Let the Ghosts Speak: An Empirical Exploration of the "Nature" of the Record*

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RÉSUMÉ Cet article se base sur des données empiriques, tirées d'une étude de cas portant sur les pratiques de gestion des documents dans les banques commerciales jamaïcaines qui ont fait banqueroute, afin d'explorer la « nature » des documents. Il s'inscrit dans le débat qui a eu lieu dans les pages des précédents numéros de la revue *Archivaria* portant sur la définition du document avec des questions sur le sens du document (est-il fixé au moment de la création ou évolue-t-il dans le temps?) et le créateur de celui-ci. Se basant sur des données empiriques, cet article prend appui sur les idées de Preben Mortensen, Brien Brothman et Tom Nesmith. Les données présentées dans l'article illustrent l'argument qu'il n'y a pas une seule façon de conceptualiser les documents mais plusieurs façons valables découlant des différents contextes sociaux et que, de plus, le sens des documents est produit, au cours du temps, par tous ceux qui sont impliqués dans le processus de leur création, de leur transmission et de leur mise en contexte, dont les gestionnaires des documents.

ABSTRACT This article uses empirical data from a case study of record-keeping practices in indigenous Jamaican commercial banks that collapsed to explore the "nature" of the record. The article continues a thread of debate appearing in previous issues of *Archivaria* which questioned the definition of a record, whether the meaning of a record is fixed at the point of creation or evolves over time, and who authors the record. Drawing upon empirical data, the article finds support for the ideas of Preben Mortensen, Brien Brothman, and Tom Nesmith. Data are presented to illustrate the point that there is no single valid conceptualization of the record, but there are many valid conceptualizations arising from particular social contexts, and, further, that meaning in records is engendered over time by all those involved in the processes of incription, transmission, and contextualization, including record-keepers.

True . . .
The paintbrush doesn't make pictures without a hand,

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The zither makes no music in its case . . .
Place a shuttle in a loom and it cannot weave alone,
Put a key in a lock and it cannot turn by itself

A plane needs a carpenter
A book needs a reader
A field needs a farmer
A wheel needs a potter
A boat needs a sailor,
An altar needs a worshipper.

In all these cases, it is the person that makes things true.
Why blame an object for being something it isn't?

– Deng Ming Dao, *Everyday Tao: Living with Balance and Harmony*

For the past three years, I have been engaged in an exploration of record-keeping and accountability in the context of the failure of several indigenous Jamaican commercial banks. Although this research project has focussed on the relationship between competitive viability, accountability, and record-keeping in the context of these commercial bank failures, it has yielded some interesting, empirically based insights about the "nature" of records as well. In this article, I discuss these insights with a view to continuing a thread of debate that has appeared in previous issues of *Archivaria.* Specifically, the article engages the question "What is a record?" and whether the meaning in a record is fixed at the point of creation or evolves over time even while the record is being preserved. It also explores the related question of who actually authors the record.

In answer to the first question, this article takes the view, drawing upon the empirical research undertaken for the Jamaican case study and influenced by ideas in a recent article by Preben Mortensen, that there is no one "true" conceptualization of the record, but rather many different conceptualizations of records arising from particular social contexts. In answer to the second question, following the ideas of Brien Brothman and Tom Nesmith and again drawing upon empirical research, the article takes the view that the meaning in records is engendered over time and that record-keepers coauthor that meaning through the activities they perform.

While Mortensen's, Brothman's, and Nesmith's arguments are theoretical in approach, this article attempts to explore their ideas empirically. This is not the first article to take this approach. Robert McIntosh's article on the National Archives of Canada and the formation of the Canadian military record in World War I, Dawne Adam's article about the Khmer Rouge genocide record-keeping, and Lily Koltun's reflections on digital mediations are just three recent articles which provide empirical examples of the influences acting upon records across various phases of their existence.[1] Nevertheless, this article does hope to offer a unique perspective in its examination of record-making and record-keeping practices within "originating agencies" prior to the point at which records traditionally find their way into an archival repository. Writings, such as the article by Robert McIntosh, that highlight the influences acting upon the meaning of the record in the archival context, offer an extension of the ideas presented in this case study.

The empirical data upon which this article draws were collected between May 1999 and November 2000 on four failed Jamaican commercial banks and two viable Jamaican commercial banks. The fieldwork involved conducting interviews with various government and banking officials, physical examinations of records and record-keeping systems, and reviews of key documents, such as records-related policies and procedures of the failed and viable commercial banks.

The data were coded and analysed using an approach informed by the Grounded Theory methodology with the assistance of qualitative data analysis software.[2] Though it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss in detail the methodological approach of the study, essentially it involved drawing theoretical inferences from the field data, developing theoretical ideas by comparing the theoretical inferences with accepted archival theories, and then returning to the field data to test theoretical ideas in a recursive manner. It was this approach to the data that led, as the study progressed, to the abandonment of early traditional assumptions about the record (e.g., the record as impartial evidence of transactions) in favour of a more dynamic view of the record.

The interviews constitute, by far, the most important source of information about the operations of Jamaican commercial banks, both those that failed and those that did not. Approximately fifty ethnographic interviews were conducted: with government officials (eight interviews); with former directors (three interviews), senior executives and operational managers (nineteen interviews), and other staff (three interviews) of four failed Jamaican commercial banks; with senior executives and operational managers (twelve inter-

1 See Robert McIntosh, "The Great War, Archives, and Modern History," *Archivaria* 46 (Fall 1998), pp. 1–31; Lily Koltun, "The Promise and Threat of Digital Options in an Archival Age," *Archivaria* 47 (Spring 1999), pp. 114–35; and Dawne Adam, "The Tuol Sleng Archives and Cambodian Genocide," *Archivaria* 45 (Spring 1998), pp. 5–26. See also Preben Mortensen, "The Place of Theory in Archival Practice," *Archivaria* 47 (Spring 1999), pp. 1–26; Tom Nesmith, "Still Fuzzy, But More Accurate: Some Thoughts on the 'Ghosts' of Archival Theory," *Archivaria* 47 (Spring 1999), pp. 136–50; and Brien Brothman, "Orders of Value: Probing the Theoretical Terms of Archival Practice," *Archivaria* 32 (Summer 1991), pp. 78–100.

2 Grounded Theory is "a general methodology of analysis linked with data collection that uses a *systematically applied set of methods* to generate an inductive theory about a substantive area." See B. Glaser, *Basics of Grounded Theory Analysis* (Mill Valley, CA, 1992), p. 16. The software I used: QSR*NUDIST.

views) and other staff (two interviews) in two viable Jamaican commercial banks; and with external and forensic auditors and other individuals close to the institutions involved in the Jamaican banking crisis (two interviews). These people were surprisingly candid in discussing the problems encountered during the Jamaican financial collapse. Given the sensitivity of the research topic and the candidness of subjects' answers to questions, the identity of interview subjects and the institutions for which they work has had to be protected; therefore, in citations of interviews in the article, subjects are identified only by an assigned alphanumeric code, not by name or institution, and all references that would link them to a particular institution have been removed.

The Jamaican Financial Crisis and the Collapse of Jamaica's Indigenous Commercial Banks

From the beginning of the 1990s, symptoms of fundamental problems in the Jamaican financial sector began to appear.[3] By mid-1996, it was apparent that the financial sector was in a state of crisis, a crisis that would lead to the insolvency and technical failure of all of Jamaica's indigenous commercial banks within a span of two years. In response to the growing crisis, the Government of Jamaica established the Financial Sector Adjustment Company (FINSAC) Limited in January of 1997 to address the liquidity and solvency problems through a process of intervention, rehabilitation, and divestment. As of 1998, FINSAC had become Jamaica's largest holding company with some 158 companies and investments in nearly all domestically owned financial institutions. It also had provided support to the financial sector by way of acquisitions and soft lending totalling $J73.5 billion ($US1.7 billion); $J68 billion ($US1.58

3 The precise year in which the Jamaican financial collapse can be said to have started is a matter of interpretation that depends on the factors one accepts as having caused the collapse; however, most analysts and commentators agree that the seeds of the collapse were sown long before the first banks failed. For example, see Dennis Boothe, "Case Study of Selected Financial Institutions," symposium on the Crisis of the Jamaican Financial Services Sector, University of the West Indies, Kingston, Jamaica, 27 November 1999. Claremont Kirton and Moya Leiba-Barnes date the financial crisis in terms of forced closure, mergers, and government assistance. Using these factors, the crisis can be dated from 1995–1998. They note that economists also try to date the crisis by the following: non-performing assets to performing assets in the banking system exceeds 10 per cent, cost of rescue operations at least 2 per cent of GDP, extensive banking problems resulting in large-scale nationalizations, and large amount of bank runs (see Claremont Kirton and Moya Leiba-Barnes, Financial Sector Crisis in the 1990s: Macro- and Micro-Economic Roots," symposium on the Crisis of the Jamaican Financial Sector, University of the West Indies, Kingston, Jamaica, 27 November 1999). For the sake of simplicity, the study views the collapse of the sector as commencing with the first in a series of bank failures, that is, with the collapse of the Blaise financial institutions in 1995, although it accepts that the roots of the collapse go back much further.

