

Archivistics Research Saving the Profession

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Abstract

The archivist has to understand the ways people create and maintain records and archives. This is particularly important as archives and archivists go through a paradigm shift from provenance defined by stable offices and roles to one of dynamic process-bound information. In all stages of records and archives management and archival usage, the socially and culturally defined "software of the mind" plays a role. This new "archivistics" demands that archival education be comparative and multi-disciplinary. Likewise, research in archival science, broadly defined, is a key instrument for experimenting, inventing, changing, and improving professional education.

What is an Archivist?

The International Council on Archives' Code of Ethics states quite simply: "The term archivists as used in this code is intended to encompass all those concerned with the control, care, custody, preservation and administration of archives." This is in line with ICA's *Dictionary of Archival Terminology*.¹ That dictionary also defines archives as non-current records preserved because of their archival value. But are archives just that? Not quite. In many European countries the terms "archives" or "archival documents" encompass current, semi-current, and non-current records. For example, in Dutch, Italian, Spanish, and French archival terminology and legislation, there does not exist a specific equivalent for the term "records". We call it all "archives". When we want to point specifically to archives-in-the-making, we have to add a qualifying adjective, such as current or dynamic. The consequence is that, in Europe, an "archivist managing archives" may be a records manager, a business archivist, a manuscript curator, or an archivist keeping historical archives only. However, the ICA's Code of Ethics does not apply to *all* professionals managing the records continuum in all European countries. In

¹ Peter Walne, ed., *Dictionary of Archival Terminology* (Munich, New York, and Paris: K.G. Saur, 1984), 26.

Germany, for example, there is a sharp distinction between *Schriftgutverwaltung* (correspondence and files management) and *Archivierung* (archiving). The two are divided by appraisal carried out not by records managers, but by archivists of the archival institution to which the archives will be transferred. German *Archivare* (archivists), are dealing with archives, not with current records, only to the extent of *vorarchivische Betreuung* and *Beratung der Schriftgutverwaltung*: service and consultancy to the records-creating agency concerning appraisal and transfer of the small portion of records with archival value. The German archival profession is closed to those who work in the *Registratur* (the registries).

The same applies in France. French archival legislation applies to archives in the broadest sense, including current records, but a French government archivist has nothing to do with records management, apart from ensuring that records are appraised and that those with archival value are transferred to the archives.

In short, in many European countries the archival profession has, by self-perception, by history, and by law, an aura of the historians' erudition, not directly attracted by or involved with records as they are currently created by public and private administrations.²

University-Based Archival Education

In many European countries, archival education is, in fact, in-service training; professional training of individuals who have started to work in the archives and who are seconded by their employer to the archival training institute. Such was the situation in The Netherlands, where the Archives School provided training for practitioners. In 1996 the whole system of Dutch archival education changed drastically.³ The archival education was "de-institutionalized"—to borrow an expression from Theo Thomassen the then-Director of the Archives School. In this case, "de-institutionalized" meant that archival students and archivists were no longer identified by the type of records or archives they manage or by the institution which employs them. The program was redesigned to account for the shift of focus from skills to attitudes. This entailed cutting the traditional apprenticeship in an archives and limiting

² Francis X. Blouin, "Convergences and Divergences in Archival Tradition: A North American Perspective," *Second European Conference on Archives. Proceedings* (Ann Arbor, Mich: International Council on Archives, 1989), 26.

³ Theo H. P. M. Thomassen, "Educació i formació arxivística a Holanda," *Jornado d'estudi i debat sobre els estudis d'arxivística a l'Europa Comunitària, Barcelona, 4 de juny de 1992*, LIGALL, *Revista Catalana d'Arxivística* 5 (1992): 203–14; Eric Ketelaar, "Archival Theory and the Dutch Manual," *Archivaria* 41 (Spring 1996): 31–40, reprinted in Eric Ketelaar, *The Archival Image: Collected Essays* (Hilversum: Verloren, 1997), 55–65.

practical work in archival arrangement and description.⁴ The Archives School has allied with the University of Amsterdam; both institutions have invested in staff and infrastructure. A four-year university course leads to a master's degree in library, archives, and information science. That degree is valid at any place where recorded information has to be managed. The law requires the degree only for senior positions in state and local archives, but many public and private employers have included the degree in job descriptions as a requirement or as a preference.

