

Across the Great Divide: Archival Discourse and the (Re)presentations of the Past in Late-Modern Society*

BERNADINE DODGE

RÉSUMÉ Cet article examine les implications, pour le discours archivistique dans notre monde de ce début du XXI^e siècle, de la technoculture et de la reformulation numérique des documents, des textes et des images. Une fois ces objets détachés de leur contexte original et projetés dans le cyberspace, des questions comme la provenance, l'autorité, la mémoire et la preuve sont affectées de diverses façons. Plusieurs théoriciens du post-modernisme déplorent les effets de la distorsion du temps et de la vitesse associés à l'âge de la machine. Plusieurs regrettent aussi la fin de l'individu autonome et enraciné, caractérisé par un soi immanent et stable. L'auteure de cet article propose qu'un relâchement des liens qui nous unissent aux façons traditionnelles de voir les pratiques archivistiques peut comporter des avantages.

ABSTRACT This article examines the implications for archival discourse in a late-modern world of technoculture featuring the digital re-mediation of documents, texts and images. Issues such as provenance, authority, memory and evidence are affected in a variety of ways once documents and photographs are detached from their original settings and enter cyberspace. Many theorists of the postmodern decry the effects of speed and time distortions associated with the age of the machine. Many also regret the passing of the autonomous, grounded individual characterized by an inherently stable self. This article suggests that there may be advantages to loosening some of the ties that bind us to traditional ways of looking at archival practices in late-modern society.

I

“Sooner or later,” he said, “the artifice of entertainment – constant, ceaseless entertainment – will drive people to seek authenticity. Authenticity will be the buzzword of the twenty-first century. And what is authentic? Anything that is not controlled by corporations. Anything that is not devised and structured to make a profit. Anything that exists for its own sake, that assumes its own shape. And what is the most authentic of all? The past. ‘The past is real. It’s authentic. *And this will make the past unbelievably attractive.*”¹

* This article is a revised and expanded version of a paper originally presented at the Association of Canadian Archivists Conference in Vancouver, British Columbia, May, 2002. I am very grateful to Dr. Barbara Craig, General Editor of *Archivaria* and the two anonymous reviewers who made many helpful and perceptive suggestions for revisions.

1 Michael Crichton, *Timeline* (New York, 1999), pp. 489–490. Emphasis in the original.

Referring to the past as “real” and “authentic” and “unbelievably attractive” as the villain in Michael Crichton’s science fiction novel *Timeline* did, has an appealing ring to archivists. Those who engage in the occupation of archivist and who concern themselves professionally with this alluring past may be reassured that their services to the preservation and presentation of the past will continue to be recognized as important. This paper is about three subjects, one of which is the past. Another is the creation of representations of the past and the third is the effect of those representations in present-day commodified technoculture. Archivists perform a variety of tasks which engage with the past in one way or another. And while we likely agree that a reconstruction of an authentic past is unachievable, most of us still adhere to the notion that our professional practices lend themselves to the preservation of authentic fragments and textual artefacts which indicate something of real events, real deeds, real decisions, real administrative structures, real lives. We appraise, arrange, describe, and make our holdings accessible to multifarious researchers for whom these holdings reflect things past. We design exhibits, real and virtual, of times past. We teach research methods and give seminars, lectures and orientations to groups on-site and out in the community about the past and our role in its preservation. In all our activities, the past is never very far away. Our professional lives are bound up in the bridging of the present and the past. Our immediate objective with respect to the past is the bringing of order to anarchic masses of historical and non-current administrative detritus which will serve any number of functions for any number of user groups. These functions have never had sharp and well-defined boundaries and are certainly not now clear nor uncontested. It is not at all obvious who our future users might be, nor the circumstances under which they will be turning to archives, nor the purposes to which they might put documents and records. Equally contested is the terrain of our responsibilities: the technical procedures that we employ; the parameters of our location as knowledge workers within the larger context of the humanities and social sciences; our commitment, if any, to some notion of collective memory and communal heritage; and the direction in which our profession is moving vis-à-vis the allied but thus far separate professions of historian, information specialist, and records manager. Archivists in late modern society may share with others a tendency to succumb to the imperative of nostalgia with respect to the past – a melancholic longing for a mythic time when history moved in a straight line impelled by autonomous individuals working within a framework of recognizable, if not always shared, assumptions and values. No wonder, then, that the past is seemingly real, and authentic, and unbelievably attractive.