billion) of this was in support of the banking sector covering 1.5 million depositors. Through its intervention in the financial sector, FINSAC came to own or control all domestic banks (with the exception of the very small Trafalgar Bank) or approximately 60 per cent of all the country's banking assets.[4]

FINSAC's initial $J73.6 billion ($US1.7 billion) infusion of capital into the country's financial sector represented 60 per cent of the Government of Jamaica's total budget for the year (1998) and raised the country's burden of debt servicing to approximately 65 per cent of its annual revenue.[5] As of 2000, the FINSAC bailout had cost the Jamaican Government and taxpayers an estimated $J130 billion (roughly $US 3.2 billion) during the longest period of negative economic growth in the country's history.[6] Not only has the economic cost of these bank failures been high, but there has been a high social cost as well. The financial crisis has driven the country into an enormous debt trap from which, at present, it is difficult to see how it will recover.[7] In 1999, the government's efforts to raise funds through higher taxes to cover the debt led to riots and protests across the country that had serious economic and social ramifications.[8] Given the economic and social impact of these bank failures, it is important to fully understand all of the factors contributing to their collapse.

Explanations of the bank failures typically have focussed on the state of the country's economy, high-level cronyism and corruption, and management incompetence in addressing new areas of business risk.[9] Without going into

4 Paul Chen Young, "With All Good Intentions: The Collapse of Jamaica's Domestic Financial Sector," *Papers on the Americas*, XXX, Study 12 (Washington, 1998), p. 1.

5 Ibid.

6 "FINSAC bill nears $130b," *The Financial Gleaner* (Friday, 25 August 2001), p. 3.

7 See Norman Girvan, "Jamaica: In Internal Debt Trap?" Symposium on the Crisis of the Jamaican Financial Services Sector, University of the West Indies, Kingston, Jamaica, 27 November 1999 and "Domestic Debt Jumps Again," *The Financial Gleaner* (27 October 2000), p. 3.

8 "Nation Unites in Protest," *The Financial Gleaner* (Tuesday, 20 April 1999), p. A1–3; "More Mayhem," *The Financial Gleaner* (Wednesday, 21 April 1999), p. A-1.

9 See, for example, Ministry of Finance and Planning, "Public Sector Response to the Problems of the Financial Sector," Ministry Paper 13/98 (8 April 1998); "BOJ Governor Keynote Speaker at Jamaican Institute of Bankers Awards Luncheon," *JIOB News* (May 1999), pp. 1, 6; Jason Abrahams, "The Need for Restructuring of the Jamaican Financial Architecture and the Way Forward," Symposium on the Crisis of the Jamaican Financial Services Sector, University of the West Indies, Kingston, Jamaica, 27 November 1999; Greta Bogues, "Origins and Causes of the Banking Crisis," Symposium on the Crisis of the Jamaican Financial Services Sector; Dennis Boothe, "Case Study of Selected Financial Institutions," Symposium on the Crisis of the Jamaican Financial Services Sector; Claremont Kirton and Moya Leiba-Barnes, "Financial Sector Crisis in the 1990s: Macro- and Micro-Economic Roots," Symposium on the Crisis of the Jamaican Financial Services Sector; Wilberne Persaud, "Financial Sector Growth, Innovation and Crisis: The Links," Symposium on the Crisis of the Jamaican Financial Services Sector; Ministry of Finance and Planning, Ministry Paper 13/98, "Public Sector Responses to the Problems of the Financial Sector" (Kingston, Jamaica, 8 April 1998).

detail (which is beyond the scope of this article), not one of these factors alone provides fully satisfactory explanations for the collapse of the country's indigenous commercial banks. Rather, empirical research has revealed that many factors dynamically interacted to create a complex spiral of decline. In analysing the factors that contributed to the collapse of the banks, commentators generally have overlooked as a contributing factor the way in which the banks created and kept records, except insofar as directors and managers of the failed banks deliberately avoided documenting or falsified the details of financial transactions.

The empirical research upon which this article draws, however, suggests that, while deliberate failure to create and keep accurate and complete records of financial transactions did contribute to the problems experienced by the banks, the failed banks' routine practices of records creation and record-keeping were an equally, if not more, significant problem. As a result of these practices, managers and directors in these financial institutions and bank supervisory authorities lacked the trustworthy and timely accounting and management information they needed to maintain effective control of the banks' operations, to assess and manage their financial positions and risk exposures, and to prevent fraud. This is not to suggest that there was a simple and direct causal relationship between the banks' poor record-keeping practices and their ultimate failure. It was in combination and interrelationship with other factors that record-making and record-keeping contributed to and fuelled the banks' collapses.

Insights into the Question "What is a Record?"

The findings of the empirical research conducted on the collapse of Jamaica's indigenous banks showed that the banks' directors and managers often lacked reliable and timely accounting and management information needed to manage balance sheets and to control a range of risks. In exploring what caused the absence, or poor quality, of this information, it was necessary to examine how the banks produced their accounting and management information. This investigation revealed some interesting insights into how different groups view records. The article now turns to providing a brief synopsis of the banks' account and management information production processes as background to a discussion of these insights.

The banks handled a wide range of financial transactions on behalf of a variety of parties. These included processing of transactions for both customers and non-customers conducted at automated teller machines or ATMs (in two banks only) and transactions on behalf of customers conducted at branches or processed through the branch network. The majority of transactions in the branches resulted from the banks' core functions of deposit taking and lending. However, with the structural reforms that took place in the 1990s in the Jamaican financial sector, banks also became licensed foreign exchange dealers and traders and, consequently, handled a number of transactions involving the buying and selling of foreign exchange. In addition, the banks invested in securities and purchased funds to finance their other activities. As such, the banks' main business transactions included: opening and administering various deposit accounts on behalf of customers (e.g., current, savings, and time deposits); processing of cash and cheque deposits to, and withdrawals from, those accounts; granting credit, such as loans, overdraft facilities, and guarantees (i.e., of commercial paper for corporate clients); sale and purchase of foreign exchange; and investing and purchasing funds. (In addition to their core functions, the banks also increasingly became involved, throughout the period of the Jamaican financial crisis, in non-core functions such as art collection and real estate development. Although their involvement in these non-core activities contributed to the problems that eventually led to their failure, the focus of this discussion will be on the production of accounting records and management information relating to the banks' core functions of deposit taking, lending, and financial intermediation.)

The process of accounting for the banks' financial transactions, and thus the accountability for those transactions, began with the creation or receipt of records documenting each financial transaction. For example, the banks created and received many different types of records in the process of opening various types of deposit accounts, such as application forms, agreements regarding the operation of the account, copies of customer identification, deposit slips, and signature cards. Other relevant records were received from the customer, such as letters of reference in the case of personal accounts or copies of certificates of incorporation, memoranda of association, and articles of association in the case of corporate accounts. These records generally were placed in customer account files. Signature cards, however, were kept separately in card files. In addition, at least one bank kept a customer account history card file, while in other banks this information was kept in a computer database. Throughout the operation of the account, the banks filed records related to the history of the account on the customer's account file, which generally was retained in the customer's branch. Examples of the type of documents placed on the file include letters concerning the printing and dispatch of cheques; stop payment orders; copies of statements; letters concerning lost or stolen cheques, drafts, or passbooks; and letters concerning the use of facsimile signatures.

On the credit side, the granting of a credit facility, for example, a loan, overdraft, or guarantee, generated such documents as credit applications, credit assessments, correspondence related to the credit facility, and, for corporate loans, notes on site visits and annual reports. The banks created and maintained credit files into which they placed documents relating to the opening of the credit facility. In addition, most of the banks' credit was secured so they also created and kept securities documentation concerning collateral on credit. This documentation varied depending on the nature of the credit but included such items as debentures, mortgages, certificates of title, bills of sale, insurance, loan agreements, promissory notes, and exchange control approval (in the case of foreign dollar credit only). The banks kept these documents in separate securities files that they generally stored in a safe area such as a branch vault. As with the deposit account files, throughout the operation of the credit facility any documentation relating to the customer's credit account generally was to be placed on the appropriate credit or securities file.

