

# *The Tyranny of the Medium: A Comment on “Total Archives”*

by TERRY COOK

No archival principle is more universally venerated than provenance. Schemes to classify records by subject or some other artificial system, whether alphabetical, geographical, or chronological, are considered quite un-archival. They destroy utterly the evidential value represented by the original order of the records and render arrangement and description of large bodies of material virtually impossible. The principle of provenance dictates that “an archivist should not disperse records, from a particular group or subgroup, among subject or other kinds of classes.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the case has been eloquently stated by the Association of Canadian Archivists (ACA) itself:

For the archivist, the functional integrity of records has precedence over the form they take. Archivists regard with suspicion repositories masquerading under the name of ‘archives’ which concentrate on the form rather than the substance of archives as records. Although various forms of records present peculiar problems of storage and handling, archival principle should not be overturned by separating records from their functional roots.<sup>2</sup>

Yet in Canada, provenance is now being steadily eroded by another, almost equally august dictum, that of “total archives”. Indeed, it might be declared that there are two principles warring in the bosom of a single profession.

“Total archives” has not really been adequately defined.<sup>3</sup> At least four dimensions or facets of this concept are current. One is that archives should acquire collections reflecting the total complexion of society; archives must not collect the papers of only the rich, powerful, and famous, but of the plumber as well as the politician, the menial as well as the musician. A second perspective of total archives concerns networks; there should be an institutionalized system of archives—national, provincial, and municipal co-operating with university, church, county, business and labour—to ensure that the records of all significant

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1 T.R. Schellenberg, *The Management of Archives*, (New York and London, 1965), pp. 41-5, 90-100.

2 Association of Canadian Archivists, *The Symons Report and Canadian Archives*, Occasional Paper No. 1, (n.p. 1978), p. 5.

3 I readily acknowledge helpful discussion with my colleague, Peter Bower, who has himself been researching the “total archives” notion.

human endeavour are preserved. This refers not only to the collection of institutional records—the above archives acquiring the official files of their parent or sponsoring body—but also to such networks developing strategies for the collection at every level of material on such important themes as labour, women, sports, or intellectual history.<sup>4</sup> The third and more traditional dimension concerns the archival involvement in each stage of the total life cycle of institutional records:

It means that the archives system should integrate control over the management of current records, the provision of records centres for dormant records, and the operation of central microfilm services, as well as the conventional archival functions of acquiring, preserving, and making available for use materials which have permanent value as a cultural resource and national heritage.<sup>5</sup>

Finally and perhaps most popularly, total archives is “the desirability of preserving all types of archival material.”<sup>6</sup> Awed by the “Age of McLuhan”, many archivists have unreservedly accepted the maxim that the medium is the message. Units in archival repositories—occasionally even entire repositories!—devoted to film, photographs, paintings, sound recordings, maps, architectural plans, and machine readable records have soared into prominence in the past decade. The initial union at the Public Archives of Canada, and doubtless many other institutions, of official government records and private manuscript collections has flowered into a rich growth encompassing every imaginable medium. All fields of historical inquiry and research have been greatly enhanced by the availability of the new media. For many, the greater aesthetic and visual appeal of a painting, map, or photograph compared to a page from a government file or private letter has allowed archives to reach out through exhibitions and publications to a much wider audience than the traditional elite clientele of scholars. This media emphasis is not, however, an unmixed blessing vis-à-vis provenance. Certainly, “total archives” and provenance are not mutually exclusive principles; indeed, they should be entirely complementary. Rather, it is the way total archives is interpreted or administered that creates difficulties. It is *not* the sheltering of various media under the total archives umbrella that threatens provenance, but the manner in which the various media are organized within archives. Quite simply, the internal divisions of archival institutions along media lines has created a *de facto* fragmentation of the archival whole, as defined by the principle of provenance. To stand the quotation by the ACA on its head:

The form of the records has taken precedence over their functional integrity. Archivists regard with suspicion those who concentrate on the total functional or administrative unity of records rather than their substance as media. Although the separation of records from their functional roots creates some peculiar problems, the necessity of storing, handling, and referencing the different media separately is the paramount archival principle.

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4 On labour, see Nancy Stunden’s provocative essay, “Labour, Records, and Archives: The Struggle for a Heritage”, *Archivaria*, 4 (Summer 1977): 73-91.

