

# Transforming Archives: The Dynamic Role of Archivists and Archival Practices in Contemporary Society

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## Abstract:

The realm of archives, archivists, and archival practices has significantly transformed to meet contemporary societal demands. This paper explores the dynamic role of archives in preserving collective memory, the evolving responsibilities of archivists, and the impact of postmodernism on archival practices. Traditionally, archives were primarily repositories of historical records for state and institutional use. However, they have expanded to serve broader societal functions, becoming vital tools for constructing histories, shaping cultural identities, and supporting social justice initiatives. The study examines the shifting responsibilities of archivists, who now act as mediators in creating and maintaining archives, balancing record preservation with ethical considerations and inclusivity. The influence of postmodernism on archival theory and practice challenges traditional notions of objectivity and neutrality in record-keeping. Postmodernism highlights the importance of context, the subjective nature of documentation, and the role of power in record creation and preservation. This paper underscores the necessity for archivists to adopt a reflective and critical approach, recognizing inherent biases in archival processes and striving for inclusivity and representation of marginalized voices. It highlights the transformation of archives from state-centric repositories to dynamic institutions serving broader societal functions, necessitating continuous adaptation of archival practices.

**Keywords:** Preservation, Archival Records, Archivist, Postmodernism, Record-Keeping.

## 1. Introduction

The term "archives" originates from the Greek word "archeion", which translates to "a place where public records or historical documents are stored." Archives are organized groups of documents that act as vital sources of knowledge and historical information. Archives are essential for maintaining and preserving priceless documents in addition to being places to store stuff. They also make reference to the establishments in charge of handling, maintaining, and administering these historical records. These organizations are essential to

preserving the authenticity of historical records and guaranteeing their availability for scholarly inquiry and use in the future. Thus, archives serve as a physical location for records preservation as well as an organizational structure for their care and administration. Archives are created gradually and continuously over time. The functioning of different governmental, private, semi-public, religious, and other organizations results in their constant contribution to the expanding archive. The systematic accumulation of these documents prompts critical questions about their management and arrangement. Managing these archives well is essential to making the most of these resources. A vast variety of items, such as coins, inscriptions, and formal and informal documents—whether private or official—are included in archival collections. A well-managed archive makes it easier for researchers to develop accurate and dependable historical works by providing easy access to these materials. By allowing scholars to investigate and uncover the major effects that certain persons and events have on the lives of common people and their communities, this cautious administration contributes to the preservation of the original records' integrity without jeopardizing it [1].

For academics, archives are essential resources because they provide access to real historical data. As seen by the National Archives of India's classification of their holdings as "Our Heritage" during displays, they are highly regarded as symbols of national heritage. Records, documents, manuscripts, atlases, photostat copies, microfilms, and maps are just a few of the many types of resources that are included in archives. Archives serve the primary purpose of protecting this priceless collection, even though many of these items are mostly made of paper and ink, which are organic materials that are prone to decay. Archive preservation is one of their primary purposes. In the context of archives, preservation refers to keeping materials in good shape over time. The two primary concerns are whether archives should be open or closed and whether they should have an eye toward the future. There are two ways to preserve material: either make copies to safeguard the original or preserve and lend the original, endangering its condition. This is true for analog materials as well, but digital records make it more difficult to define what is unique. Because of the fragility of media and the obsolescence of technology, preservation for digital records focuses on preserving their meaning and reliability rather than the medium itself [2] [3]. It guarantees that the historical riches preserved in these archives won't be lost for a long time. Archives help administrators create strategies, help governments shape policies, and offer vital support to researchers in their studies. Still, archives have a much larger function than just gathering, arranging, and preserving documents. A rigorous, scientific approach to preservation, which pays close attention to the technical details of preserving archive documents, greatly increases the efficacy of these functions. Because of this commitment to preservation, archival materials are guaranteed to be dependable and accessible, facilitating the continuous quest of knowledge and historical comprehension [4].

Archives are made to preserve certain types of knowledge in order to protect collective memory. Two fundamental tenets form the basis of archiving: arrangement/description and appraisal. These ideas are still essential to archival work even in the face of rapidly changing media, technology, and cultural landscapes [5]. Information is stored in archives so that it can be retrieved at a later time. But it's crucial to remember that