Now we live in a world of contingency where meaning is constituted in the use of shared languages and constructed and deconstructed with equal ease.²

² Barry Smart, *Facing Modernity: Ambivalence, Reflexivity and Morality* (London, 1999), p. 48. Smart recapitulates the common themes expressed by theorists of postmodernity vis-à-vis

In the late-modern, multi-mediated digital landscape, boundaries are blurred between past and present, information and entertainment, the real and the hyper-real, author and reader, writing and speech, and elite and popular culture. The meanings of the materials that we handle rupture: does a document have a “once and for all” author? Is the author the creator, or has that author been supplanted by the archivist who appraised and described it, re-contextualised and re-presented it? Just as the compiler of an anthology or the editor of a journal reassigns and recreates meaning through the juxtapositioning of chosen texts, so too does authorship occur through archival practices.³ And, further, if the document has been digitized, who then is the author? Is it the creator, the archivist, or is it the reader who is at liberty to remake the artefact – to refashion, to reconstruct it in any way he or she wishes? Can you say that it has authority? That it is a record and, if so, what exactly is it recording? Part of the difficulty stems from our inability to define precisely the characteristics of digital representations. Are they evidence, or *aides-mémoire*, or free-floating information? Does the emphasis shift depending on the context, for example, a court of law, or a genealogical chart, or a multi-media Web site?

The electronic document has been described as a hybrid between writing and speech – more mutable and less permanent than the printed word but less spontaneous and potentially more lasting than oral communication.⁴ As such, is the digitized document a representation or a simulacrum? For the electronically sampled, digitized image, there is no meaningful original which inheres irrevocably in the reincarnation. The digitization of records gives them a life of their own. Digitization facilitates the (further) fragmentation of meta-narratives which both informed, and were formed by shared notions of common-sense in modernity. These meta-narratives grounded the collective memory of nation states and facilitated the coherence of common experience for ethnic, racial, class, and gender groups. The loss of common assumptions also batters much of the discourse we associate with the professional praxis of the archivist. The meaning of documents will be assigned to them by diverse people and will vary over space and in time. The past in its digitized configuration is more than ever a foreign country – not so much an impenetrable one, approachable only by the most tenuous and suspect of evidential remnants – but rather an entirely permeable one, where the rules of evidence and authen-

aspects of the late modern period: the crisis of representation and associated instability of meaning; the absence of secure foundations for knowledge; the importance of language/discourse/texts; the absence of a rational, autonomous subject; the emphasis on how individuals are constituted as subjects. See Smart, *Facing Modernity*, p. 38.

3 Several archivists have tackled the issue of archivist as author. Most recently, Tom Nesmith explicitly argues that any work of archives-making is a work of authoring. See Tom Nesmith, “Seeing Archives: Postmodernism and the Changing Intellectual Place of Archives,” *American Archivist* 65 (Spring/Summer 2002), p. 32.

4 Mark Poster, *The Mode of Information* (Chicago, 1990), p. 78.

ticity seem somehow anachronistic.⁵ In the end though, it is just as unknowable. How we see ourselves, how we see others and how we interpret past actions are ephemeral. Historical memory becomes whatever the subject wishes it to be. This crisis of representation and the resulting instability of meaning points up an increasing reliance on language and on discourse. The “record” is no more than an interpretive moment in a never-ending conversation with the texts. In other words, the past is no longer real, much less authentic, if it ever was. A hypertext document on a Web site is the *sine qua non* of the “writerly” versus the “readerly” text as Roland Barthes has described the situation when talking about the meaning of any given text. He saw the “writerly” text as deriving its meaning from a combination of author **plus** reader. The “readerly” text, on the other hand, accommodates the concept of “authority” in ways that the “writerly” text does not: in the case of print media, the reader and author are clearly distinct. We communicate electronically to invisible users and are apt never to know what becomes of our communications. Nor do we have any way of knowing what will become of our communications as the user accesses our Web sites and wends a circuitous route through documents, images, editorial side-bar comments, and advertising banners to arrive at a place, and an understanding, far from our intent.

