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Digitised, digital and static archives and the struggles in the Middle East and North Africa

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the differences between archived material that was always a digital record and hard-copy archives that were subsequently digitised. It considers the rationales behind the digitisation of archives in established western democracies as digitised collections and ad-hoc files are made available online. It compares this with how the archives of regimes in the Middle East and North Africa that collapsed between 1990 and 2011 were digitised. Overt political expediency determined the circumstances under which documents were released and recalled from public view. It examines the digitisation of archival material after the wars in Iraq in 1991 and 2003 and its political implications . Then it examines material that has always been digital: the record of social media exchanges on the day when Colonel Qaddafi was killed in Libya in October 2011 and how the archived digital form reflects the origins and purposes under which it was produced. In both cases the electronic format is not simply a question of ease of distribution, both have become a record because they were assembled for particular purposes. Like 'traditional' archived documents, they were never intended to satisfy the needs of later historians but they became a source by being brought together.

Is an archive a building that contains archives, a physical container as well as what it contains? Ann Stoler drew the two functions together in the following description:

> Paper trails of weekly reports to superiors, summaries of reports of reports, recommendations based on reports all called for systematic coding systems by which they could be tracked. Colonial statecraft was an administrative apparatus to gather, draw together, and connect – and disconnect – events, to make them legible, insignificant, or unintelligible as information.[1]

That addresses two questions. The first is the form of the archive which is understood to consist of documents, on paper, contained in files that are stored in series. It takes a physical form and it follows that this has to be housed in a building of some sort. The second is that it is the record of a state, or at least a body with an institutional identity, and the archive was the tool of a formal administrative apparatus, providing an institutional memory that could be used by its servants. In recent times this has become increasingly and obviously untrue, at least in some cases.

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This article is about a fairly common phenomenon in the modern Middle East and North Africa, particularly, but not exclusively, as a result of the invasions of Iraq in 1991 and 2003 and the events of 2011 across the region. Because of the collapse of states, the originators of archives lost control of them and they became the tools of their enemies and rivals. The form of these archives also changed as huge quantities of documents were digitised and made available to a much wider public. Often, this served the interests of the enemies of the state that produced them by making clear their crimes to a worldwide audience. Simultaneously, the rebellions of their enemies were documented in conformity with the medium that helped to sustain them. Digital media (such as Facebook and other systems like it) were an important way of communicating with the supporters of rebellion, and their born-digital records can be organised into a digital archive, but one without a physical form. This article is an attempt to portray and understand how the process of forming a digital archive became a political act, but one that still raised problems of who controlled it.

The archive as a tool of the state

The archive as a tool of the state was the oldest purpose of an archive, stretching back to ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt, and placing control of the past into the context of control of the state.[2] Archives were established by the state, for its purposes and conforming to its hierarchical organisation.[3] Although since the time of the liberal revolutions in Europe they have come to serve other purposes: keeping tabs on what the government does and helping to hold it accountable for its actions, and protecting individual rights and laying the basis of a collective memory,[4] the public use of a state's archives remained largely out of reach until then. Officials of the Bavarian Secret State Archives refused access to Leopold von Ranke, saying that it was 'highly questionable' that a Prussian historian should use them.[5] When the British Public Records were opened in 1838 it was to those 'sufficiently qualified by age, knowledge and discretion', and in 1844 it was decreed that only 'literary researchers' could read the Spanish archives, on condition that an archivist should examine each document before any copy or note was taken, unless it was more than 150 years old, and even then there were restrictions on documents concerning property rights and the private lives of members of the royal family.[6] Even the French National Archives, which began in 1794 with the revolutionary pronouncement that 'all citizens can ask, in all depositories, at the dates and times fixed, communication of the pieces contained therein', had adopted a much more restrictive system of access by 1855 to 'protect its most precious secrets not only from public scrutiny but from the eyes of other archivists as well'.[7] This is not that remote a history. In the late 1970s, doctoral research on the Rif War in Morocco in the 1920s was impeded by military officers attempting to preserve the 'honour of Spain', by the personal whim of a French archivist, and by the inaccurate information conveyed by an archivist in what was then the Public Record Office that the police Special Branch in Britain did not exist, let alone its archives.[8] What was true is that those archives were not publicly available.

As the power of the state grew, so did its archives and the building that contained them embodied its power and prestige, or its glorious past. The modern website of the Archivo General de las Indias in Seville boasts of its physical size ('over forty-three thousand dossiers, held on eight linear kilometres of shelving, with some eighty million pages of

original documents'), its scope (political social, economic, intellectual and religious history and the history of art) and its huge time frame (from conquest to independence; from the political institutions of the Indies to the history of the pre-Columbian peoples; from commercial trade to maritime traffic problems; from the missionary expansion through to aspects of the Inquisition). So many topics in which the General Archive of the Indies has contributed to over time to obtain the most complete and documented historical view of the Spanish Administration of the New World.[9]

Caroline Elkins, an American historian of Africa, made the National Archives in London into a concrete example of that idea. Its modern buildings were opened in 1977, long after the decline of the British Empire.