archives don't contain every document that organizations produce or receive. Rather, they are made up of items that archivists have carefully selected according to legal and regulatory requirements. Furthermore, the environment in which archive documents are produced is essential because it helps the public and scholars comprehend and analyze the procedures that went into creating these records [6]. A brief definition of archival theory is the scientific study of the nature, importance, and development of archives as well as the procedures needed for their maintenance, evaluation, and operation [7]. It includes the principles and procedures for managing and preserving archival records as well as the conceptual understanding of such materials [8]. The ideas of systematization and organization principles are fundamental to archival philosophy [9]. Duranti [10] describes archival theory as "a system that integrates theory, methodology, practice, and scholarship, characterized by its logical cohesion and a clear external purpose that defines its operational boundaries" [11]. In order to comprehend archive theory as a whole, we need to look at its three main elements: process, structure, and parts. Theory, technique, practice, and scholarship are among the constituents. The framework is hierarchical, with theory acting as the deciding and unifying factor and each level built upon and dependent upon the one before it. The most important mechanism in this system is feedback, which brings in fresh theories, concepts, findings, or modifications and keeps the system evolving [12].

### 1.1 Research Problem

Archives have historically been used as static repositories to preserve historical records, mainly for institutional and state usage. But this terrain has changed drastically with the arrival of the digital age and postmodern theoretical developments. These days, archives have a more expansive and active role in the development of social justice, cultural identity, and collective memory. This change brings up a number of important issues: In light of these developments, how have archivists' duties changed? What innovative techniques have been developed in the archiving sector to deal with the problems of public involvement and digital preservation? What impact has postmodernism had on how archives are understood and handled? This research aims to address these questions by examining the intersection of archival theory, practice, and contemporary societal needs, highlighting the complexities and implications of these changes for both archival science and historical scholarship.

### 1.2 Objectives

- To investigate the changing responsibilities of archivists
- To analyze the impact of postmodernism on archival practices
- To examine preservation challenges and strategies in the digital age
- To assess the role of archives in social justice and cultural identity

## 2. Scholarly Insights and Debates

### 2.1 Traditional Definitions and Historical Views

Historically, archives were established by the state as repositories for preserving documents essential to its hierarchical structure and organizational culture. According to Arthur Doughty, a renowned Canadian archivist, "Of all national assets, archives are the most precious. They are a gift of one generation to another and the extent of our care of them marks the extent of our civilization" [13]. Similarly, Michael Swift, an Assistant National Archivist, emphasized that archives serve as the "collective memory" of a nation, providing cultural continuity and foundational elements of nationhood [14]. Charles M. Andrews highlighted the paramount importance of public archives, asserting that neglecting them signifies a failure of national duty and calling for their preservation and care as key state responsibilities [15].

### 2.2 Postmodern Reinterpretations and Expanded Functions

In the post-war era, perspectives on archives have evolved. Charles M. Andrews later shifted his focus to argue for the careful handling of modern administrative records as a state duty. Thabo Mbeki, speaking at the inauguration of the African National Congress Archives in 1996, described archives as a "school for both the philosopher and the historians as well as the agitators and the activists" [16]. This view highlights archives' dual role in promoting national identity and accommodating diverse social missions, including activism and resistance.

### 2.3 Contemporary Understanding and Postmodern Views

The term "archives" in postmodern contexts refers to broader notions of communal social memory rather than just physical repositories. The French post-structuralist theorist Jacques Derrida redefined archives as being essential to the "institutionalization of history" and the preservation of social and cultural memory in its many manifestations, including oral histories and digital archives. Archives are no longer only places to store documents. According to Blouin and Rosenberg, archives are "complex structures" that embody cultural pieces and shape identities, not just places to store stuff. As a vital junction of academia, cultural practices, politics, and technology, they emphasize the importance of archives in recording and shaping collective memory within political and cultural contexts [17][18].

Thus, archives have transitioned from being simple state repositories to dynamic institutions that reflect and shape cultural, social, and political realities. This expanded understanding acknowledges their role in preserving and influencing collective memory across various domains.

### **3. Evolving Responsibilities of Archivists**

#### **3.1 Defining the Role of Archivists**

The important role archivists play sets them apart from historians and librarians. Douglas Brymmer asserts that archivists are in charge of compiling the records that serve as the foundation for history. Their work necessitates a profound comprehension of allied topics that may appear tangential in addition to the immediate themes they address. As Brymmer points out, in order to guarantee the accuracy and breadth of historical records, archivists need to have a vast knowledge base. In his analysis of the future of "documentary heritage," Canadian archivist Terry Cook emphasizes the significant influence archivists have on determining what is remembered or forgotten, who is visible or invisible in history, and who has a voice in society [19].

#### **3.2 Holdings Maintenance and Preservation**

One of the key duties of archivists is holdings maintenance, or taking steps to prolong the life of records and minimize the need for drastic conservation measures. Ritzenthaler characterizes this as bringing big records up to date, perfecting shelving methods, and putting policies in place for their preservation. Among the steps that could be taken are to remove dangerous fasteners, store huge documents in rolled or flat formats, and replace acidic storage materials with archival-quality ones. Archivists must treat fragile documents with care and use certain tools and methods to preserve its integrity [20].