Modernism acknowledged the importance of the lessons of the past as a means to shape a new and ever-improving future. History was characterized as a lineal progression of events working its way from one advancement to another, one scientific discovery to another. Historical events were read either as cautionary tales or as inspirational allegories by individuals convinced of their own abilities as autonomous, rational subjects to mold meaningful ways of living in the world by avoiding the mistakes of others. Historical myths were woven into the discourses of religious sects, ethnic groups and nation states. Reconstructing the past from memory, text, or image, requires a narrative – a reconceptualizing of events and experiences to make them sensible, rational, coherent, and frequently, to make past events serve a contemporary moralizing purpose. Historiography, generally, results in renditions of the past which provide conclusions, and assigns motives and causes. Explication of the past tends towards interpretation and speculation.⁶ As archivists, we acquire, arrange,

5 The original depiction of the past as a foreign country where they do things differently is found in the opening lines of L.P. Hartley, *The Go-Between* (London, 1953). The phrase has been most famously appropriated by David Lowenthal in his work on heritage, history, and the exploitation of nostalgia. See David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (London, 1985). Brien Brothman has argued that, “In memory processes, artifacts from the past lose their temporal strangeness.” See Brien Brothman, “Memory, History, and the Preservation of Archival Records,” *Archivaria* 51 (Spring, 2001), p. 65. I would argue that the dissolution of “temporal strangeness” obscures as much as it reveals the past.

6 Hayden White and Dominick LaCapra have effectively dealt with issues relating to the “linguistic turn” in historiography. LaCapra makes a perceptive observation of the tendency to fetishize archival records: “The archive as fetish is a literal substitute for the ‘reality’ of the

preserve, and make available remnants of the past; evidence already suspect, already textual in the Derridean sense of being an unstable product of discursive activity and already subject to, and subject of, multiple interpretations. We acknowledge the partialities, the silences, the incongruities, the anomalies – the impossibility of capturing the meaning of any real past. Every professional thing that we do, from appraisal, to arrangement, to description, involves re-presentation. And as we digitize our records and documents, the situation changes, and is exacerbated when the letter, the diary, the photograph, the memorandum enters cyberspace and becomes an element in the larger, amorphous interaction spectacle.⁷ The surfer who clicks on a digitized archival document with embedded hypertext links is doing something very different from the user sitting in a reading room, interacting with an archivist and reading a document arranged lineally, fixed in time, and attached to a space.

The archivist is bound to have an ambiguous relationship to re-presentation since he or she is the locus of mediation between the information artefact, the description of it, the digitized simulacrum of it, and the user of it. One could argue that the archivist's role in this latest cultural revolution⁸ is a pivotal one. We facilitate the construction of new narratives of the world we live in, including what it means to be a knowledge worker, re-presenting artefacts whose originals once served as reference points when now there are no stable relationships of reference between signified and signifier. When the interplay between texts is facilitated by new media, the emergent culture will equally produce reality as much as reflect it. Again, I refer to the extended definition of "author" which I ascribe to both writer and reader and then the expanded ability to create new "realities" from existing cultural elements arranged in a montage. Surface and depth are easily confused. Fact and fantasy elide. In the realm of the self-referential world, the digitized letters of a woman living on a

past which is always already lost for the historian. When it is fetishized, the archive is more than a depository of traces of the past which may be used in its inferential reconstruction. It is a stand-in for the past that brings the mystified experience for the thing itself – an experience that is always open to question when one deals with writing or other inscriptions." See Dominick LaCapra, *History and Criticism* (Ithaca, 1985), p. 92.

7 Guy Debord and the movement Situationist International maintained that the revamped twentieth-century culture of consumption, technology, images, simulations, media, and information required new forms of contestation which have the ability to displace the hegemonically-motivated spectacle which seeks to pacify and mollify the consumer. A reappraisal of the work of Debord by Steven Best and Douglas Kellner can be found at the following Web site: <<http://www.uta.edu/huma/illuminations/kell17.htm>> (last checked on 1 June 2002). An earlier work is also useful: Stephen Best and Douglas Kellner, "From the Society of the Spectacle to the Realm of Simulation: Debord, Baudrillard, and Postmodernity," chap. 3 in *The Post-modern Turn* (New York, 1997), pp. 79–123.

8 I have used the word "revolution" in referring to the latest aspects of the mediatization of culture even while agreeing that late modern techno-culture is just the latest one in a succession of paradigmatic shifts.

stump-strewn farm in Upper Canada written to her mother at home in another country have an unstable and unpredictable future. They may be incorporated as pastiche in an art poster, or they may be the source of coloratura in a movie: we cannot be certain that they will be connected in any way to historical verisimilitude, to the life and experiences of a particular individual living in a specific place at a certain time. New histories, new meanings, new culture and new audiences are ceaselessly being reconfigured, and at the same time, we ourselves are not immune to being remade by media situated as we are in a late-modern society and the object of forces that encourage us to be consumers of everything from cultural experiences to soft drinks. Form leads to function(s) rather than being derived from it – an inversion equation which cannot fail to have an impact on the way our professional duties as archivists are construed, as much as on the way the products of our labours are used. Archival discourse – our writings, our professional practices, our devotion to provenance, evidence and authority, our physical arrangements and apparatuses of environmentally-sound buildings and supervised reading rooms, and so forth – speaks to an ideology which grounds our profession. Our discourse defines our profession. It relays the truth of our profession. But truth itself is problematic:

Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its régime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.⁹

This already slippery, mutable truth is made more elusive by the presentation of digitized images and texts on our Web sites. These can be manipulated in ways that were not available to users in our reading rooms. To date, our engagement with new ways of bringing together audience, author, and digital artefact has focused on technical issues: standardization, database structures, and the development of document type definition sets (DTDs). Technology too often has been seen solely in terms of its ability to solve problems – problems of access and problems of preservation. And too infrequently have we looked much beyond issues such as the obvious dilemmas of preserving electronic records or of creating comprehensive systems of electronic access to documents. We need to look hard at the perhaps less obvious ways in which technology has created new problems, or at least presented a challenge. In the

9 Michel Foucault, “Truth and Power,” in Colin Gordon, ed., *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977* (New York, 1980), p. 131.

age of the machine, we need to look anew at what we say we do as archivists, and what we actually do. Too often the Internet is perceived as a neutral tool for doing familiar things in a new way rather than as an entirely new environment, producing new products, new kinds of information for new uses and new users (in effect producing new cultural communities) and new kinds of archivists immured in new kinds of archival discourse.

The Internet is only one avenue which currently puts authenticity into question. Internal procedures, such as the deployment by archival repositories of software that parses, tags, and ultimately constructs new documents from pre-existing components, are problematic. There are any number of existing and pending technologies which will need to be scrupulously monitored and documented by vigilant professionals for whom the notion of provenance is crucial. More exploration is required into the role that we as archivists might play in contributing to the creation of a virtual elite *contra* providing new avenues of egalitarianism; our role in displacing the authenticity of documents *contra* preserving the distinction between simulacrum and original; our role in widening our audience to include greater numbers of traditional users *contra* creating new categories of users; and our role in creating historical narratives *contra* providing merely the raw materials for narrativization. Never before has there been so much information, so many images for the self-reflective individual to choose from in constructing their own personal narratives. If there is not now there will soon be a surfeit of history and a glut of confusing, undifferentiated information. These hypermediated re-presentations are dispersed far from any anchor of any original.

Walter Benjamin, in his classic 1934 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," addressed some issues that archivists might be wise to think about, though he was concerned with works of art, not archives, when he referred to the loss of "aura" which occurs when originals are photo-reproduced. He insisted that even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art lacked one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at one location. The archivist operating in the age of the machine contributes to the disintegration of the "aura" found in original documents as we digitize first our finding aids, then our databases and union lists, and then our documents. While Benjamin for the most part, found the prospect of mechanical reproduction to be democratizing and liberating, critical theorists of the Frankfurt school such as Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Karl Popper, in varying ways saw technology as a new avenue for introducing authoritarian social control over passive consumers of mass culture. Similarly, Paul Virilio has written extensively on the militaristic model of technoculture. Some of Virilio's more convincing arguments are centred on the assault by technology on phenomenology which privileges lived human experience and its grounding in concrete objects, individuals and events. He refers to the destruction of human cognition of time, space and the lived environment by a technological vision

inspired by telecommunications.¹⁰ Not unlike Marshall McLuhan, Virilio argues that new technologies alter the physical world in ways that challenge our ability to perceive it. His analysis of the relationship between increased speed and the resultant compression of space emphasises such dangers as the loss of the capacity to think with concepts in an onslaught of images, and the further loss of the ability to escape the eye of surveillance.¹¹ Jean Baudrillard, one of the more extravagant theorists of media and its relationship to culture, is convinced that mediatization destroys any traditional concept of civil society. Reality implodes into an absence of coherent social patterns.

