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Building a Living Memory for the History of Our Present: New Perspectives on Archival Appraisal

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Résumé de l'article

Cette présentation analyse les problèmes théoriques et pratiques qui confrontent les archivistes — et les historiens — aujourd'hui. Dans ce monde d'explosion de l'information, de généralisation de supports déplus en plus complexes, diversifiés et fragiles, la façon de trier et de préserver les documents d'archives ainsi que la nature même de ces documents sont en train de changer radicalement. Ce texte résume les courants récents de pensée qui révolutionnent l'archivistique. Il clarifie également l'approche actuelle des Archives nationales du Canada à la masse des documents gouvernementaux.

Building a Living Memory For the History of Our Present: New Perspectives on Archival Appraisal

JEAN-PIERRE WALLOT

Résumé

This paper examines the practical and theoretical problems that confront archivists — and historians — today. Because of the information overload in our world and of the complexity, diversity, and fragility of supporting media, the way archivists are now choosing archival records, and the very nature of the records retained, are radically changing. The paper summarises the latest thinking that is revolutionising the way archivists do their work. It also clarifies the present strategy of the National Archives of Canada insofar as public records are concerned.

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> A nation, like a man, is senile if it has no memory.
> Northrop Frye

INTRODUCTION

Having wandered away from the historical tribe, but still inside the "hinterland" from which it harvests its substantive material, I voyage "home" with great pleasure, yet with the ambiguous feeling of being split between two neighbouring worlds without belonging totally to any one. The second tribe — that of the archivists — is, it is true, connected to the first and many of its members have experienced the same migration. The reverse crossing also occurs, as demonstrated by past president Jean-Claude Robert. Last year, in his presidential address, he mapped the major obstacles to overcome in the information age in which we are being propelled by socio-economic, cultural, and

I thank many of my colleagues for their comments, in particular Terry Cook, who has suggested many readings and ideas. Errors and omissions, of course, remain my sole responsibility.

technological change.[1] This is a period often miscast as the age of communication because of the technological revolution, but it is also an age of obtuseness, of break-up of knowledge into partitioned specialties, of loud silences, because of the difficulty in organising, controlling, retrieving, and massaging this massive avalanche of information in a context of fleeting technological supports.[2]

Recently, a humorist characterised the historian as the "eyewitness of events that occurred on paper"![3] This chromo caricatures the historian as well as the archivist, both traditionally depicted as termites worming their way through tons of dusty papers. In fact, as Christopher Hill has expressed it, the "difficult task" of the historian is to explain what has happened and why.[4] To succeed in this intellectual venture, the historian must mine the rich ore of the past and engineer a reconstructed image of it that sparks life into otherwise amorphous layers of archival sediments.

As I have suggested elsewhere,[5] to know history, one must "relive" the past, not just grasp intellectual bits and pieces of it by scanning thousands, indeed millions of words or numbers or images. Human beings are complex wholes: they are not just abstract minds, but persons with feelings, sensations, understanding, passions, and

1. Jean-Claude Robert, "Historiens, archives et archivistes: un ménage à trois," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association/Revue de la Société historique du Canada* NS 1 (1990): 3-16.
2. For this incomprehension and the resulting fear, see, for example, R. S. Wurman, *Information Anxiety* (New York, 1989). This "anxiety" is placed in the context of the archival and historical professions by Terry Cook in "Rites of Passage: The Archivist and the Information Age," *Archivaria* 31 (Winter 1990-91): 171-76; idem., "Viewing the World Upside Down: Reflections on the Theoretical Underpinnings of Archival Public Programming," ibid.: 127-31. Information is defined as "anything recorded" by Basil Stuart-Stubbs in "Whither Information," in *Management of Recorded Information, Converging Disciplines. Proceedings of the International Council on Archives' Symposium on Current Records . . . May 15-17, 1989*, ed. C. Durance (Muchen, 1990), 16 (hereafter *Management of Recorded Information*). The impact of technology on information generation and use is well illustrated in Hugh Taylor's brilliant essay, "Transformations in the Archives: Technological Adjustment or Paradigm Shift?" *Archivaria* 25 (Winter 1987-88): 12-25. On the changing technological supports, see, for instance, the internal National Archives report by K. Hendricks, P. Bégin, and J. Iraci, *Research on the Preservation of Archival Records* (Ottawa, 1990), 5-11, and C. Durance and Jean-Pierre Wallot, "Normalisation des pratiques archivistiques aux Archives nationales du Canada," to be published in part 1 of the Ducharme *festschrift* in 1991.
3. *Le Devoir* (Montréal), 5 April 1991.
4. Christopher Hill, *The Century of Revolution* (rev. ed., London, 1969), 13; see also E. H. Carr, *What Is History?* (rev. ed., London, 1964). "Facts that could be established beyond all reasonable doubt remain trivial in the sense that they do not in themselves give meaning or intelligibility to the records of the past . . . . Pattern recognition is the *chef-d'oeuvre* of human intelligence." W. H. McNeill, "Mythistory or Truth: Myth, History and Historians," *American Historical Review* 91 (1986):2. One also wonders how true can be the admonition of some archivists: let the records speak. Do they, by themselves?
5. Jean-Pierre Wallot, "Letter to the Public" in *A Place in History*, eds. Jim Burant *et al* (Ottawa, 1991), i-ii; the same point is made in the Annual Report of the National Archives for 1990-91 (forthcoming).

sometimes awe for experiences that transcend normal day-to-day life. History is not the dead ashes of persons and events gone by, the simple scratch of reasoned acts on the map of time. It is a living tissue, an evolving adventure that has led us to where we are now and is still driving us further. We are the result of the past and cannot easily jump out of its main current. Thus, studying history means more than peering at one aspect or another. It means trying to encompass in one understanding vision the forces at play and the people and groups in interaction, as well as the sense of time and place, the permeating surroundings, personalities, and other intangible "breaths" that drive life beyond the mechanical. This total sense, an ideal of course, cannot be attained unless documents of all types and in all media, selected with care, add to the dry knowledge of sole words or numbers or pure constructs of the intellect.

The documents through which we explore the past are often residues haphazardly landed on the shores of our time. They have survived wars, fires, floods, insects, accidents, or voluntary destructions, or else have been transmitted because of some individual's whims or of the need to record personal and collective rights of a private or public nature.[6] Instead of this wild selection process, we must now plan and garner a diversified contemporary documentary base for future historians, grounding the process in as global a vision as possible of our society and of its component parts.[7] This approach also implies the need for "total archives."[8] In effect, historians are more and more culling groups of documents (*fonds*) to bolster their "retrovisions" from an already-pruned documentary corpus, shaped by archivists and their allies in information sciences

6. Jean-Pierre Wallot, "L'Histoire, science de la vie," in *Présentations [. . .] à la Société royale du Canada, 1979-1980* (Ottawa, 1980), 33-47; "De l'indiscipline historique et de la régulation des passés au présent," *Liberté* 147 (June 1983): 57-62; "L'histoire et la recherche du sens. Discours de réception à l'Académie canadienne-française," *Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique française* [*RHAF*] 37 (1983-84): 533-42.