#### **3.3 Developing Preservation Policies**

The creation and execution of preservation policies is a vital aspect of the work of an archivist. These regulations guarantee adherence to international and national guidelines for the preservation of documents. This entails keeping documents in safe, ideal storage facilities that guard against moisture, fire, theft, and bad weather. Archivists also need to think about preventive preservation techniques, such digitizing documents to lessen physical handling and increase the longevity of originals. Copying equipment must be operated by trained workers in order for preservation to be effective, and different types of records require different techniques [21].

#### **3.4 Public Awareness and Exhibition Risks**

Through exhibitions, archivists also contribute to educating the public about preservation. Their physical safety is at stake when original records are displayed, so careful planning and safety precautions are needed. This include putting in place security measures to deter theft and damage, as well as making sure exhibition rooms are physically sound and have systems to detect moisture and smoke. Safeguarding records that are on display requires proper invigilation, CCTV surveillance, and secure barriers [22].

Recognizing that humans are an essential part of an archive information system and that it includes both technological and social components is critical. The workflows of archivists will likely become more integrated with the larger archival information system in the future. The human component will be the primary emphasis of this analysis, as we will examine the problem from the archivists' point of view, even if it is crucial to take



the entire system into account [23]. Important duties in the preservation, upkeep, and display of records fall to archivists. Strategic planning is necessary for them to preserve and manage documentary heritage in an efficient manner in addition to using precise preservation measures.

#### **4. Conservation and Disaster Preparedness in Archival Practice**

##### **4.1 Conservation of Deteriorated Records**

Records that are deteriorating chemically or physically should be submitted right away for conservation measures. The public value of the documents, the type and amount of the damage, and the possible outcomes of any corrective action should all be taken into consideration when deciding which records to preserve, how much work they need to undergo, and how important they are. The highest standards must be followed while performing conservation treatments, and personnel must be qualified to evaluate the state of documents and apply the right materials, equipment, and methods in accordance with modern archival standards [24]. Records serve as a source of evidence [26] as well as recollection [25]. The reusable data generated by specific processes sets them apart from other articles. Paper records and electronic records are equally subject to this process-bound character. Electronic records, on the other hand, do not have interconnected logical and physical structures like paper records do; instead, these relations are preserved independently. In the context of intricate information systems like relational databases, hypermedia, and smart documents, this distinction is especially important for identifying electronic records [27].

##### **4.2 Disaster Planning and Emergency Measures**

For archives to be safeguarded from unanticipated calamities like floods, fires, bomb attacks, theft, and earthquakes, a thorough disaster plan is essential, particularly in regions vulnerable to natural disasters like the northeast. Every location where records are handled, handled, inspected, reviewed, or shown needs to be covered by the disaster plan. To prevent archives from being destroyed and to guarantee a speedy recovery, emergency protocols must be implemented effectively [28].

##### **4.3 Evolving Roles in the Digital Age**

Archivists now face new obstacles and ethical dilemmas as archives transition from physical storage spaces to virtual "archives without walls" that are accessible online. The shift in emphasis from only maintaining physical records to comprehending and managing the processes and intents behind record generation is required as a result of the move to digital platforms. With a strong moral and ethical compass, archivists must negotiate these shifts while carefully weighing their options in the processes of memory generation and archiving. To preserve a fair and inclusive collective memory, archivists need to critically assess their choices and record their justifications, as stated by Williams & Wallach [29]. Duranti [30] [31] asserts that in the digital age, maintaining the ability to recreate digital records is the primary concern for record preservation. Authenticity can only be assured if the following conditions are met:

- The correct data was properly stored.
- No significant alterations or issues occurred during storage.
- Only the intended data was retrieved from storage.
- The retrieved data underwent the appropriate processing.
- The process was accurately executed, resulting in the reproduction of a genuine record [32].

Determining and maintaining records becomes increasingly difficult in an electronic information environment, particularly when virtual documents and databases are involved. In order to guarantee that archival systems collect and maintain crucial provenance and contextual information, Dollar [33] counsel's archivists to participate in systems design. They ought to incorporate technologies that automatically capture records, designate electronic documents as transactions, and integrate assessment capabilities. In order to guarantee long-term access to electronic records, archivists should also move from custodial to regulatory and access-facilitative responsibilities, advocating worldwide norms. They need to create plans to deal with growing technological demands and privacy issues, as well as modify arrangement and description conventions for digital records [34].