Students in Amsterdam, after a first year in any school or department of the university, take a three-year course. A little less than half of the course is taken in information science, history, organization science, and philosophy of science. The other 55 percent is devoted to archivistics, which includes one semester for research in archival science. Students participate in a class research project, and each student writes his or her master's thesis.

Theory and Practice

Archival science is a science in the German sense of *Wissenschaft*, but to avoid confusion with the natural sciences in the Anglo-Saxon meaning, I personally use the term "archivistics," being the equivalent to the Dutch *archivistiek*, the German *Archivistik*, the French *archivistique*, and the Italian and Spanish *archivistica*.⁵ Archivistics consists of theory, practice, and methodology. Archival theory can only flourish if it is, as Angelika Menne-Haritz said at the ICA congress in Montreal (1992), "free from the constraints of direct practical application and in exchange with other scholars' ideas in discussion meetings and seminars, essays and dissertations."⁶

Archival theory is despised and rejected by many practicing archivists. "Much ado about shelving"—that famous and defamatory expression—can be heard in Europe, too. It is also a common expression in The Netherlands, the country of Muller, Feith, and Fruin. The Dutch *Manual* of 1898 codified and standardized archival methodology before archival theory could develop. This

⁴ See Richard Cox, "Advocacy in the Graduate Archives Curriculum: A North American Perspective," *Janus*, 1997, no.1: 33; Richard Cox, "American Archivists, Cyberculture, and Stasis" (paper presented at the conference "Cyber, Hyper or Resolutely Jurassic? Archivists and the Millennium," University College Dublin, 2-3 October 1998, <www.ucd.ie/~archives>.

⁵ The term archivistics has also been used by Angelika Menne-Haritz in, "What Can be Achieved with Archives?" *The Concept of Record: Report from the Second Stockholm Conference on Archival Science and the Concept of Record 30-31 May 1996* (Stockholm: Riksarkivet 1998), 21.

⁶ Angelika Menne-Haritz, *Archival Education: Meeting the Needs of Society in the Twenty-First Century* (Montreal: XIIth International Congress on Archives, 1992): 13; Angelika Menne-Haritz, "Archivfachliche Ausbildung: Den Anforderungen der Gesellschaft des 21. Jahrhunderts gerecht werden," *Archivum* 39 (1994): 273-74.

is the paradox of professional quality.⁷ Their early professionalism constrained Dutch archivists to ask “what” and “how,” instead of “why.” It led them to focus on the procedures, methods, and technologies of archival work and to put matter over mind.⁸

It is correct that an archivist may well process archives adhering to the methodology and not to archival theory.⁹ *Archivistica applicata* and *archivistica pura* are not opposites, they follow naturally from one to another, because every practitioner—even the manager—starts from hypotheses and ideas. The practitioner (other than the theorist) often accepts these hypotheses straightaway as true. The practitioner is thus concerned with the operational side. Yet at some point he or she will have to address more fundamental questions to prevent archives’ management from becoming routine and to find answers to changing technologies and challenges.

A New Paradigm

Changing technologies and challenges have recently opened the eyes and minds of archivists. Earlier revolutions in information and communication technologies (like the vertical file, punch cards, and carbon paper) changed the physical appearance of the record but left the intrinsic qualities untouched. Records managers and archivists continued to manage records as artifacts. This has changed fundamentally with the advent of digital records, so fundamentally that the old paradigm of archivistics has had to be replaced. Recently, Theo Thomassen presented an important paper on the paradigmatic revolutions in archival science.¹⁰ The concept of the paradigm has been introduced by Thomas Kuhn in his classic work on the structure of scientific revolutions.¹¹ According to Kuhn, a paradigm is a universally recognized scientific achievement that for a time models problems and solutions to a community of practitioners. Applied to a science as such, a paradigm provides the explanatory model of a scientific discipline in the specific stage of its development and defines its fundamentals.