> The doors of its imposing, sterile structure give way to an uncluttered interior governed by a hyper-monitoring system, identification cards, assigned seats, routinized systems for ordering and holding documents, proficient archivists, and security checkpoints.[10]

Achille Mbembe, a radical historian of Africa, who also had a conservative view of what an archive was, conflated the contents with the building:

> The term 'archives' first refers to a building, a symbol of a public institution, which is one of the organs of a constituted state. However, by 'archives' is also understood a collection of documents – normally written documents – kept in this building. There cannot therefore be a definition of 'archives' that does not encompass both the building itself and the documents stored there.[11]

Mbembe saw an archive as a space of ritual, where the records of the state are ordered and filed, a 'cemetery', whose systems mould how they are interpreted. Officials determine who can consult them, and when and which documents are released. The archive is built up, regulated and housed as a function of a 'specific power and authority'.[12] It is a 'montage of fragments', belonging to the state that owns and controls it.[13] It follows, though Mbembe does not say so, that historians using the archives may be complicit in establishing authority, making sure that the dead do not disorder the present too much.

If an archive represents authority, it also reflects how that authority was or is organised. Arlette Farge described the archives of the eighteenth-century police administration in France, conserved in the Archives Nationales and other Parisian repositories, as records of the practical necessities of maintaining order: 'the records of criminal complaints, trials, interrogations, case summaries, and sentencings'.[14] The police of eighteenth-century France used these papers to function properly, and their bundles follow the original chronology and organisation. Two centuries later, Farge, overwhelmed by their volume as much as their contents, was drawn into the allure of the documents because she could then reorder them herself.[15]

When a historian reveals, reinterprets or explains an archive's contents, as Mbembe points out, that can pose a danger to the state. There is always a threat that a historian can undermine, or at least discomfit, the rulers. So the government may try to destroy, hide or neutralise their content in ways that allow some memories to be forgotten and others to be commodified as folklore or popular mythology.[16]

Mbembe and Farge are cited here as examples of a perception of archives that is challenged by two interrelated phenomena: the move away from bricks-and-mortar to virtual archives and a transit in some situations from state to non-state control. The

political and the technological revolutions of the past generation have called into question this traditional formulation of the archive. It has two aspects.

Firstly, archives are no longer necessarily physical containers filled with discrete objects, for digitisation has allowed both the contents and the container to become virtual. Archives no longer simply preserve papers that the administration no longer needs, but they make them available beyond the walls of the building through digital technology, seemingly an answer to the question of access to archives: readers no longer have to enter the hushed halls of reading rooms of buildings that embody and symbolise the power of a state, and unique documents are infinitely reproducible. Seemingly, digitisation has opened documents to which there was once only limited access to a wider public: 'computers will pave the way to democratic and instant access to information'.[17] At the same time, a historical record has developed that never was in paper form, that was born digital. States produce such documentation as part of their administrative processes and it can be made available through the mechanisms of the government, through official websites with the logo of officialdom marking the entrance and guarded if necessary by passwords and user IDs. The process of recording government functions may have changed, but the functions themselves remain quite similar.

Secondly, control of the contents has moved away from those who originated documents and the system that once controlled them. Terry Cook has described a new understanding of records, no longer as 'static physical objects' but as active agents in forming social and organisational memory. Consequently, archivists have had to change how they see themselves: no longer as guardians of an inherited legacy, but as active shapers of the collective memory.[18] Digitisation, Cook says, shifts the meanings of traditional concepts of archives away from concrete records towards an understanding of the functions and processes by which they were created and transmitted. Provenance becomes 'virtual rather than physical', the order of documents moves from their original placement in a file to a system that can be ordered and reordered by software, preservation a matter of maintaining software able to store documents while they change their form.[19]

There is a lacuna in this argument: it leans heavily on the development of archives from a stable origin and leaves out both the consequences and expression of far-reaching change. In the past generation or so, the hands of revolutionaries have opened more and more archives that repressive states created with no intention that they should serve other purposes than maintaining their power, with no likelihood of being brakes on the power of the authorities, and with no idea that they could provide a resource for liberal historians. Sometimes these archives have been released according to the rules and practices of the successor authority. At other times, the archives have passed out of government control, either by accident or design, a process that has frequently been done by digitisation of their contents and their communication, sometimes in an almost random and uncontrolled way.

This article examines these three phenomena – the change of ownership of an archive as the result of political change, the making of its contents available in new forms, and the combination of change with a new technology based on digitisation. That technology can not only allow historians to observe the change but can be part of it and even bring it about. It is concerned not so much with the form of the archive, as with the distance between the original purpose of documents and the uses that readers, not always

historians, might put them to. It argues that the form of the archives – paper or digitised – is less crucial than how they were generated or re-generated. Historians should understand them in terms of how they came to be released and if and why they came to be digitised, recognising that both digitised and born-digital archives are not as static as documents confined to a dedicated building. They can be moved and manipulated with great ease, giving a wider potency even while their fragmentation is increased.