7. "Les archives . . . de demain ne seront plus ce qui reste quand le temps a passé, mais ce que les hommes auront prévu de mettre à la disposition de ceux qui les suivront . . . . Il faut penser à la mémoire de l'avenir dès le moment de l'action." Address of French President François Mitterand to the Eleventh Congress on Archives, Paris, 24 August 1988 (hereafter Mitterand address).

8. The concept of "total archives" refers to the acquisition and use of private and public records in different media and pertaining to all subjects of human endeavour, by an archival repository that may also be involved in current as well as historical archives. In Canada, it was first articulated as such by the National Archives of Canada in 1970. It was and is still widely applied in newer archives around the world. See W. I. Smith, "Total Archives: The Canadian Experience," *Archives et bibliothèques de Belgique* 57:4 (1986): 323-46; for a survey of the evolution of the concept, see L. Garon, "Les documents non textuels et fonds d'archives," *Archives* 22 (Winter 1991): 29-39. Terry Cook has criticised some excesses in the application of the concept, particularly as they relate to the partition of archives by media to the detriment of an overall view of the *fonds*. See his "The Tyranny of the Medium: A Comment on 'Total Archives'," *Archivaria* 9 (Winter 1979-80): 141-50. This triggered a hot debate which culminated in Cook's "Media Myopia," *Archivaria* 12 (Summer 1981): 146-57. A recent issue of *Archives* 22 (Winter 1991): 41-72 has a whole section on *respect des fonds*; see also *Le respect des fonds à tous les stades de la vie des documents*, actes du XXe Congrès de l'Association des Archivistes du Québec (AAQ), 1990.

from as complete an understanding as possible of the contemporary realities to be recorded and of the record's creators.[9]

This is the archivist's main challenge, to structure a future to the historical experience of our time. This goes beyond simply adding another monograph or another article upon a specific subject, albeit a worthy pursuit in itself. It means establishing a documentary base sufficiently luxurious and wide to nurture future generations of historians and their grasp of the second half of the twentieth century. Working for tomorrow, to ensure the "continuity of the memory" of our people,[10] is to insert oneself in a trajectory towards the future. This task, which I preside over at the National Archives of Canada, will yield its fruits in twenty, fifty, or one hundred years. If it is well conceived and executed, however, it will remain relevant well beyond individual efforts and scholarship. That is the main source of satisfaction for those who labour in archives.

In his Presidential Address last year, Jean-Claude Robert identified the two most crucial problems facing archivists and historians today: the exponential growth of the documentary mass and the proliferation of fragile media with no, or shifting, standards. Thus the need to shear deeply, to use sampling methods when appropriate, and to preserve only the small proportion of documents having great historical value. M. Robert commented that historians have often withdrawn from the field of source criticism, deeming it to be an auxiliary science to history and better left to archivists. Lamenting the stiff and sometimes suspicious relationships between the two professions (though not necessarily between individuals), M. Robert called for greater cooperation between them and for the maximisation of their complimentarity so as to ensure an adequate archival heritage from the present for future generations.[11]

Starting from this discourse, I would like to scrutinise the practical and theoretical problems that confront us today, when appropriate by marshalling concrete examples.

9. On the theme of strategic appraisal reflecting contemporary reality, archives in Europe and North America have developed different, although complementary, approaches, both based on extensive research by the archivist. See H. Booms, "Society and the Formation of a Documentary Heritage: Issues in the Appraisal of Archival Sources," *Archivaria* 24 (Summer 1987): 69-107. This is a translation of an article originally published in German in 1972. See also H. Samuels, "Who Controls the Past?" *American Archivist* 49 (Spring 1986): 109-24.
10. "Vous servez la continuité de la mémoire des peuples du monde. Sans une mémoire vivante et bien informée, les peuples perdraient beaucoup de leur culture . . . ." Jean-Paul II to the Bureau of the ICA, in *Observatore Romano*, 31 March 1990. "C'est la mémoire du monde que vous préservez et que vous mettez en valeur. Les archives de tous les pays, en gardant la trace des actes d'hier et leurs cheminements éclairent mais aussi commandent le présent." Mitterand address. "Records are still the basic tools used by public and private institutions and organizations; they serve as their collective memories, providing them with an identity and enabling them to continue to function beyond the lifetimes of the individuals who created them." F. B. Evans, "Records and Administrative Processes: Retrospect and Prospects," in *Management of Recorded Information*, 34.
11. Robert, "Historiens, archives et archivistes . . . ." The author has participated in a task force on judicial archives in Québec which has produced an extremely illuminating document on appraisal and sampling of such voluminous records as the case files. See Québec, Comité interministériel sur les archives judiciaires, *Rapport du comité interministériel sur les archives judiciaires* (Montréal, 1989); an abridged English edition was published in 1991.

The first section examines the mandate of the National Archives of Canada and the main problems faced by archivists when tackling the immense documentary mass generated by the "information age" or society — the theme of the Twelfth International Congress on Archives in Montreal, in September 1992. The second section explores paths sketched by diverse theories and practices in archival science. The third clarifies the present strategy of the National Archives of Canada insofar as public records are concerned and discusses some examples of the particular problems triggered by contemporary media such as electronic and audio-visual records. This paper relates more particularly to the experience of the National Archives of Canada and to public records, but it largely mirrors the Canadian and international realities.

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Before browsing through problems related to this theme, it might be useful to recall the mission and specific objectives of the National Archives of Canada. As an *arm of government*, the National Archives ensures the preservation of important recorded information relating to the activities of the government of Canada. This recorded information in all media is essential both for current departmental use and for maintaining corporate continuity. Such an activity is usually referred to as the management of recorded information (or records management). *As a cultural institution*, the National Archives protects and nurtures the sense of national identity for all Canadians. More specifically, the mission of the National Archives of Canada is expressed in the following objectives, which are rooted in the *National Archives of Canada Act* (1987):

> To preserve the collective memory of the nation and of the Government of Canada and to contribute to the protection of rights and enhancement of a sense of national identity, by:
>
> — acquiring, conserving and providing access to private and public records of national significance, and by serving as the permanent repository of records of federal government institutions and of ministerial records;
>
> — facilitating the management of records (in all forms and formats) of federal government institutions and of ministerial records;
>
> — exercising shared leadership in supporting and developing the Canadian and international archival community.

