Our Expectations About Archives
Archival Theory Through a Community Informatics Lens

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ABSTRACT

Archival institutions and the concerns of Community Informatics occupy a great common territory and yet little familiarity (and even less interaction) exists between the discourses. What do community informatics and archives have to talk about? Why are they ostensibly opposed in theory and practice? How might the roadblocks to a growing potential for joint programming be dematerialized and what is the rationale for attempting it? The archives is presented as a site of negotiation between public memory and contemporary aspiration. The proposition of creating primary records within the archives challenges certain assumptions regarding long-term custodianship by taking up the uncertainties of active community identity-building, by transferring the inherent philosophical debate to the archives proper, and by seeking strategies by which the infrastructure and conceptualization of archives would be equipped to facilitate an emerging model of community informatics.
Situating the Discussion

The title of this paper points to a crevice between archives and community informatics, on which there exists no literature specifically attempting a linkage. A rapprochement can only be achieved through the examination of subsets within concepts and the consequent identification of common threads. The classificatory, organizational, descriptive, linguistic and physical supports, by which means the uninterrupted stream of transactional events defining our collective experience may be correlated, tend to pool themselves into specialized areas of our focus according to reasonable rules of attraction. The substance and validity of these trials of correlation, to which we are of necessity devoted, are alone the measure of our ability first to abstract information and then to assign value to it. The attitudinal perspective of this inquiry takes as its primary subject of observation the disjuncture between the tried and true archival method, to the extent that we may agree on it and such as constitutes the guiding principles of some of our most essential and benign institutions, and the vector of community informatics, which has, as a newly-formed discipline, taken up as its main concern the enablement of communities within the current technological environment.

Support of citizenship (we can also say access to information) is one of the prime drivers of an emerging community informatics paradigm. So, too, do archives grapple with both the general and specific problems of transgenerational accountability, the core of community enablement. But whereas community informatics inclines itself more towards a local applicability, the overall credibility of archives has tended to rely upon its ability to stand back from the record; to promote a sufficiently contextualized picture as might allow a type of conversation among records.

While it is true that every individual record or document may be said to have been the product of innovative technologies of its day, presently occurring revolutions in the sphere of electronic records and in broadband initiatives have catapulted us into an unusually rigorous place of introspection, one that is rich in cultural challenges and entirely dependent upon our malleability, intuition and groundedness for any effective forward advancement. Seeking ways to extend the possibilities for communion with our

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1 While the grander scope of community informatics concerns itself with evolving principles and applications around the use of ICTs for the development and enablement of communities, the main thrust of its potential nonetheless relies upon the accommodation (and even the creation) of institutions and the building of institutional bridges, for insuring access to records of all types. For a concise account of current features of the CI landscape, including influences and disciplinary convergences, see Wikipedia at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Community_informatics. Also see http://davidley.user.openhosting.com/ci-course for pieces pertinent to the CI discourse, the wiki itself being a significant testament to technology-driven exercises of definition and access.

2 Gurstein has acknowledged localization as being the key to community informatics; in particular, the cultivation of localized technologies can lend geo-local significance as a means of ‘tagging’ information. See the Portals Discussion on the Community Informatics and Community Technologies page of the CI Course on the Community Informatics Wiki at http://davidley.user.openhosting.com/ci-course.

3 Richard Cox uses this phrase in his discussion about the importance of not privileging one form of record over another, in his book, No Innocent Deposits: Forming Archives by Rethinking Appraisal, Lanham MD: Scarecrow Press, 2004, p.183.
documentary inheritances, given the pressing interest in balancing what we may call a well-established cultural predisposition to one-sided historical accounts and given the escalating psychological and social impact of contemporary technoculture, has a lot to do with how archives will proceed in the future. The stumbling blocks to an easy rapport between the two disciplines are more numerous than a first glance may suppose, and it is to the diminishment of these that this inquiry aspires.

A discussion of electronic records per se, either the habits of their management or specific predictions about their general evolution, are not a priority of this investigation, which accepts, without reserve, their predominance on society’s central stage. The preference here, however, is to concentrate on a more specialized range of questions that the somewhat broader phenomenon poses to our conceptions about the handling of collective narrative. There are a number of paths in to the prescribed subject area, for there are features about the way we experience, conceptualize and navigate our lives that ricochet throughout the gamut of our aesthetic and social behaviours, and that are useful springboards to elucidating what the role of archives should or could be toward the empowerment of communities. These shared fields of interest inform the meaning and manner of our collaborative practices, memory recovery, history writing, our attitudes about access to records and accountability, and, summarily, our concern for the creation of social capital.

Social capital, a cornerstone of community informatics theory, is the currency of trust institutions. It has been defined as follows:

Social capital is a capability that arises from the prevalence of trust in a society or in certain parts of it... Social capital differs from other forms of human capital insofar as it is usually created and transmitted through cultural mechanisms like religion, tradition or historical habit.

An increase in social inclusiveness generally follows an increase in social capital. A greater potential for the development of 'soft technologies' (such as capacity-building, awareness-raising, education, and so on), is also a consequence of expanded social capital and enables the success of sustainable projects by facilitating inclusiveness over time.

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4 Institutions that are grounded in, formed by virtue of, and enabled by the trust of their user populations, whether these fulfill governmental, legal, cultural, financial or social requirements (or any other specialized function, for that matter), deal in the exchange of social capital. This is, in essence, the nature of their business. And such institutions operate within a permanent state of subtle negotiation and re-adjustment in order to assure their long-term viability. Heather MacNeil’s doctoral thesis, entitled Trusting Records: The Evolution of Legal, Historical, and Diplomatic Methods of Assessing the Trustworthiness of Records, from Antiquity to the Digital Age (National Library of Canada, 1998), focuses attention on the archival institution specifically, and is a comprehensive study of the relationships and inferences that describe the equating of records with evidence.

In the *archives* environment, trust is a concept upon which everything else may be tabled. Donations are made to an archives, first and foremost, because donors are able to place their trust in the archives’ capacity to undertake the custodial responsibilities required of its rigorous contract with posterity. This is the archives’ most fundamental enablement of communities – and does, in fact, and despite the minefields of appraisal, tax law, copyright and accession, give an historical voice to communities, whether these communities are identifiable visibly, virtually or intellectually.

The *community informatics* discourse (which seeks ways to activate the potential for community identity-building and networking) and the *archival* discourse (which aims to capture, and represent (no less), a reliable record of the processes and interests of creators over time) appear to have readily found themselves in the same, albeit huge, amphitheatre. But, we may ask, then what? Is not part of custodianship a commitment not only to future users but also to present users? Is not all history written in the present? Once magically committed to the public record, is that voice ironically silenced until the forever-elusive ‘future’ arrives? Perhaps the use community does have a directorial role to play. So, to what extent can an archives expect to facilitate the shaping of memory without favour and how can the drivers of such enterprise be truly grounded in community? Lest the introduction of solutions, technological or organizational, be mere impositions of limited vision and not viable in any meaningful way, further reflection on the terms of reference within these territories – that is, collective memory, historical context and the concepts (plural) of community – are called for and, indeed, have very real implications for development of the archival programme. Not only do we need to review our terms, but we must also acknowledge the inherent ambiguities that animate their definition. Taking a step back for a moment, a few establishing shots may help to better describe the chasm that looms between our two disciplines, for these few unedited pictures will contain the clues for proper and timely bridge-building. These ‘shots’, as it were, are borne of a highly nuanced lineage, having nested undisturbed for centuries in the shadows of our cultural activities. But now, in an attempt to cultivate new platforms for cross-fertilization among institutions and disciplines, we cannot resist the beckoning of estranged relatives.

