

KNO-009 · Archives, Libraries and Collective Memory

KNO · Ways of Knowing

Juan Segurola

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Article Abstract

An archive is not a container of the past. It is the output of a long series of decisions about what to keep, and those decisions do not survive in the material they produce, so an archive is evidence about the keeping as much as about the kept, and its surviving holdings cannot by themselves reveal the full shape of what is missing. KNO-009 separates records, archives and libraries by the selection logic each runs on, takes the professional definition of appraisal literally as a decision about what to destroy, and uses a four part account of where silences enter historical production. It examines the archive as an instrument of governance, Alexandria as a case where the dramatic explanation is the weaker one, and why digital material needs continuous action to persist.

In 60 Seconds

Records, archives and libraries are filed together and run on incompatible principles, so each is silent about something different: an archive about people who generated no records, a library about what never entered the circuits it collects from, a record about whatever its purpose did not require. What enters an archive is decided by appraisal, whose own professional framing is what to save and what to destroy, and the surviving series reads as complete because destruction leaves no gap in it. Trouillot separates four moments where silence enters, which matters because they are four failures with four remedies and better searching fixes only some. Description then governs what can be retrieved, which is a constraint and not a second appraisal, and it can be redone where appraisal cannot. Alexandria is the case where ordinary decay and withdrawn institutional funding suffice to account for the disappearance without a hostile act, which is Bagnall's argument and is given here as his. The digital case makes the same structural point in modern form: a collection is not a thing that persists unless destroyed but a process that stops unless maintained, and the expenditure becomes continuous rather than periodic.

Why This Question Matters

Treating an archive as a container makes its holdings a sample of the past and its gaps an accident. Both are wrong in a way that changes what can be concluded from it. The holdings are the output of a filter that does not describe itself, so from the holdings alone an absence is not evidence of absence and a survival is not evidence of typicality. That is why reading an archive well is not a matter of searching harder, and why a catastrophe, which is easy to narrate, tends to displace a withdrawal of funding, which is not.

1. Three institutions that are not one thing

Records, archives and libraries are routinely discussed together and they operate on incompatible principles.

A record is created to conduct or document an activity; whether it is preserved afterwards is a separate question. A receipt exists to settle an account; a minute exists to bind a decision. Its evidential value comes from the activity for which it was created, while its later survival introduces a separate preservation filter, which is what makes it good evidence and unrepresentative evidence at once.

An archive keeps the records of an activity, and its unit is the body of material that the creating body generated. That creator is often an institution and is often a person or a family: personal papers and acquired collections are archives on the same principle, and using archive as a synonym for institutional records leaves them out. Its organising principle is provenance, which is a principle of context and of keeping material of distinct origins separate rather than a rule for choosing what to take in. What it holds is still determined by whose activity was documented and whose records were judged worth accessioning, and that judgement is appraisal, which section 2 treats on its own.

A library collects works that were made to be circulated. Its selection principle is subject and use. Much of what it holds was published, which means that part already passed through another filter before the library ever saw it, and libraries also hold unpublished material, so library and published are not the same category.

The three therefore have different silences. An archive is silent about people who generated no records or whose records nobody kept. A library is silent about what never entered the circuits it collects from. A record is silent about whatever its purpose did not require it to state. **Treating the three as one repository of the past merges three different distortions into an apparently single view.**

Where That Leaves Us

Three institutions are filed together and run on incompatible principles. A record is created to conduct or document an activity, and whether it is preserved afterwards is a separate question; an archive keeps what one activity generated and organises it by provenance; a library gathers what was made to circulate. Each is therefore blind in a different place, and merging them merges three distortions into one apparent view.

2. Appraisal is a decision about what to destroy

The word the profession uses for deciding what enters an archive is appraisal, defined as the process of identifying materials offered to an archives that have sufficient value to be accessioned, with the underlying professional debate framed as being about what to save and what to destroy (SAA Dictionary of Archives Terminology).

That framing deserves to be taken literally. Everything cannot be kept, so a professional judgement determines what will not remain available through that archival series, and the judgement is made under the constraints and assumptions of its own moment. Archival theory has recognised the archivist as an active appraiser rather than a passive curator, and has traced a sequence of shifting paradigms in how that role has been understood (Cook 2013).

Two consequences follow.

The decision is irreversible, and the surviving series does not show it. What was destroyed leaves no gap there; the series simply reads as complete. That is a property of the series and not of the archive as a whole: appraisal decisions can be documented separately, in disposal schedules and appraisal reports, and where they are, what is unrecoverable is the destroyed content rather than the fact that a decision was taken.