This is an issue that especially confronts historians of very recent history. How can they use and understand the documentation, digitised or born digital – of entities that have collapsed in ways that meant their archives were opened by force and obligation? This article examines a series of case studies, beginning, for comparative purposes, with the example of a traditional state archive whose opening was only possible because the originating authorities were forced to allow it. Legal intervention obliged the British government to admit to the existence of secret archives of the British colonial administration in Kenya. These revealed a record of oppression and mistreatment that the courts forced the government to recognise, but when they were eventually released, it was according to the coherent orderly and sterile authenticity of the British National Archives.[20]

The archives of some collapsed regimes in the Middle East and North Africa, such as Libya and Iraq, were made public in a more random fashion, subjected in some cases to less certain control and, often, transmitted out of the context of their original structure in digitised form. Many of the archives of Baʿathist Iraq were removed from the control of a legitimate successor state and expatriated and organised by outsiders. Libyan documentation was not even archived but released, in digitised form, overtly divorced from the structures of the archives from which they were drawn. Most recently of all, some the archives of Islamic State as ruler of a substantial area of Syria and Iraq have flooded out of the area, collected by journalists and political opponents and made available according to their criteria. This process has been so unlike the management of regular public archives that one might be driven to ask whether they really are archives or just a collection of papers. On the other hand, it will be shown that the archives of Tunisia, a state that did not fall apart under the pressures of the Arab Spring of 2010–11, were preserved by the successor state, but largely made unavailable because not digitised in any large-scale way.

Finally, the article examines an example of born-digital materials where the record is of a much more ephemeral nature: a collection of tweets surrounding the fall of Colonel Qaddafi's regime that resulted from the same revolutionary processes that destroyed his state and asks what sort of a source these tweets are and how they can be understood.

The 'traditional' archive in the service of the state

In Britain, as in most liberal democracies, there is a waiting period before which public records are released first to the National Archives and then to the public. In 1967 this period was reduced to 30 years and to 20 years in 2013. After records are transferred, the offices of the state are required to pass their records to the Archives, to be released to the public, unless there is some sort of exemption (which applies to some criminal cases and some relating to current defence, security or foreign relations). But in the early twenty-first century the British government revealed that when former colonies became independent, the Colonial Office had brought home and hidden away a secret archive of documents that

they did not want to hand over to the newly independent governments. It contained material that might embarrass the government and former officials from the police army and public service, and compromise intelligence sources. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) eventually stowed it away at Hanslope Park, one of the centres of British security and espionage. Although the FCO denied its very existence, by the early 2000s historians had slowly become aware of it. In 2006 a London law firm, acting for some elderly Kenyans whom officers of the British had tortured during the Mau Mau Emergency in the 1950s, began a process of suing the government that led in 2011 to the government admitting with great embarrassment that it did indeed hold relevant records. By 2013 the 'Migrated Archives' as they were called had been catalogued and incorporated into the main collection of the National Archives.[21] They covered 41 former territories and colonies.[22]

The sequestration of these archives until the government grudgingly agreed they had survived, may have been a very serious management failure, rather than a 'deliberate conspiracy to withhold embarrassing information' as an official report concluded.[23] In coming to this conclusion, Anthony Badger, a Cambridge University historian appointed to monitor the eventual release of the whole archive, largely followed the tenor of a previous internal report by Anthony Cary, a former British Ambassador to Sweden and High Commissioner to Canada. Cary's report is available on the British government's gov.uk website but redacted to remove the names of the officials responsible. This was rather pointless, since many of them are identified in an article about the case by David Anderson, an academic expert witness at the trial.[24] Anderson took a different view to Badger: this was more than a bureaucratic bungle. It was also a colonial conspiracy 'to covertly remove "sensitive" files from our former colonies at the time of independence' and cover up the crimes of the colonial authorities.[25] The affair was important beyond the immediate question of the Kenyan legal case because the archive included extensive documentation about Africa, the Middle East and Asia, including human rights crimes as well as less explosive material from colonies in the Pacific which bears on constitutional reform, land tenure and citizenship.[26] Another group of documents relating to the remote British possession of Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean showed 'the casual disregard of the rights or the fate of the indigenous islanders'.[27]

The catalogue description of these files is rather coy about their origin and the controversy surrounding their transfer:

> The records cover a wide range of subject matter relating to colonial administration. The material contains a resource that represents what was happening in the territories, mostly prior to independence and Her Majesty's Government's views. The records complement the material already held at The National Archives.[28]