The question that needs to be posed is whether archives are destined to be under-used treasure troves of human chronicle that exist due to the well-intentioned, visionary, manufactured mandates of benevolent institutions, corporations and governments, or can they be somewhat reconfigured to embrace the shifting agendae of communities? Can we actually effect a change that would herald the inclusiveness sought by proponents of community informatics theory and by the user community, who have something to say, now, about the record base, its biases and its triumphs, without disturbing the

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6 This would hold true in the case of both voluntary and required deposits, and is not an attempt to favour custodial over postcustodial scenarios. The observation is made only to affirm the archives’ position as a trust institution and, therefore, as a potentially suitable platform for the initiatives of the community informatics agenda.

organizational principles that prevail over the full distance of archival custodianship? Is it possible to transcend what are the essentially opposite perspectives of archival thinking and community informatics (that is, the inescapably top-down manner of archival organizations versus the bottom-up demands of community politics)? Can a more direct line be plotted between user communities and their archives? In other words, is there a truly active, current context to be explored for past documents; one that permits current communities to literally (and habitually) take into account the records of their predecessors?

The Problem

At several levels of analysis, it would seem that the enablement of communities is, strangely, thwarted by some of the basic tenets of traditional archival practice, which attempt (for obvious and worthy reasons) to avoid, as a guiding marker, the transient claims of intellectual fashion. The proposition of overlaying the priorities of community informatics\(^8\) onto archival practice is, necessarily, a tentative one, to be examined with far-reaching after-effects in mind. Therefore, and without taking even the most reactionary view, we immediately recognize the glaring risk: that any manipulation of the record base to suit the needs of community would bespeak a spectacular and short-sighted failure. The archival way of preservation, of the safeguarding of records, does not license the shuffling or highlighting of records to suit the tastes of users. Archival principles cannot authorize what amounts to the interference of communities of interest in the appraisal, organization or description of collections, without seriously sabotaging the consistent impartiality that archival practice aims to identify and defend. So, where exactly can communities effectively enter the archival process, by which the storage of their own heritage is, presumably, accomplished? Community informatics, which aims to render the large and the small discourses of information sharing and management as fluid and as democratic as possible, does not appear to be speaking the same language as archives, which takes as the core of its responsibility the authoritative protection of naturally accumulated records, with ultimate neutrality (however idealized) in mind.

The great impasse is that an archives, by definition and by tradition, is perceived to be, at least from an outside view, a passive entity. The degree to which it may be conceptualized as an active entity is the degree to which it functions as a zone of contention and debate. It is the degree to which the archives is able to be responsive, if not interpretive. Within this possibly impatient but useful formula, the community of interest, being both spokesperson and investigator, does direct, by posing endless questions of its archives and begging its constant elasticity. The user of archival records is, by this thinking, not merely used by the archives (that is, as a justification for the archives itself, insofar as users provide donor and patron populations, past, present and future), nor is the user of archives simply a cog in the wheel of archival machinery. In fact, highly sensitive to the organic nature of communities, archives, by proclamation and

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\(^8\) A sampling of such priorities would point to inclusiveness, collaboration and the facilitation of emergent practices.
by their very existence, cannot help but chart the patterns of change orchestrated by the creators of its contents. And elaborate schemes and protocols (with which we archivists are all familiar), designed to acknowledge the functions and provenance of the records are, rightfully, invoked to protect such an understanding for future generations. The structure of archives aims to protect what it understands to be emergent, to be organic and to be heard, preoccupied as it is with subtleties of intervention and with fidelity to the uniqueness of records; for as a defining quality of the archival condition, each document is considered in its own singular relationship (by chronology and function) to every other document. As a consequence, even the archivist’s efforts to provide meaningful access to such records risk sabotaging the creator’s intent at every turn. Of this, archivists are dreadfully aware. In fact, the only compensating action to offset the possibility of such a peculiar paralysis on the part of the archivist is to create adequately yielding and intellectually rigorous descriptions as will re-animate the records and secure their endless availability for re-interpretation. And this with every minor intervention and judgment call generously documented.

We now come closer, in our oscillating view of what is ostensibly a discontinuous territory, to the possibility of shared aims and to a joint project of solidarity. There are sufficient indications pointing to the overlap of concerns. If the community (the user, literally) is able to achieve an equal footing within the archival institution, a symbiosis of the most practical sort is envisaged. The archives becomes the site of its own discourse. And the discourse becomes relevant to the user and to the entire trans-generational community. The sustainable archives is nourished by an enduring, reciprocal, recyclical relationship with the community it represents. Social capital is in this way created.

Although an archives is already, by design, a comprehensive system of orientation to the records, there is a ‘counter-factuality’ that remains lacking. And this counter-factuality may be found in the (as yet) unvoiced input from and reception by the communities above which the archives appear to hover. The absorption and management of these sorts of spontaneous and passing truths do not fall within the parameters of any guiding principles to be found in a traditional archives manual. Current records, after all, are not the archives’ domain. Those naturally accumulated documents created in the course of quotidian affairs and serving limitless authorial functions will find their way into the archives eventually. But there is a tandem collecting function, running parallel to more entrenched operating modes, that can be achieved by the archives and that can help to strengthen the effective bond between a community and its documentary legacy. Its postulation continues as follows.

If the attempt is made (and not only has the warrant for it become clear, but a fair urgency also perceived) to alter the stance of the archival institution, to shift its repertoire of tools just slightly, to enhance its voice such that communities of interest may in fact, and in turn, enhance their voices, it is important first of all (and generously before any specific technological platforms to facilitate these goals may be formulated) to acknowledge the true nature of mechanisms at play and to strip bear the proposition: for to talk about a zone of contention and debate (that would in essence constitute the contemporary participation of communities in archival affairs) is to talk about a type of
cut-and-paste region (figuratively speaking), where new documents, possibly interactive documents, are created, tracked and ultimately assimilated into the record. Assimilation would adhere to usual appraisal methodologies and likely not be total, but in keeping with ordinary procedures be described accordingly, with transparency uppermost in mind.

Resting beneath our very noses, and in the spirit of tapping the more bountiful intellectual resources of multiple tributaries (a favourite pastime of the serious cross-disciplinarian), we may, for fuel and affirmation, draw a number of analogies from neighbouring disciplines, not strictly developed out of either archival theory or community informatics, but that nonetheless offer models readily harnessed to our purpose. We shall first build a raft. Bridgeworks will follow as a natural consequence of necessity.

**Strategies for an Adjusted Understanding**

In cultivating a new basis for access, it becomes necessary to afford the ‘new’ user community the experience of a unique vantage point, one that archives are indisputably well positioned for. Under the umbrella, shall we say, of this unique vantage point shall be the protection and expansion of a triumvirate of callings; namely, to experience the privilege of the past, to inform the conjecture of the future, and to secure the thumbprint of the present (this last being key to the sharing of power which enables us all in the pursuit of active society membership and upon which community informatics philosophy, in particular, fixes its sights).

In social practice, we remain confronted with persistent power imbalances, but the social imaginary of full participation can be applied to legitimate and understand our plea for the maximization of generative and the minimization of restrictive power mechanisms.