Before proceeding further, let me sketch a portrait of a familiar and dear past. When I first arrived at the then Public Archives of Canada in the autumn of 1960 (except for a brief stint in 1957), I had prepared cards with notes extracted from the *Reports on Public Archives* of the 1890s. These summarised the dispatches exchanged between the Governor and other colonial officials and their London masters. During lunch hour, an archivist friend would let me snoop through the stacks where I spotted all kinds of boxes of relevant material about which I had found no mention in the reports or in the scarce finding aids. As late as 1968 and 1969, I was allowed to stay in the Archives nationales du Québec in Québec after hours, as long as I wanted, to look at the *fonds* and collections box by box, on the condition that I would spot and report errors on the identification labels. I thought then: "Thank God there are so few archivists, for I have the freedom to rove and to delve at will."

Yet, with time, it became clear to me that this was a most inefficient manner of proceeding. It could serve the interests of a small élite of specialised scholars, but could not cope with thousands of researchers. Moreover, there were few accurate finding aids. Summaries reflected their author's interests and missed other important themes. There was neither *provenance* nor contextual descriptions. It took me twelve years to understand the maze of British army administration, of its operations, and of its expenditures in Canada after reading the more than sixteen hundred boxes of the C series, and more than fifteen years to decipher the financial system. One snatched small kaleidoscopic fragments of pictures, often unrelated to one another, and created a sort of collage. This was called history as art. Only after immense documentation (a small percentage of which would really be useful in the end) could one reconstruct the structure and functioning of an institution, of an organisation, of a process, and of the role of specific human actors in these societal networks of relationships. These golden days were really youth cavorting through the unknown, not reasoned access to an organised body of documentation about the past. Furthermore, the past under study was distant; thus the records were relatively few and, in the main, textual.

Today, without some guidance, it would take armies to ramble through the records of a single major federal government department before coming to some understanding of its purpose, its main functions, its programmes, its procedures, and its cases. For instance, the RCMP creates more than 3.8 million case files a year, ranging from murder to minor traffic violations, in about four hundred categories of records, over half of which have some archival value, and three associated electronic systems. CSIS has entrusted to us more than a thousand boxes; yet this represents only a fraction of the records that will eventually be available for transfer to the National Archives. The Canada Employment and Immigration Commission, with over twenty-seven thousand employees and an estimated sixty thousand business transactions daily, have prepared a submission for scheduling at most one third of their records: these comprise the hard-copy central registry and case files (about one hundred thousand linear feet and over three million case files annually) as well as twenty-three related national and 108 regional electronic records systems and microfiches dealing with over fifty programmes that have grown, evolved, and sometimes disappeared over the years. Moreover, some output of those records is being provided to thirty-four different agencies and departments, including Statistics Canada. Yet these are only three departments and, in fact, only part of their activities are covered by the submissions. I do not dare to mention Health and Welfare, Environment Canada, or even Revenue Canada — Taxation, which alone fills our records centres with 165 000 boxes a year.

The question for archivists is how to deal with such oceans of information in all media and still find, capture, and protect the small quantity that has archival value, while allowing the destruction of the great majority (95 per cent at least) that has little or no value. The same constraints apply to the records of many private organisations, but the percentages vary considerably for personal and ministerial records.[12]

12. An up-to-date overview of those challenges and of the approaches envisioned may be found in *Management of Recorded Information*.

In short, the information society overloads us with meaningless, routine junk, with oceans of records full of data, often repetitive and without meaning when taken in isolation. A very small proportion of this material should remain as evidence of the programmes, of the processes at work, and of the policies pursued and their application. Regional disparities in programme implementation, if any, must be noted.[13] Valuable information must also be retained to portray society, its structures, its evolution, its processes, and its dynamics. Finally, documenting the individual lives of citizens cannot be ignored, insofar as such lives are reflected not only in personal papers but through the citizen's interaction with the state. In the case files relating to individuals, in conjunction with other aggregate sources such as censuses and/or legal documents such as probates and inventories after death,[14] may be found the basis for the new social history of recent decades.

Today, there is simply neither enough money nor the intellectual resources to keep and cope with such massive quantities of information, without even mentioning the space and the equipment required to preserve it. In Canada, as elsewhere, archivists use *appraisal and selection criteria* to ensure that they acquire only the most valuable documents, while developing *descriptive standards* to master them intellectually and to make them available to a wider range of researchers. This immensity *can* be mapped and roads to explore *may* be outlined, but there will be less and less description and indexing at the item level.

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Appraisal, selection, acquisition, and description can be seen as four links in the chain of making the records of the past available to researchers. Though intellectually distinct, they are often more like connected and parallel streams in recent approaches to large *fonds* and their *provenance*.[15] Taken together, these (with preservation and access) are

13. D. Stacey has made the point that regional records often differ from headquarters records in his paper "Archivists and Industrial Collections," at the Association of Canadian Archivists Annual Conference at Banff in May 1991 (hereafter 1991 ACA Conference). In 1986, the National Archives adopted the principle that records created in regions and pertaining to those regions should remain there. The institution has never had the resouces, however, to implement a true policy of decentralisation, although it has approved a pilot project for the period 1992-94.

14. See the Québec report on judicial case files, cited in note 11; see also two recent texts: Terry Cook: "Many Are Called, But Few Are Chosen: Appraisal Guidelines for Sampling and Selecting Case Files," *Archivaria* 32 (Summer 1991) and *The Archival Appraisal of Records Containing Personal Information: A Ramp Study with Guidelines* (Paris, forthcoming 1991). Among many calls for archivists to keep case files, see Joy Parr, "Case Records as Sources for Social History," *Archivaria* 4 (Summer 1977): 122-36.

15. "Archivists follow two principles when organizing records. First, the principle of provenance states that the records of a given records creator must not be intermingled with those of other records creators. Second, the principle of original order states that the original filing or classification system of records in their office of origin (which may not be the order in which they are first received at the Archives) must as far as possible be respected and/or recreated. To do otherwise, to arrange and organize records by research-oriented subject areas, geographical location, or chronological period, for example, would destroy the evidential value

the fundamental activities of archivists. They are rooted in archival theory and rely both on art and disciplinary principles, few of which are familiar to most historians. This is an unfortunate situation, since the latter wind up at the end of the chain, the beneficiaries or the victims of the choices made upstream.