Digitising the archive

The Hanslope Park files were progressively released but not digitised, so they could not be freely downloaded. Since the turn of the century, the National Archives had been digitising large file sets, starting with the Macmillan Cabinet Papers, 1957–63, and the complete 1901 census, which eventually became part of a commercial, fee-paying web collection run by the genealogy website Ancestry.com. Subsequent releases of online data have followed this

pattern of digitising larger series of files covering complete sets of records such as 'British Army casualty lists 1939–1945', the 'Durham Home Guard 1939–1945' or 'Sir Anthony Eden's private office papers 1935–1946'. In April 2018, the British National Archives website stated that 'over 5%' of the collection was available online.[29]

As there had long been with other material, there was nothing to prevent on-demand digitisation of the records, but it was not done as part of a series as the 'proactive' digitisation of record classes of particular significance or 'high public interest', as two Australian government archivists put it.[30] When this *is* done, digitised records follow the existing organisation of the material, in a digitised version of the written archive. They are not reordered in the radical way that Terry Smith talks of: provenance does not become 'virtual rather than physical', and documents remain ordered by their original placement.[31]

Archives as enemies of the state that created them: Iraq and the Arab Spring

The release of the Hanslope Park files was resisted by the government that originated them and only came about through the actions of its legal opponents. Their preserved virtual form lacks the brooding presence of the archives building and dissolves the physical boundaries between the readers and the material, but it is controlled and selected, catalogued and managed by the authorities that originated the material.

Even the archives of fallen regimes do not necessarily fall into uncontrolled public view. The East German Stasi recorded in minute detail the lives of those it surveyed, which was practically everyone; but while the reunified German state carefully maintained the Stasi files, it made them available only under strict rules to limit the damage they might do by revealing the most personal details. When Timothy Garton Ash, a British historian who had studied in East Berlin in the early 1980s, returned in the late 1990s to consult his own file, he discovered records of a brief romantic affair that he had until then forgotten.[32]

There is a striking anecdote in Cary's report about how the Hanslope Park archives were 're-discovered'. Following a Freedom of Information request from the lawyers for the Kenyan claimants, a senior manager in the Foreign Office's Information Management Group was instructed to investigate whether there really were any missing files. The National Archives catalogue listed two files about the destruction and pre-servation of pre-independence documents from former British colonies. The files were marked as 'closed', but really were missing, so that even officials could not consult them. The manager demanded a proper search and staff at Hanslope Park found the two missing files 'sitting, loose, on top of the migrated archive lists'.[33] That image of randomly stacked archival material is more typical of the archives of collapsed regimes in the Middle East and North Africa. In the past 20 or so years regime change in the Middle East and North Africa has seen whole archives cut loose from their moorings and digitised in a less controlled but sometimes almost random fashion.

After the defeat of the Saddam Hussein regime in 1991, there were risings in the Kurdish north and the Shi'i south of Iraq. Rebel militias captured several depositories of secret police archives and in November that year Kanan Makiya, an Iraqi writer and human rights activist, went to northern Iraq where the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and the Kurdish Democratic Party had seized 18 tons of secret police files before

Saddam Hussein's armed forces crushed the revolt. Makiya knew how important it was to document Iraq's legacy of abuse and worked hard to have many millions of Iraqi secret police files airlifted out of Iraq and, in 1992, he set up the Iraq Research and Documentation Project (IRDP) at the Center of Middle East Studies of Harvard University, to create an archive and make the documents available to scholars. Some were digitised and translated and put onto a website that the IRDP has now taken down. A large collection was held by the Iraqi Kurdish Front, a coalition of several Kurdish parties that controlled a rebel enclave, each with its own collection of files.

In March 1992 the American PBS's series *Frontline* broadcast an investigation by BBC film-maker Gwynne Roberts of the Iraqi government's ethnic cleansing of the Kurds ('Saddam's Killing Fields'). It showed Baʿathist documents, stacked higgledy-piggledy on the floors and crammed in the cupboards of former government buildings, dusty and deteriorating. In 1993, Michael Wood made a documentary for the British ITV channel that confusingly had the same title of 'Saddam's Killing Fields'. Wood was searching for the roots of the regime's destruction of the Shi'i Marsh Arabs in the south of Iraq after the rising there, so he went to Kurdistan to view several collections of secret police papers. These included a memo on the campaign against the Marsh Arabs written by Ali Hasan al-Majid, 'Chemical Ali', who acted as one of Saddam's chief enforcers.[34] Between May 1992 and the second half of 1993, Makiya, US Senator Peter Galbraith and representatives of Human Rights Watch (HRW) persuaded the various Kurdish groups to transfer the documents to the United States for 'analysis and safe-keeping'. In practice, this meant in the US National Archives and Records Administration where they were scanned, digitised and analysed by research teams from the Defense Intelligence Agency and HRW. By the end of 1994, they had digitised 5.5 million documents, which they burned onto CDs. In 1997 control of the original and digitised files passed to the University of Colorado at Boulder (although they remained the property of various Kurdish political organisations). The University opened access to the records to researchers seeking evidence of crimes against humanity. Then, in late 1998, the digital versions of most of the original files were delivered to the IRDP, which, after setting up its archive, began releasing them to scholars on a website that the IRDP subsequently took down (as far as it can be judged from the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine, in 2005).[35]