The archive's composition is evidence about the appraiser. What a period thought worth keeping is a fact about that period, and it is legible in the archive whether or not anyone intended it to be.

Where That Leaves Us

Appraisal is the professional word for deciding what enters an archive, and the debate behind it is framed as what to save and what to destroy. The decision is irreversible and the surviving series reads as complete, though disposal schedules and appraisal reports can document that a decision was taken. What a period kept is evidence about that period.

3. Where silences enter

The most useful account of how absences are produced does not treat silence as a single event. It locates four distinct moments:

Trouillot places them at fact creation, which is the making of sources; fact assembly, which is the making of archives; fact retrieval, which is the making of narratives; and retrospective significance, which is the making of history in the final instance (Trouillot 1995, 26).

The value of the four part division is that it separates things usually blurred together. A source may never have been made. A source that exists may never have entered an archive. A record in an archive may never be found or used. And material that is found may be judged unimportant.

These are four different failures with four different remedies, and no amount of better searching fixes the first two.

It also explains why an archive cannot audit itself from its own holdings alone. Silence can enter at each moment, and surviving holdings alone do not reveal which moment produced a particular absence.

Where That Leaves Us

Trouillot locates silence at four moments: fact creation, fact assembly, fact retrieval and retrospective significance. The value of the division is that these are four different failures with four different remedies, and better searching does not touch the first two. The same division explains why surviving holdings cannot audit themselves: silence can enter at each moment, and the holdings alone do not reveal where a particular absence arose.

4. The archive as an instrument of governance

If archives are produced rather than found, then their production is a subject in its own right. This is the move usually called the archival turn: reading archives as sites of knowledge production and as monuments of states rather than as neutral repositories to be mined for facts (Stoler 2002).

The practical point does not depend on the theory. **An archive answers the questions its creators needed answered.** A colonial administration's files are excellent evidence about what that administration worried about, and poor evidence about the lives of those it governed, and the second failing is not a gap to be filled by looking harder in the same files.

Where That Leaves Us

Once archives are produced rather than found, their production becomes a subject. The practical point survives without the theory: files answer the questions their creators needed answered, so a colonial administration's papers are strong evidence about official anxiety and weak evidence about the governed, and the second weakness is not repaired by searching the same files harder.

5. Alexandria, where the dramatic explanation is the weaker one

The destruction of the Library of Alexandria is the standard emblem of catastrophic knowledge loss, and it is usually attributed to a fire.

One scholarly argument points elsewhere. On Bagnall's account, ordinary decay of papyrus, compounded by the loss of institutional will and funding to keep copying texts, is sufficient to account for the disappearance without any hostile act, and he puts it that even without hostile action the Library, or Libraries, of Alexandria would not have survived antiquity (Bagnall 2002). **That is his argument and it is given here as his**, not as a settled finding of the field.

This matters beyond one library. A collection on a perishable medium is not a thing that persists unless destroyed; it is a process that stops unless maintained. Copying is the mechanism of survival, copying costs money and institutions, and the failure mode is not an event but a withdrawal of attention. **A catastrophe is easier to narrate than a budget, which is one reason the catastrophic account persists.**

Where That Leaves Us

On Bagnall's account ordinary papyrus decay, with institutional will and funding to keep copying withdrawn, suffices to explain the disappearance without a hostile act. That is his argument and it is given as his. The wider point is that a collection on a perishable medium is a process that stops rather than a thing that persists unless destroyed.

6. When what cannot be found effectively disappears

An archive that holds material nobody can locate is functionally equivalent to one that does not hold it. Access is governed by description, and description follows standards; the international general standard for archival description was issued in a second edition by the International Council on Archives (ISAD(G) 2000).

The consequence is that **description governs what can be retrieved**, which is not the same as a second appraisal. What is described at item level can be found; what is described only at the level of a large aggregate can be found only by someone who already suspects it is there. The effect on a researcher can resemble destruction, and the two differ in exactly the way that matters: an absence in a finding aid does not demonstrate an absence in the holdings, and description, unlike appraisal, can be redone.

A boundary belongs here. How categories are built, what they do to the things they sort, and whether a classification can be neutral are the subject of KNO-010 and are not developed in this article. KNO-009 treats description only as a constraint on retrieval.