Now the media are nothing else than a marvelous instrument for destabilizing the real and the true, all historical or political truth ... the addiction we have for the media, the impossibility of doing without them ... is not a result of a desire for culture, communication, information, but of this perversion of truth, and falsehood, of this destruction of meaning in the operation of the medium. The desire for a show, the desire for simulation ... is a spontaneous, total resistance to the ultimatum of historical and political reason.¹²

Nevertheless, Baudrillard is able to find things to celebrate in this implosion of the social. Though frequently portrayed as a proponent of nihilism, he urges that individuals avoid seeing the “real” in opposition to the “hyperreal” and further encourages active engagement with what is better described as a “new reality” rather than a “virtual reality.”¹³ Other theorists, using the language of neo-liberalism, have gone even further in characterizing techno-culture as a liberating force. A more attractive argument would look for a middle-ground somewhere between techno-utopianism and technological Armageddon.¹⁴

What archivists need to do is to substantiate their professional discourse even as it becomes increasingly problematic through the effects of hypermediatization. At first glance, our traditional discourse is at odds with global techno-culture. Finding solid ground that can support such concepts as “authenticity,” “evidence,” and “provenance,” is critical in the presence of multi-media finding aids with hypertext links, networked informational data-

10 John Armitage, ed., *Paul Virilio: From Modernism to Hypermodernism and Beyond* (London, 2000), p. 117. Mark Poster also comments on the tension between phenomenologists and materialists on the one hand, and those who allow only self-referential language and who dismiss the possibility of any purposeful, rational action beyond surface seduction. See Mark Poster, *The Second Media Age* (Cambridge, U.K., 1995), pp. 110–111.

11 William Connolly, “Speed, Concentric Cultures, and Cosmopolitanism,” *Political Theory* 28.5 (October, 2000), p. 596.

12 Mark Poster, ed., *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings* (Cambridge, 1988), p. 217.

13 William Merrin, “To Play With Phantoms: Jean Baudrillard and the Evil Demon of the Simulacrum,” *Economy and Society* 30.1 (February 2001), p. 86.

14 Sean Cubitt, “Virilio and New Media,” in John Armitage, ed., *Paul Virilio*, p. 127.

bases, and electronically-mediated remnants of the past in the form of digitized and sampled photographs and documents. Grounding is not just a simple matter to be addressed by carefully including contextual annotations on Web pages. It is more than tracking provenance and custodial history and including as much context referencing as possible with a digitized image. Electronically re-presented culture is another foreign country. Even when digitized materials are presented in a straight-forward manner which aims simply to allow access to original materials to a wide audience, the presence of the medium intrudes; the speed of re-presentation shrinks and skews space and time. With many imbedded, disconnected, hypertext links, and without appropriate comment that provides contextualization, digitized documents and images are habitually re-presented without apparent intention, irony, or critique. In these cases, the electronic medium is not set in opposition to painting, photography, or printing; instead, the computer is offered as a new means of gaining access to these older materials, as if the content of the older media could simply be poured into the new one.¹⁵

II

*"You'd think that, in an age of perfectly reproducible high-tech and digital art, the old issues of authenticity would fade away."*¹⁶

It is not necessary to be an inflexible, fearful, technological determinist to find the above remark by an art critic worrisome. Authenticity is a basic tenet of archives. Archives as evidence presupposes authenticity. How did cultural artefacts become disassociated from the authentic? Under classic industrial capitalism, real objects were produced by real labourers. Social organization and the economy were based on production and power relations, and the use-value of goods. By contrast, in late-modern society, media, information technologies, and the production of signification, as an end in itself, have become its central features.¹⁷ Western society is increasingly organized around the consumption of signs, requiring the commodification of both subjects and objects of culture. We are working now at a time of conjunction between consumer, media, and information society. The total separation of the original from the copy has never been easier. In our "culture of the copy,"¹⁸ the effects

15 Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation* (Cambridge, Mass., 1999), p. 45.

16 This comment was made by an art critic commenting on the controversy over the use of reproductions in a Rodin exhibit. Blake Gopnik, "What's the Rodin fuss really about? Money," *Globe and Mail* (29 August 2001), Review Section, p. R2.

17 Craig Calhoun, *Critical Social Theory* (Oxford, 1995), p. 102.

18 The term "culture of the copy" is the title of a book devoted to the study of copies and the effects of "duplication" and "virtuality." See Hillel Schwartz, *The Culture of the Copy* (New York, 1996).

are subtle and pervasive. Whole museums exist which are devoted to copies of original works to which, presumably, customers of culture flock in numbers large enough to provide satisfactory gate receipts. Our Web sites filled with digitized images and documents are museums of copies. The success of those sites, indicated by the statistics of their use, convince our sponsors that we serve some useful purpose and convince granting agencies that we are worthy of support. We, too, have to pay attention to gate receipts. In late-modern market society, our internal professional standards of self-regulated practice must be accompanied by a sharp eye on stakeholder accountability. There are no exemptions for knowledge workers in a political economy which includes commodified systems of knowledge and information.