Deleuze and Guatteri have observed,

> [In] societies, there exist collective mechanisms which simultaneously ward off and anticipate the formation of a central power. The appearance of a central power is thus a function of a threshold or degree beyond which what is conjured away ceases to be so and [simply] arrives. This threshold of

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9 A resemblance to certain features of Upward’s records continuum concept is noted here. Namely, the interest, in Upward’s words, in a layering approach that allows development of interconnected methods for document creation, establishment of routine for record capture, and management of the distancing processes of traditional archival methodology. The convergences are wholly embraced. But whereas Upward is ultimately interested in mapping the continuum process to produce a functional model of our documentary habits that no longer keeps separate the dimensions of space and time, my concern, at this point, is merely the rationale for pursuing the notion of record creation in the archives. To this end, it fits very well within the cyclical paradigm that Upward presents in *Modelling the continuum as paradigm shift in recordkeeping and archiving processes, and beyond – a personal reflection* (2001), retrieved at [www.sims.monash.edu.au/research/rcrg/publications/Frank%20U%20RM](www.sims.monash.edu.au/research/rcrg/publications/Frank%20U%20RM)

consistency or of constraint is not evolutionary but coexists with what has not crossed it. What is more, a distinction must be made between different thresholds of consistency.\textsuperscript{11}

‘Thresholds of constraint’ is a particularly interesting concept, especially when linked to a discussion about the authority of archives. Within the limits of this investigation, we can adopt it in the most literal way, as the explanatory instrument of gaps in the record, or as an interpretation of the absent archives\textsuperscript{12}, or even as the anticipation of the perils of loose or rich description.\textsuperscript{13} Or we can simply take up the challenge, politically motivated, to nudge the ‘strong arms’ of consistency towards greater democratization. But where I feel the concept leads us is toward the acknowledgment of more existential matters. We live in highly non-linear times.\textsuperscript{14} And as Alliez and Feher have described it,

Such is the new double status of the façade: sometimes polished and homogenized by an image, it is a vertical plane on which all depth is reduced to mere surface, and sometimes it is perforated, permitting the unfolding on a horizontal plane of a field of unlimited depth.\textsuperscript{15}

It is these perforations, these tangential meanderings, these departures from linear progression, which provide us with the resonance we seek – in our lives and in our records. Archives embody both the directionality of memory and immanence\textsuperscript{16} (and we appreciate in this the long-term aspect it contains) as well as the tide pools and pockets that resist temporality and draw our attentions to alternate dimensions of experience and analysis. The archives sanction the linear \textit{and} the non-linear.

A cut-and-paste contact zone, while it does contribute to the continuum of sedimentary deposit by adding to the record base, may be considered a non-linear


\textsuperscript{13}Michael Baxandall, referring to art description, claimed that “the most powerful terms in the description will be at best indirect, in that they refer not to the physical picture itself but to the effect the picture has on us, or to other things that would have comparable effects on us...”, in \textit{Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures}, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985, p.11. Also, Brian Cantwell-Smith has referred to our natural inclination to over-correlate, due to the desire to highlight details of events or records according to areas of greatest interest, from personal notes, lecture at the Faculty of Information Studies, University of Toronto, entitled “So What Is Information, Anyway?”, Nov.14, 2003.

\textsuperscript{14}This observation does not pretend to any originality and is readily encountered in the literature. For example, Manuel Hinds includes such a proclamation in the introduction to his book, \textit{The Triumph of the Flexible Society}, p.xx.


\textsuperscript{16}This phrase was part of the title of a short piece about the city as the site for the mimesis of presence, by Peter Eisenman, “The City as Memory and Immanence”, in \textit{Zone}, New York: Urzone, 1986, p.440.
strategy and, applied to practical archival situations, takes the form of a responsive record. It permits the recovery of subject positions, ensuring meaningful access by reducing distance and foregoing neutrality; for not only is the creator of the record situated, the reader of the record is also situated, both positions demanding the opportunity to place themselves historically. The relativity of all opinions and documents notwithstanding, the act of commentary, and the creation of a commentary record, does not take a back seat to first-person practice. In its full expression, it is no less than the DNA of the horizontal archives. It keeps company with those tools for social, intellectual and aesthetic assessment that labour to offset the alienating (and marginalizing) effects of vertical hierarchies and predominantly linear histories. As such, it sits well within the frame of certain philosophies of the connectivity revolution as well, and is sensitive both to the benefits of horizontal societies and to the optimizing of relationships within them.

The interrogative manner of the commentary record is hardly new to the history of documents. Talmudic commentary is the most obvious example, being the record of rabbinical discussions of Jewish oral law, and taking the form of layers of subsequent commentaries laid down, over the centuries, upon earlier commentaries. Combinations of Talmudic text and transcribed discussions interrogating the text, fragmented tracts, added historical information, edited versions of texts, references to related passages, short and lengthy interpretations, are all characteristics attesting to the remarkably transparent and highly interactive procedure that propelled the creation of this type of record. Commenting on the striking similarities of design and purpose, Rosen compares formal aspects of the ancient record to a typical page on the Internet,

where nothing is whole in itself but where icons and text boxes are doorways through which visitors pass into an infinity of cross-referenced texts and conversations. Consider a page of Talmud. There are a few lines of Mishnah the conversation the Rabbis conducted (for hundreds of years before it was codified around 200 C.E.)… [and] underneath these few lines begins the Gemarah, the conversation later Rabbis had about the conversation earlier Rabbis had in the Mishnah. Both the Mishnah and the Gemarah evolved orally over so many hundreds of years that, even in a few lines of text, Rabbis who lived generations apart participate and give the appearance, both within those discrete passages as well as


18 Ibid, p.5.

by juxtaposition on the page, of speaking directly to each other.\textsuperscript{20}

Transposing the eloquence and flexibility of such enduring schema to matters at hand, archives need not only connect the present with the past by means of passive preservation for the “immeasurable benefit of a remote future society”\textsuperscript{21}, but may also employ a variety of \textit{active} preservation strategies that grapple with contemporary desire for involvement in the sedimentary processes of society and that embrace our current and undeniable predisposition to horizontality. We employ this manner of investigating in our cultural and social habits.\textsuperscript{22} And given the archives’ natural predilection for the analysis of organic accumulations, we already have mechanisms, principles, theory and guidelines conveniently in place that may be adapted to new forms of the documentary record. The victory to be achieved, in so doing, does not lie only in archives being able, as an institution, to withstand the pressures of new conditions of connectivity, but in being able to become the offspring of community need (as opposed to being the offspring, merely, of organizational need\textsuperscript{23}), finding in both results the keys to sustainability.

While sustainability was initially formulated in terms of environmental preservation, the sustainability debate has broadened its scope to include social, economic and cultural aspects… a more multi-dimensional view on sustainability is being presented which implies a holistic and integrated policy framework of environmental capability, economic stability, social sustainability and cultural diversity.\textsuperscript{24}

The constant renegotiating of positions, of rights, of degrees of participation, of degrees of detachment, and of memory, all of which is ultimately implied by the sustainability debate, is precisely the stuff of primary records.

\section*{Record Creation Within the Custodial Institution}

But how shall we accommodate, both practically and philosophically, an \textit{archival} interest in contemporary record creation? We are plunged, swimmers or no, into a consideration of the archives’ role with regard to history writing (and even history making) and with the ramifications of reproducible records. It is the contention of the present investigator, however, that we are better swimmers than we often think, and that we must situate ourselves squarely in the centre of the debate.


\textsuperscript{21} David Bearman used this phrase in his discussion about the urgency of reciprocity between the concepts of records and archives, in “Archival Methods”, \textit{Archives and Museum Informatics}, Pittsburgh, vol.3, no.1, 1989, p.59.


\textsuperscript{24} Servaes and Carpentier, p.8.
Record creation is, clearly, not about impartiality. It is not about self-transparency. It is partial and it is opaque, only rendered transparent generously after the fact (and only to a degree) by virtue of its (archival) arrangement and description. The record itself is usually non-historical, or ahistorical, for it does not see itself. Objectivity is not its purpose.

…the experience of truth does not occur in the reflection of an object by a subject committed to self-transparency, but rather as the articulation or interpretation of a tradition (a language, a culture), to which existence belongs, and which it reformulates in new messages sent to other interlocutors.25

E. L. Doctorow said the same thing,

I have no audience in mind when I write. My mind is in the language of the book, attached to its words like their spirit. I am only the book… In this way I may hope to speak for other people, by never having them in mind as I write.26

And Robert Putnam, too, observed the fundamental qualities of effective and meaningful communication, adjusted to the civic arena:

Citizenship is not a spectator sport… Without face-to-face interaction, without immediate feedback, without being forced to examine our opinions under the light of other citizens’ scrutiny, we find it easier to hawk quick fixes and demonize anyone who disagrees. Anonymity is fundamental anathema to deliberation.27

We have managed some progress by means of these pronouncements. We have established the warrant for our interest in contemporary commentary, without which the archives suffers in these times of heightened awareness. And we recognize the need to involve ourselves generally, and not just with the peculiar case of electronic records, in the earliest moments of the life cycle of records (despite an understanding that the cultural moment of a document’s birth is at best illusory28). But before we can make a case for the practical marriage of archives and community informatics, we must be clear about the archivist’s true function. In prioritizing impartiality29 (although this tends generally to elude us), in exaggerating transparency (and this may be hypothesized only in fragile agreement with the archivist’s own interventions) and in attempting to represent


28 Higgs discusses the merits of intruding into the life cycle of records at birth, in History and Electronic Artefacts (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998, p.185), while Upward has pointed out that creation can hardly be considered a starting point and is, instead, a continuing process (Modelling the continuum…, p.4.).