#### **4.4 Historical Context: The South African Experience**

South Africa's experience with apartheid provides a striking example of the role archives play in forming historical narratives. Through "systematic forgetting," official archives were utilized during colonial control to marginalize and justify segregation, thus legitimizing the practice. The state-controlled history and used it to further its own agenda, while the liberation groups functioned in covert areas. Nelson Mandela emphasized that archives have the ability to either uncover or conceal realities, underscoring the importance of recording "untold history" and correcting historical misrepresentations. Mandela's observations highlight how archives can be used as instruments of oppression as well as emancipation [35].

#### **4.5 Implications for Archiving and Research**

The situation of South Africa reminds us how important it is to research the archival processes connected to resistance movements and repression by the state. Analogous experiences in other domains, such the operations of outlawed parties like the Communist Party of India or modern militant organizations, underscore the necessity of conducting thorough investigations into these archiving procedures. Subsequent research is necessary to address the crucial question of whether these archives belong in governmental or private collections [36].

## **5. Paradigm Shift in Archival Research: From Product to Process**

### **5.1 Postmodern Perspectives on Archives**

Archival research has moved its emphasis from the records themselves to the making process and context since postmodernity arrived. This shift places more emphasis on comprehending history via particular eras and places than it does on universal truths. By incorporating fresh perspectives on historical analysis and shifting from "history from above," which emphasizes political events and elite figures, to "history from below," which emphasizes marginalized voices, class, gender, ethnicity, and other diverse perspectives, postmodernism challenges conventional archival practices. With the inclusion of cultural, social, and economic aspects in addition to political history, this change has completely transformed historical writing [37].

### **5.2 Expanding the Scope of Historical Inquiry**

The changing focus of historical study has made it necessary to look for non-traditional sources and to reassess conventional archival materials. Archives are now closely examined for their capacity to represent marginalized groups, including workers, peasants, women, and children. Previously, archives were generally thought of as holdings of official records and political history. Historians are challenged to take into account the "unconscious" reasons and the personal papers of common people, which calls for an interdisciplinary approach and creative approaches to collect and interpret archival resources [38].

### **5.3 Derrida's Theory of Archives**

Jacques Derrida's "Archive Fever" presents a postmodern view of archives as akin to psychoanalytic memory. He conceptualizes the archive as a place of preservation and control, where classification and hierarchy are forms of repression. Derrida argues that archives are not neutral sources but are shaped by the very processes of documentation and classification. This view underscores that documents are not merely evidence but are imbued with the historical context and the biases of their creators [39].

### **5.4 Foucault and the Politics of Archives**

Michel Foucault's analysis of archives focuses on their role as systems of power and control. He contends that archives are not passive collections but active systems that reflect socio-political power structures. According to Foucault, the organization and classification within archives often obscure the complete truth, masking underlying power dynamics. His approach calls for a critical examination of the language and discourse surrounding archival materials to reveal the motivations and power relations at play [40].

### **5.5 LeGoff and the Power of Archives**

Jacques LeGoff argues that documents and archives are not objective records but are influenced by the power dynamics of their time. He asserts that the creation and control of memory through archival practices lead to the control of historical narratives and, ultimately, power itself. Feminist scholars like Gerda Lerner have



demonstrated how historical archives have historically marginalized women, highlighting the ongoing influence of patriarchal structures in archival processes [41].

Traditional repositories have given way to virtual "archives without walls," which are accessible online and linked by digital technologies. Archivists now have additional responsibilities in light of this change, since they must strike a balance between protecting historical records and enabling public access and participation. In a fast evolving digital landscape, archivists must make difficult judgments over which documents to add or remove from the collective memory while balancing ethical and practical issues. Archives increasingly play a wider role in society, despite their original establishment as state tools. The postmodern viewpoint emphasizes the intricacy and dynamic nature of archival work, underscoring the necessity for archivists to play an active role as intermediaries in the construction of historical narratives and collective memory.

## 6. Conclusion

The nature of archives has evolved from traditional repositories to dynamic digital institutions, reflecting cultural, social, and technological changes. This transformation has made archives crucial for constructing collective memory, cultural identity, and social justice, necessitating a redefinition of preservation to maintain the integrity and trustworthiness of records in the digital age. Archivists now balance traditional roles with new challenges in digital preservation, public engagement, and ethical considerations. The shift to digital platforms presents both opportunities and challenges, requiring archivists to navigate digital preservation, ethical issues, and public engagement. Archives and archivists play increasingly complex and vital roles in society, shaping collective memory, cultural identity, and social justice. The integration of postmodern perspectives and digital technologies necessitates ongoing adaptation and critical examination to ensure archives remain reliable and inclusive repositories of collective heritage.

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