We are a self-reflexive society. It is not just the discipline of historiography which involves the weaving of narratives. We study ourselves, construct appropriate narratives for our lives – viable stories about how we arrived at our current place in the world. Anthony Giddens says it clearly: “A person’s identity is ... in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going.”¹⁹ The availability of huge masses of information via multiple media increase the options and the sources of raw material contributing to those narratives. Theorists from sociologists like Richard Harvey Brown²⁰ to archivists like Verne Harris have reminded us that archives are sites for the manufacturing of memory and not just the preserving of it. As Harris says, “There is no keeper of the record who is not also a record creator, no keeper of a story who is not also its teller.”²¹ Everything we choose to mount on our Web sites will now also be used as fodder for the self-constituting individual and will be used in ways very different from print sources. We are no longer citizens, in the liberal democratic sense, or, if you like, proletarians in materialist analysis. We do not live in a Kantian world filled with time, space, and events which add up to, or point the way to a truth of our existence.²² We are consumers of images, fitting them together in the most coherent way that we can manage. Reality is located in the myriad of images which envelop us, not in ourselves as subjects. Mark Poster puts it this way:

Individuals are now constituted as subjects in relation to these complex information systems: they are points in circuits of language-image flows; they are, in short *textualized agents*. Their perceptions are organised by information machines. Their sense of

19 Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stamford, 1991) p. 54.

20 Richard Harvey Brown and Beth Davis-Brown, “The Making of Memory: The Politics of Archives, Libraries and Museums in the Construction of National Consciousness,” *History of the Human Sciences* 11.4 (1998), p. 22.

21 Verne Harris, “Law, Evidence and Electronic Records: A Strategic Perspective from the Global Periphery,” *Comma: International Journal on Archives* 1.2 (2001), p. 41.

22 Poster, *The Second Media Age*, p. 111.

time is edited and recombined by systems of digitised sequencing: real time on tape, movies on demand, fast forward, instant replay, pause, slow motion. ... Their knowledge is stored in electromagnetic archives that render reproduction literally immaterial, instantaneous ... Individuals who have this experience do not stand outside the world of objects, observing, exercising rational faculties, and maintaining a stable character. The individuals constituted by the new modes of information are immersed and dispersed in textualized practices where grounds are less important than moves.²³

This all sounds rather disconcerting and many social theorists, a few of them already mentioned elsewhere in this paper, have found much in mediated global techno-culture to fret about. Many of their concerns are no doubt justified.²⁴ And what of the issues for knowledge workers operating in the market economy of hypermediated techno-culture?

We are archivists. We create Web sites, archival information networks, and databanks of digitized images. We re-present and re-mediate the materials in our care. At the same time, our discourse speaks to such “truths” as authenticity, provenance, and evidence. How do we reconcile our professional principles with techno-culture? The first step I think is to avoid a simple binary construction which opposes the “real” community of autonomous rational citizens against an “unreal” virtual community of ceaselessly mutating subjects. The notion of unstable subjectivity is not new. Many theorists of the postmodern have seen the construction of individual subjectivity as a complex interplay between subject, text, and discourse. And many have argued that the discursive individual is not without agency. And reading Baudrillard as a theorist who sets “real” against “virtual,” or “simulacrum,” or some other word which at first blush seems to mean “unreal,” is to give a very reductionist reading to complex arguments. It is more useful to see that body of work as “old real” *versus* “new real.” I also want to reject the reductionist arguments of technological determinism – the spectre of a world controlled and directed through rampant and self-perpetuating technology. Men and women make machines.

23 Mark Poster, *Cultural History and Postmodernity: Disciplinary Readings and Challenges* (New York, 1997), p. 45.

24 Certainly I think it is indisputable that wide-spread access to disparate data sets, digitized images, and unorganized information has meant the weakening of community as traditionally construed and the advent of new kinds of community where individual communicants interact via computer more-or-less unconstrained by gender, class, and ethnicity. This is bound to have a substantial impact on the possibility of broad-based national identities. I am aware that when we are discussing issues of hypermediatization including digital re-presentation we are not talking about most of the world; we are not talking about experiences on the margins of western-dominated techno-culture. The nexus of human plus machine as a source of reality cannot be extended to what is often but erroneously referred to as global society. The chimera of genuine global cooperation and commonality of purpose, much less economic resource equalization, is as remote as ever.