The 1991 annual conference of the Association of Canadian Archivists broached the question of theory and practice today in choosing as its theme, "Archival Appraisal and Acquisition: Building a Selective Memory." This was a most appropriate theme given that appraisal is the single most important action of archivists, based as it is on tradition, on social values, and on more conscious approaches. While most historians seem to have temporarily shelved theories about society and their discipline in the past ten years,[16] archivists, on the other hand, hotly debate different theories and practices. In fact, their efforts to root their decisions in "objectivity," or to objectivise their particular subjectivity, recall the debates about scientific and objective history that raged in the 1960s and 1970s. To quote Terry Eastwood, how do archivists move "from what [they] can know about the documents to suppositions about their continuing value"?[17] All agree that nothing is certain and that the archivist's work is permeated with some subjectivity. Thus there is a need for a better rationalisation and documentation of the choices made.[18] As one commentator has noted,

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represented by the records themselves; it would, in effect, remove them from the context in which they were created and thus destroy a significant part of the information they contain." *General Guide to the Government Archives Division* (Ottawa, 1991), 7. See also Wendy M. Duff and K. M. Haworth, "The Reclamation of Archival Description: The Canadian Perspective," *Archivaria* 31 ((Winter 1990-91): 31-32; K. M. Haworth, "Reclaiming Archival Principles: The Future of Appraisal, Records Management and Description in North America," paper given at the Conferenza Internationale Universita Degli Studi de Macerata, Italy, September 1990. E. Lodolini has explained the principle of provenance, while positing an incompatibility between library and archival principles and a close link between archival science and "records management" in "La gestion des documents et l'archivistique," *Management of Recorded Information*, 156-69.

16. In Canada, Gilles Paquet and I have tried to stimulate debates on theoretical historical approaches, notably by suggesting the use of Popperian concepts and of an institutional approach; see the following: "Pour une méso-histoire du XIXe siècle canadien," *RHAF* 33 (1979-80): 387-425; "Sur quelques discontinuités dans l'expérience socio-économique du Québec: une hypothèse," *RHAF* 35 (1981-82): 483ff and 517ff; *Le Bas-Canada au tournant du XIXe siècle [. . .]* (Ottawa, 1988), introd. It is refreshing, after many years without such discussion in this area, to see another attempt to introduce Popperian concepts: see Nadia Fahmy-Eid, "Histoire, objectivité et scientificité. Jalons pour une reprise du débat épistémologique," *Histoire sociale/Social History* 24:4 (May 1991):9-34.
17. Terry Eastwood, "How Goes It With Appraisal?" the keynote address to the 1991 ACA Conference, 4-5: "No material artifact of human life, no work of literature or science bespeaks action in the way archival documents do. Indeed, often one cannot fully understand the historical dimension of artifacts and works of the mind without reference to archives, which may be used to help us understand how and why such things came to be. Archives are then a means by which we carry forward the experience and results of action in the past, by which we try to overcome the constraints of present conditions."
18. G. Myrdal, "How Scientific Are the Social Sciences?" *Économies et sociétés* 6 (1972): 1473-90.

> there is a growing interpretative consensus amongst archivists that "complexity" is a condition endemic to the configuration and meaning of society, and hence to the archeology of its historical documentation. As records analysts and appraisers, we now accept that there are many encodations, linkages, references, and other cross-structural and functional "pollinations" which contribute to the documentary heritage of our own society and the societies of our predecessors.[19]

From the 1920s to the 1940s in Europe, the dominant historicist school assumed that the experience and methods of practising archivists, who were also historians, were sufficient to discern intuitively what was valuable. Of course, they also relied on their own personal and political values, moulded by the standards of the day. Then emerged the methods of appraisal based on form, which assumed that state records were worth keeping *in toto*. When that proved impossible by the 1960s, archivists ranked agencies and departments according to judgements of their relative importance. In socialist countries, archivists claimed they had found the basic kernel of truth in dialectic and historical materialism. Archives in Eastern Europe, in other words, *only* judged as archivally valuable those records documenting class struggle and class solidarity. All other records were, by definition, "untrue" and therefore without value, of no archival interest and, in theory at least, condemned to destruction.

At this point, many trends of thought emerged. In Germany in the early 1970s, Hans Booms proposed the establishment of a documentary plan, based on a chronology of important events as judged by contemporaries and the creators of the documents. This plan also assumed the need to analyse the administrative structure that had generated the records and to recognise provenance and the context leading to their creation as the cornerstones of the appraisal process. Even with all those investigations, including those of the links among the creating agency and other institutions, Booms nevertheless concluded (and he reasserts today) that archivists are human products of their societies and that they have to permeate themselves with the values of the contemporaries of the records to be appraised. In other words, archivists grope for some sort of objective subjectivity, just as historians do.[20]

Others delve into complex and interesting theories about primary and secondary value; evidential, informational, and intrinsic value; administrative value, including legal and fiscal value; more importantly, into provenance and pertinence, two concepts often contrasted during the ACA conference as opposites, though they are more dichotomic in theory than in practice.[21] Eastwood has even proposed a controversial theory

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19. R. Brown, "Modelling Acquisition Strategy at the National Archives of Canada: Issues and Perspectives for Government Records," paper presented at the 1991 ACA Conference, 4. Candice Loewen noted the same linkages and interconnections in her own paper to the same conference: "Appraising Environmental Records in the Information Age".
20. H. Booms, "Society and the Formation . . ." and "Archives-Keeping as Social and Political Activity," first plenary address at the 1991 ACA Conference.
21. L. Duranti made that point at the end of the ACA Conference. She added: "What if, rather than considering the archivist the professional responsible for the formation of the cultural heritage, the 'documenter' of society, we look at this professional as the mediator between social forces and the people, between the records creators and those for whom the records are created in the first place?" See her "ACA 1991 Conference Overview," *ACA Bulletin*

of appraisal based solely on value as determined by use/need:

> If we wish archives to express the society in which they were created and its values, the only possible criterion to guide evaluation is use in some particular context. Suppositions must of course be made, but they are part of the act of projecting value. In effect, we infer continuing or future benefit from the experience or evidence of use of archives we have or can acquire and then analyze.[23]

Objectivity, then, would emerge from the cogency of the archivist's method of handling evidence of use. During the act of appraisal, they would "fashion [an] understanding of the accumulated experience of humanity's use of archives" so as to insert cases of appraisal in larger contexts than most people can do in the "here and now."[24]

For others, the understanding of the form and function of records, more or less tied to contextual analysis, makes it easier to grasp their content. The primary responsibility of archivists would therefore be to represent life as viewed by people contemporary to the records. The form of the record should reveal its function. This notion ties into the ancient science of diplomatics where, for mediaeval documents especially, function could only be deduced from the surviving documentary form.[25] With electronic records, however, form is less important than the functional intent of the system. The functional approach is also well developed now in some European countries, where archivists catalogue all forms, institutions, and responsibilities before appraisal. Organisations change a great deal, but their functions do not. Hence one must discern the patterns. Judgement should not be based on content, for this would be too subjective. On the other hand, function and form largely dictate the content, at least in administrative and judicial bodies.[26] As a result, archivists now appraise less by sifting through all the records one by one, searching for possible research subjects, but rather by assessing more globally the functions of the records creators rather than the records, and the records-creating processes rather than possible research uses.