The banks processed numerous financial transactions on a daily basis with respect to their deposit and credit accounts. These included cash and cheque deposits and withdrawals, and credit disbursements or payments on loan accounts. Each transaction generated records, for example, deposit slips, savings account withdrawal vouchers, internal vouchers, cancelled cheques, and other types of documents. The banks microfilmed nearly all of their transaction records. Microfilming of records was carried out in order to create backup copies in the event that documents were lost in transit between branches and central processing units, and also in order to retain copies of original cheques returned to customers with bank statements.

Traditional "accounting" for these transactions began as branch employees created entries for each transaction in various journals. Each of the banks had computerized their transaction processing to varying degrees. In some cases, the item processing systems were stand-alone while in others they were modules of the bank's system.

After entering each financial transaction, the banks posted entries to various "accounts" in double entry ledgers, for example, deposit account ledgers, credit ledgers, and general ledgers. Here again, many of these ledgers were computerized, forming part of the banks' computerized core accounting systems, but others were not. In the case of the computerized ledgers, like the transaction processing systems, the banks' core accounting systems used different software running on a variety of platforms. Two of the banks used IBM AS400-based systems approximately five years old. Another used a DOS-based system. Yet another had a system dating from the 1970s running on the now outdated IBM system 36 platform.

In keeping with standard accounting procedures, the banks undertook to balance the double entries in each of their ledgers resulting in the production of trial balances, though commentators and analysts of the Jamaican financial crisis have noted that account balancing was not done with adequate timeliness and regularity. Through the process of balancing the accounts, the banks sought to verify the accuracy of their books of account and detect any errors. The correction of account imbalances required bank employees to research individual financial transactions, which often necessitated retrieval and examination of original source documents, such as vouchers.

Production of the trial balance formed the basis for preparation of the banks' statements of profits and losses and, from this, the balance sheets that showed their liabilities, assets, and capital. Together, the profit and loss account and balance sheet provided directors and managers with information to assess their financial positions and risks as the basis of choosing appropriate strategies to maintain profitability, liquidity, and adequate capital as well as to maintain adequate control over banking operations.

In addition to the production of profit and loss accounts and balance sheets, the banks produced other financial and management reports from information in their accounts to assist managers and directors to meet statutory reporting requirements, control operations, and manage risks, though many commentators and analysts believe those reports were less than required under the economic conditions in which the Jamaican commercial banks operated at the time. The reports that the banks did produce included: liabilities with other institutions; assets with other institutions; asset details; currency positions; asset and liability maturities; interest accruals; past due loans; and non-performing loans. Many of these management information reports were created using Excel or other spreadsheet software packages.

The empirical research revealed that there were many weaknesses in the banks' accounts that negatively affected their ability to control operations and manage risks. Customer information was often missing, loan documentation was incomplete, and information needed to monitor the banks' liquidity, deposit base, asset quality, and loan loss provisioning was unavailable. From the perspective of former directors and senior managers of the failed banks, government officials, and many public commentators and analysts, shortcomings of the banks' accounts were attributable to weak "management information systems." In the words of one interview subject:

> I would have to say that one of the big problems that faced Jamaica is [that] the management information systems ... were absolutely atrocious; nobody could get anything out of them and if I was a manager I would not have a clue as to what was going on in my bank. ...[10]

Interestingly, however, interview subjects all had very different conceptions of what constituted a management information system. For example, some interview subjects used the term to refer to the banks' transaction processing and core accounting systems.[11] Others used it to refer to the reporting functionality of information systems (whether computerized or manual) that sup-

10 Subject A-1, personal interview, Kingston, Jamaica, 19 May 1999.

11 For example, subject A-16, personal interview, Kingston, Jamaica, 30 July 1999. "Subject: That's what we need, one management information system. One loan system, one platform and we can't wait until [system name] gets on board so we can do all this."

ported management review and decision making in the context of hierarchical organizational structures.[12] Still others used the term quite liberally to refer to all computerized information systems in the banks.[13]

Despite the interview subjects' belief that the problem was one of weak management information systems, it is possible to classify the banks' accounting and management information weaknesses as a records-related problem from both archival and accounting perspectives. This is because many of the types of documents encompassed in interview subjects' conceptualizations of management information systems and in the banks' accounting and management information production processes match documentary forms that, by traditional archival definitions, would qualify as "records," since they are documents produced in carrying out particular financial transactions and kept as evidence of those transactions.[14] That being said, however, some of the accounting and management information generated as a result of the banks' accounting production processes might not be considered records by traditional archival conceptualizations of the term. For example, by some archival

12 For example, subject A-3, personal interview, Kingston, Jamaica, 20 May 1999, who asked, "As a manager sitting there looking at your management information systems and all the numbers and things for your IT systems, how do you get behind these numbers then as a manager and really get to the pulse of what is happening in your organization behind some of those soft issues?" Or, subject A-6, personal interview, Kingston, Jamaica, 6 June 1999, who said, "The whole idea of, my idea and philosophy of MIS is to [flatten] the organization chart so that there are ... the reporting is simple to understand and that you shorten the lines of communication between the people who are dealing with the customers and the ultimate decision maker."

13 Subject A-1, personal interview, Kingston, Jamaica, 19 May 1999: "In terms of computerization of the accounts. I think, I am trying to break this down, in terms of different institutions. Each of them was computerized differently and someone like [name of bank] really had no computerization, a lot of it was manual. So if you had to get any information out, what would have to happen is that the information request had to go out to each of the branches. They would have collated the information manually; a time-consuming operation, then it would be collated and given to you. So that was the worst example in terms of [name of bank]. The other major problem affecting the institutions, even ones which were computerized, like [name of bank], was the actual quality of data ... They had not got significant report-writing functionality within their management reporting tools. They could not get management data readily out. Management suffered with or just put up with what they actually had rather than actually demanding, 'this is the kind of data we wanted'." He later went on to discuss various templates that had been created to provide managers with information about profits and losses and other information required for monitoring and decision making.

14 For example, Australian archivists Frank Upward and Sue McKemmish define the "archival document" (a term they use to refer to both records and archives) as follows: the archival document can be conceptualized as recorded information arising from transactions. It is created as a by-product of social and organizational activity in the course of transacting business of any kind, whether by governments, businesses, community organizations or private individuals. It is therefore defined by its contextuality and its transactionality. The documentation of transactions may be any storage media and is increasingly an electronic process. See Sue McKemmish and Frank Upward, eds., *Archival Documents: Providing Accountability Through Recordkeeping* (Melbourne, 1993), p. 1.

definitions, it is dubious whether management and financial reports based on a bank's books of account could be called records. Hilary Jenkinson asserted that records are unique because they are not created in the interest of or for the benefit of posterity.[15] Accounting reports, in comparison, are created with a mindfulness and attention to an audience removed by space and time from transactions to which the reports refer.

Contrast the traditional archival concept of a record to that of the accounting profession. In accounting, the record is the entry documenting a financial transaction in an organization's books of account.[16] By this definition, root causes of the bank's accounting and management weaknesses could certainly be seen as a record-keeping problem. Problems with documentation of the sort that archivists identify as records would, to the accountant, be problems with "source documentation," as this is the term given to such documents by the accounting profession.[17]

The point of this discussion is to show how the empirical data, coupled with a comparison of theoretical conceptualizations about records, support the view that there is no "one" record. Interview subjects held their own ideas and conceptualizations about the types of documentation involved in the bank's accounting and management information production processes. Likewise, archivists and accountants have different labels and ideas about this recorded information. Even within the archival profession, there are many differences among archivists' conceptualizations of records. Perhaps the argument is best summed up with the observation that one person's "management information" is another person's "record." This is consistent with the theoretical ideas discussed in a recent article by Preben Mortensen, in which he comments: "... philosophical problems are not solved by metaphysical assumptions about essences, but by examining how we use concepts within the practical circumstances of our lives. In particular, the meaning of words and concepts are not, as in the Platonic tradition, secured by the shared form of things to which we apply the same name, but are a matter of the ways in which we use concepts in practice."[18]

Taking this view, the important question becomes not "What is a record?" but "How does this particular individual or group perceive and understand a record?" It is argued that this viewpoint permits a broader scope for analysis, as it frees us from any one conceptualization of the term that may limit analysis. For example, the dynamic and cumulative way in which the banks' account production processes undermined internal control and accountability

15 Hilary Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration*, 2d ed. (London, 1965), pp. 2–6.
16 Frank Wood and Alan Sangster, *Business Accounting I*, 8th ed. (London, 1999), pp. 3–4.
17 See use of the term in Wood, p. 148.
18 Preben Mortensen, "The Place of Theory in Archival Practice," *Archivaria* 47 (Spring 1999), p. 6.

in the failed banks may not have been revealed if the field research had focussed only on documentary forms which qualify as records according to traditional archival conceptualizations of the term. For example, vouchers or credit files, traditionally viewed by archivists as impartial and "true" records of evidence, contributed to only a part of the overall problem with the bank's accounts. Problems with the banks' management information systems also contributed to the generally poor quality of the banks' accounting and management information. A research focus based on traditional archival ideas about records, it is argued, would have been less revealing about the weaknesses that existed in the banks' documentary chain of evidence for accountability. Taking a more socially situated view of records and record-keeping, on the other hand, has shown that the banks' accounts – though required and relied upon to present a "true and fair" view, to use the accountant's language, or a reliable and impartial view, to use the archivist's terminology, of the banks' financial transactions – came to be collectively viewed as unreliable, partial, and misleading. More generally, the research offers a warning to archivists to be wary of assuming that archival conceptualizations about records are absolutes when they are only one possible way of understanding recorded information.