Our discomfort with the availability of a profusion of information on computer networks and our role in contributing to the proliferation of simulacra has more to do with the modernist desire to follow through from reflexive observation to control. We are not happy just to observe and analyze ourselves and society; we want also to understand and improve ourselves, and to understand and improve our environment through better control over chaotic happenstance. As knowledge workers that is what we are trained to do. And as individuals, we strive against ambiguity and confusion. We ceaselessly experiment with new theories, innovations, and techniques to control uncertainty. Yet the more we analyze things, the more categories of experts and professionals we create and employ to give us direction, the more we seek to manage the world in which we are located as individuals, the more we realize that the paradox of modernity is that, as author Barry Smart remarks, “the pursuit of control and order continually reveals objects and processes which remain beyond control and/or in a state of disorder.”²⁵ The uncontrolled, in fact uncontrollable growth of information resources exacerbates our discomfort, located as we are within traditional archival discourse. According to Barry, there are too many contingencies:

The disorder of unintended consequences remains an inescapable feature of modern life, and modern scientific reason, by definition, is continually exposed to the possibility of being reflexively undercut or challenged, and is thereby unable to provide us with the security of certain knowledge.²⁶

The audience accessing our Web sites must remain largely unknown to us. We do not really know what narratives are being constructed from our digitized images and we have fallen victim to the panopticon effect of the various forms of surveillance which seek to discipline and normalize us – creating subjects capable of, and amenable to, self-censure.²⁷ A relatively new form of surveillance occurs when an invisible public peruses our Web sites. More and more information about holdings, policies, services, and staff appear on our Web sites. Not too long ago, how we described our archives and our practices to each other was essentially up to us. We revealed as much as we wished, and, to a large extent, were able to manage the image that we presented to the pub-

25 Barry Smart, *Facing Modernity*, p. 48.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 76.

27 Panopticism was first described by British Utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham in 1787. See Jeremy Bentham, *The Panopticon and Other Prison Writings* (New York, 1995). Much of the work of Michel Foucault involves an analysis of power as a force which circulates through a web of disciplinary mechanisms using a variety of surveillance techniques. This surveillance works to normalize the subject through its gaze. Foucault saw surveillance in modern societies as being the social expression of Benthamite Panopticism. See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York, 1979), pp. 195–228.

lic. In recent decades our visibility has expanded. In the past our exposure was limited to simple directory listings, for ourselves and our repository, and to brief descriptions of holdings that we contributed voluntarily to a print union list. We are now visible to the whole wired world.²⁸ The CAIN world is not for the bashful. Total strangers, not to mention friends and colleagues, now click their way to our doorstep: these visitors are unseen and beyond our control.

Maybe our uneasiness is misplaced. Our discomfort with the uncontrollable could be seen as one more example of nostalgia – a lingering melancholy for a time when our documents and images were bound by space and time and our researchers were either sitting face-to-face with us in our reading rooms or were at least identified individuals communicating with us directly. It might be time to let go of some of the constraints that we have imposed on ourselves and on our profession. The stringent requirements connoted by “evidence” and “authority” are difficult concepts to protect in techno-culture. Obviously, in so loosening our rules, we would not abandon principles which have been so crucial to what we do as professionals. Web sites, after all, can be carefully constructed in ways which provide contextualization for their contents. Images and digitized documents can be faithful in size, proportion, clarity, content, and colour to the original, not assembled from sampled bytes of multiple originals. Copyright can be carefully accounted for and accommodated. Simple sites providing normal, obvious, and connected hyperlinks can retain much of the essence of original texts. In other words, our re-mediations and re-presentations can replicate, to a large extent, the lineal mode of the “read-erly” text where author and reader are distinguishable. We can broaden and moderate our vision to encompass an acknowledgement that we, in effect, have always preserved both evidence and memory – that each requires the other to have validity.

Terry Cook has written persuasively on “evidence” juxtaposed with “memory” and has argued that these can be understood as “two sides of the same archival coin, in creative rather than destructive tension ...”²⁹ But we cannot realistically cling to the remnants of a belief in ourselves as objective, rational, preservers of juridical and historical truth. We now have to allow, if we have not done so previously, that both archivists and researchers are storytellers and records remediators. We have always contrived an historical narrative through

28 *The Union List of Manuscripts* was a project sponsored jointly by the Public Archives of Canada (now National Archives) and the Humanities Research Council of Canada. The U.L.M. was published under the direction of Robert S. Gordon in 1968. Four supplements released over the next 17 years brought the listings up to 1982 when the project was terminated and plans for an electronic successor were initiated.