There is even the "institutional functional analysis"[27] — a term which I did not

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15:6 (July 1991): 22-27. Basil Stuart-Stubbs points out that this mediation function is heightened in the case of electronic records: "Whither Information?" in *Management of Recorded Information*, 22.

22. Eastwood, "How Goes It With Appraisal?" To a certain extent, this may be the practice of the Public Records Office in England, for it will not consider acquiring any record that has not been kept/needed/used in the originating department for at least four years. Use here does not mean access for, in this sense, "use provides the ultimate justification for archives." Gabrielle Blais and David Enns, "From Paper Archives to People Archives: Public Programming in the Management of Archives," *Archivaria* 31 (Winter 1990-91): 101-13.
23. Eastwood, "How Goes it With Appraisal?"
24. Ibid.
25. L. Duranti has pursued this point in a six-part series on "Diplomatics: New Uses for an Old Science," *Archivaria* 28-33 (Summer 1989 to Winter 1991-92).
26. J. P. Sigmond emphasised this notion in the third plenary address at the 1991 ACA Conference, entitled "Form, Function and Archival Value."
27. Samuels, "Who Controls the Past?" She outlined this new dimension of her well-known "documentation strategy" during the second plenary address at the 1991 ACA Conference, "Improving Our Disposition: Documentary Strategy." An overview of these different approaches is in Haworth, "Reclaiming Archival Principles. . . ."

coin, even though I have always believed that historical enquiry would be facilitated by the institutional approach à la Popper. Institutions here are defined as the variety of arrangements between human beings to survive in society and to ensure social reproduction in its widest sense: customs, laws, family arrangements, private enterprises, and state organisations.[28] In this approach, the archivist must understand the primary functions of an institution. It is more than a mere "list" — but rather a sense of understanding and interpreting all its activities, considering the future uses of the records, surveying those that have survived and predicting those that are missing from a theoretical grid of needed information.

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This simplistic overview leads me to summarise the approach of the National Archives of Canada to the appraisal of the monumental mass of the federal government's records. Until recently, our approach remained mostly reactive. Departments did transfer some valuable records, generally through personal contacts between archivists and the staffs of those institutions. The records scheduling function — that is, the process by which documents are identified, appraised, and disposed of under an authority signed by the National Archivist, either through destruction or transfer to the archives — did not work very well.[29] Departments would submit schedules to answer their own immediate needs, generally the destruction of bulky, low-value records so as to save space and money. Yet these would deal with only minute functions and programmes, often only with textual records, without any mention of links to other records in all media — photographs, plans and drawings, audio-visual material, computer records and so on. Archivists would spend most of their time on records of little, or at best secondary, value, with little or no knowledge of possible duplications or links, and with few chances to focus on the most valuable records.

This situation has changed. This year, we have launched a five-year strategy of acquisition of government records. (The development of a strategy for the acquisition of private records of national importance is another subject, too complex for discussion here.[30]) We have ordered the more than 150 departments and agencies subject to our law in a priority list based on the importance of their functions in government and society, on the state of their information management, and on the quality of the holdings we already have garnered in the past. In cooperation with these departments and agencies (for they know a great deal about their own business), we will develop plans to schedule their records over the next five years, beginning with the programmes, functions, processes, and activities where the probabilities of high yield of permanently valuable material are greatest. The approach is holistic: information holdings in departments,

28. Paquet and Wallot, "Pour une méso-histoire . . ." and "Sur quelques discontinuités . . . ."
29. Eldon Frost, "A Weak Link in the Chain: Records Scheduling as a Source of Archival Acquisition," a paper presented at the 1991 ACA Conference. The present "information age" is dramatically different than the time when records scheduling was developed. There are also problems such as division of records by media and increasing numbers of case files. These will not go away, as it is predicted that, in the United States for instance, 75 per cent of all the federal government's transactions will be electronic by year 2000.
30. Brown, "Modelling Acquisitions Strategy . . . ."

whatever their media, are surveyed as integrated wholes, as corporate assets,[31] and will be dealt with at the global level, so as to ensure the identification and protection of the records of highest value. For instance, in the case of the more than fifty programmes of the Canada Employment and Immigration Commission, the approach has been to appraise the records functionally and not by programme or internal organisational structure. The emphasis has been on choosing the best records at the most appropriate level in the department, rather than consider the value of all possible levels of records. In this case, as in many others, the National Archives will retain parts, or the whole, of electronic records systems rather than paper files.

Now, before approval is given to dispose of records, proposals are prepared describing the creating organisation, its programmes and activities, its numerous information holdings in all media, and the links between the flows of information and the data banks themselves. This difficult process is carried out by the departments, in close cooperation with a team representing different branches and divisions of the National Archives. Our archivists can then concentrate their time and talents on appraisal, where the returns are the greatest for us and for our researchers. Records are either destroyed or, if they have archival value, are transferred by agreement to the National Archives. A further selection of those documents transferred may be carried out at a later time. Thus we have shifted from a bottom-up approach to a top-down one. This is based both on sound archival theory and on the impossibility of coping with so many records in so many departments within available resources.

This brings me back to consideration of the appraisal process.[32] The only solution to the present information explosion and resulting "anxiety" seems to be the adoption of a holistic and contextual perspective. Instead of trying to encompass the incredible mass of raw data, facts, and figures, we must concentrate on knowledge, "which is created by individual minds, drawing on individual experience, separating the significant from the irrelevant, making value judgements."[33] Instead of trees, we must concentrate on the forest or, in archival terms, on provenance, order, interrelationships. and context rather than on mere "facts" or raw data.[34] As Terry Cook has explained,

31. This approach is facilitated by the Treasury Board's Management of Information Holdings policy, enacted in 1989. See also Eldon Frost, "The National Archives of Canada and Electronic Records," paper delivered to the International Association of Social Science/Information Science, Edmonton, May 1991, 8-9. Diana Sangway has described work conducted in the United Kingdom since 1984 to develop the policy and practice of information management in "Information Management Policy and Practice," in *Management of Recorded Information*, 176-90. For the American case, see K. Thibodeau, "Information Resources Management in Context and Contest," ibid., 191-205.