⁷ According to Thomassen, cited by Ketelaar in “Archival Theory;” and in Ketelaar, “Archival Image,” 61.

⁸ Terry Cook, “Mind Over Matter: Towards a New Theory of Archival Appraisal,” in *The Archival Imagination. Essays in Honour of Hugh A. Taylor* edited by Barbara L. Craig (Ottawa: Association of Canadian Archivists, 1992), 38–70.

⁹ Trevor Livelton, *Archival Theory, Records, and the Public* (Lanham, Md. and London: Society of American Archivists and Scarecrow Press, 1996); Preben Mortensen, “The Place of Theory in Archival Practice,” *Archivaria* 47 (Spring 1999): 15, 19–20.

¹⁰ Theo Thomassen, “The Development of an Archival Science and its European Dimension,” in *The Archivist and the Archival Science. Seminar for Anna Christina Ulfsparré*, (Lund: Landsarkivet, 1999) 67–74; Theo Thomassen, “Paradigmatische veranderingen in de archiefwetenschap,” in Peter J. Horsman, Frederick C. J. Ketelaar, and Theo H. P. M. Thomassen, eds., *Naar een nieuw paradigma in de archivistiek. Jaarboek 1999 Stichting Archiefpublicaties* (Gravenhage: Stichting Archiefpublicaties, 1999), 69–79.

¹¹ Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

Thomassen asserts that the classical paradigm in archival enterprise, as codified by the Dutch *Manual* of 1898, had as its object the archival *fonds* as an organic whole. The methodology of classical archivistics was based on the principle of provenance. In the 1980s, Hugh Taylor proclaimed and predicted the paradigm shift.¹² The object of the new paradigm of archival science is what Thomassen calls “process-bound information,”¹³ that is “information generated by business-processes and structured by these processes in order to enable contextual retrieval with the context of these processes as the starting-point.” He considers “archival quality” as the objective of archivistics in the new paradigm, “which stands for the transparency, the strength and the enduring stability of the bond between the information and the generating business processes.”

Thomassen has been influenced, as I myself have, by the writings of Hugh Taylor and Terry Cook. Cook summed it up in his article “What is Past is Prologue.” “[This new paradigm for archives has] a renewed focus on the context, purpose, intent, interrelationships, functionality, and accountability of the record, its creator, and its creation processes, wherever these occur. Because this suggested focus goes well beyond drawing inspiration for archival activity from the study of records placed in the custody of an archives, it has been termed a postcustodial mindset for archives.”¹⁴ Speaking frankly, I would say that the prevailing mindset in Europe is not yet post-custodial in this sense, since many archivists still consider themselves custodians of the historical record and nothing more. I consider transforming this attitude to be the challenge for educators and researchers; they have to lead the profession

Down the passage which we did not take
Towards the door we never opened
Into the rose garden . . .

(T.S. Eliot, “Burnt Norton”)

Social and Cultural Archivistics

Records are always created and used on account of work processes and actions that give the archives their context and structure. These elements

¹² Hugh A. Taylor, “Transformation in the Archives: Technological Adjustment or Paradigm Shift?” *Archivaria* 25 (Winter 1987–1988): 12–28; reprinted in Tom Nesmith, ed., *Canadian Archival Studies and the Rediscovery of Provenance* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1993), 227–49.

¹³ Preceding Thomassen, Menne-Haritz, “Archival education,” 9–10; Menne-Haritz, “Archivfachliche Ausbildung,” 270–71 used the term “process-generated.”