29 In the strictly archival sense, impartiality refers to the inseparable connection between a document and the purpose it was meant to serve; that is, that no other motivation may be said to disturb that relationship. It is in the more general sense of ‘objectivity’, however, that I use the term here.
relationships (which is often the proclaimed domain of history writers), have we not already exited the expected boundaries of collective memory custodianship? What exactly is collective memory? And what is the nature of the archives’ responsibility for it?

Collective memory has become almost as nebulous and overused a term as community, which Little describes as,

> an idea that is perennially resistant to ideological categorization and... provides dynamism in the ongoing debate on its meaning. In some approaches to social theory and political practice, community has become something of a holy grail, while in other circles it is a concept that arouses deep skepticism.\(^{30}\)

With similar difficulties, the term ‘archives’ has often been used synonymously with ‘repositories of collective memory’. And collective memory is usually defined in contrast to history.\(^{31}\) It might be possible to sidestep the semantic issue by thinking of archivists as heritage facilitators, which would imply a performative aspect as it "projects the present back and the past forward"\(^{32}\), but this would be inadequate to the breadth and reach of the archival act, which we understand in the fullest sense of its societal character and historical (or documentary) obligation.

*Collective memory*, thought of as a set of records (that is, inactive records), traditionally simplifies and reduces the complexities of past transactional events in order to see them from a committed, fairly singular, and ongoing perspective.\(^{33}\) It takes up portions of more or less agreed upon narrative and contrives a type of ownership by connecting them seamlessly to the present. Indeed, Phillip has referred to memory as being “analytically blunted”.\(^{34}\) But the *historical* method, at least the convention of reconstructing causal, linear linkages and master narratives of the sort that detachment allows, focuses on the historicity of events and sees them within the passage (that is, the push and pull) of time. Pierre Nora has written,

> Memory is always a phenomenon of the present, a bond tying us to the eternal present... history, by contrast, is reconstructive, critical and perpetually suspicious of memory.\(^{35}\)

It is possible, however, for both sides of the coin in the history/memory debate to manufacture similar perspectives in order to control the particular shading of purposive

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\(^{32}\) “Projecting the present back and the past forward” was a phrase used by David Lowenthal. He is quoted in Phillip, p.90.

\(^{33}\) Some of these ideas are borrowed from Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999, pp.3-4.

\(^{34}\) Phillip, p.91.

arguments. Therefore, rather than digress unnecessarily (since this topic may easily be left to more concerned examiners), a focus on the performative idea that has arisen tangentially has some relevance to the present discussion.

The performative aspect signifies, in very real terms, the notion of a living, historical community. Furthermore, we understand by it a quality of self-consciousness that allows the luxury of conflating, somewhat, the notions of historical consciousness and collective memory. In that a living, historical community would be seen to possess no “stable boundaries” or “fixed identities”, it makes sense to also consider its structures (and its records) as similarly charged indicators of a state of flux. Eisenman writes,

… self-reflexive traces of past and future are disrupted through manifestations of their own processes. Thus the idea of a city as a site and source of originary value is destabilized… By treating the site as a palimpsest, traces… can be introduced.

An intensification of information traffic, both in volume and direction, imposes an additional pressure to destabilize originary value and further blur the interaction between the creator of records, the custodian of records and the user of records. But it is on this very playing field that the aims of archives institutions and the goals of community connectivity might hope to establish a new, merged sensibility, dealing, as they both do, in the detritus of human statements, erasure and recovery, intention and remnant. The traces, in fact, of our own accounting. The archives itself may be thought of as a piece of intricate community technology, an agency for the dispersal of evidential fragments that have, by surviving a perspicacious and well-tuned series of screening exercises, managed to skirt their own perishability.

And past and present are highly relative terms at best. Worded a different way, “what has been present becomes past and the past has been [and will be] studied by many different presents”.  

This elusive record of moving parts cannot be the representative of factual, historical communities, for there are no factual, historical communities. This much is plain. It is the present that leads and reorients and reconjures the past, in a sense forever summing it up without the possibility of final analysis. Order is perpetually temporary. Even fixity itself is temporary. Archival philosophy understands this. The commentary record that inserts itself (hypothetically) into the scheme does not in any way aspire to overcome these temporal facts but, on the contrary, embraces the record base as a family of past relations and is a testament to active and charged re-engagement. It is savvy and versatile, and it is conscious of the nuances of proximity and distance.  

It is, in the end, analytical without the trappings of the historical method. Halbwachs observed that,

36 Terms used by Vattimo, The Transparent Society, p.107.
37 Peter Eisenman, p. 441.
39 Mark Salber Phillip, in his essay “History, Memory and Historical Distance”, talks about problems of proximity and distance and the construction of audience positions. See Seixas, Peter, ed., Theorizing Historical Distance, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2004, pp.86-102.
Apparently, history must wait until old groups have disappeared, until their thoughts and memories have vanished, before becoming concerned to fix the image and temporal order of facts that only it can now preserve. Of course, the historian requires the aid of… traces of testimony about the past… but [he] is guided in this selection and evaluation by reasons having little to do with the opinion of that time, which no longer exists. He is not obliged to take it into account, nor need fear that it will contradict him.\footnote{Maurice Halbwachs, \textit{The Collective Memory}, trans. by Francis J. Ditter and Vida Yazdi Ditter, New York: Harper and Row, 1980 (first published under the title \textit{La Memoire Collective}, Presses Universitaires de France, 1950), pp.118-119.}

Despite the usual connotation of an archival record as one that has ceased to have an ongoing function (at least that its \textit{original} purpose, as a carrier for the activities of its creators, no longer dictates its continued usefulness), it is not a stretch to refute pronouncements of its death.\footnote{Nor to refute, by the same token, announcements of its intellectual birth.} Indeed, archives promote the rewards of ongoing engagement with the records for their very usefulness as evidence and as gauges of past practice and public opinion. The more charged the encounter, the better, as we attempt to transcend historical distance and re-imagine the aura of the record itself. The archives user navigates these (and other) issues that contribute to establishing value and orientation and ends with his own experiment.

\begin{quote}
The thing… is not mediated by our senses, our sensations or our perspectives; we go straight to it, and it is only in a secondary way that we become aware of the limits of our knowledge and of ourselves as knowing.\footnote{Merleau-Ponty, quoted in Christian Norberg-Schulz, \textit{The Concept of Dwelling}, New York: Electra/Rizzoli, 1985, p.16.}
\end{quote}

This simultaneous gathering and shedding of information that describe the user’s (we might also say reader’s or spectator’s) experience is both a central difficulty and a defining strength for the development of a practical philosophy of archives. As the document is taken over, stored, described, positioned, studied, and so on, it tends to dissolve to one degree or another.\footnote{Walter Benjamin would have called this the “suspension of usefulness”, once a text is appropriated by the institution, the collector or any other agent of explanation. See Baxandall’s discussion in \textit{Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures}, 1982, and Gianni Vattimo’s numerous references to Benjamin in \textit{The Transparent Society}, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992.} More dramatically laid out, any \textit{act} of information is designed “to do violence to the thing it is oriented towards in order to provide access to it.”\footnote{Cantwell-Smith, from personal notes.} And the practice of labels and description is an art in itself, aimed at safeguarding
as much about the originals as possible. In fact, the whole of the archives acts as a single label that encapsulates the tension between things and their verbal proxies.  