After the invasion of Iraq in 2003 brought down the Saddam Hussein regime, Makiya obtained another huge stock of documents from the Baʿath Party Archives, which he wanted to house in a national memorial centre in Iraq. The IRDP was renamed the Iraq Memory Foundation (IMF) and its management moved to Baghdad, supported by the Coalition Provisional Authority, although the reconstituted Iraqi National Library and Archive tried to gain control of Makiya's collection. As the pace of the civil war increased, Makiya persuaded the Pentagon of the documents' great intelligence value in understanding the structure of the insurgency and it took them back to the USA, digitised many of them and handed the originals and scanned copies to the IMF. After Harvard University refused to house them, the Hoover Institution at Stanford University agreed. They arrived there in 2008 despite the objections of the Iraqi National Library and Archives that the Baʿath Party Archives belonged to the Iraqi people.[36]

Meanwhile, the IMF took down the documentation that it had digitised and translated in the early 1990s and placed a notice on its website, dated February 2006,

explaining that 'the fundamental premise of freedom of information' must be balanced against 'respect for the privacy of individuals'. These detailed and often extremely personal documents could still harm innocent individuals, so, echoing the concerns in post-reunification Germany, it concluded 'the unmitigated release of records to be highly problematic at best, and reckless at worst'.[37] By 2018 it was making available digitised documents from its collections, reordered primarily on the basis of when they had been collected: two collections from 2004, and two from the early 1990s. The 1990s material was extensively digitised and annotated and made available from behind a password wall, with access conditions unclear.[38] Scholars have been allowed to use them: Joseph Sassoon referred to them extensively in a book on the Baʿathist state.[39]

This detailed account shows two things. Firstly, that control of the original files has moved far away from the point of origin, to be used against the originators of the files. Secondly, that although the files have been extensively digitised, that is not for general access, but only for those who have received approval to have access. A successor organisation has taken control of them and is applying rules that it has devised. The Collection Guide to the online Archive of California bluntly states 'No online items. Request items: Contact Hoover Institution'.[40]

Several other online collections of Iraqi Baʿathist documents emerged. An important one, still in existence, organised by the Harmony Program at the Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) at West Point, opened in 2005. It contains scanned images of documents (and analyses of them) captured during military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. These are internal documents of al-Qaida and its offshoots, available on the CTC's website and the website warns that they

> were collected on the battlefield unscientifically. There is no way to know just how representative documents captured by U.S. forces are of the larger body of information produced by al-Qa'ida or other insurgents. Likewise, the vast database in which they are stored is imperfect and virtually impossible to search systematically. Readers and researchers should therefore be wary of conclusions drawn from Harmony documents alone.[41]

They are also the tip of an iceberg: only just over 630 documents drawn from a vast collection.

The Harmony Program iceberg is the calf of an even larger one. Some other collections of captured Iraqi documents have disappeared from view. In 2012 Douglas Cox, Law Library Professor at the City University of New York, published a web list with the title 'Captured Documents Index'. It included about 800 documents from Iraq and Afghanistan held by US government agencies (mainly military), about two-thirds of which have hyperlinks to the documents themselves on various servers.[42] The hyperlink to what Cox calls 'the extensive collection of Iraq and Afghanistan documents at the Conflict Records Research Center (CRRC)' no longer functions, although two indexes to CRRC documents are still available through the Internet Archive/Wayback Machine (around 850 documents on one index and 250 on another).[43]

A graphic illustration of the arbitrariness of randomly digitising documents and then placing them online in an ad hoc, haphazard and uncoordinated fashion was an important collection of many thousand captured Iraqi documents ('Operation Iraqi Freedom Documents') uploaded between March and November 2006 to the website of the US Army Foreign Military Studies Office. This was designed to settle the

vituperative political debate over whether the invasion of Iraq in 2003 was justified. In March 2006, two members of Congress introduced bills to require the Director of National Intelligence to release captured documents they said the intelligence agencies had not examined carefully enough. There were, after all, some 48,000 boxes of them. If they became available, they could be crowd-researched by enthusiasts who would trawl through them to find evidence of links between Saddam and al-Qaida and whether the Iraqi nuclear program had continued secretly. The Director caved in before the bills could proceed and released thousands of digitised documents. Crowd-researchers, almost all from the political right, flocked to the task, which was a political disaster. Some files caused diplomatic problems with Russia, others gave instructions on how to make nerve gas and on 3 November 2006, the site was shut down after the *New York Times* alleged it had found a basic guide to making an atomic bomb in files about Iraqi nuclear research before the 1991 war. It never reopened, although once again some of the documents remained on the Internet Archive/Wayback Machine, and others were reproduced elsewhere, notably on Donald Cox's site.[44]