¹⁴ Terry Cook, “What is Past is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas Since 1898, and the Future Paradigm Shift,” *Archivaria* 43 (Spring 1997): 48; reprinted in Horsman, Ketelaar, and Thomassen eds., *Naar een nieuw paradigma in de archivistiek*, 66.

determine the form of the documents. Archivistics focuses itself on context, structure, and form as determined by these processes, and not on the contents of the document. This idea—a concept that also forms the basis of new methods for archival appraisal—is not new at all. For the past hundred years, the *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives* has required the archivist to understand how administrative machinery functions. He or she therefore has to study the administrative records. Archivists are “scholars of recordkeeping,” as Richard Cox wrote.¹⁵ That scholarship uses historic knowledge, its methods, and its auxiliary disciplines—administrative history, legal history, heuristics, paleography, and diplomatics. When archival science was dominated by the paradigm of archives being historical sources, these were auxiliary subjects of classical *descriptive archivistics*. But today, those studying modern *functional archivistics* also have to master the historical method and its auxiliary disciplines, to study administrative history and the history of records creation and maintenance.¹⁶ Terry Eastwood addressed this issue in his article “Reforming the Archival Curriculum to Meet Contemporary Needs,” in which he wrote, “Archivists do not study historical subjects in some diffuse effort to comprehend past social contexts for their own sake, but rather to understand, critically interpret, exploit, preserve, and communicate the archival heritage.”¹⁷

Records are created in an organization to support and manage work, to record why, when, where, in what capacity and by whom particular actions were carried out. Archivistics is concerned with basic questions such as the ones Frank Burke asked in his seminal article in 1981:

What makes a society or an organization create and use archives the way it does and will a better understanding of the way people in organizations create and maintain archives enable us to make statements about an efficient and effective way of creating records?¹⁸

We therefore look at the societies, organizations, and people that create archives. This, I have named social and cultural archivistics.¹⁹ Its object is defining the continuum of records creation, processing, and use.

¹⁵ Cox, “Advocacy in the Graduate Archives Curriculum,” 32.

¹⁶ Menne-Haritz, “Archival education,” 13; Menne-Haritz, “Archivfachliche Ausbildung,” 274; F. Gerald Ham, Frank Boles, Gregory S. Hunter, and James M. O’Toole, “Is the Past Still Prologue?: History and Archival Education,” *American Archivist* 56 (Fall 1993): 718–29.

¹⁷ Terry Eastwood, “Reforming the Archival Curriculum to Meet Contemporary Needs,” *Archivaria* 42 (Fall 1996): 83.

¹⁸ Frank G. Burke, “The Future Course of Archival Theory in the United States,” *American Archivist* 44 (Winter 1981): 42–43; Tom Nesmith, “Archives From the Bottom Up: Social History and Archival Scholarship,” *Archivaria* 14 (Summer 1982): 26; reprinted in Nesmith, *Canadian Archival Studies and the Rediscovery of Provenance*, 180.

¹⁹ Frederick C. J. Ketelaar, *Archivalisering en archivering* (Alphen aan den Rijn: Samsom, 1998).

Archivalization

Traditionally, the object of archival science was the body of archives once the records had crossed the threshold of the repository.²⁰ The archivist used to be a mere custodian or keeper, at the receiving end, dependent upon what the administration had created and passed on.²¹

But recently, and as an outcome of the already mentioned conversion to a post-custodial mindset, the archivist's focus has shifted (Hedstrom and Wallace recently used the expression "catapulted") from the inactive stage of the life of recorded information to the front-end of the records continuum.²² There, he or she has a contribution to make even before documents are captured by a recordkeeping system. To be able to develop the information strategy and the recordkeeping system of an organization, the archivistics professional has to understand the way people create and maintain records and archives. To arrive at such an understanding, one should take into account the stage that *precedes* archiving. That is what I have recently called, in my inaugural lecture at the University of Amsterdam "archivalization."²³ This is a neologism, inspired by Jacques Derrida, denoting: *the conscious or unconscious choice (determined by social and cultural factors) to consider something worth archiving*²⁴. In the Popperian metaphor, the searchlight of archivalization has to sweep the world for something to light up in the archival sense; it must do this before we proceed to register, record, and file it—in short, before we "archive" it. By distinguishing archivalization from archiving, we gain an insight into the social and cultural factors, the standards and values, and the ideology that *infuse*—the expression is Jackson Armstrong-Ingram's—the creation of records and archives²⁵.