Insights into the Construction of Meaning in Records and Its Relation to Documentary Truthfulness

Trustworthiness is arguably one of the most common and important qualities required of records for purposes of accountability, no matter what the organizational context. However, it is a quality often taken for granted. Records generally are perceived as having greater capacity to convey intended meaning reliably across space and time, and it is for this reason that the "giving of an account" in large, hierarchical organizations has come to depend on the production, distribution, and preservation of many forms of written communication. Traditionally, archival thinking on the relationship between records and accountability has rested on a belief that the usual circumstances of records creation give assurances of reliability and authenticity, and therefore of trustworthiness, a quality essential to giving of and holding to account.

The ideas underlying this belief are succinctly expressed in the business records exception to the hearsay rule (i.e., the rule that allows for the legal admissibility of what would normally be considered second-hand information), the origins of which signaled society's growing reliance on records in the transaction of social and organizational business. Under this rule, courts generally accept business records as trustworthy evidence of transactions for the following reasons: their form would have had to have been complete to effect the business transaction for which the record was created; the regular making of a particular record calls for accuracy; the records creator generally would have had no reason at the time to manipulate, substitute, or falsify the record for some future, unthought-of purpose; the business enterprise had to have been relying on the record for its business purposes, so would have noticed that the record was not reliable or authentic if that were the case; and the record was created under a duty to an employer and therefore there is the risk of censure or disgrace if errors are made.[19]

A record created in the normal course of business that is contemporaneous to the events to which it refers, for example, a voucher, is therefore usually accorded a level of *documentary truthfulness*. Even those records that are not created to effect a business transaction but are written up afterwards as a record of an event or transaction, such as minutes of a meeting or financial ledgers, if created reasonably close to the events or transactions to which they refer, generally are considered to reflect the documentary truth.

To say that the courts, and by extension society, generally consider records to be trustworthy because they meet the above described criteria is not the same as saying that records *are* trustworthy and always meet these criteria, of course. A record's documentary truthfulness may be challenged legally through demonstrating the ways in which it fails to meet the criteria of the business records exception to the hearsay rule. Thus, what we might want or require a record to be (i.e., trustworthy evidence of a business transaction) should not be confused with what a record may, in reality, be (i.e., less than trustworthy evidence of a business transaction). Deliberate or unintentional deviations from the conditions of record inscription that generally lead to accordance with documentary truthfulness mean that records can be quite unreliable as evidence of a business transaction.

Yet, traditional archival conceptualizations of the record have fused *ought* with *is* by suggesting that reliability and authenticity are somehow inherent in the immutable nature of the record, that is, they somehow define its *recordness*. Hilary Jenkinson argued that the impartiality of records arises from the circumstances of their creation as a means of carrying out activities and not as ends in themselves and that, consequently, records are "inherently ... capable of revealing the truth about those activities" and of bearing "authentic testimony of the actions, processes, and procedures which brought them into

19 Written documents came to be accepted as evidence before the courts with the first business records exception to the hearsay rule covering shop books of tradesmen. The hearsay rule came into being around 1500 as juries began to rely on the evidence presented by witnesses before them in court, rather than by going out and obtaining it themselves from an informed person, as had been the earlier practice. See John Henry Wigmore, *A Treatise on the Anglo-American System of Evidence in Trials,* 3d ed., vol. 5 (Boston, 1940), pp. 9–19; 347–51; 369–70.

being. ..."[20] Following Jenkinson's line of thought, Heather MacNeil writes that, "to protect the value of records as evidence, it is necessary to preserve their *originary* qualities, that is, the qualities with which the records are endowed by the circumstances of their creation, accumulation, and use in the conduct of personal or organizational activity. These qualities include naturalness, uniqueness, interrelatedness, authenticity, and impartiality."[21] Along similar lines, the literature on accounting generally portrays the preparation of accounts as a neutral technique that does no more than objectively record and produce a "true and fair" view of the results of organizational activity.[22]

These conceptualizations reify records and accounts. They separate records and accounts from the social and technological contexts that lead to their creation until they are no longer recognizable as socially and technologically constructed entities but, instead, become imbued with an almost god-like power and objectivity. However, the traditional archival and accounting viewpoints leave an important question unanswered: why should it be necessary to protect a quality that is apparently already part of the inherent nature of the record and the account? If these qualities define records and accounts, then they should exist in them as a natural state and need no protection. But, clearly, these qualities in records and accounts do require "protection," or rather, careful cultivation.[23] Thus, instead of being immutable aspects of the nature of records or accounts, impartiality and authenticity are ideals. Like Plato's shadow images, actual records and accounts exist as pale and imperfect reflections. They are, however, no less records or accounts.

In both the accounting and archival fields, there is a growing body of literature influenced by philosophers such as Michel Foucault, Jūrgen Habermas, Anthony Giddens, and Jacques Derrida that offers a critique of the view that records and accounts of organizational activity provide impartial and objective evidence. Rather, authors of this body of literature clearly see records and accounts as social and technological constructs.

Critiques of the traditional view of accounting have focussed on explora-

20 This definition, taken from the School of Library, Archival and Information Studies, University of British Columbia "Select List of Archival Terminology," neatly summarizes the Jenkinsonian perspective. It is cited in Heather MacNeil, "The Context is All: Describing a Fonds and its Parts in Accordance with the *Rules for Archival Description*," in Terry Eastwood, ed., *The Archival Fonds: From Theory to Practice* (Ottawa, 1992), p. 202. Jenkinson's ideas are elaborated in his book *A Manual of Archive Administration*, 2d ed. (London, 1965), pp. 2–6.

21 MacNeil, "The Context is All," pp. 200–201. (Emphasis added.)

22 John Roberts, "The Possibilities of Accountability," *Accounting, Organizations and Society* 16, no. 4 (1991), pp. 355–59.

23 A paper by Verne Harris that discusses the use of records as evidence in South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission is an interesting case in point. In this paper, Harris describes how South African courts overlooked the traditional rule against hearsay to allow for oral testimony in support of land claims as it was felt that the official records too greatly prejudiced the ruling elite. See Verne Harris, passim. fn. 33.

tions of the use of accounting information in the production and reproduction of systems of organizational accountability to show how accounts are constructions that issue and express relations of power. This revisionist view of accounting sees the function not as a set of practices that mirror organizational reality but rather as practices that shape organizational reality. John Roberts writes, for example, that "as a vehicle for hierarchical forms of accountability, accounting information appears as just one means of negotiating and defining the significance of events, as a method for expressing and enforcing expectations, and as a resource in the enactment of particular power relations."[24]

Roberts goes on to explain that the way accounting information has been institutionalized as the most important, authoritative, and telling means whereby organizational activity is made visible ironically has rendered invisible social and technological influences on the meaning of accounting records and given rise to acceptance of accounting information as objective numerical representations of facts.[25] He states:

> ... this invisibility lies in accountings [*sic*] capacity to present information as if it were objective fact; the detail can be contested but not its basic capacity to reflect the truth. Like the scientific method it imitates, the knowledge that accounting produces is presented as somehow independent of the interests of those who produce and use it.[26]

Recent accounting and archival research reveals, however, that accounts and records are anything but neutral, objective, and disinterested. Much of the literature critiquing accounting's claim to neutrality and objectivity has focussed on accounting standards, regulations, and conventions that govern accounting measurement and classification and how these construct accounting "facts." Joni J. Young's article on the American savings and loan crisis, for example, discusses how accounting standards and regulations reflected changing political interests and objectives of regulators.[27]

Arguably, the tendency to focus on the way in which accounting data are classified, aggregated, and presented in accounting reports according to accounting standards and regulations has led to two important gaps in understanding accounting records as social and technological constructs. First, this approach overlooks the ways in which other aspects of the complex process of accounting construct the meaning of accounting records. Second, it leads to a tendency to overestimate the degree to which construction of the meaning of accounts, and expressions of power relations in the construction of meaning, is

24 Roberts, p. 355.
25 Ibid., p. 359.
26 Ibid.
27 Joni J. Young, "Getting the Accounting 'Right': Accounting and the Savings and Loan Crisis," *Accounting, Organizations and Society* 20, no. 1 (1995), pp. 55–80.

a conscious and intentional process. Though the manner in which accounting data are reported undeniably is an important and essential feature of the production of meaning in accounts and the production and reproduction of accountability systems in organizational settings, it is only one aspect of a complex accounting production process (as outlined in the previous section of this article). The meaning of accounts evolves not only as a result of the conscious process of classifying and reporting financial transactions but also throughout the complex process of record inscription, transmission, and contextualization over space and time, the goal of which is to produce accounts of financial transactions. Thus, the meaning of the account at any given moment may be less the result of social actors' conscious intentions to portray the "facts" in a particular light than the unintentional result of colliding interests underlying mediations that take place over time throughout the account production and communication process, particularly when the effects of these interests and mediations on the meaning of accounting records is not consciously understood nor subject to explicit managerial coordination and control.