5 Wilfred I. Smith, “Introduction”, *Archives: Mirror of Canada Past*, (Toronto, 1972), pp. 18-20.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

This is evident in the daily operations of not only the Public Archives of Canada (PAC), but also most other national archives and of many provincial and municipal archives in this country.<sup>7</sup>

## II

The various media divisions within archives tend to become small isolated components, often stressing the collection of their own media *qua* media as much as the collection of significant material—whether national, provincial, or local—according to the institution's mandate. Thus, maps are sometimes acquired more to demonstrate cartographic techniques and processes or to document the *oeuvre* of individual cartographers, rather than to obtain any previously unknown historical information revealed on the face of the map itself. Some photography units make no secret that a substantial part of their acquisition activity is oriented to documenting the history of the photographic medium and that aesthetic appeal rather than historical significance is of primary importance. For example, one such unit has refused on occasion to accept photographs found on government files and recommended for transfer from another unit's custody. In one case involving portraits of deputy ministers and directors-general tucked into their personnel files, the photographs were deemed of no interest because they were neither aesthetically pleasing nor the handiwork of significant photographers. In other words, the records were rejected because they did not document sufficiently the development of the medium itself, even if they were excellent visual representations of leading scientists and administrators who had made a significant contribution to the development of Canadian agriculture. To switch to another medium, abstract works of art have recently been purchased and exhibited by an archival unit. Even if such art illuminates the career of a painter working in Canada, the subject matter of the painting itself provides no documentary evidence about the history of the country, especially so when the works included settings in Mexico, Peru, and Polynesia. A costume collection containing examples of Greek, Roman, and even primitive cavemen's garb falls into the same category.

All this is not to say that the history of cartography or photography or costume is not a valid focus for the collection activities of an archives and, indeed, necessary to a limited degree to permit proper identification, dating, and conservation of certain items. But should complete divisions or units be devoted to these subject themes? If so, why not also for such more important themes as agriculture, transportation, native people, defence, and science. The problem of the concentration on media may perhaps be best illustrated by analogy. If the textual divisions were similarly preoccupied with the format of the records they collect, then they would devote significant time, professional skill, and acquisition and conservation dollars to document the history of quills, typewriters, letterhead designs, and handwriting styles. Imagine the uproar if an important letter by Karsh or Notman was rejected by manuscript archivists because it was typed only on an old-fashioned Underwood model, the type from which was very common

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7 My assertions and examples are perforce drawn from the practices I observe around me at the Public Archives of Canada, but the situation according to some archivists with whom I have spoken is not dissimilar at other institutions. I will stress, too, that the opinions which follow are mine alone and not necessarily those of the Public Archives of Canada.

and already well preserved in other examples of MSS typescript. Now, if it had been typed on a brand new I.B.M. micro-computer word-processor, that would have been different!

Documenting the history of the medium itself—the medium is the message—is dangerous not because the material collected is insignificant, but because of the isolation it symbolizes and invites, an isolation in the case of the Public Archives of Canada not at all aided by the scattering of the various divisions throughout separate buildings in Ottawa and Hull. This physical separation is reinforced by the fact that many newer archivists have worked only in the visual media divisions and therefore naturally accept the media focus found therein. This all leads to the concentration on media type at the expense of the functional unity of the original record. For example, in the past many maps, plans, and pamphlets have been stripped from government files and removed to the custodial control of the appropriate division. In several cases, no reference was left behind that anything had been removed or the reference was so vague as to be useless. Such action destroys the functional integrity of the original file. Furthermore, the receiving division occasionally did not keep the material in its original order and reference system, but dispersed at least part of it throughout its own holdings according to its own classification criteria. Consequently, the chances of locating some such transferred material are indifferent. In such cases, the principle of provenance has been thwarted. Although cross-reference arrangements for material actually transferred have recently improved, several questions regarding cross-media interdivisional relations have rarely been answered satisfactorily. Must material be accepted when offered? Must material be given up when requested? Must all such media be treated consistently or, as unfortunately happens, only “highlights” removed? Should acquisition activity be co-ordinated? Should reference systems be standardized—or at least made compatible?

A common defence in this dilemma is that of conservation. If a map or photograph remains on a government file, it will eventually disintegrate. Agreed. Storage, handling, circulation, and conservation of the various media obviously require different approaches. Yet, the assertion that one archivist cannot care for all types of media generated by the administrative unit for which he is responsible is a red herring. In such smaller institutions as the Archives of the Canadian Rockies and the Yukon Territorial Archives, archivists very satisfactorily look after records in several formats. Storage and handling peculiarities could easily be handled by auxiliary technical support staff, as conservation now is in our larger institutions. The crucial point is that while the physical and handling control of a series of functionally related records in various media can be separated, the intellectual control must not be.

