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EDITORIAL

The end of archival ideas?

In May 2019, a well-known archival commentator posted on Twitter a message that questioned how it was possible that a 'dude' that they did not know could suggest that we had come to 'the end of archival ideas' and dismiss all the work done by the current wave of archival scholars. That tweet was retweeted several dozens of times by their followers. It was referring to a book chapter written by Craig Gauld, Lecturer in Archives and Information Studies at the University of Dundee, entitled 'The End of Archival Ideas?', part of the book *Archival Futures* edited by Caroline Brown. The author of the original tweet (which has since then been deleted) admitted in a later comment that they had not read the work they were commenting about. Most of their followers clearly had not read it either (none of their comments suggested that they had) and liked or retweeted the tweet on the basis of its author's assumed authority in the archival field. Some of them suggested many names of people who they thought were living proofs that the archival field is flourishing with new thinkers and new 'ideas'.

The problem with those tweets is not whether or not the authors they listed had come up with new 'ideas', but the fact that they rashly condemned Gauld's argument without having read his paper and tried to understand what he meant by it. In fact, what happened on Twitter in May/June 2019 is a typical illustration of what Gauld was lamenting about in his chapter. Quoting cultural historian Neal Gabler,[1] Gauld wrote that:

> 'we live in a society that no longer thinks big' … the Information Age is simply dangerous for ideas … What has seemingly been lost is the ability to contextualise information. As Gabler states:

> 'In the past we collected information to convert it into something larger than facts (or alternative facts) and ultimately more useful – into ideas that made sense of the information. We sought not just to apprehend the world but to truly comprehend it, which is really the primary function of ideas.'

> Our ability to stand back and to assess where the information came from, to ascertain its authenticity and veracity, to question rather than digest, has been diminished in this argument … we prefer knowing to thinking because knowing has more immediate value. It keeps us in the loop, keeps us connected to our friends and our cohorts within our self-made silos or safe spaces where we can communicate only with those we consider 'good' or 'virtuous'.[2]

Popular commentators active on Twitter share information with their like-minded followers, who enthusiastically retweet it, but rarely take the time to check whether that information is accurate or not. Sharing the viewpoints of others whom they admire or whose opinion they value is easier that thinking for themselves. Sharing ready-made information posted by others is easier than going back to the source, *reading* it and forming one's opinion. It is easier to share others thoughts than to develop one's own ideas. The author of the original post swiftly dismissed Gauld's arguments as those of

someone they did not know, and hence whose opinions were not worth spending their time to read and try to understand.

In the age of post-truth when 'it has become far too easy to manipulate data, alter information and render evidence unreliable' and 'when many people prefer feelings over facts' and 'think it is reasonable to reject science, research and reason, in favor of suggestion, interpretation and nuance',[3] archivists and archival scholars should more than ever advocate for their mission of preserving evidence and memory for future generations. They should also lead the way by basing their discourse (in whatever form or media) on evidence. To quote Terry Cook, the community of archivists 'should be one capable of embracing differences rather than founded on either a single animating mythology or the exclusion of those different and "other"'.[4]

In the wake of the controversy about the publication of Frank Boles' article in *The American Archivist*, it is important to reaffirm that academic and professional journals are the place to present new ideas that are based on solid reasoned argumentation, rather than on emotion and personal preferences. *Archives and Manuscripts* will welcome contributions that present new ideas and demonstrate that the archival field is flourishing with new ideas. As General Editor of *Archives and Manuscripts*, I would be pleased to publish papers that present new ideas, – whether I agree with them or not, – as long as they are based on rigorous scholarship and respect for others and they make research in the archival field progress.

Mentoring emerging writers is another avenue the editorial team of *Archives and Manuscripts* is keen to pursue. We published last year an issue dedicated to papers by new professionals ('New Horizons: Writing on Records and Archives from Emerging Scholars', vol. 46, no. 3) guest-edited by Laura Millar, Donald Force and the late Lise Summers; and the present issue includes three more contributions by authors whose papers had been short-listed for that special issue, but could not be included in it due to time and space constraints. At AERI 2019 in Liverpool, I had the opportunity to organise an informal get-together with four of those new professionals, Sumayya Ahmed, Lecturer at UCL Qatar campus and Ellen LeClere, PhD student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Information School, whose papers were published in vol. 46, no. 3, and Judit Gutiérrez-de-Armas, PhD student at the University of La Laguna, Canary Islands, and Nampombe Saurombe, Lecturer at the University of South Africa, whose papers are included in this issue. Also present in Liverpool, but unable to attend our gathering was another one of those promising new archival writers, Hannah Ishmael, PhD student at UCL, who won the 2018 Sigrid McCausland Emerging Writers Award for her article 'Reclaiming History: Arthur Schomburg'. Together with myself, we had representatives from five continents. Our get-together was a lively meeting during which we shared our experiences as archival students, researchers and educators, and the common experience of publishing in *Archives and Manuscripts*. All the authors commented on the positive experience they had and particularly on the level of support and encouragement they got from the reviewers and in particular from the guest editors who shepherded them through the writing and publication process. I wish one more time to acknowledge all the time and efforts spent by Laura Millar and Donald Force, and the passion and enthusiasm of Lise Summers, who will be sadly missed by the Australian archival community.