References here to recent archival literature challenging traditional positivist views of the record move beyond an examination of the way in which data are classified according to accounting principles or accounting standards and towards exploration of the cracks in the image of accounting records as neutral and immutable. The traditional archival view of the record is that its author creates it to effect consequences as part of official transactions.[28] The author of the record, therefore, fixes in the record his or her will concerning the desired consequences to which he or she wishes to give effect.[29] Assuming none of the problems that can affect reliability is introduced, either deliberately or unintentionally, into the record's inscription, the traditional view holds that the record then becomes the stable vehicle by which the author's intended meaning and documentary truth about a transaction is communicated over space and time. In this view, everything is nice and neat and linear.

The ideas of communications theorist Mark Poster suggest that the traditional archival conceptualization of records may have grown out of an era in which print media were the predominate forms of communication. As Poster writes, "print culture constitutes the individual as a subject, as transcendent to objects, as stable and fixed in identity, in short, as a grounded essence."[30] In contrast, in the electronic age, "electronic culture promotes the individual as an unstable identity, as a continuous process of multiple identity forma-

28 Jenkinson, p. 4.

29 Luciana Duranti, "Diplomatics: New Uses for an Old Science (Part II)," *Archivaria* 29 (Winter 1989–90), pp. 6–9.

30 Mark Poster, "The Mode of Information and Postmodernity," in David Crowley and David Mitchell, eds., *Communication Theory Today* (Stanford, 1994), p. 174.

tion. ..."[31] In the same way as the electronic age shifts our understanding of the individual, so, too, it changes our conceptualization of the record.

The electronic age has moved the epistemological and ontological discussion surrounding the record away from viewing it as stable object towards seeing it as something mutable and unstable. In a recent review of Trevor Livelton's *Archival Theory, Records, and the Public*, Tom Nesmith challenges us to think of the record as "...an evolving mediation of understanding about some phenomena – a mediation created by social and technical processes of inscription, transmission, and contextualization."[32] Essentially, Nesmith and a growing number of archivists influenced by postmodern theory are saying that the record is a vessel for communicated meaning, a meaning that is socially and technically constructed and not static but evolves over time as the record is created and kept.[33]

A look at how records were created and kept in the failed Jamaican commercial banks reveals how social and technological processes during record inscription, transmission, and contextualization shaped the meaning of the bank's accounts over time. In searching for the underlying reasons for the failed banks' records creation and record-keeping practices, the research data has shown that many different people authored the meaning in the banks' records throughout the records' continuing existence. In the absence of a strong guiding organizational record-keeping culture, each individual was motivated differently in making choices about record inscription. Many of these record-making and record-keeping choices served individual or, at best, group interests, rather than providing the need for reliable, authentic, and accessible evidence of financial transactions in accordance with organizational or regulatory requirements.

For record inscription to take place, the accountable person must not only wish to undertake the transaction but also must have the intention to fulfill the requirements of the accountability relationship by giving a "truthful" account of the transaction. This was not always the case in the failed banks. At all organizational levels, there were times when individuals deliberately avoided the creation of records in order to keep the details of a transaction from being known. One type of decision for which this failure to give account was most evident was in the granting of loans. In many instances, loans were not prop-

31 Ibid.

32 Tom Nesmith, "Still Fuzzy, But More Accurate: Some Thoughts on the 'Ghosts' of Archival Theory," *Archivaria* 47 (Spring 1999), p. 145.

33 Another leading proponent of this viewpoint is Verne Harris. See, for example, his book *Exploring Archives: An Introduction to Archival Ideas and Practice in South Africa*, 2d ed. (Pretoria, 2000), in which he writes that the meaning of the words *archives* and *records* is a site of contestation. His own understanding of the terms is heavily influenced by the writings of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, who see the archive as a construction expressing relations of power (see pp. 18–23).

erly documented and booked (i.e., recorded in loan books of original entry). The failure to document and book loans made these loans "invisible" to those whose job it was to track the credit risks of the banks and to ensure that assets and liabilities were appropriately matched and risks adequately covered by sufficient capital and liquidity. The failure to make proper records of loan transactions contributed to a distorted picture of the health of the banks' loan portfolios and overall financial positions and risks. This, in turn, prevented managers, directors, and bank regulators from taking action to correct operating problems. Problems could not be corrected, as they were not known.

In many cases in the failed Jamaican commercial banks, there was no will to record or to give account of a transaction because that transaction was "sharp," that is, illegal or bordering on illegal. Many of those interviewed for the research project, as well as public commentators, government officials, and others, have pointed to the fact that directors and managers in failed banks engaged in practice that was motivated by a desire to circumvent Jamaica's bank regulatory and supervisory framework or a desire to reap benefits for themselves and their "cronies."[34] As one respondent explained, there was a certain deliberate vagueness in documentation, the root cause of which was that senior managers were out to "feather their own nests." As revealed by one interview subject:

> There are certain cases. I won't mention any names. There are cases where directors would take out loans to themselves and never pay at subsidized interest rates and it is very hard to find it on the books. Because of course the directors know the system and know how to beat it.[35]

This attitude permeated entire organizations. In some cases there was "willful intention" not to document in order to get away with things. Others knew what was going on (e.g., the financial controller) but were instructed by senior managers to turn a blind eye.[36] These bankers' "sharp" practices promulgated a record-keeping culture in which the documentation of business transactions was actively discouraged in some instances.

In other cases, broader cultural influences discouraged the making of records. There are two ways in which research subjects saw culture as being a factor in the failure to document the banks' transactions. First, some observers point to the fact that, because Jamaica is a small society, many deals were made on the basis of personal contacts. In commenting on this phenomenon,

34 See for example, "BOJ Governor Keynote Speaker at JIOB Awards Luncheon," *JIOB News* 2, no. 1 (May 1999), pp. 1, 6 and subject B-1, personal interview, Kingston, Jamaica, 20 May 1999.

35 Subject A-1, personal interview, Kingston, Jamaica, 19 May 1999.

36 Subject B-1, personal interview, Kingston, Jamaica, 20 May 1999.

Jamaica's Minister of Finance, Omar Davies, pointed out that, in a small community, decisions cannot be made dispassionately, noting that you can have rules but "sooner or later you get a call."[37] He also has observed that the tendency to do business with friends or known associates in the context of a small society mitigates against the creation of documentation (i.e., because the other party is known to the banker and there is greater trust), adding that this was the reason why some of the loan documentation in the failed banks was non-existent or incomplete.[38]

Second, some respondents pointed to a generally held belief that Jamaican people favour oral forms of communication and therefore are less likely to make records. As one interview subject remarked: "... it is very difficult to get [employees] to put this information down on paper. Maybe it is because we are not very literate in that we don't like writing letters and writing memos and that sort of thing. We just don't do it."[39]

Despite the two cited cultural explanations for the failure to document, the research data reveals that Jamaican employees working in foreign-owned banks did create documents where their counterparts in the failed banks did not, so societal culture alone as an explanation is not convincing. A comment by another research subject in one of the failed banks suggests that organizational culture was also significant:

> You will find that [people do not make records] and that's why it is important for the organization to set off and establish the structures that drive managers and supervisors to document versus verbally communicate. Because you do find that the preference is to verbally communicate versus document.[40]

This response indicates that where documentation was poor it was the cultural predilection not to document *coupled with* an organizational absence of accountability for the making of records that led to failures to account.

The same cultural influences that discouraged bank employees from creating documentation also contributed to managers' and directors' lack of awareness of and appreciation for the need to make records of all business transactions. This, in turn, resulted in a failure on the part of directors and managers to establish and enforce accountability for recording financial transactions. In contrast, in one of the Jamaican commercial banks that did not fail, which was foreign-owned, the organizational values of the foreign parent company placed greater emphasis and importance on documenting transactions,

37 Omar Davies, "Introductory Statements," Symposium on the Crisis of the Jamaican Financial Services Sector, University of the West Indies, Kingston, Jamaica, 27 November 1999.