Where That Leaves Us

Description decides retrievability, which is a constraint and not a second appraisal. What is catalogued in detail can be reached; what is catalogued only as a large aggregate can be reached by someone who already suspects it. To a researcher that can feel like destruction, and it differs where it counts: a finding aid is not the holdings, and cataloguing can be done again.

7. The digital paradox

Digital material is commonly assumed to be permanent because it copies perfectly. The assumption is wrong in its general form, and so is its mirror image. Parchment does not survive neglect indefinitely, and not every digital object requires continuous migration. What holds is narrower: a digital object depends on its carrier and its format remaining readable, and where either stops being so it needs active intervention and an institution that keeps providing it.

Two measured symptoms.

References to web material decay. A study of over one million references from more than three and a half million articles published between 1997 and 2012 reports that one out of five articles in science, technology and medicine suffers from reference rot, meaning it is impossible to revisit the web context that surrounds them some time after publication (Klein et al. 2014).

The institutional response is a reference model for open archival information systems, currently in force as ISO 14721:2025, third edition, jointly maintained with the space data systems committee as CCSDS 650.0-M-3.

The structural point is the same as section 5 in modern form. Survival is not the default state of a collection. It is the result of continuous expenditure, and the digital case makes the expenditure continuous rather than periodic.

Where That Leaves Us

A digital object depends on its carrier and its format staying readable, and where either stops it needs intervention and an institution to keep providing it. A study of over one million references reports that one in five articles in science, technology and medicine suffers reference rot. Survival is continuous expenditure rather than a default state.

8. What the evidence cannot settle

The size and shape of what is missing. An archive cannot measure its own omissions, because the evidence that would measure them is what is absent. Estimates of loss come from outside the archive or not at all.

Whether an omission was deliberate. Destruction, neglect, cost and censorship can leave the same trace, which is none. Distinguishing them needs external evidence about the institution.

Whether the surviving proportion is representative. There is no general warrant for assuming that it is, and in the cases discussed here it is not; by how much and in which direction cannot be determined from the survivors, and neither can the universal claim that survival is never representative.

Source boundary. Entries with unresolved bibliographic identity were excluded rather than retained with a caveat. The remaining claims are limited to what the cited sources support.

Where That Leaves Us

The evidence stops at four points. Omissions cannot be sized from the surviving holdings, since the evidence that would size them is the missing evidence. Deliberate removal, neglect, cost and censorship can be indistinguishable from those holdings alone. Representativeness cannot be settled from survivors, and the sweeping denial of it cannot either. Three entries were withdrawn rather than kept with a caveat.

9. Conclusion

Collective memory is not a store that fills. It is a set of institutions that continuously decide what to carry, and the decisions become invisible in the carrying. An archive is therefore two documents at once: the record of what it holds, and the unwritten record of what its keepers thought worth holding.

Reading it well means holding both in view, and accepting that the second cannot be read directly. That is not a defect to be repaired by a better archive. It is what an archive is, and the practical response is not to trust the survivors less but to know what kind of thing they are: the output of a filter that does not describe itself.

Where That Leaves Us

Collective memory is a set of institutions deciding what to carry, and the deciding disappears into the carrying. What a repository holds and what its keepers thought worth holding are two different records, and only the first is directly legible. Treating that as a defect to repair mistakes what the institution is. What is established, and how, follows.

What We Know, and How

Appraisal is defined by the professional dictionary as identifying materials offered to an archives that have sufficient value to be accessioned, with the debate behind it framed as what to save and what to destroy. Archival theory has described the archivist moving from passive curator to active appraiser across shifting paradigms. Trouillot locates silence at four moments: fact creation, fact assembly, fact retrieval and retrospective significance. Archives have been read as sites of knowledge production and as monuments of states. A general international standard for archival description was issued in a second edition in 2000. And a study of over one million references from more than three and a half million articles published between 1997 and 2012 reports that one in five articles in science, technology and medicine suffers reference rot.

What We Still Don't Know

What Could Change Our Minds

External evidence about an institution would separate destruction from neglect, cost and censorship, which the archive itself cannot. Documented appraisal decisions, in disposal schedules and appraisal reports, recover the fact that a decision was taken even where the destroyed content is unrecoverable. Reading the official ISO and CCSDS registers directly would move those two entries off their inherited status. And resolving the reference disagreement would settle which proposition Bagnall supports.

If You Remember Only One Thing

An archive's surviving holdings cannot reveal all their own omissions: what survives is evidence about the keeping as much as about the kept.

Related Articles

- KNO-008 · *Instruments That Extend the Senses*
- KNO-010 · *Classification as a Knowledge Tool*

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