29 Terry Cook, “Beyond the Screen: The Records Continuum and Archival Cultural Heritage.” Paper delivered at the Australian Society of Archivists Conference, Melbourne, 18 August 2000. This paper can be found at a Web site last checked on 10 September 2002: <<http://www.archivists.org.au/sem/papers.html>>.

our professional practices no matter how much we might wish it to be otherwise. And in a digitized world, the uses to which our documents and images are put to must be entirely beyond our control and even our knowledge. In the world of print, plagiarism, misrepresentation, and egregious error of fact were more-or-less visible and concerns and objections could be voiced, if not always acknowledged. Certainly some archivists have been advocating that we need to relax, not our basic professional tenets, but our expectations of what we can effectively control. Verne Harris wants records kept as a “cornucopia of meanings.”³⁰ He conveys no sense of crisis at the prospect of digitized documents entering the imprecise world of collage and pastiche. Yet all our training and professional practices, from writing acquisitions policy to arranging *fonds* to overseeing our reading rooms to participating in information networks to designing contextualized on-line exhibits, are geared towards effecting order – order which has become increasingly elusive with masses of paper records flooding into our repositories, electronic documents overwhelming our descriptive capabilities, and invisible users electronically “cutting and pasting” our documents. Writers have described the traditional focus of knowledge workers and their role in late modern society:

In modernity, the emphases are upon an orderly totality, the search for control and an increasing and irreversible knowledge of the natural order. Intellectual work is that of “legislating,” making authoritative statements which arbitrate. This authority to arbitrate is legitimized by superior knowledge. Various procedural rules ensure truth, moral judgement and artistic taste. Modernity produces intellectuals as “legislators,” experts who ... minimize risk and generate trust for the mass of the population.³¹

Such a role is impossible to maintain in the face of techno-culture. Perhaps we have no choice but to find ways to revise our discourse given the ascendancy of fragmented meta-narratives, dispersed textual subjects, documents and photographs comprised of electronic signals and rendered infinitely mutable, re-presentable in any form and in any context, remediable numberless times by unknown audiences. Maybe we can proceed using some of the more optimistic and liberatory ideas which inhere in instability. The past is unbelievably attractive, for it is a source of the infinitely variable. Through electronic media, readily accessible images and documents are available to be used as “writerly” texts, which would allow restless, self-reflexive, late-modern individuals to construct more, and better, stories about themselves –

30 Verne Harris, “Law, Evidence and Electronic Records: A Strategic Perspective From the Global Periphery,” pp. 41–42, emphasizes the advantages to be gained from dispensing with binary oppositions such as record/non-record. He writes against the archon, the “sure thing,” the business plan and he notes that rationality is the enemy of possibilities.

31 Zygmunt Bauman, quoted in Scott Lash and John Urry, *Economies of Signs and Space* (London, 1994), p. 257.

who they are and what place they have in the world. A virtual world has limitless possibilities consisting of multiple points of view. A principal cultural attraction of digital visual media, including archival Web sites and databases, is that they place point-of-view under the user's control.³² Zygmunt Bauman refers to the "palimpsest identity" created when individuals sample from amongst the myriad images available in various media for self-construction: "In this world, bonds are dissolved into successive encounters, identities into successively worn masks, life-history into series of episodes whose sole lasting importance is their equally ephemeral memory."³³ One would not wish to underestimate the dangers of speed: the instant access to the digital image, the immediate messaging, the hypertext links flashing between centuries of real time and miles of geographic space, and the attendant effect of the de-centred self. Yet, as William Connolly argues in refuting Virilio's obsession with the negative aspects of speed:

The crawl of slow time contains injuries, dangers, and repressive tendencies too. It may be wise therefore to explore speed as an ambiguous medium that contains some positive possibilities. The positive possibilities are lost to those who experience its effects only through nostalgia for a pristine time governed by the compass of the centered nation, the security of stable truth, the idea of nature as a purposive organism or a set of timeless laws, and the solidity of thick universals.³⁴

If history has heretofore been written by the winners, maybe some of the losers will now have a chance to rewrite those histories. And if some of our more muddled Web sites implode into messy middens, layer upon layer of heterogeneous and unconnected images, maybe new realities will be constructed from the rubble and maybe those realities will prove empowering to individuals or groups who have traditionally been rendered speechless, silenced by modernity.

32 Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation*, p. 243.

33 Peter Beilharz, ed., *The Bauman Reader* (Oxford, 2001), p. 207. Beilharz is quoting from a Zygmunt Bauman text "The Making and Unmaking of Strangers," *Thesis Eleven* 43(1995).

34 Connolly, "Speed, Concentric Cultures, and Cosmopolitanism," p. 598.