Archivalization does not only determine whether and how actions are recorded in archives. In the subsequent stages of records and archives management and archival usage, the socially and culturally determined *software of*

²⁰ Eastwood, "Reforming the Archival Curriculum," 85.

²¹ Carol Couture, "Today's Students, Tomorrows Archivists: Present-day Focus and Development as Determinants of Archival Science in the Twenty-first Century," *Archivaria* 42 (Fall 1996): 97.

²² Sue McKemmish, "Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow: A Continuum of Responsibility," <www.sims.monash.edu.au/rcrg/publications/recordscontinuum>, reprinted in Horsman, Ketelaar, and Thomassen eds., *Naar een nieuw paradigma in de archivistiek*, 195–210; Margaret Hedstrom and David Wallace, "And the Last Shall Be First: Recordkeeping Policies and the NII," *Journal of the American Society of Information Science* 50 (April 1999): 331.

²³ Ketelaar, *Archivalisering*; Eric Ketelaar, "Archivalization and Archiving," *Archives and Manuscripts* 27 (May 1999): 54–61.

²⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 16–17.

²⁵ R. Jackson Armstrong-Ingram, "The Givenness of Kin: Legal and Ethical Issues in Accessing Adoption Records," *Archival Issues* 22, no. 1 (1997): 33. See also Heather MacNeil, "Archival Theory and Practice: Between Two Paradigms," *Archivaria* 37 (Spring 1994): 13.

the mind also plays a role.²⁶ 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.²⁷ Even within the same organization, accountants, lawyers, and engineers create their records differently, not only because of legal requirements, but because they have different professional—that is social and cultural—standards. Richard Cox and Wendy Duff write that we must “extend our understanding of how organizations work, and how records fit into this work-environment and culture.”²⁸ Therefore, archivistics not only deals with the records as they are created, but also encompasses the organizational culture and the people in these organizations who create records; and all this in their social, religious, cultural, political and economic contexts. This, again, is not totally new. Traditionally, the archivist studies law and administration in order to understand how society functions and creates its archives. But the archivist has to go further; he or she has to understand the social and cultural factors of archivalization.²⁹ And as the archivist dealing with historical archives uses history and its auxiliary disciplines, so the archivist caring for today’s and tomorrow’s records has to be acquainted with sociology and anthropology, especially organizational sociology, organizational anthropology, and organizational informatics.

²⁶ Eric Ketelaar, “The Difference Best Postponed? Cultures and Comparative Archival Science,” *Archivaria* 44 (Fall 1997): 142–48; reprinted in Horsman, Ketelaar, and Thomassen eds., *Naar een nieuw paradigma in de archivistiek*, 21–27.

²⁷ David Bearman, “Diplomatics, Weberian Bureaucracy, and the Management of Electronic Records in Europe and America,” *American Archivist* 55 (Winter 1992): 168–81; reprinted in David Bearman, *Electronic Evidence: Strategies for Managing Records in Contemporary Organizations* (Pittsburgh: Archives and Museum Informatics, 1994), 254–77.

²⁸ Richard J. Cox and Wendy Duff, “Warrant and the Definition of Electronic Records: Questions Arising from the Pittsburgh Project,” *Archives and Museum Informatics* 11, nos. 3–4 (1997): 227.

²⁹ Barbara L. Craig, “Serving the Truth: The Importance of Fostering Archives Research in Education Programmes, Including a Modest Proposal for Partnerships with the Workplace,” *Archivaria* 42 (Fall 1996): 112.