32. This part is inspired by Terry Cook's writings, especially his "Viewing the World Upside Down . . . ," *The Archival Appraisal of Records Containing Personal Information*, and "Mind Over Matter: Towards a New Theory of Archival Appraisal," to be published in an ACA-sponsored *festschrift* for Hugh Taylor, scheduled for publication in 1992.

33. T. Roszak, *The Cult of Information*, quoted in Wurman, *Information Anxiety*, 32.

34. "If we are to retain any kind of perspective on the role of humankind in the future, we must sometimes stand back and view the landscape, not merely a tree." E. Sandberg-Diment, "The Executive Computer: How to Avoid Tunnel Vision," *New York Times*, 15 March 1987, as quoted in Wurman, *Information Anxiety*, 35. According to Hugh Taylor, "'My Very Act

> the quest for knowledge rather than mere information is the crux of the study of archives and of the daily work of archivists. All the key words applied to archival records — provenance, *respect des fonds*, context, evolution, interrelationships, order — imply a sense of understanding, of "knowledge," rather than the merely efficient retrieval of names, dates, subjects, or whatever, all devoid of context, that is "information" (undeniably useful as this might be for many purposes).[35]

The deciphering of the forest's shape and purpose, the drawing of paths to explore them — these are the archivist's first purpose and role, not that of answering the particular needs of specific researchers. This latter responsibility comes rather as a consequence of the above work and sometimes as a serendipitous effect.[36] "Retrieval of information," explained Eric Ketelaar at the International Congress on Archives in Paris in 1988, "is not merely a logical, analytical and linear process. The archivist and the researcher equally make use of holistic, intuitive, and creative perceptions . . . . There should always be a mediator with sufficient . . . knowledge and scholarship capable of refining, reformulating and resolving enquiries by trial and error . . . ."[37] For many historians too, facts are meaningless without the historian and his or her *problématique* or net of organised questions to assess and build causal explanations.[38]

Archivists also approach this material with a structured, organised, holistic perspective. This explains why the first recommendation of the Working Group on Archival Descriptive Standards of the Bureau of Canadian Archivists was to emphasise the importance of the archival *fonds*: "We recommend that, as a priority, Canadian archivists describe and index holdings at the level of *fonds*, regardless of the form or medium of

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and Deed': Some Reflections on the Role of Textual Records in the Conduct of Affairs," *American Archivist* 51 (Fall 1988): 468, the task of the archivist is "pattern recognition in the face of overwhelming information fallout rather than a hopeless concentration on subject indexing of content."

35. Terry Cook, "From Information to Knowledge: An Intellectual Paradigm for Archives," *Archivaria* 19 (Winter 1984-85): 49 and passim. The same insistence on knowledge emerges in Hugh Taylor, "Transformation in the Archives . . .," 13ff. For his part, R. Brown has called the process evoked by Cook "macro-appraisal" or "archival deconstruction," a process which allows the "harmonization of a structural and functional approach to the archival-historical interpretation of its documentation." This is based upon the notion "that the configuration and meaning of society is most completely ascertained through a concentration on the interactive process between social structures and social functions; on the functionality or actions of structures." For example, this approach reduces "the universe of government information to the sources of its primary discursive encodations and significations, its administrative *fonds* or bureaucratic discourse, its primary texts, in order to present an interpretive reading of documents which is a more faithfully true, meaningful, and/or explanatory to the inspiration of their original creators and intended audience." Brown, "Modelling Acquisitions Strategy . . . ."
36. "Users look for subjects, we look at contexts." L. Duranti, "ACA 1991 Conference Overview," 26. We must move from one-to-one service to training researchers to be more self-sufficient; see Blais and Enns, "From Paper Archives to People Archives," 106ff and Taylor, "Transformation in the Archives. . .," 23.
37. E. Ketelaar, "New Archival Materials," paper presented to the third plenary session, Eleventh International Congress on Archives, Paris, 1988, 14-15, 21 and 23.
38. Paquet and Wallot, "Pour une méso-histoire. . .," 392-93.

the records."[39] Since description must proceed from the more general to the particular, the *fonds* becomes the focus of the primary efforts of the archivist. Whether primarily a physical unit of records or a conceptual entity to be described (as a *fonds* may comprise records on many supports that are physically separated), the *fonds* is understood as "a dynamic and organic collection of . . . series; a series consists of files; and a file consists of items."[40] The point here is that each item or series can be understood fully only in its relationship to the whole: the summer youth programme, for example, has very limited meaning or even informational value if it is not connected to all other programmes and to the policies and objectives of the Canada Employment and Immigration Commission, or even to those of the government. Thus, the *fonds* is the central focus of archival description. Conversely, items or files divorced from this descriptive global context (like some of the ordnance files in C series) are largely unintelligible. Apart from specific, isolated, and perhaps useful information that may be derived from them, often about other subjects, these individual documents make little contribution to the understanding of historical processes.

This theoretical approach to appraisal has allowed us to drop our former approach, which was random, fragmented, uncoordinated, and often accidental.[41] Some Americans too are adopting a "documentation strategy" which focuses on "macro-appraisal," that is, of first understanding societal functions before appraising particular groups of records.[42] Hans Booms' proposals, mentioned earlier, appear less ambitious and more realistic, but they too insist on the *fonds*, on provenance, and on context.[43]

In the same way as historians have turned gradually towards *tableaux* rather than stories, archivists try to put societal templates at the centre of appraisal. Of course, the subjective and even artistic nature of appraisal cannot be completely eliminated — and thank God for that, for the cold nature of absolute theory and science often stifles the human element on which history must also feed. As Hugh Taylor has suggested, "this may go beyond objectivity and rationality into the creative resources of the right brain — a kind of 'mega-browsing'."[44] Yet archivists speculate less and less about possible uses of records — even historians are hard pressed to predict research trends in the next decades — than about the criteria to determine if acquired records reflect the values, patterns, and functions of society today or, for older records, of the society contemporary to the records' creators. I would not exclude, as some archivists do, the

39. This is a key recommendation of the Working Group on Archival Descriptive Standards of the Bureau of Canadian Archivists in *Towards Descriptive Standards. Report and Recommendations of the Canadian Working Group on Archival Descriptive Standards* (Ottawa, 1985), 55-56. It has been adopted by the Ad Hoc Commission on Descriptive Standards of the ICA: *Statement of Principles Regarding Archival Description . . . November 1990*. See also Haworth, "Reclaiming Archival Principles . . . ."
40. Terry Cook, "Viewing the World Upside Down. . .," 129.
41. This approach produced a biased and distorted archival record. This assessment was articulated by G. Ham in a very influential article which, in turn, has generated much of the recent theoretical reassessment of archival appraisal: "The Archival Edge," in *A Modern Archives Reader*, eds. M. F. Daniels and T. Walch (rev. ed., Washington, 1984), 326.
42. Samuels, "Who Controls the Past?"
43. Booms, "Society and the Formation . . . ."
44. Personal communication from Hugh Taylor, 29 September 1991.

historian's knowledge of possible uses for certain groups of records or, for that matter, that of the records' creators who must cooperate more and more with archivists. Yet in the end, the global view will prevail.

