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Submission for the Royal Society consultation on the future of Canada's libraries and archives

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The following submission is an individual opinion, but is informed by my 20 years of work in the Preservation Services unit of the Archives of Manitoba.

Regarding the framing questions:

COMMUNITY OUTREACH AND AWARENESS

3. In the digital era, what support for patrons do/should *archives* provide?
4. What in your opinion are the specific roles of ... heritage institutions in community building and memory building?

NEW DIRECTIONS

2. What will be the function and future of a brick-and-mortar .. archives in a paperless future?

Archival records, whether born digital or analogue, are material culture. They are historical evidence of actions arising from within particular contexts, and they also remain participants in present human activity. Materiality provides unique physical and sensory information about records' context of creation and ongoing use, as well as information about the written, image or aural content conveyed by the records. Unlike museums or galleries, archives can offer their users personal hand-on contact with most of their holdings, and this service will be increasingly valued and sought as the record-making record-keeping and record access environment becomes increasingly digital. Archives have always served as a kind of hands-on museum of paper and they should embrace and promote this role rather than limiting access to original records after digitization. Archives can support the development of material literacy skills, akin to media literacy or visual literacy skills, to help users recognize and interpret meaning from beyond surface text or image in order to more fully understand the societal context which produced records (or representations of records), and to critically consider how different representations of records shape both the questions that can be asked of records and the stories the records can tell.

Those who have access only to an image of a record have access to significantly less materially manifested evidence than those who can use the original records. The risk of damage or theft of original records can often be mitigated though stabilization of fragile records (which should have been done before digitization anyway), or improved training and procedures for handling by staff and researchers, or improved security training for staff supervising research rooms. Where original records cannot be made available, archives could also offer "discovery" or "touch" collections of records with no archival value to simulate or contextualize the archival records' technologies.

The evidence lost in microfilming, digitization, or other imaging methods, can be at least partially restored through improved access tools for documentation and dissemination of records, for

instance, by adding the capacity to zoom in on high-resolution images of records, or displaying the images next to versions enhanced to highlight or “restore” aspects of their materiality such as compensating for yellowed or faded images. Surrogate representations can thus be used as a strategy for enhancing access to, and documentation of, records’ materiality, as long as archives reveal both the context for creation of the representations and the limitations of the representations as an access or documentation or preservation tool.

Understandings of relationships between individual or groups of items in an accession or fonds can be enhanced though highlighting patterns in use of record-making and record-keeping materials (paper, binders, file folders); patterns in use of record-making equipment (e.g. computer software, printers and plotters, typewriters, mimeographs) present at the site and when they were used; patterns of storage locations and furnishings within an organization; procedures for record-making and record-keeping and use of records within the organization, as well as for tracking use of records within a creating organization. These patterns may provide further contextual insight regarding the records’ evolving status and functions over time, and might be recorded using techniques such as oral accounts, or videotaped tours of the worksite, in addition to written accounts. Even if the original records are reformatted, or are not retained, these patterns can be preserved through this documentation. Links could be made to the archives custodial files, providing “snapshots” of various states of the records, such as the appraisal reports incorporating the archivist’s research into the records’ contexts and the resulting recommendation of which records to acquire and why, the results of condition surveys or photographs of the records at all points in their “lives,” as well as indications of alterations made by the archives (e.g. pagination, foldering and re-foldering, framing and un-framing, re-arranging), or of changing understandings of records (e.g. descriptions and changes in them over time, uses in publications and public programs, when microfilmed or digitized.

Descriptions could also include links to documents created by the archives or external links might provide the histories of particular record-making and recordkeeping technologies to place disparate records into a local, national or international technological context. Heritage institutions could work more collaboratively to support memory building and community building using the documentary and cultural record.

Related publications by Ala Rekrut:

“Connected Constructions, Constructing Connections: Materiality of Archival Records as Historical Evidence,” in *Archival Narratives for Canada: Re-Telling Stories in a Changing Landscape*, eds. Kathleen Garay and Christl Verduyn (Halifax and Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2011), 135-157.

“Reconnecting Mind And Matter: Materiality In Archival Theory And Practice” (Master of Arts thesis, University of Manitoba and University of Winnipeg, 2009). <http://mspace.lib.umanitoba.ca/bitstream/1993/3161/1/Thesis%20-%20final.pdf>

“Material Literacy: Reading Records as Material Culture,” *Archivaria* 60 (Fall 2005): 11-37. <http://journals.sfu.ca/archivar/index.php/archivaria/article/view/12513/13640>

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