All texts, given the absence of their authors, are forever more at the mercy of their readers. They provide openings for endless re framings in accordance with selected sets of ideals belonging to selected readerships and subject to unforeseeable contingencies. These are the facts of usage, regardless of the most brilliant, insightful, respectful, accurate and nuanced labelling and description aimed, of course, at fixing the records in the sphere of their creators. As Baxandall observed about the description of pictures (and this applies equally well to the description of textual documents),

What one offers in a description is a representation of thinking about a picture more than a representation of a picture… Most of the things we can think or say about pictures stand in a slightly peripheral relation to the picture itself. It is in this region between label and text that our exercises of contradiction and tests of credibility enact themselves. And bearing in mind the “galloping individualism” that currently informs much of our behaviour, and that also inclines much of our cynicism and distrust with regard to ‘official’ narratives, this space may swell with the emotional investments through which we seek to reclaim experience. Baxandall articulates this particular aspect of the affair:

Meaning [in description] is largely ostensive: that is, it depends on both myself and my hearers supplying precision to it by reciprocal reference between the word and the object. And this is the texture of the verbal description that is the mediating object of any explanation we may attempt. It is an alarmingly mobile and fragile object of explanation. However, it is also excitingly flexible and alive, and our disposition to move around in the space offered by the words is an energetic and muscular one.

It is worth lingering on the art model, and the light it sheds on aspects of the archival situation, a little further still, for it confirms the kind of emphasis on the experiential domain of individuals that lends itself to transference to community informatics philosophy in which valuations of opportunities for individual experience, for control and for meaningful participation play an important part. The cultivation of the experiential over the theorized has enjoyed many decades of attention in Western art circles. Not the least significant of ambitions in this regard were the experimental narratives of Allan Kaprow and the loosely staged Happenings of the 1960’s and early 70’s, in which life and art were merged to indistinction by means of emergent and

45 “Verbalized proxy” was a phrase used by Baxandall in his discussion about the description of pictures, p.9.
46 Baxandall, p.5.
47 To borrow a somewhat dramatic, but apt, image used by John Torpey in his essay, “The Pursuit of the Past: A Polemical Perspective”, in Seixas (ed.), Theorizing Historical Consciousness. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004, p.242. Torpey speaks about the galloping individualism of our times replacing the collective vision of our forebearers.
48 Baxandall, p.10.
unpredictable performances. These (art) movements and related antecedent movements shifted the traditional frame to include and necessitate the participation of the art public, not only in the creation of the art record but, indeed, at the epicentre of its expressive procedure.⁴⁹

The concern here for social involvement, emotional connection and emergent process (and these often within the context of impermanent installations), bears a striking kinship to the interest in participation, social cohesion, issues of trust, control and reciprocity that inspire ongoing, experimental incarnations of a community informatics model. If we view the archives under a community informatics lens, the hypothesis entreats the consulter of archives to create new records in counterpoint to existing records. The new record points to the original. It points up evidence in the original. In a sense, it renders the ensemble of records even more evidential. It adds additional transparencies through which to magnify the earlier records. The new record, by itself, is also original and evidential, its provenance and accountability readily tracked, and it serves as a foil to the ‘original’ original. It stands as testimony and opinion in its own right, solicited not in any specific case, but by the general invitation of archival institutional policy; a policy re-purposed to express the continuum of our engagement with the public record and requiring as its most basic point of departure the mere recognition of being outside the ‘original’.⁵⁰ According to Vattimo,

As Heidegger describes it, the encounter with the work of art is like an encounter with someone whose view of the world is a challenge to our own interpretation… one must understand the Heideggerian thesis according to which the work of art founds a world by presenting itself as a new historical event.⁵¹

The act of re-orientation in the archives is a mainstay of most of its methodologies. The only reason this is so, is that the archives anticipates disorientation and accepts fragmentation. Ambiguity becomes a pervasive property, assumed and managed, but never dismissed.

Aesthetic experience appears to be an experience of estrangement, which then requires recomposition and readjustment. However, the aim of this is not to reach a final, recomposed state. Instead, aesthetic experience is directed towards keeping the disorientation alive.⁵²

In the same way that the scholarly editions and the callisthenics of hypertext expect no final text and acknowledge the permanent incompleteness of the record, so too

⁴⁹ Cy Twombly and Robert Rauschenberg are but two examples of other artists in the post-modern era whose works contemplated and celebrated ambiguity, erasure and variability. Vattimo echoes these same concerns when he talks about the danger of moving towards a fabling of the world rather than towards self-transparency. See Vattimo, p.24.

⁵⁰ The ‘original’, at this point, refers to the document that serves as a host for the commentary record, in the process having assumed a type of interim status.

⁵¹ Vattimo discusses Heideggerian theory at length, drawing parallels to the cultural habits of citizenry, in The Transparent Society, p.50.

⁵² Vattimo, p.51.
do responsive records created in the archives understand the collaborative, transparent and open-ended possibilities that their project encourages; without cover of revisionism. By virtue of the demands of transparent process, a contact zone that reflects these inescapable facts consigns authority upon a particular, traceable, authentic moment, with at least the metadata of its creative context quite readily recoverable.

With the use of such a template, advantages for the empowerment of communities is clear. And if we can transpose the site of debate about the records to the archives, to the physical archives, it should not be beyond institutional expectations to envisage the reinvestment of its function to society with more of the identity-building (including all the uncertainties of identity-building) that at one time guided some of the archives’ earliest civic relatives, and that today motivates the equally politically-minded community informatics movement.

The intellectual heritage of the key principles of community... [is] based upon classical visions that characterized the public sphere... the key characteristic of the good polity was to be found in the internal arrangements which defined relationships in that sphere... Rather than focusing on a strict definition of the group of people who constituted the polis, Aristotle attached primacy to the values and principles that characterized the mode of association.\[^{53}\]

The idea of institutionalizing memory in the archives necessitates, from its very inception, the removal of memory from man.\[^{54}\] This is its principal gesture. From that point forward, all interventions and projects contrive designs for its recovery. Here may be seen the basic irony of the archival situation. It is as if the job of collective memory, which works to secure the identity and continuity of a group, has been given office space inside a history institution, which has no such function and tends usually to respond to changes beyond the sphere of a particular group’s collective memory.\[^{55}\] Unable to divest itself of this inevitable exteriority,\[^{56}\] the archives undertakes the mediation of external and internal discourses.\[^{57}\] This difficulty has not been newly superimposed upon the archival mindset. In very early experimental postures,

The mnemonic technique of ancient times... imagined memory as an artificial series of rooms in which objects and images were placed for recollection by


\[^{54}\] Claudia Banz, from an interview with Arnold Dreyblatt, “Without the Presence of the Past, We Are Without Consciousness”, in Aus dem Archiven / From the Archives, Arnold Dreyblatt, Heidelberg: Stadtgalerie Saarbrucken, 2003, p.69.

\[^{55}\] Some characterizations of collective memory and history are borrowed from Maurice Halbwachs, as paraphrased in Thomas Fechner-Smarsly, Catastrophe, Memory, Archive: Arnold Dreyblatt’s Media-and-Archives Supported Works in Cultural Remembrance, in Aus dem Archiven / From the Archives, pp.18-19.

\[^{56}\] This is one of the elements of Jacques Derrida’s theory in Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression, translated by E.Premowitz, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995. See also the discussion about Derrida’s conception of the institutional passage from the private to the public, in Carolyn Steedman, Dust, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001, pp.3-7.

\[^{57}\] As Marshall McLuhan said, “The content of a medium is always another medium”. In Understanding Media, Dresden/Basel, 1994, p.22.
wandering through these imaginary rooms, in accordance with later need… the thinking together of memory and space.\textsuperscript{58}

The archives, from the Greek “archeion”, was initially a house, a home, an address for the spatial systematization of memory.\textsuperscript{59} And Norberg-Shulz has noted how the gathering function of ‘things’ derives from its situation, how it is in space, how it stands, opens, closes and reflects.\textsuperscript{60} The same is true for the document in the archives and for the individual in the community.