38 Ibid.

39 Subject A-18, personal interview, Kingston, Jamaica, 3 August 1999.

40 Subject A-14, personal interview, Kingston, Jamaica, 22 July 1999.

reflecting the broader cultural values of a society more oriented to making records. Thus, the organizational culture reflected this value system and the bank promulgated clear rules and structures to ensure that proper documentation was made and kept.

The failure to record transactions was one problem in the collapsed commercial banks. The quality of the records bank officials did make was another. The same social and organizational factors that explain why records were not made also explain why those that were made were frequently incomplete and inaccurate. Assuming there is the will to inscribe an account of a transaction and to do so truthfully, there must also be the will to ensure that the account is accurate (i.e., contains no error of fact) and complete, both in terms of content (e.g., all required information is filled in on a form or data entry screen) and form (e.g., all signatures have been obtained, the document is properly dated, and so on). Moreover, all records creators must understand what constitutes an accurate and complete record for each particular record type. In some cases, the banks failed to develop and communicate requirements and standards for accuracy and completeness in recording transactions for which bank officers could be held accountable. For example, one interview subject noted in relation to customer information files, "you will find that there was no standardization of inputting data. So what you find is a CIF (customer information file), [they] were extremely variously inputted at random by different people."[41] In the absence of clearly documented written standards concerning accuracy and completeness of customer information files, staff at various levels invented their own standards in the creation of these records. As in the case of choice about whether to create records, employees' standards of completeness and accuracy in the making of records were conditioned by their own motivations and attitudes. These were influenced by a variety of factors undetermined and uncontrolled by the banks' directors' and managers' requirements for trustworthy accounts of financial transactions.

As several interview subjects suggested, the absence of clear standards for accuracy and completeness was due to the lack of appreciation on the part of those responsible for record inscription of the need for adequate recording of transactions, an attitude that filtered down from the top of the failed banks. Due to their lack of appreciation and concern for the need to ensure that employees created accurate and complete records, managers in the collapsed banks failed to develop standards or take other steps to ensure that employees created documents capable of supporting the requirements of internal accountability and control. For instance, they might have instructed information technology support staff to modify existing systems to introduce built-in features (e.g., data entry edit checks) designed to produce greater levels of accuracy and completeness. Likewise, they could have taken steps to ensure

41 Subject A-1, personal interview, Kingston, Jamaica, 19 May 1999.

that subordinates received appropriate training on the degree of accuracy and completeness required of certain types of records. However, they did not do so because they, themselves, did not view the creation of accurate and complete records for accountability purposes as a priority.[42] They were, by and large, much more concerned with responding to the daily pressures of operations. Managers' failure to control the record-making process contributed to a situation in which disincentives to creating records required for effective accountability and control remained unchecked and even subtly encouraged.

It was difficult for directors and senior managers of the failed Jamaican commercial banks to override individual, organizational, and cultural disincentives to making records.[43] Without clear record-keeping business rules, the banks succumbed to what can be described as a sort of organizational "anomie." Anomie occurs when a set of shared values, beliefs, and norms are absent or unclear because social controls are weak and the moral obligations that constrain individuals and regulate their behaviour are not strong enough to function effectively.[44] Under these conditions, records creation and record-keeping behaviour becomes individualized, unpredictable, and chaotic and is often in conflict with behaviour that is in the best interest of organizational objectives. This was the case in the failed banks where individual motivations and cultural disincentives to record-making had full sway.

In other cases, although the banks developed policies and procedures to address decentralized operations which had weakened management oversight and control (ironically, because untrustworthy and inaccessible information prevented effective monitoring of subordinates' actions and decisions), bank managers and personnel were not held to account for adequately recording business transactions. The problems created by weak enforcement of any existing controls permitted the banks' officers to record transactions according to their own motivations, preferences, and personal standards. As can be seen, their interests were not always in keeping with the information requirements of effective accountability. However, it is important to note that, although individual motivations were not in keeping with this goal, the officers' choices were not always intentionally subversive, as was commonly believed. Collectively, however, these choices led to weaknesses in the banks' accounts of financial transactions that undermined systems of internal accountability and control.

The Jamaican case data also reveal that those with responsibility for keeping records – at different times a record's original author, an accounting or file clerk, a secretary, and others – also contributed to shaping the meaning in the banks' records as a result of the choices they made about reinscription,

42 Subject B-1, personal interview, Kingston, Jamaica, 20 May 1999.

43 Roy Radner, "Hierarchy: The Economics of Managing," *Journal of Economic Literature* XXX (September 1992), p. 1404.

44 M. Haralambos and M. Holborn, fn. 65.

transmission, and contextualization. In some cases, their choices included the choice of technologies for record-making and record-keeping, and these technologies also mediated the meaning in records by virtue of possessing particular characteristics and limitations.

For example, as the operating environment began to change to demand more from the banks' managers concerning asset and liability management and control over operating expenses, they began to employ computer technology to assist them with these functions. Since the banks' existing computer systems lacked the functionality to produce the types of reports that managers required, managers tended to create and use ad hoc reports using popular spreadsheet software (e.g., Excel).[45] For example, the finance department in one bank stored a number of spreadsheets on its server. The department relied on these spreadsheets for completion and control of one of its core accounting processes, the reconciliation of accounts. As such, these spreadsheets arguably accounted for how the department performed that function and provided important evidence of that business process. Thus, it can be argued that they were integral to accountability.

Many of these spreadsheets provided what could be viewed as important evidence of decisions concerning critical bank business functions such as asset and liability management, budgeting, and loan loss provisioning, however, the informal way in which managers created and kept these spreadsheets often led to dissolution of the meaning in these records over time. This problem was partly due to the limits of managers' choice of technology in creating and keeping the records. Specifically, the spreadsheet software had no features that automatically linked spreadsheet documents within their structure and content to the business transactions and processes for which these records had been created. The meaning of records derives not only from content and form but also from context; over time, the context in which the Jamaican bank managers had created these records became more distant and the significance of the records and their meaning became more obscure. Moreover, the records' meaning and significance often were lost completely because of the ease with which the technology for storing spreadsheets permitted alterations and deletions of computer files, a characteristic which also undermined accounting and accountability for the banks' financial transactions.

In the absence of clear corporate definitions for "records," implicit conceptualizations about records and assumptions about their value led creators to make independent decisions about adding them to more permanent and stable organizational record stores, thereby elevating them to the status of official records and expanding their meaning through contextualization. Jamaican bankers found themselves in the midst of a shifting documentary landscape.

45 Subject B-3, personal interview, Kingston, Jamaica, 25 June 1999; Subject B-6, personal interview, Kingston, Jamaica, 13 July 1999.

Business processes and accounts that had once been documented in paper form were recorded increasingly in electronic form to facilitate transaction processing and the convenient manipulation of data for reporting purposes. Despite these changes, most individuals working in the Jamaican commercial banks still thought of a record as paper. The following comment by one interview subject illustrates this point:

> Primarily when we think of records and files we think of a record ... and a file and we know that there are other records and files. We all are aware of that but it doesn't mean that we have to let go of, you know, the record and the file. Which is why we probably would print this piece of paper rather than to send it, the message, next door [via e-mail]. The day will come when we will stop it, printing the paper, but I can tell you as far as [name of bank] is concerned probably for about a decade now we have been talking about a paperless office, etc. There is no such thing as a paperless office. Forget it. It doesn't exist. We get, you know, we improve our technology and we ... create more paper.[46]

This subject's conceptualization of the record was so integrally linked to the paper medium that he was unable to see any other recorded information, such as e-mail, as being a record.

Even subjects, such as one information technology specialist, who were more comfortable with the idea of documentation in electronic form, saw legal limitations to adopting electronic documentation as official records of business transactions.[47]Significantly, the legal constraints to which some respondents referred are more imaginary than real in the Jamaican context, as under Jamaican law computer-generated documents are admissible as evidence in both criminal and civil legal proceedings as long as they satisfy certain clearly specified standards of trustworthiness (the provisions have yet to be tested extensively in a court of law).[48] Vague notions about the meaning of records, coupled with lack of awareness of their value to the organization as it relates to accountability and control, prevented bank officials from viewing spreadsheets and other documentation created in office productivity application software as official records and from therefore ensuring that they were added to logically organized records stores, whether electronic or manual (e.g., printed out and added to a hard-copy file). Their failure to add records to appropriate record-keeping systems obscured the significance and meaning of many documents in relation to the transactions they documented, and left gaps in the account of organizational decisions and actions.