The final documentary collection about Iraq to be mentioned here is very recent. In September 2018, a *New York Times* reporter named Rukmini Callimachi presented a series of articles and podcasts about her coverage of Islamic State. She had covered IS since 2014 and in the final year or so she went five times to Iraq, and took possession of – she called it 'recovered' – more than 15,000 pages of internal Islamic State documents. She found some in a bombed building in Mosul, more in a briefcase belonging to a young administrator in IS's agriculture ministry, others came from a railway tunnel that IS had turned into a training camp, and yet more 'from the drawers of the desks behind which the militants once sat, from the shelves of their police stations, from the floors of their courts, from the lockers of their training camps and from the homes of their emirs'. Many of them were, in themselves extremely trivial: budget projects, spreadsheets, taxation records and details of the electricity supply; from the briefcase, records of the imprisonment of a 14-year-old boy for 'goofing around during prayer', or personnel management problems. 'Individually,' she wrote, 'each piece of paper documents a single, routine interaction: A land transfer between neighbours. The sale of a ton of wheat. A fine for improper dress.'[45] They formed what Callimachi, in one of her podcasts, called ISIS's diary, which she would use to answer the question 'who are we really fighting?'[46] At the end of her podcast series, Callimachi told how she was packing up all the documents so they could be scanned. 'And after that, we're going to basically preserve these documents and share them with the public, and the originals are gonna go to the Iraqi Embassy.'[47]

The same sort of mechanisms surrounded another major documentary source for Islamic State, the digitised documents collected by Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi and reproduced in images of the Arabic originals and English translation on his website, often accompanied by detailed analyses. The documents, which are largely ones that Al-Tamimi himself obtained through means that he does not reveal, seem to be genuine and include material from IS affiliates outside its main area. Al-Tamimi is controversial: he describes himself as a specialist in terrorism studies – he graduated from the University of Oxford – and has had such good contacts with people in Islamic State that he has been accused of being one of its supporters. He denied this in a blog on his website, explaining that he had early on feigned sympathy for jihadist views in order to

gain the confidence of those circles. The documentation on his website about the inner workings of IS and its bureaucracy is extensive although he is very unclear about the process through which it reached him.[48]

In short, the documentation of Islamic State seems to rest on truly random collections of documents removed from the territory of an originator that no longer existed, preserved (after a fashion) by a newspaper or on a website, with some of the originals planned to be handed over to a successor state that could not control their use. This was the only likely way in which this valuable material *could* be preserved and made available for consultation and scholarship, but the important thing for the argument of this article is that it reduced a coherent administrative system – for that is clearly what IS maintained in its Caliphate – to what were almost archaeological fragments. While the archives of Baʿathist Iraq had been preserved by structured organisations – Kurdish guerrilla groups, the US Army, the Iraq Memory Foundation – and eventually earmarked to be returned to a government that maintained at least the outlines, in territorial terms, for Saddam's regime's archives, the extirpation of Islamic State has left its papers and bureaucracy in the hands of individual initiative. These conditions have transformed the collection of documents along the lines imagined by Terry Cook, but probably not for the reasons he imagined. The collectors of documentation are active shapers of the collective memory because they are no longer archivists; the documents themselves are no longer static physical objects because they are communicated only in virtual form; and the only order in which they can be stored is determined by the software on which they are stored.

The Arab Spring revolts and the fate of the states' archives in Tunisia and Libya

After the Arab Spring revolts, oppressive governments collapsed with no time to dispose of the evidence of their tyrannies. Their papers fell into the hands of their opponents, but in Tunisia and Libya, the experience had quite different outcomes. In Tunisia, after President Zine el Abidine ben Ali fled in January 2011, people in the higher management of the National Archives mobilised the army, using barbed wire and sentries, to prevent functionaries of the former ruling party from carrying boxes of documents from its headquarters building. Hasna Trii, deputy director of community outreach at the archives, asked her son to pass on a message through his Facebook account: 'Protect the documents as you protect your cities.' She told a *Los Angeles Times* reporter: 'I panicked, thinking of all the documents contained in the various offices: all these troublesome issues on corruption, torture and abuse of power that would die.'[49]

Zine el Abidine ben Ali had gone, but the revolution respected the Tunisian constitution and preserved a legal continuity so that he could be charged *in absentia* with a variety of crimes. Protecting vital files was part of that constitutional legitimacy and the archives officials relied upon the existing legal structure and its 30-year rule of file closure to prevent a free-for-all access to papers that might harm victims of the former regime. That is not what happened next door, in Libya.

The rising against Qaddafi overthrew both the ruler and the state he had created. The rebellion began in Benghazi on 15 February 2011, and within days its leaders

established the National Transitional Council (NTC) as a temporary government to conduct the war and to administer the territories it had liberated. Qaddafi was defeated in a civil war that lasted eight months, causing many casualties and heavy damage to the infrastructure. NATO's no-fly-zone and air operations against Qaddafi's forces were a major factor in his defeat but much of the fighting on the ground was done by various locally based militias, particularly in Tripoli and the west of the country, where the NTC had little sway. After Tripoli fell at the end of August 2011, it was militia forces that controlled the city, and it was militia forces from Misuratah that captured and killed Qaddafi on 20 October.