Despite having no choice but to accommodate the preservation situation that \textit{is} the archives, the user desires and aspires to a type of private emancipation, in which a personal existential space may be conceived and activated. Such is the dynamic domain of interaction that the present conjectural thesis takes as its jurisdiction and understands to be key to the identity-building instincts of individuals in society and the capacity-building imperatives of communities. Appadurai articulates this conception of the archival circumstance in the following way:

Instead of presenting itself as the accidental repository of default communities… the archives returns to its more general status of being a deliberate site for the production of anticipated memories by intentional communities… Archives viewed as active and interactive tools for the construction of sustainable identities, are important vehicles for building the capacity to aspire among those groups who need it the most… in this link between memory and desire may also lie a way to close the gap between our understandings of neuro-memory and social memory. These two locations of memory may have different materialities and different architectures. But they meet in the body of the agents, living persons who negotiate the gap between these terrains by building archives – bodily, electronic and institutional, in which new solidarities might produce memories, rather than just waiting for them.\textsuperscript{61}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{58} Smarsly, \textit{Catastrophe, Memory, Archive}, in Aus dem Archiven / From the Archives, p.17.
\item \textsuperscript{60} Christian Norberg-Schulz discusses these aspects in relation to Boccioni and Heidegger, in The Concept of Dwelling, p.19. Similar ideas about reclaiming and re-inhabiting experience for the purpose of making meaning have been transposed to many other deconstructivist investigations. Rex Martin, in Historical Explanation: Re-enactment and Practical Inference (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1977), talks about the search for an explanatory continuity between deed and thought, characterizing the relationship as a built entity based on available evidence, page 56. Gaston Bachelard espoused the notion of \textit{place} as an expression of concentrated time, in his larger theorem of topo-analysis. See Bachelard, \textit{The Poetics of Space}, Boston: Beacon Press, 1964 [1958].
\end{itemize}
Implications

As we try to produce concrete and tangible expressions (re-incarnations) of our illusions about continuity\(^\text{62}\), our desires lead us naturally to devices of juxtaposition, counterpoint and irony. Out of a society of fragments, but with a moral commitment to avoid the eroding process of endless undercutting\(^\text{63}\) (in which case every document would become banal and superficial, signalling certain death to the archives), we tangle with the reproducibility of documents and the liberatory technologies at our disposal. We position ourselves in front of the record with a natural understanding of the conditions of irony. A series of short excerpts from Fernandez and Huber eloquently frame the conceptual territory. (And emphasized words\(^\text{64}\) are intended as a makeshift armature on which to drape subsequent portions of this discussion.)

When things seem misaligned, disproportionate, unexpected, or out of place, philosophers, poets and everyday people… often use irony to capture and comment on the pattern of contrasts they discern. By projecting an attitude of disbelief along with the ‘outer’ meaning of their words, ironists convey a contrary, ‘inner’ meaning to those who catch the cue.\(^\text{65}\)

Irony’s association with variability and non-fixity also derives from its use in those extreme or elusive situations that are hard to grasp or master, where one struggles to find a way to say what can’t be said, or do what ought to be done.\(^\text{66}\)

At the height of Higher Irony… [is] the humanistic recognition of that inevitable, existential gap between human intention and human effects and which is the product of the pervasiveness of human inexperience and human forgetfulness.\(^\text{67}\)

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\(^{62}\) Scott Watson talks about the subjugation of our ideas to the business of their expression and the inevitable tensions held in suspension, in “The Past of Our Practice: A Note on the 1960’s”, in Peter White, ed., Naming a Practice: Curatorial Strategies for the Future, Banff: Banff Centre Press, 1996, pp.5-21.

\(^{63}\) James W. Fernandez discusses the instability and risks of irony in several chapters of James W. Fernandez and Mary Taylor Huber (eds.), Irony in Action: Anthroplogy, Practice and the Moral Imagination, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001. This particular phrase (“the eroding process of endless undercutting”) was used in the chapter entitled “The Irony of Complicity and the Complicity of Irony in Development Discourse”, p.95.

\(^{64}\) Emphases have been added by the present writer.

\(^{65}\) Fernandez and Huber, in Irony in Action, p.1.

\(^{66}\) Ibid, p.4.

\(^{67}\) Fernandez, in Irony in Action, p.100.
Irony… this irregular register in human affairs, is the potential consequence of all practice, arising as it does in the space between the world as planned or promised and the world as achieved or received.\textsuperscript{68}

Archives are lodged, in fact embedded, within the civic cultures of trust and social capital. They are in the business of trust management and, as such, are instruments of community, of identification, and even of activism. The social bonds on which these broad concepts rest are most assuredly the summation of the activities and aspirations of ‘everyday’ people at any given point. They are also indicators of the degree of horizontality being enjoyed by a given society.\textsuperscript{69} And the communication networks by which the populace conducts its transactions (which resemble, in effect, huge, moving and multi-directional electronic hypertexts), the incorporation of everyday activities into the art manifesto, the trends of e-democracy, the acknowledgment of situational intelligences, the interest in vocalizing marginal, fringe and entirely absent sectors of the public record, are all examples of power-shifting, and display signposts and markers for the timely transposition of these debates (and of the implications of these debates) to the archives territory proper.

There is a connection waiting to be made between the decline in democratic participation and the explosion in new ways of communicating. We need not accept the paradox that gives us more ways than ever to speak, and leaves the public with a wider feeling than ever before that their voices are not being heard.\textsuperscript{70}

It is not the improved instruments of ventriloquism, imitation or re-iteration we seek by our seeming obsession with issues of identity and experience. Our post-modern survival has already demonstrated many times over the more questionable features of the chase (and the fairly elusive nature of what we profess to have captured). Nor need we resign ourselves, on the other hand, to expect the concept of identity to connote only sheer fluidity and disarticulation.\textsuperscript{71} The emancipating middle ground we cultivate depends on the provision of sustainable tools for the playing out of identity politics within the frame of \textit{usual} social activities; and here the proposition shapes itself as an outgrowth of the self-conscious archives. Record creation carried out under the roof of the archives is open to the variability of collaboration and the forward-looking, experiential and context-minded experimentation of contributors. It takes as its fodder the multiplicity of

\textsuperscript{68} Ibid, p.261.

\textsuperscript{69} Manuel Hinds, and others, have suggested that the vertical orders of the past tend to be the result of weak social bonds. See Hinds, p.165.


\textsuperscript{71} See La Capra, pp.3-7. He makes the point that just because identity is never fully determinate does not mean that it is therefore fully disarticulated.
memories\textsuperscript{72} and the multiplicity of witnesses\textsuperscript{73}. It assists and enhances archival aims by helping to diffuse the single vector approach and by helping to break down the image of knowledge monopoly in the archives.\textsuperscript{74} The following is excerpted from Vattimo, for its perspicacity and for its usefulness in establishing this preliminary basis for merging the ambitions of archives with those of community informatics:

\textldots standardization, uniformity, [and] the manipulation of consensus... are not the only possible outcome of the advent of generalized communication, the mass media and reproduction. Alongside these possibilities – which are objects of political choice – there opens an alternative possible outcome. [While] enhancing the inconstancy and superficiality of experience... it runs counter to the generalization of domination, insofar as it allows a kind of weakening of the very notion of reality, and thus a weakening of its pervasive force... reality presents itself as softer and more fluid, in which experience can again acquire the characteristics of oscillation, disorientation and play... [And] art is constituted as much by the experience of ambiguity as it is by oscillation and disorientation.\textsuperscript{75}