46 Subject C-5, personal interview, Kingston, Jamaica, 5 October 1999.

47 Subject A-13, personal interview, Kingston, Jamaica, 9 July 1999.

48 Laws of Jamaica, An Act to Amend the *Evidence Act*. L.N. 12–1995. I am only aware of one case, *Zachary Sheriffe v. NCB*, that focussed on the question of the admissibility of computer-generated evidence.

As the above example illustrates, the record-keeper does not simply passively hold the record but, in many cases, participates in shaping its original inscription and what happens to it subsequently through processes of reinscription for preservation, recurrent transmission, and contextualization: the record-keeper shapes the record's meaning and becomes its co-author. It was Brien Brothman, influenced by the ideas of postmodern literary criticism and philosophy, in particular, the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, who first disquieted archivists with the suggestion that record-keeping was something more than an uninvolved act of custodianship. Reflecting on archival practice, Brothman has written that it "forms an integral part of the record," that the typical record-keeping and archival function of ordering records "also served to transfigure, if not transform, the record."[49] The interventions of the record-keeper, therefore, can distance the record from the meaning intended by the record's original author.

To further highlight the record's shadowy relationship with documentary truth, Brothman, in his exegesis of the writings of Jacques Derrida in relation to archival theory, asserts that "the writing that humans do functions as much to obscure and *defer* meaning as to fix it permanently."[50] Writing is a form of temporal delay that seeks to capture an intended meaning in some ineluctable form that transcends the vagaries of time. However, as such, it is incapable of suspending the effects of time: "Time, creator of difference, inevitably defers or postpones arrival at stable structure – whether of languages, writing, societies, records or record systems."[51] Brothman adds:

> For Derrida, the very premises upon which our commitment to writing rest themselves establish limits to communication that writing cannot breach. To write is already to concede the necessity of placing our fate in others' hands, so to speak. Writing, by its nature, suspends its own consummation of meaning. The certification of meaning as "the meaning" of a particular piece of writing inevitably requires the endorsement of a subsequent reading. It is other readers' interpretations that ratify the "original," "genuine" meaning of the work.[52]

The ways in which the logical and physical arrangement of traditional paper records and files in the failed Jamaican commercial banks matched the requirements of record users, or not, serve as an example of Brothman's ideas. One research subject described being frustrated while trying to retrieve information from the banks' credit files on connected party lending, which did

49 Brien Brothman, "Orders of Value: Probing the Theoretical Terms of Archival Practice," *Archivaria* 32 (Spring 1991), pp. 85 and 91.

50 Brien Brothman, "Declining Derrida: Integrity, Tensegrity, and the Preservation of Archives from Deconstruction," *Archivaria* 48 (Spring 1999), p. 70.

51 Ibid., p. 72.

52 Ibid., p. 70.

not become an issue of significance until well into the financial crisis and, indeed, until the bank regulatory authorities introduced new regulations limiting the practice.[53] Up to that point, registry staff had organized the files by branch and thereafter by customer name in order to facilitate transaction processing and customer account queries; however, because the records took on new significance after the banks' failures, the existing organization of the records no longer supported managers' information requirements, given the new meaning they assigned to these records.

Similarly, during the financial crisis when the banks began to experience losses due to guarantees, managers recognized the need to track contingent liabilities in order to control credit risk more effectively. However, because managers previously had not identified these records as being significant, no indexes existed to assist them in "mining" this information from records once they realized the importance of monitoring guarantees. One interview subject explained the difficulties as follows: "But the real issue is how do you go back and identify [guarantees] that are out there that you don't know about when you have to go file by file by file ...."[54] Changing information requirements as the financial crisis unfolded illustrate Brothman's point about the meaning of the record relying on each reader's interpretation of its significance and show how different physical and logical orderings of the records can serve to reveal or obscure ascribed meaning.

Those tasked with the management of the banks' records did not create indexes to the records, hampering the retrieval of necessary information. In many of the failed banks, responsibility for the management of records stores was assigned to low-level clerical staff. For example, one person in charge of the registry for the credit files was untrained in record-keeping principles and techniques. Neither had this person received any training in the basics of credit administration.[55] Thus, this clerical officer was ill equipped to appreciate the information retrieval requirements of the bank's credit administrators and risk analysts and had little, if any, understanding of the value of, and techniques for, creating indexes to support managers' information requirements.

Of course, ultimate responsibility for the problem lay with the banks' managers as they were the ones making the decisions about whom to assign to manage their records. The fact that they assigned low-level, untrained clerical staff to manage these stores reflects the generally low level of importance that managers assigned to most classes of manual records and the function of keeping such records, as well as their lack of appreciation and understanding of specialized record-keeping techniques and methods in which those with

53 Subject A-7, personal interview, Kingston, Jamaica, 10 June 1999.
54 Subject A-16, personal interview, Kingston, Jamaica, 30 July 1999.
55 Site visit to Bank A, conducted 6 July 1999, and subject A-12, personal interview, Kingston, Jamaica, 6 July 1999.

responsibility for record-keeping ought to have been trained. As one respondent noted: "Who wants to wade through paper?"[56] Another commented that "if you have a manual system chances are the information is not as timely as you want it. The level of accuracy might not be as good."[57] Yet another respondent said: "Of course you recognize that record management per se is not seen as a priority item by us."[58] In contrast, when managers saw fit to assign responsibility for a record storage to experienced and trained staff, as in the case of the securities files in one of the failed banks, indexing systems were much more sophisticated and retrieval of information from the storage place that much better.[59]

Ironically, the absence of appropriate indexes for records storage areas, which was in part due to the low level of value managers placed on managing most types of manual records, further fuelled managers' perception of manual records as being "less efficient" than those in computer form. This led the banks' managers to focus on computerization as a solution to information retrieval problems. Many managers assumed, and still do, that once the information store is converted to electronic form, information retrieval difficulties will disappear, as, for example, in this exchange with one interview subject:

> [The information] was there but [the retrieval system] wasn't functioning as it should ... because of too much paper. A lot of it is based on a document, written rather than a process that is automated. That you can actually go and automate ... It is written down but it is not automated.[60]

While computerization of records storage areas does facilitate faster retrieval of information and, in many cases, easier "re-presentation" of information in storage, as with manual storage places, if the requirements for a particular contextualization of the information are not identified, the resulting system will lack the required fields or structures to permit the desired view of the organization.

That computerization does not automatically make the retrieval of relevant information any easier is illustrated by interview subjects who complained of the lack of "reporting functionality" in the banks' core accounting systems.[61] It is not as easy as is commonly believed to re-present information retroactively in computerized records storage areas. This is not only due to changing information requirements and technological limitations but also to social influences on the contextualization process. One respondent observed that,

56 Subject C-4, personal interview, Kingston, Jamaica, 30 September 1999.
57 Subject A-7, personal interview, Kingston, Jamaica, 10 June 1999.
58 Subject C-5, personal interview, Kingston, Jamaica, 5 October 1999.
59 Subject A-12, personal interview, Kingston, Jamaica, 6 July 1999.
60 Subject A-2, personal interview, Kingston, Jamaica, 19 May 1999.
61 Subject A-1, personal interview, Kingston, Jamaica, 19 May 1999.

having identified the need for a different view of the bank's accounting in- formation, managers experienced difficulties in negotiating the necessary systems changes with information technology staff.[62] Interview subjects suggested that information technology experts' own assumptions about the significance and meaning of the information being requested made them reluctant to make systems changes. In other words, they simply did not share line management's understanding of why this information should be needed for accountability purposes.[63]

These examples of the records creation and record-keeping practices in the failed Jamaican commercial banks reveal the meaning of the record to be the composite of an endless set of choices made by social actors, those who originally inscribe the record as well as those who are involved in subsequent transmission, contextualization, and reading. These social actors made choices about whether to inscribe an account of a transaction, the form it would take, and the degree to which that inscription would be contextualized (e.g., through preservation in an official organizational records storage place), how, and in what form. They also made choices about the technological means of inscribing, transmitting, and contextualizing the record, whether they chose to use paper, computers, or some other means, with all the limitations and problems inherent in the chosen technology. Finally, as the financial crisis progressed, they ascribed different meanings to records. These subsequent redefinitions of the meaning of records then recursively influenced how records were inscribed, transmitted, and contextualized.

Thus, a range of social factors can be seen to have influenced social actors' record-making and record-keeping decisions and actions. By social factors I mean all factors pertaining to norms of behaviour and systems of belief in social settings, in other words, culture.[64] Culture relates both to the culture of the wider society, to the norms and beliefs of defined groups (i.e., management or professionals), and to organizational culture. Together, the socially influenced choices social actors made in how they inscribed, transmitted, contextualized and, finally, read records had the effect of constructing the communicated meaning of the record over time.