With militia forces in control of the capital, the records of the numerous organs of the repressive state collapsed into their hands. Foreign news organisations published images that resembled those from Iraq 20 years before: papers stacked in disorder on the floor, or spewing out of drawers or crammed into shelves anyhow. Watched by inexperienced militiamen, reporters photographed pages of documents. There was some very revealing documentation among the hastily abandoned files. A journalist working for Al Jazeera described the abandoned office of Moussa Koussa, Qaddafi's intelligence chief:

> I managed to smuggle away some documents, among them some that indicate the Gaddafi regime, despite its constant anti-American rhetoric – maintained direct communications with influential figures in the US.[50]

A correspondent for *The Times* found files that laid the basis of a whole series of scoops: the British role in extraordinary rendition of Libyan opposition figures to Qaddafi's torturers, British complicity in torture, how MI5 passed on details of Qaddafi's opponents in London, assistance by the British prime minister Tony Blair to Qaddafi's son Saif al-Islam in providing research questions for the PhD he was writing at the London School of Economics. *The Times*'s reporter had only 15 minutes to find all this, and the files were so revealing that Fred Abrahams, of Human Rights Watch, suggested that the fallen regime's spymasters might well have left them out deliberately, hoping that they would be discovered. '"We just wonder if they left these files out on purpose," Mr Abrahams mused. "It's as if they said "You motherf****rs, we will embarrass the hell out of you". I can see them chuckling over it now."'[51] It is worth remembering that Qaddafi's forces were still fighting on outside Tripoli at that moment.

This bizarre form of document delivery does not resemble established professional repositories in more stable environments. Like the files removed from Iraq, these were randomly selected and divorced from their administrative context. They could only illustrate patches of it, lit as if by lightning (or photographers') flashes.

As in the aftermath of Islamic State, the gathering, digitisation and communication of archival material from Libya was almost serendipitous. It was not intended to provide a coherent understanding of defunct regimes, but at best to back up the political engagement. It neither preserved the original order of documents and files nor replaced it with any other systematic order. The virtual envelope containing them was informal, reproducing isolated documents in different newspapers or online journalism (Al Jazeera or *The Times*), on websites that have since been taken down and can only be recovered either by using the Internet Archive/Wayback Machine, or as lists of

files grouped according to who digitised and uploaded them originally, with no reference to theme or content, as in the case of the *Document Exploitation* collection. They had great interest as historical evidence, but quite clearly they had been chosen from paper originals and digitised. Libya was a post-archive environment in which the rather transitory victors transformed the files of the organs of the repressive state into a confused mass with outcrops of information. The confusion revealed some of the Qaddafi regime's sinister and grisly activities, but because the militias had no real overall command, there was no structure to what was revealed by the files they controlled. Yet the victors, or at least a faction of them, did produce their own records of the fighting. Social media exchanges aggregated on the Libya Uprising Archive website document its course until its climax with the death of Qaddafi in October 2011.

The Libya Uprising archive

In the early days of the revolution, a journalist named Mohammed Nabbous set up a live stream television service in Benghazi, called *Libya al-Hurra* (Free Libya). The first live broadcast was on 19 February 2011, four days after the initial rising.[52] *Libya al-Hurra* was extraordinarily successful: one academic account estimated that within the first four weeks over 150,000 worldwide viewers had visited the news channel. It also generated information through social media such as Facebook and Twitter.[53] Within five weeks, Nabbous was dead, shot by a sniper. This was hours before the no-fly zone began, when he was reporting in the thick of the fighting.

In his memory, Nabbous's colleagues set up a website called the Libya Uprising Archive and dedicated it 'to help show the world the spirit, wit, bravery, tenacity, and beauty of Free Libya'.[54] It was filled with news links and Twitter and Facebook postings by 'all the helpers in Mo's Libya AlHurra chatroom'.[55] It was necessarily as partisan as it frankly stated. Other limitations were that it relied on volunteers, and so it was patchy, and it was in English (because that was a 'common' language) and so left out all but the few Arabic and Tamazight communications that it translated.

The site still exists, although the most recent articles, on the home page, are dated September/October 2012 and it has frozen in time since then. It states that 'all main sections of the site are active except some of the Daily Archives', and this is true apart from a few hyperlinks that had fallen out by April 2018. What remains is a jumbled collection of eyewitness accounts, pages listing people who are dead and former militants, and some transcripts of Qaddafi-era officials whose phone calls were hacked by the NTC. From another page (the site is confusingly organised), there is a link to a collection with the title 'From a Good Source' made up of 'Twitter Logs and Other Sources'. This is organised on a roughly weekly basis until May 2011 and then a much more frequent basis as the civil war moved towards its climax. It ends with the page for 19–20 November 2011 covering the 'Capture of Saif al-Islam Gaddafi and [supposedly but never confirmed] Abdullah al-Senussi'.[56] The 20 October 2011 is given its own page with the title 'Free Libya edition' in the index. This is the day when men from a militia originating in the city of Misratah captured Qaddafi, and murdered him in a very sordid fashion.