At any rate, many historians would be on shifting ground, as it were, if they tried to argue differently. They themselves adopt holistic approaches, even sometimes veering away from the overt content of the records to consider instead their context, their linguistic patterns, their signs, and their symbols — what is often called their evidential value beyond what they explicitly say. Here, historians and archivists share a common contextual perspective:

> Patterns of thought, the power of words and rhetoric, the underlying structural influences, a consciousness of the values embedded in social book-keeping systems of the past and in societal metaphors and myths, this new concern with the nature of "discourse" is certainly very similar to archivists' own scholarly work of unravelling the provenance, context, records-keeping environments, electronic records systems logical data models, and the original "order" or pattern of the records in their care.[45]

Today, general guides and finding aids establish a short history of the creating body or person of the record, analyse its functions and activities, and then list or describe the records in the original order and not, for example, by themes, dates, or geographical locations — unless, of course, such a category was intended by the creator of the record.[46]

Electronic records present specific virtues and problems. On the positive side, if an archival repository adopts the top-to-bottom methodology alluded to earlier, all (or nearly all) the records of an institution, a corporation, or an individual will be reviewed so as to pinpoint the links, the duplications, the complementarities and, in many cases, the electronic data that could allow us to destroy large quantities of bulky paper records. It took years for our archivists to follow all the complex and interconnected flows of information in the Canada Employment and Immigration Commission. Now, they can save most of the high-yield material in the snapshots provided by the data banks that duplicate, in miniature and for the essential part, what miles of thick files contain. The overall view also avoids the lengthy and now impossible task of appraising each programme and subprogramme separately and in detail. The flows of information criss-

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45. Cook, "Viewing the World Upside Down . . .," 130; H. Glassie, *Folk Housing in Middle Virginia: A Structural Analysis of Historical Artifacts* (Knoxville, 1975); Régine Robin, *La société française en 1789: Semur-en-Auxois* (Paris, 1970); idem., *Histoire et linguistique* (Paris, 1973); John Hare, *La pensée socio-politique au Québec, 1784-1812, analyse sémantique* (Ottawa, 1977); Jean-Pierre Wallot, "Frontière ou fragment du système atlantique: des idées étrangères dans l'identité coloniale," *Historical Papers/Communications historiques* (1984): 1-29.
46. For example, see the *General Guide to the Government Archives Division* (Ottawa, 1991).
47. R. E. F. Weissman, "Virtual Documents on an Electronic Desktop: Hypermedia, Emerging Computer Environments and the Future of Information Management," in *Management of Records*, 41ff. "Tomorrow's documents, in fact, will be: compound in form, maintaining text, graphics and images; in their purely electronic presentation state, they may also contain sound, video and animations; and increasingly hard to define because they will contain pieces

cross each other but, at the intersecting points, we can catch all the edible fish in the archival gate.

These electronic records, however, pose their own unique problems. First, provenance and order may not be directly applicable, as complex databases may serve two or more branches or even departments. The division of data files thus creates a major archival problem. Second, they are inherently unstable and are condemned to a quick natural erosion unless costly measures of protection are taken. They also risk being erased by design — particularly if the data are on reusable tape — by accident (floppy disks, for example, are quite susceptible to damage in electronic or static environments), or by simple lack of use and poor climatic conditions or by time. Third, the technological tools — the hardware and software, for mainframes as well as for microcomputers, in a stand-alone or a network mode — to generate, update, and use these records are in a constant state of flux of obsolescence and renewal, so that many records will never be retrievable. Fourth, some data banks are so large — for example, data on climate or Statistics Canada's major holdings — that it would be impossible for the National Archives to afford the technology to deal with them. Environment Canada can buy and run a Cray computer, which costs over thirty million dollars, but the National Archives very definitely cannot. Fifth, most departments, agencies, and even private bodies or individuals create records in a number of formats — on paper, as audio-visual material, as large or micro-computer records, in photographs, and so on. An archivist must thus recreate a conceptual view of the entire *fonds*, even if it is physically separate and diverse. Sixth, modern technology not only allows for the simultaneous interplay of text, graphs, sound, images, data, and other kinds of information but, with hypermedia technology, it also blurs the boundaries between records (often in "virtual" form) and constantly recreates new clusters of complex "documents." Finally, with the electronic office, it will become mandatory to determine beforehand, in the systems themselves, what categories of records should be preserved, without prior knowledge of their exact content.[48] One could also delve at length into the difficulties of use by researchers, of the existence of an "original" or of copyright, along with the problems of appraisal,

of and links to other documents accessed through a hypermedia network" (51). In his "Multisensory Data and its Management," in ibid., 111, D. Bearman adds:

> The important point of these challenges to the traditional document is that the boundaries of the document have given way to a creative authoring event in which user and system participate. Only the context in which these virtual documents are created can give us an understanding of their content. While this requires a fundamental cultural adjustment, from viewing humans as the authors of information to accepting systems authorship, I would argue that it corresponds closely to a professional perspective of the archivist, which has long focused on provenance and the context of records creation rather than on the physical record or its contents."

48. This is not a theoretical concern any more. For instance, the National Archives acquired last year all the electronic records of the Trade Negotiations Office, about 300 interlinked microcomputers and memory servers. This information would have been lost had the transfer been effected two or three years later. See the papers by D. Taylor-Monro, "The Acquisition of the Electronic Records of the Trade Negotiation Office: The Technical Implications," and Paul Marsden, "The Electronic Records of the Trade Negotiation Office and the Effect of Automated Offices in Archival Acquisition," presented at the 1991 ACA Conference. The

arrangement, and description.[49] This brings us back to the above mentioned theoretical underpinnings to appraisal. Content *per se* cannot be the main appraisal criterion, not even for paper records. Apart from theoretical and historical problems, it would imply that archivists would have to peruse every single record to make a judgement. That is simply not feasible in the modern world, particularly with regards to electronic records.[50]

More and more information, public and private, exists only in electronic form. Yet we have certainly lost a large part of our electronic heritage for the 1960s and 1970s, perhaps even for the 1980s. The records died, or now yield no information, or cannot work on available equipment, or their software has been lost. As John MacDonald has argued for years, the massive amount of information to be grasped in electronic records, the fragility of the records themselves, and their constant need for upgrading because of changing technology are forcing archivists to work more and more "upstream," for instance, in developing archival rules which would be imbedded in systems at the time of their development, before the creation of any record has taken place and certainly before their specific content is known. This is why archivists focus on general content as defined by functional intent, organisational context, and data system models.[51]

There have been some improvements in the past year or two. Previously, we stored electronic files, but we could not work on them in the National Archives. Archivists

whole question of electronic records is well presented in *Taking a Byte out of History: The Archival Preservation of Federal Computer Records. Twenty-Fifth Report by the Committee on Government Operations* (Washington, 1990). As illustrations on the kinds of records in electronic form, the report mentions data relating to political and judicial matters, national security and international relations, military and civilian personnel, and to science, technology, administration, and geography (7-8). See also C. Granstrom, "The Evolution of Tools and Techniques for the Management of Machine-Readable Data," in *Management of Recorded Information*, 92-101.