When we peek behind the record as object, we are reintroduced to the human in the record, that is, to its "*subject*-ivity." Of course, as the Jamaican case study reveals, whenever human beings as social actors enter the picture things become messy, unruly, and often conflict-ridden. Conflict theorist Ian Carib sums it up: "Society is like a more or less confused battle ground. If we watch from on high, we can see a variety of groups fighting each other,

62 Subject A-10, personal interview, Kingston, Jamaica, 17 June 1999.

63 Subject A-2, personal interview, Kingston, Jamaica, 19 May 1999.

64 See Collins Dictionary of Sociology entry under "social" and "culture." *Collins Dictionary of Sociology*, 2d ed. (Glasgow, 1995).

constantly forming and reforming, making and breaking alliances."[65] From this point of view, the meaning of records is a manifestation of the power struggle, both conscious and unconscious, between competing interests as the record is created, kept, and used. In this confused battleground, it is a challenge to analyse what relation the record bears to the phenomenon it is about or to its inscriber's original intended meaning. Each individual involved in record-making and record-keeping is motivated by different influences – personal interests, organizational culture, professional values, societal mores, and so on – in the production of the account and the construction of meaning. Moreover, differing and often conflicting motivations can lead individuals to create and keep records in ways that are in direct opposition to what is required to produce the quality of accounting information needed to sustain systems of organizational and social accountability.

Clearly, these insights into the nature of accounts and records have implications for accounting records as evidence of business transactions in support of accountability. Despite the expectation of greater trustworthiness of records as a form of communicating organizational accounts of actions and decisions, the perspective on the record provided by new archival and accounting theory and supported by the Jamaican case data call the impartiality and objectivity of recorded accounts into question. This viewpoint forces us to recognize that the record does not offer objective impartial evidence of facts but is, in fact, an account of organizational actions and decisions shaped both intentionally and unintentionally by the interests of social actors involved in the record's inscription, transmission, contextualization, and reading over time.

Nevertheless, impartiality and authenticity in records, as well as other desirable qualities, such as reliability and timely accessibility, are essential to the effective production and operation of accountability, even as we recognize that these qualities are impossible to attain because of the mediated character of the record as a form of communication. As Verne Harris points out, at best the record serves only as one window on organizational and social processes.[66] However, the record is, in the end, as Harris acknowledges, one of the best windows we have. To suggest that records are not trustworthy, therefore, is not to suggest that we should not and cannot rely upon them as evidence of business transactions. It is only to suggest that they must be seen as accounts of these business transactions, not as the undisputed "truth" of those transactions. In clinging to the idea of records as impartial and objective, archivists' traditional thinking about the record may be too limited to arrive at workable solutions to the problem of making sense of records as evidence of business transactions. The record can be evidence of a business transaction, even by its

65 Quoted in M. Haralambos and M. Holborn, *Sociology: Themes and Perspectives* (London, 1996), pp. 887–88.
66 Harris, p. 22.

absence or in a fragmented form, but in this regard it must be given a critical reading with an appreciation and understanding of the messy behind-the-scenes social interaction of often conflicting interests that enters the record's evolving and mediated formation with every new inscription, transmission, and contextualization. Archival theorist Eric Ketelaar describes this type of knowledge about the record as "social and cultural archivistics," being the work of understanding the processes involved in the choices made about archiving.[67]

Implications

When we explore the record empirically, as this article has sought to do, we see that the production of meaning in records takes shape over time through the choices made by individuals, both records creators and record-keepers involved in processes of inscription, transmission, contextualization, and use. The end result can be messy and accidental, as in the case of the failed Jamaican commercial banks, because individuals and managers alike often are blind to the overall organizational implications of their decisions. They may be caught up in the daily pressures of their work and operating on the basis of cultural values deeply embedded in their consciousness. In other cases, individuals may be acting more consciously in their own self-interest at the expense of the organization. In large, complex organizations where there are a multitude of social actors making and keeping records according to an equal multitude of motivations, it is the chaotic collision of these motivations and choices that produces the meaning and significance of the organization's accounts of business transactions.

As seen in the discussion on the problems experienced by the failed Jamaican commercial banks in the production of accounting and management information, the accidental production of meaning in records can be a far cry from what is necessary to support the effective operation of organizational accountabilities and controls (e.g., reliable, authentic, and accessible records). Unacknowledged and uncontrolled social and technical influences on the creation and keeping of records shaped the meaning of the banks' accounts. Of course, inadequate accounting and management information alone did not cause the collapse of six indigenous Jamaican commercial banks. Nevertheless, ongoing research indicates that it was an aggravating and contributing factor. It is therefore possible to see that, in combination with other factors,

67 Eric Ketelaar, "Archivistics Research Saving the Profession," *American Archivist* 63, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2000), pp. 326–27. Ketelaar calls for a study of what he terms "archivalization," that is, the processes leading to the choices involved in archiving. He writes: "People create, process, and use archives, influenced consciously or unconsciously by cultural and social factors. People working in different organizations create and use their records in different ways ..." (p. 329). He argues that archivists must come to understand these processes better.

the organizational and social consequences of uncontrolled records' inscription, transmission, and contextualization can be high.

Thus it would appear necessary, in the interests of serving organizational accountability and control and, by extension, viability, to attempt the "precarious structuration of chaos,"[68] that is, to aim to introduce accountabilities and controls over record inscription, transmission, and contextualization that, to the extent possible, encourage individuals to make choices that produce meaning in records which serves organizational (and in many cases broader social) ends as opposed to other interests. However, even the best efforts to build a dam against chaos often fail. In other words, it is not realistic to expect that even the best practices will ever result in the perfect preservation of some inviolate intended meaning in records, and that records will ever be perfectly reliable and impartial evidence of either the "facts" of a transaction or intended meaning. There are simply too many diverse mediations affecting record-making and record-keeping over space and time in complex organizations, and record-keepers are simply too human and apt to impose their own (often unconscious) interests. Moreover, there are any number of subsequent readings that also will shape the meaning of the record.

For this reason, attempts to contain chaos must be accompanied by the ability to give the record a critical reading, a reading based on an understanding of how both designed and accidental social and technological influences structure meaning. Only by listening to the virtual clamour of voices making choices behind the record is it possible to form impressions about and map the complex relationship and interplay among the act or fact that is the subject of the record, the inscriber's intended meaning, the meaning required to serve organizational and social ends, and all subsequent layers of meaning produced through mediated processes of reinscription, transmission, contextualization, and use. Unfortunately, in this article, it is possible to do no more than highlight the need for archivists to develop the aptitude for such a critical reading. Much further research is needed to hone this skill, although many of the methodologies archivists already have developed for the appraisal of records lend themselves exceptionally well to this task. In addition, archivists must continue to draw upon organizational and social theory to better understand records creators and their motivations and behaviour.

This brings the discussion to the role of the record-keeper, and, in particular, to archivists as record-keepers, for archivists increasingly lay claim to the territory of controlling the processes by which records are created and kept so as to ensure the production and preservation of reliable and authentic evidence of business transactions. Moreover, as archivists, we see ourselves as uniquely situated to give the record a critical reading because of our provenance-based

68 Ien Ang, "In the Realm of Uncertainty: The Global Village and the Capitalist Postmodernity," in David Crowley and David Mitchell, eds., *Communications Theory Today* (Stanford, 1994).

appreciation of the context of the record. This must include garnering an understanding of the record from outside the traditional archival conceptualizations of records. But, that being said, we must seriously question how effective we can be at these tasks if we refuse to fully acknowledge our own "ghostly" presences, as Tom Nesmith puts it, or our own coauthorship of the meaning in records. In order to be competent to design effective accountabilities and controls, we must be able to see the ways that record-keepers, including archivists, engender meaning in records. Failure to understand all influences and interests that shape meaning in the record will render its meaning adventitious. We must also accept our involvement in the creation of the record if we are to give it a critical reading, that is, to interpret the mediation process of the record and assess all its twists and turns over time, inclusive of those in which we have participated.

Along with recognition of the record-keeper's wider role as cocreator of the record, including both record-keepers in creating agencies and archivists (one and the same in some institutional settings), comes accountability to those for whom record-keepers keep records as well as those to whom records are communicated through organizational accounts (e.g., shareholders, the public, posterity). This may be both a blessing and a curse for record-keepers. As long as record-keepers' role in engendering the record remains unacknowledged or silent, their interests remain invisible or ghostly. As such, record-keepers are seldom called to account for their actions or decisions. However, once made visible in the process of engendering meaning in records, the record-keeper becomes accountable. This may be an uncomfortable proposition for many record-keepers (including archivists), as those who have been held to account for their record-keeping decisions and observations will understand only too well. Yet, it unleashes great potential in what the archivist does and is able to do for the organization and for society. Still, there is a price to be paid: record-keepers, including archivists, will have to give up the comfortable silence of the past and let the ghosts speak. Will they?