concerning the nature of social action in the context of a rapidly evolving Internet forces the archivist to clearly elucidate the analytical framework used in archival work, especially the practice of documentary selection and, increasingly, that of description.

This renewal in archival thinking and the possibility of witnessing a new concept of archives developing on the Internet, must be channelled through a comprehensive questioning of current archival practices. As well, the archivist must also renew his/her understanding of archival practices themselves. The archivist must in fact be aware of three realities relating to archival science:

- the archivist “reads” society and takes a stand. Archival science is not neutral; it is a social practice, subject to the same economic and ideological constraints as every other cultural practice;
- archival science represents the actions of mankind at a specific moment in time; it unearths the means of social action;
- archival science is an end unto itself.

Archaeology and museology have long considered their activities as exercises in critical intervention in society's cultural sphere. Both disciplines developed critical thought on social intervention and on the political role played by cultural institutions. Roland Arpin offers the following thoughts on the role of museums in society and the historical reading they propose:

For us, diving into the heart of society, participating, is a political function, not a political action. We use the Museum of Civilization as a mediator and as a powerful communication tool for intelligence and thought; the museum offers a vast market of knowledge to the thousands upon thousands who visit and visit again, knowing that this institution belongs to them and welcomes them – it is user-friendly, continually renewed, respects their intelligence and their opinions. The museum does not preach nor proselytize.¹⁹

The Internet can become a place where one can find collective memory, where archivists will be the mediators of the Web's evolution, where what we have been will rub shoulders with what we will be, and where all individuals will be able to see and explore the medium as stakeholders. But archives must first squarely face their political function. This, it seems to me, is a prerequisite to properly addressing the issue of the archives of the Web.

19 Roland Arpin, *La fonction politique des musées* (Montréal/Québec, 1999), p. 40.