The fragmentation of such intellectual control is readily apparent in the case of federal government records at the Public Archives of Canada. The vast bulk of these records, the registry files created in the course of a department's normal operations, are kept in the Public Records Division. However, series of maps produced by the same department as well as those maps transferred from the department's archival files are controlled by the National Map Collection. Series of photographs generated by the same department and those removed from its files are housed in the National Photography Collection. Publications plus any pamphlets or leaflets removed afterward from government files are in the Public

Archives Library. This situation is further muddied by inconsistency: not *all* maps, photographs, or pamphlets are taken from the files, but only those appealing to the recipient division at the time. And even for these, it is sometimes impossible to link the removed item to its original file. The operations of the same department would also be reflected in the papers of senior civil servants, ministers, and even prime ministers controlled by the Manuscript Division. The same department's historically significant computer-generated documentation would be in the Machine Readable Archives Division. And if this department produced publicity or broadcast films and sound recordings, the National Film, Television and Sound Archives would also enter the fray. Given the relative isolation of these various archival units one from another and the lack of day-to-day co-ordination between them, at least at the working level, the intellectual control of the total *fond* of our sample department's records has most certainly been lost. Contrary to Schellenberg's principle the records have clearly been dispersed from the group or sub-group in which they were created.

This fragmentation seriously affects the three universally acknowledged archival functions of acquisition, custody, and public service. For example, various divisions have conducted surveys in the field and for headquarters quite independently of each other. Not only does this naturally result in wasted effort and duplication, but also it can confuse transferring agents or private donors and thwart acquisition success. More than one archivist has been embarrassed by having had questions posed to him about another division's survey about which he knew virtually nothing. The media isolation even harms the rational collection of material of interest to media divisions: lack of coordination means that public records archivists may not acquire the final textual report based on EDP sources on some subject already acquired by computer records archivists or may ignore otherwise routine housekeeping files on photographers and a department's photographic practices and purchases which may keenly interest archivists in charge of photograph collections. In terms of meeting even the managerial ideals of efficiency and effectiveness—let alone any archival ideals—"total archives" certainly creates acquisition problems.

In the custodial arena, the media fragmentation admittedly lends itself to easier storage, handling, and circulation, although these aspects do not alone justify the present situation. Regarding the custodial description of the records and the production of reference aids, however, the media fragmentation is retrogressive. Expertise is duplicated. In large institutions such as the Public Archives of Canada there are among the various divisions two and occasionally three archival specialists for such areas as the Canadian north, military history, immigration, and Indian affairs. Working in isolation one from the other, they spend time researching the same sources, producing similar administrative histories, planning similar acquisition strategies, and developing similar contacts with researchers, learned societies, subject interest groups, and scholarly journals. At the same time, such other important areas as women's, children's, medical, and intellectual history are relatively ignored.

For public service, the fragmentation of the archival whole according to media retards scholarship in most fields of Canadian studies. Only those few researchers able to spend many weeks in archives are able to learn the intricacies of the different media collections and their varying methods of organizing and

describing material, and so find all the relevant sources on a given topic. Most personal visits and all telephone and written inquiries rely on the expertise of the archivist with whom first contact is made and that expertise too rarely crosses media lines. And, as mentioned above, the practices of removing some records from one division to another can actually mislead researchers, while inefficient acquisition and custodial operations—duplication in one area, no activity in another—plainly does not aid research. Even subject exhibitions and publications intended to reach a wider public usually concentrate on or at least highlight one medium rather than integrate all archival media sources.

Aside from the drawbacks regarding acquisition, custody, and public service, there are three other undesirable results of this archival fragmentation. The first is that government records are controlled by various access limitations imposed by the transferring department, including at the federal level not only the familiar thirty-year rule, but also exempt records categories of the Cabinet's "Access Directive". The privacy requirements of Part IV of the Canadian Human Rights Act as well as the dictates of the federal government's *Treasury Board Administrative Policy Manual* and the forthcoming Freedom of Information and Privacy Acts make the administration of access by the Public Archives of Canada an increasingly complex and delicate affair. Because a department's records are scattered in many archival areas, however, the administration of its access requirements is diffused too widely. The greatest danger lies with the so-called private papers of civil servants, members of parliament, cabinet ministers, and the prime minister. Except for their purely personal affairs and political party involvement, these public figures created or acquired official government records. Because a cabinet minister may have put a top-secret report or confidential memoranda in his own filing cabinet instead of in his ministry's registry system does not render that document any less a public record subject to all the official access requirements. The administration of a department's often-complex access requirements by five or more archivists in separate units is a regrettable division of control. In these circumstances, it is quite likely that a researcher will sometime be inadvertently shown restricted records. Depending on the situation, this could have legal repercussions for the offending archivist. Just as seriously, it could harm the credibility of archival security and upset the delicate balance now maintained between acquisition and access.