The tension that arises between an increasingly disorganized world and claims to a kind of ultra-organization\textsuperscript{76} within our most fundamental institutions tends now to be overtaken by our fixation with ambiguity. Ambiguity and fragmentation are the stuff of our contemporary existences. They preserve the range of vantage points from where, as temporary residents, we conduct our inquiries into social posture. We function as a type of migrant database, regardless of our degree of connectivity. And despite the daunting outward mass of compartmentalized information, chunked text, piecemeal access, coveted residue and transactional events of all ‘personality’ types\textsuperscript{77}, the effect of fragmentation is to scale down the interactive operations of our communication behaviour, such that opportunity and choice is built up. In this way we are able to continue to nurture the crucial dialogue between the minute and the monumental.\textsuperscript{78}

We are empowered. As Phillip has observed,

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{72} Halbwachs, \textit{The Collective Memory}, p.84.
  \item \textsuperscript{73} Doctorow, p.190.
  \item \textsuperscript{74} See Burton, p.17, on the idea of total knowledge implicit in official archives, and p.63, for a discussion of the archives as a source of power and authority.
  \item \textsuperscript{75} Vattimo, p.59.
  \item \textsuperscript{76} See Gere, p.198.
  \item \textsuperscript{77} Hilary Jenkinson, in his attempt to address the problem of dealing with new types of records of his time, referred to them as having “an extra personality”, \textit{A Manual of Archive Administration}, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1922, Part IV, Section 2: “Materials Old and New”, p.139.
  \item \textsuperscript{78} This imperative is addressed in Burton, p.5.
\end{itemize}
…a shift in sensibility [has occurred], marked by a preoccupation with a sort of intimate or everyday experience that best lends itself to the close focus of microhistory.\footnote{Phillip, p.88}

Part of what has also been called the new sentimentalism\footnote{Ibid, p.88.}, and attempts at more personal and less formal manners of communication (aimed no doubt at compensating for the diminishing instances of face-to-face exchanges) contribute, too, to the bracketing of quotidian affairs\footnote{By ‘bracketing’, I mean taking note of, even highlighting. See discussion in Fernandez and Huber, p.4.} and the improved prospects for the enablement of average citizenry.\footnote{Burton discusses the current proliferation of different kinds of archival subjects and archives users, p.5.} Technological possibilities for “miming sociality”, as Appadurai puts it, are being dramatically stretched, as we speak. And they are responsible for,

… push[ing] prosthetic sociality to its edges, seeking a utopia of elective sociality… [and] returning to the non-official actor the capability to choose the way in which traces and documents shall be formed into archives.\footnote{Appadurai, p.17.}

Although it has seemed fitting to dwell somewhat on the potential bases for congruency between archival policy and our electronic society, the suitability and application of community informatics theory to the complexities of the archives must not only be considered in the face of a technological coup of some sort. These questions are concerns of organization and philosophy before they are concerns of technological prowess. As Hinds has pointed out, and it is important to bear this in mind to avoid the lure of sweeping gestures, the pressures of digital gadgetry and the inclination to buy in too readily to high-technological solutions,

The ability to coordinate complex activities horizontally does not depend on the availability of computers and telecommunications. It can be exercised without any physical equipment. Conversely, the availability of computers and telecommunications does not guarantee that such ability would be developed. This ability is an advance of the art of organization.\footnote{Hinds, The Triumph of the Flexible Society, p.7.}

For it is in the small nuances of our relationships with our own records that the timbre of an archives and community informatics discourse will likely begin to describe itself.
Afterword:

This paper takes fundamental concepts and concerns of community informatics, insofar as they relate to ideas about community, and carries them to the archival arena, for the purpose of assessing compatibility. It is, therefore, less interested in many of the external contours of the CI field – matters such as ownership of the pipeline, competition, political adversaries, the deployment of broadband technologies, and so on. Instead, it looks at the less visible qualities and features that drive some of the central arguments (and assumptions) of each discipline. By means of comparison to ideas in related fields of the humanities, a region of mutual benefit is identified and tended. Whereas the initial goal was to examine the viability of community informatics theory and behaviour within the archives for the enablement of communities, the incidental by-product is a set of invigorated, shared practices for ensuring the enablement of archives.

One of the key aspects discovered that bodes well for the productive overlap of strategies is a shared predilection for the interrogation of master narrative. Reclaiming experience as an object of philosophical reflection, as evidence of accountability and as an instrument of empowerment is another priority of both schools. And an interest in organic orders and emergent theory is still another area of confluence.

The emotional and technological machinery that moves Community Informatics may prove to be the impetus (no longer ignorable) that mobilizes the archives to engage the community in uncharted ways. The testing ground needs to be assessed and critiqued and adjusted on an ongoing basis to determine the validity and direction of initiatives. As sketched out, the plan inserts a manner of ongoing re-appraisal into the overall archival scheme of things. And surveyed from the galleries of both ideological camps, the expectation of tangible and compelling social benefits is extremely reasonable.

Speculation and investigation thus far has concentrated on the justifications for blending the agendae of two ostensibly opposed disciplines that nonetheless share obvious areas of interest. And deconstructions of several oblique features regarding underlying processes and philosophies have been brought to bear on our understanding of the field and have shown themselves to be quite central. In general, these tacks have not dissuaded the argument but have underscored the call. Positive indications notwithstanding, it is prudent to recognize resistance and to understand its origins. These pertain, predominantly, to two general spheres of concern. The first, that a depreciation in the quality of the record would be an early and chronic ailment of the assimilation of commentary records into the archives; an ailment difficult to treat and no doubt exacerbated by the likely depletion of symbols and the certain indulgence in novelty.  

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85 For an expanded discussion, in the vein of Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, see LaCapra, p.4.
86 See Vattimo, p.57.
And the second, that the shift in official position, required by the archives in order to embrace the proposition would compromise its authority, perhaps irrecoverably.

With regard to the latter pattern of objection first, Burton’s comments about the seeming diminishment of the authority of archives, in light of tendencies toward the development of more representative, more active and more accessible civil institutions are astute. They suggest not only the importance (generally, from the point of view of society, and specifically, from the specialized view of cultural custodianship) of allowing natural trends to play out but also the urgency around taking a pro-active, not defensive, role in guiding the institution and the profession:

[We must] move resolutely, if experimentally, beyond naïve positivism and utopian deconstructionism, beyond secrecy and revelation, towards a robust, imaginative, and interpretively responsible method of critical engagement with the past. If, in the process, archives as such are rendered less Olympian, more pedestrian, this does not mean the end of the archives as an analytically vigorous category or the death of the discipline.87

Whereas there was a time when archives were the exclusive domain of lawyers and historians for provision of evidence and legitimacy (and before that, when official, painted annals portrayed regents alongside their records, as icons of corporate accountability and memory),88 now the non-elite, the non-professional, the under-represented and the disenfranchised are being served by archival mandates.89 Indeed, pulled along by the protocols and habits of cyberspace, the archival institution is more relevant to the needs of a broader public than ever before, as a supplier of evidence and as a mediator of communal memory. And so, it dons new clothes, sets up shop, and attempts its own democratization.

With regard to the first objection second, there is most definitely a risk of the gradual disintegration of verbal significance when, as the phrase goes, ‘talk is cheap’. And in the world of abundant theory and ready networks, the exchange of less than reliable information and fictive narratives90 offered up in the guise of authentic, originary formulations is by no means rare. So, too, would the irreverent manufacture of new records either for the sake (short-sighted) of advantaging the already technologically-equipped and well-connected or aimed, intentionally or not, at the manipulation and distortion of records (due to instantaneously imposed novelties of reproductive technology), damage the evidential and ethical grounding of the record base. The capacity for reproduction has done much, as we know, to compromise the


89 Antoinette Burton, p.1-3, discusses the plebian phenomenon as it pertains to the evolution of archives.

90 The term ‘factoid information’ has also been suggested. See Bugeja, Michael J., Interpersonal Divide: The Search for Community in a Technological Age, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. p.7.
value of texts. But, a platform for the creation of commentary records within the walls of the archives is tuned instead to the capture of authentic moments of discovery. It is designed as a node of connectivity that waits for the full and readable thumbprint, the rich record (understood also in terms of accountability and transparency of process), and is not interested in superficial re-enactments. And, it aspires to achieve the levelling of privilege. As such, it cannot be said to contribute to the various diminishments of texts.