That international gathering of emerging writers was intended to be the first in a series of informal meetings of new professionals with an experience of publishing in *Archives and Manuscripts* or interested in submitting their contributions to the journal. The Editorial Board during its meeting in Adelaide in October 2019 discussed the setting up of a mentoring scheme to support new professionals, which we will endeavour to put in place in 2020.

The present issue includes four contributions by international writers, the first three of which being papers which had been shortlisted for the New Horizons special issue. These international contributions, which illustrate the diversity of research done in the archival field around the world, are followed by a reflection by Nicola Laurent and Kirsten Wright on a new training course that they developed for the Australian Society of Archivists and four book reviews.

In the first paper, Judit Gutiérrez-de-Armas discusses how family archives were constructed and reconstructed in the Canary Islands under Spanish domination from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century and how they were used as 'tools of political and social dominance and weapons against rivals'. She conducts a multi-dimensional analysis of different pathways of development experienced by family archives and relates them to developments undergone by public archives in the same period. Her analysis of how archives were reconstructed following plunder, natural disasters or prolonged neglect to support family ambitions treat these developments as historical developments deeply connected to contemporary conflicts rather than mere recovery from past archival failures.

In 'Taking Archives to the People', Nampombe Saurombe investigates the outreach programmes of the National Archives of the Eastern and Southern Africa Regional Branch of the International Council on Archives (ESARBICA) and proposes a framework to help archivists in the ESARBICA region, and indeed around the world, to raise awareness of public archival repositories and their contents. Her study in 12 countries of Eastern and Southern Africa revealed that public programming and outreach were not a priority for the National Archives in the region, that limited resources were allocated to those programmes, and that very few people made use of archival holdings. Her proposed framework recommends an integrated approach to public programming by National Archives, which combines policy changes, skills development, greater use of technology, user needs studies, and external collaborations.

In 'Facebook is creating records – but who is managing them?', Dominique Glassman shows that Facebook has very few rules and guidelines to help properly manage the content and information uploaded by its legions of users. She suggests that Facebook is reluctant to adopt proper recordkeeping practices because they would not allow them to store and disseminate user's data at their will. She argues that Facebook posts result in three different versions of the same records: the records (posts) as understood by the users, the records formatted by the Facebook interface, and the marketable personality profiles created by third parties from those records. Taking the Cambridge Analytica scandal as an example, she maintains that the fact that Facebook content can be taken and changed without their creators' permission indicates that the Facebook records lack reliability and authenticity.

In the fourth article, Belinda Battley argues that community groups constitute complex, adaptive recordkeeping systems that create and maintain their records. She

postulates that removing records from their communities to store them in archives without taking the complexities of their contexts into account implies that the record-keeping methods of the archives are superior to those of the communities, takes the records away from their living contexts and constructs barriers between the communities and their records. She suggests that if community records are to be transferred to an archival repository, the archivists from the receiving institution must ensure that the community is able to create, or co-create with the organisation, a 'place of belonging' where those records can be accessed in culturally appropriate ways that maintain their authenticity, relevance, integrity, meaning, authority and other multiple qualities so that they can continue to play their roles in the community processes to which they are integral.

Finally, in the last contribution, Nicola Laurent and Kirsten Wright reflect on the new online training course, 'A Trauma-informed approach to managing archives', that they developed for the Australian Society of Archivists. The course, which will be available in early 2020, is designed to support archivists and archival institutions in providing a safe and supportive environment for all who interact with archives and can be affected by trauma or vicarious trauma. The intended audience for the course includes anyone working in archives or in the broader GLAM sector, in particular, those who work in reference roles or in frontline positions dealing directly with the public or the users of an archive and those who work with collections known to contain records documenting traumatic events.

Future plans for the journal include a special issue guest-edited by Bart Ziino and Anne-Marie Condé, which explores the ways historians and archivists engage with archives and with each other in 2020, and a special issue on Archival Traditions and Languages guest-edited by Eric Ketelaar and myself, which will discuss the problems of translating archival concepts around the world, in 2021. Suggestions for other special issues are welcome and submissions to ordinary issues are accepted at any time.

Notes

1. Neal Gabler, 'The Elusive Big Idea', *The New York Times*, 13 August 2011, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/14/opinion/sunday/the-elusive-big-idea.html>, accessed 24 December 2019.
2. Graig Gauld, 'The End of Archival Ideas?', in Caroline Brown (ed.), *Archival Futures*, Facet Publishing, London, 2019, pp. 143–4.
3. Laura Millar, *A Matter of Facts: The Value of Evidence in an Information Age*, ALA Neal Shuman and the American Society of Archivists, Chicago, 2019, pp. 4, 20.
4. Terry Cook, 'Evidence, Memory, Identity, and Community: Four Shifting Archival Paradigms', *Archival Science*, vol. 13, no. 2–3, 2013, p. 117.

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