Yet another drawback is the real threat that in times of fiscal restraint media may be removed entirely from the control of archives. Certainly aspects of the collection priorities, as presently defined, of some archival units dealing with photographs and paintings, for example, overlap those of galleries and museums in the same jurisdiction. Duplication of acquisition activity, and such costly support areas as conservation, storage vaults, and exhibitions, may well draw unfavourable notice from economizing governments. If, as a result, certain media were removed from archives and given over exclusively to galleries or museums, it would be truly tragic for total archives. One way to prevent such a disaster is to integrate all media more tightly into an archival whole, in place of the present isolation.

The sixth, and perhaps most nebulous, result of media isolation is the tendency towards an additional fragmentation according to function; there are now in some media areas separate acquisition archivists, cataloguing specialists, and

reference archivists. Obviously this further reduces the overall ability of any one archivist to control a defined group of records. Given the symbiotic relationship of acquisition, custodial description, and public service, and their close relationship as I have argued elsewhere to scholarship,<sup>8</sup> this further fragmentation has ominous implications for the archival profession as it has been understood and practised in Canada. As Wilcomb Washburn recently observed, it is crucial that the archivist be “identified as a scholar whose natural and instinctive commitment is to truth before administrative convenience. . . .”<sup>9</sup>

While these arguments have focussed most heavily upon federal government records, the conclusions may be applied to other records as well. They most clearly relate to other institutional archives charged with collecting the records of their parent bodies, and therefore most susceptible to the application of the principle of provenance. These archives include other levels of government (provincial, county, municipal), universities, churches, and large businesses. The same arguments would also seem to be relevant to records created in the private sphere—records which are not scheduled by a records management system to be transferred from operational redundancy to archival status. The division by media and subsequent loss of intellectual control of the total records of a theatre company, sports team, women’s association, labour union, small business, legion branch, or private individual would have the same results.

### III

Two solutions to the problems created by media fragmentation are apparent. The first, the maintenance of the present organization by medium with improved inter-media acquisition coordination and especially the development of common, compatible, cross-media reference aids, has been tried with some success. Given that the problems outlined above result from organizational and administrative interpretations of the total archives concept, rather than a philosophical flaw in the concept itself, new administrative procedures should be able to bridge the inter-media barriers and reduce substantially the fragmentation of archives. In the area of acquisition, for example, coordination—admittedly informal—between media units when faced with mixed-media potential accessions is noticeably improving. Inter-media cooperation on such concerns as sampling techniques or privacy legislation is also evident. In the custodial area, however, the situation is far less reassuring. With such descriptive tools as PRECIS (Preserved Context Indexing System), the production of common reference aids is certainly feasible. But is there the will? As each media area commits itself to increasingly expensive, time-consuming, and sophisticated finding aids for its own collections, the chances must remain slim that such vested interests will readily modify or abandon their own systems for a nebulous, future, common index. Any archival networks that have been established across Canada, from a reference viewpoint, have not shaken the media focus. Indeed, they have reinforced it. Witness, for example, *The Union List of Manuscripts* and the *Guide to Canadian Photographic Archives*. Meanwhile, common inventories establishing even the most elementary intellectual control over all

8 Terry Cook, “Clio: The Archivist’s Muse?”, *Archivaria*, 5 (Winter 1977-78): 198-203.

9 Wilcomb Washburn, “The Archivist’s Two-Way Stretch”, *Archivaria*, 7 (Winter 1978), p. 140. See also p. 141 and *passim*.

media sources of a government agency or private individual are virtually non-existent. Such a basic tool requires neither computer time nor vast sums of money. The only essential requirement is the will to break down the barriers between administrative units. It is inexcusable that a researcher cannot find in one single inventory a full description of all media sources in the custody of the archives that emanated from a single government agency, private individual, institution, or association. Another practical suggestion to retard archival fragmentation is that all accession notices, inventory entries, and detailed finding aids created by any media unit be circulated to every other unit. Acquisition surveys and investigations should be co-ordinated in a formal manner. Strict procedures must be developed that will protect the integrity of the total record whenever material is removed from files and transferred to another media unit. Finally, whenever possible, archival exhibitions and publications should strive to demonstrate the significance of all media sources on a given topic instead of highlighting the glories of a single medium.