The coverage of the events of 20 October, as well as of the revolutionary period as a whole, would repay a detailed study because for all the limitations of the site's

methodology they do provide a blow-by-blow narrative structure which makes clear the emotions and reactions not only of Qaddafi's opponents but also of the international news reporters whose Twitter and Facebook comments make clear their confusion and sometimes their sympathies and give significant details that were omitted from published accounts at the time and have not been referred to since. Space in this article does not allow such an analysis, but it is worth mentioning some aspects of this: rumours about Qaddafi's supporters using black magic, the conflicting reports about the fate of two of Qaddafi's sons and the extent of their injuries. The details of the transport of Qaddafi's corpse back to Tripoli, related on social media by an American freelance journalist named Holly Pickett, but ignored by the print and online media apart from the *Montana Standard* (she came from Montana), which quoted bits, and the Australian ABC website, which reproduced it in full, but shorn of the hashtags that give it a starling sense of immediacy and narrative power that other reports of the fighting lacked.[57]

Immediacy runs through the archive. Some of the tweeters were also well-known international journalists from very mainstream news outlets like the BBC, CNN, Al Jazeera and *Gulf News*, but they include here material that did not appear in their published reports. Others were Libyan political activists on the ground or observant commentators on the scene. One repeatedly described how the irresponsible use of guns, fired into the air in celebration, caused terrible injuries to his friends who were attending protests.

Is the Libyan Uprising Archive really an archive, as one of the anonymous reviewers of this article asked, or is it just a bunch of tweets? This article has described the creation of new 'unofficial' collections of sources from the leftovers of collapsed states. The enormous mass of material from Baʿathist Iraq preserved in Stanford University is coherent, catalogued and organised according to filing principles derived from the original organisation. Where they differed from regular state archives is that they were no longer under the control of the state that made them, but of its opponents. As the saga of the Kenyan papers in Hanslope Park shows, archives under the control of the state can be alien to the interests and wishes of their rulers if they are dragged out into public view, but the state can still control how they are communicated and reproduced and they still follow the orderly structures of the administration. But around the edges of the collapsed state of Iraq grew much less formal, much more uncontrolled releases of papers, some of which were originally released and then withdrawn by a higher authority, to survive in outcrops as has happened with Islamic State or in Libya with the piecemeal release of the papers of the regime that had been overthrown.

From this perspective, the Libyan Uprising Archive is more than a random collection of papers. It has a coherence because it is drawn from a defined source according to specific criteria: date, place, the manner of transmission and, not least, intention. The tweets from Libya on 20 October were intended to inform and encourage the rebels against Qaddafi's regime and they had a triumphalist effect that was celebrated afterwards.

Conclusion

This article has centred on some rather new phenomena. Although it develops out of a body of literature about the interrelationship between the organisational brick-and-mortar containers of archives, new political developments and new virtual containers have raised new questions for historians about how sources can be marshalled and used. It is intended as the opening of a discussion which has so far been little explored and on which there does not seem to be a professional consensus.

Firstly, what is the consequence of the way sources are stored? It would be wrong to suggest any sort of hierarchy of merit, to claim that traditional archives in buildings containing papers collected by the public authorities that (largely) originated them are in some way superior to digitised or born-digital archives. They are different. It is better to ask whether a fully digitised archive can function and be understood in the same way as a regular archive that has been partially digitised or one that was born digital. The short answer is that the difference lies in the contents and origins of the archive and its purposes.

Secondly, historians of the Middle East and North Africa in recent years are faced with a repeated history of regime change. At the very least, what happened to the archives of the states concerned gives a perspective on the processes of their formation and collapse. This is quite a varied history – none of the cases outlined simply illustrates instances of similar phenomena but taken together the pattern of an overall problem emerges. In the first place the process of bringing together the records as digital objects does change their nature, partly by the very process collection itself, partly by the way in which the documents are preserved and curated. A prime question is the web of intention that lies at the back of this. Only a small fragment of Qaddafi's security archives has been copied and revealed, possibly to serve very immediate political objectives. The Islamic State documents that Rukmini Callimachi and Aymenn Al-Tamimi collected are consciously intended to answer the question of who the 'enemy' is. The tweets of the Libya Uprising Archive were collected and ordered as a homage to a brave colleague.

The final question, which is by its nature unanswerable, relates to the eventual use of these archives. How are historians to understand them when their provenance is so politically loaded, and how can they be relied upon when they are protected not by bricks-and-mortar and conservators who do not conserve them once they have been identified and made public. Administration of the Libya Uprising Archive seems to have stopped, and it is possible that its very survival depends on the Internet Archive/Wayback Machine, in other words, once again, on a third party.

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