Regarding the issues of disorientation and temporal distance that have already been touched upon, and have been located mostly in the fertile river-beds of aesthetic experience, history writing and social action, there is another model, a subset of these, which has not been directly addressed but which offers abundant inspiration for the design of our bridgeworks. It is rich in innate qualities of the sort that have animated this discussion and, while it may employ a slightly different vocabulary, unites themes and trajectories already introduced, illuminating the rationale behind them. In his discussion of the deep and authentic involvement of the subject in (aesthetic) experience, and we are clear on this precondition for empowerment of any kind, Vattimo writes,

The shock-effect… characteristic of the cinema… had been anticipated by Dada. The Dadaist work of art is actually conceived as a projectile launched at the spectator, at his every security, sensory expectation and perceptual habit. The cinema too is made up of projectiles, of projections: as soon as an image is formed, it is replaced by another to which the spectator’s eye and mind must re-adapt.

Kaprow’s description of values embodied in the Happenings also joins in this “ultimate existential commitment”, as he puts it, in which,

… the passing, the changing, the natural, even the willingness to fail are familiar. They reveal a spirit which is at once passive in its acceptance of what may be, and affirmative in its disregard of security… One is also left exposed… [and yet] they are a moral act, a human stand of great urgency.

The highlighting of emergent possibility as a defining feature of the indeterminate paths of community is fairly obvious. But additionally, the film medium, in particular, is exceedingly and overtly referential, and self-referential. It catalogues and describes and

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92 Vattimo, p.58.

inverts, as a natural consequence of its very structure, yet it does so in the tyranny of the moment\(^\text{94}\) and in deference to all facets of the play between desire and forgetting. Film is the ultimate horizontal archive that arrests time (by fixing what is mobile) and also moves it (by manipulations of temporal proximity) in a single, grand gesture. It is the tool of irony made visible. It displays an unparalleled depth of vision (literal and metaphorical) and yet reduces all depth to mere surface projection. Film concentrates provenance and yields to the unpredictabilities of spectatorship, at the same time, and without condition. It understands immanence and becoming, is both performative and transitory. In short, it contains, in compacted form, the seeds of all the elements that have been shown to demand leading roles in the joint programme of archives and community informatics.

While analysis is necessarily thick and contentions layered, much of the justification for commentary records production in the archives is self-interested. For while the proposal appears to be a response to the silent invitations and objectives of both disciplines, it does much to reverse perceptions of the archives as a rather staid institution, by virtue of its egalitarian message and site-specific yield. The following remarks are taken from a short discussion about the science fiction film genre and are offered only partly in jest, since they remain oddly apropos to the present project, which ultimately hopes for similar effectiveness:

The imagination that goes into the creation of the technology wielded by the evil force is all too often undermined by the triviality of the political system in whose name it is deployed. The real objective, in spite of all the special effects and all the machines designed for control and extermination, is to come to the essential as quickly as possible: the duel between the liberating hero and the tyrant.\(^\text{95}\)

As a civic institution, with duties to the shifting society beyond its walls, it may be time for archive institutions to participate more actively in the mapping of our knowledge environment. To take a seat at the table, as it were. In the spirit of the multi-stakeholder approach of the WSIS initiative (World Summit on the Information Society), Archives need to represent themselves, to stimulate partnership, and to underscore collaboration. We have an important role to play in recommending social solutions for a sustainable future and an interest in the potential of ICT’s to stimulate a democratic dialogue within and between communities. And the future sustainability of the archives, itself, depends firstly upon the acknowledgment and secondly upon the demonstration of its central position. Servaes and Carpentier note that,

Throughout the past decades… a gradual shift can be observed in favour of more socio-economic and cultural [as opposed to technological] definitions of the

\(^\text{94}\) The tyranny of the moment was a phrased used by Thomas Hylland Eriksen, in *Tyranny of the Moment: Fast and Slow Time in the Information Age*, Sterling, VA: Photo Press, 2001, p.39 and elsewhere. Many others have commented on new attitudes to the past being cultivated in the environment of the disoriented present. Gabrielle Spiegel has written about the post-Modern urge to return to liturgical memory, post-Holocaust sensibility and a variety of perspectives on time, in “Memory and History: Liturgical Time and Historical Time”, in *History and Theory*, 41, no.2, 2002, pp.149-162. Also, Seixas talks about the idea of the “foreshortened moment in an era of breaking news”, *Theorizing Historical Consciousness*, p.3.

\(^\text{95}\) Alliez and Feher, p.42.
Information Society… Others prefer to use the term Knowledge Societies… to clarify the shift in emphasis from information and communication technologies (ICT’s) as ‘drivers’ of change, to a perspective where these technologies are regarded as tools which may provide a new potential for combining the information embedded in ICT systems with the creative potential and knowledge embodied in people.\(^96\)

Particularly in light of the rapid diffusion of technological advances, and in these times of converging disciplines, vigilance with regard to the destruction or obsolescence of certain knowledge sets and skills, and vigilance with regard to the shapes and mandates of our institutions (designed to capture and pool these knowledge sets), is required in order to guide our transitions and re-invest our assets.

The following excerpt, from Gere, offers a whimsical but sobering report on the current state of our culture:

> The spell cast by these [new] technologies owes much to their apparently magical qualities. Their ineffable, immaterial capabilities suggest a whole array of supernatural figures such as angels, ghosts and golems. These spectral emanations are accompanied by… a panoply of priest engineers, software wizards, technogurus, charismatic leaders and futurologist soothsayers. It is against the technological enchantment practised by these figures… whose message of combined technological and social progress charms us into complacency… [that a response is made].\(^97\)

The present investigation of possible footings for the expanded mandates of archives hinges on the acceptance of certain constructs of participation. It relies upon the inclination of institutions to respond creatively to collaborative experiment without perceiving, therein, a threat to legitimacy. And it is aimed at enabling more, rather than fewer, voices in the archives. Given the unpredictability and the long-term nature of this type of generative project, only the most patient and gentle administering of tonics will safeguard the generational bridge without obscuring the processes by which we may continue to confer authenticity on both original records and ‘new’ original records. A subtle and steady vision is required.

> … it is not a question of harmonizing with the background but, against a mottled background, of becoming mottled.\(^98\)

My recent work on the arrangement of archival records at the United Jewish Peoples’ Order presents a rather opportune case for broadening definitions and experimenting with procedures. Possessing, as it does, a rich eighty-year tradition of

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96 Servaes and Carpentier, p.5.
97 Gere, p.15-16.
political, social and artistic culture that, for the most part, has been enacted somewhat below the mainstream radar, documentation is highly dispersed and severely limited. An aging original membership, now dramatically few in number, additionally hampers the recovery of records. And time itself is, of course, the prime saboteur of access to the organization’s foundational history. The highly consultative archival process is rendered additionally so, forced to rely in generous measure upon the guidance of oral authorities. The corporate narrative struggles to form itself amid spectacular gaps in the record base, a fair degree of social marginalism and an equally fair degree of collective memory loss, and it may remain to a large extent unrecoverable. But having personally witnessed the emotional and charged responses still prompted by the records that do remain, the benefits of expanding the archivist’s palette of options by the facilitation and administration of commentary records are clear. Additionally, this project has coincided with a time of renewed reflection within the organization, when horizontal communications and transparency around internal records are receiving coordinated attentions, and when historical structures and narratives are being revisited. These processes are occurring primarily for the elucidation of more recent generations of the organization’s membership, but also with a genuine interest in the articulation of identity issues and the contingencies of recollection. All these features combine to make the organization especially suited to the curious and timely proposition of Record Creation in the Archives.
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