A far more radical alternative would be the restructuring of our archives in a manner consistent with the principle of provenance. Instead of each government records archivist being responsible for the textual records of ten or twelve departments, each cartographic archivist responsible for the maps and plans of perhaps twenty government agencies, and each photographic archivist responsible for the photographs of perhaps thirty government departments, why not make each *archivist* (unmodified or qualified by a media adjective) responsible for all records created by two or three such departments? For records generated in the private sphere, the same principle would hold. Thus, one archivist would be solely responsible for the correspondence, diaries, photographs, house plans, and home movies of, say, a Yousef Karsh just as one archivist would be responsible for all the files, reports, photographs, and maps produced by the Geological Survey of Canada. Archives would be internally organized along two separate lines. The first, obviously, would reflect the administrative units of the archives' parent body or level of government, with the collection of whose records the archives is officially charged. Second, all the documents of each private institution and individual falling under the acquisition mandate of the archives would be arranged in separate collections. In effect, public or institutional records *and* private collections (whether manuscript, photographs, film, or a combination of any such media) should be the only two separate units or divisions within an archives.<sup>10</sup> Within those two divisions, there might well be media specialists on a limited scale. Certain kinds of records—early maps, for example—do not have close or evident connections with the wider *fonds* of individuals or institutions, public or private, and one specialist would easily have his hands full caring for such material, without looking after other media as well. But in modern archives, where most collections in all media are readily connected to an individual, association, or institution, such situations would be the exception rather than the rule, and should be treated as such.

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10 Collections from civil servants, cabinet ministers, and prime ministers, all of whom likely served two or more administrative units, could not of course be broken up and assigned piece by piece to various records groups reflecting the agencies they served, or else the provenance of these collections would be destroyed. Nevertheless, they should for the reasons outlined above be administered by the public records side of an archives. Similarly, all records of predecessor governments should obviously be administered by the same public records unit.



This proposal would not be achieved without turmoil. The admission that much past effort had been misdirected would not come easily nor would vested interests readily loosen their grip. Archivists would have to be truly educated for their new role, a state which those aspiring to be the "compleat archivist"<sup>11</sup> should happily welcome. And, admittedly, the gain in depth of understanding of all media in an area would be partially offset by a loss of breadth in any one media in an area would be partially offset by a loss of breadth in any one media field. But the benefits of such a restructuring would be large. Duplication and inefficiency would be reduced, collection mandates better observed, acquisition properly co-ordinated, more, and more thorough, finding aids created, access consistently administered, researchers better satisfied, and Canadian scholarship advanced. Just as important, the archivist would be elevated from an isolated, increasingly technocratic, and administrative role to one of total control of an integral unit of records. Instead of seeing many parts, he would be responsible for a true entity of archives. This would encourage genuine scholarship to again be, as it once was, an attainable ideal of our profession.<sup>12</sup>

Withal, I do not wish to attack the zeal or motives of colleagues working in various media divisions at my own and other institutions. Their professionalism and many real accomplishments are not in question. I do wish, however, to open a debate on first principles such as provenance and total archives and their implications. Archival journals are not "noted for the frequency of articles expressing dissent or a questioning of the assumptions of the profession."<sup>13</sup> That should change. We must first define in principle and reconcile in practice the nature and application of provenance and total archives, the role of the archivist as scholar or administrator, the relationship of the archivist to his own institution and his wider profession, the organization of our repositories by administrative or archival criteria. Only then can we begin to solve such a fundamental issue as the most effective form of education for archivists. Obviously no small part of the problems described above results from simple lack of knowledge of the nature of true "total archives" in all its dimensions. Effective archival education would lower the mental barriers separating media units. Only then, in effect, will all four dimensions of the total archives concept be harmonized, in contrast to the current working at cross purposes.

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11 The ideal to which I am alluding is nicely stated in Gordon Dodds, "The Compleat Archivist", *Archivaria*, 1 (Winter 1975-76): 80-5.

12 See Cook, "Clio: The Archivist's Muse?", *Archivaria*, p. 199; and Carl Berger, *The Writing of Canadian History: Aspects of English-Canadian Historical Writing, 1900-1970*, (Toronto, 1976), p. 30 and *passim*.

13 Washburn, "Archivist's Two-Way Stretch", *Archivaria*, p. 140.

## Résumé

L'expression "archives totales" fut créée par les APC, mais elle est employée de façon croissante par les autres dépôts d'archives conservant des documents dans tous les médias. Cette expression, selon l'auteur, a donné naissance à des difficultés en ce qui touche le contrôle du droit d'auteur et la qualité des services au public. Il analyse la nature de ces problèmes, propose une solution, et donne quelques commentaires sur les besoins en formation des archivistes canadiens.