49. Catherine Bailey has well summarised these difficulties in her "Archival Theory and Electronic Records," *Archivaria* 29 (Winter 1989-90): 180-96. See also Sue Gavrel and J. MacDonald, *Appraisal Guidelines in the Machine Readable Archives Division* (Ottawa, 1981); Harold Naugler, *The Archival Appraisal of Machine-Readable Records: A RAMP Study With Guidelines* (Paris, 1983); *Guidelines for the Scheduling of Data in Automated Systems* (Ottawa, 1986); and Taylor, "Transformation in the Archives . . .," 16ff.

50. Terry Cook, "Rites of Passage. . ." and L. Duranti, "Diplomatics: New Uses for an Old Science (Part IV)," *Archivaria* 31 (Winter 1990-91):23.

51. For a good summary of his large output, see his recent article, "Organiser l' 'amont' d'un programme d'archivage d'archives ordinolingues," *Janus* 2 (1990): 37-42. MacDonald argues that "la seule voie ouverte aux archives pour remplir leur mission à l'égard de la sélection, de la collecte, de la conservation et de la diffusion des archives informatiques ayant valeur archivistique est de prendre part à l' 'amont', c'est-à-dire au stade où les systèmes d'information sont mis à l'étude, puis constitués, où leur documentation est créée, et où les problèmes posés notamment par la sélection, la conservation et le sort final sont en discussion" (37). The author then explains the experiences attempted by the National Archives both in-house and in cooperation with the public and private sectors. See also the same author's studies: with Dorothy Alhgren, "The Archival Management of a Geographic Information System," *Archivaria* 13 (Winter 1981-82): 59-66; "An Approach to the Identification and Scheduling of EDP Data," *ADPA* 5:1 (1985): 51-68; "Records Management and Data Management, Closing the Gap," *Records Management Journal* 1:1 (1989). See also *Taking a Byte*. . . .

and researchers alike had to go to outside facilities even to process the records, though researchers could buy copies of the tapes. Now, through the enhancement of micro-computers running in networks and improvements in software design, we can download data in large quantities and process them in an archival environment, for the benefit of both archivists and, hopefully in the near future, researchers.[52] It may well be, however, that theorist David Bearman was right when he argued that archival repositories should act like information hubs whose role is in issuing standards of organisation, ensuring preservation, and facilitating access. Otherwise, they should leave it to large institutions, such as Statistics Canada, to implement this process on electronic records of permanent value which they would retain. Hence, in the end, what is important would occur: valuable material would be preserved and be accessible at relatively low cost.[53] However that may be, the cost of running even smaller systems will become extremely heavy and difficult to bear without additional resources, if the global acquisition plan of the National Archives works well in the next few years.

Audio-visual archives, often called moving images and sound archives, also appear both essential and difficult and costly to acquire and preserve in an archival repository. In many countries, some specialised institution keeps such records and makes them more or less available to researchers. In Canada, the "total archives" concept, tradition, and the difficulty of breaking up *fonds* comprising various types of materials, including audio-visuals, has prevented such an approach. Radio and television programming as well as cinema pervade our society. From leisure to education, from sports to music, from fiction to news, images and sound mould our society and reflect it at the same time. It is already impossible to write a serious study of recent events without consulting some audio-visual material. Our present will certainly be known by future generations mostly through it. The media also allow for greater dissemination of the contents of archival holdings.

Yet the use of appraisal criteria for the assessment of audio-visual material remains still in its infancy. Most difficult of all, audio-visual materials are fragile. Their supports have to be upgraded regularly. In a world of running technology, in many cases there are not even broadly accepted standards — for instance, in the case of digital recordings — and costs are exploding at the same time as the volume of material to be processed. It is impossible, at least at the National Archives of Canada (and, for that matter, in the whole Canadian archival community), to do justice to these contemporary recording media. The processing of our backlog of CBC material alone would necessitate millions of dollars and at least a hundred person/years over the next three years. That

52. Eldon Frost, "A Weak Link. . .," passim and "The National Archives. . .," 11.
53. D. Bearman, "An Indefensible Bastion: Archives as a Repository in the Electronic Age," *Archival Management of Electronic Records* 13 (1991): 14-24. Bearman argues for a greater role for archivists in regulation, auditing, and informing, but for a lesser one in custody. In his view, archivists cannot afford any more to acquire records except as a last resort. In fact, they don't need to collect them at all to accomplish their real task: locating valuable records, ensuring their preservation in agencies, facilitating access, dealing with the creation of new records, and so on. Bearman's radical perspective was foreshadowed by G. Ham, "Archival Strategies for the Post-Custodial Age," *American Archivist* 44 (1981): 207-16 and "Archival Choices: Managing the Historical Record in an Age of Abundance." ibid. 47 (1984): 11ff.

being impossible, selection criteria will have to become extremely narrow and harsh. Losses will be immense, some for the better, but a great deal for the worse. Unless there is a well-financed national programme of support for archiving audio-visual material at the national and regional levels, Canada will be visually amnesiac for large parts of its past in ten or twenty years.[54]

CONCLUSION

I could raise a number of other fascinating subjects about archives: the development of descriptive standards; the preliminary steps in the establishment of the Canadian Archival System which is similar to the system which now links libraries across the country;[55] the levels of service that are now possible in the current climate of restraint; the analysis of our user groups, their respective proportion in our global clientele, and the need for their support to ensure that the National Archives may tap the resources needed to accomplish its mission;[56] and the possible regionalisation of some of the operations of the National Archives, including services to researchers. This would, however, impinge on other kinds of problems for which other forums for discussion already exist. Moreover, enough has been said: explicitly about the selection and preservation of records, and implicitly about the required cooperation with other archives across the country,[57] with the creators of the records, and with relevant national and international bodies.

Historians too must assist in the enhancement and accessibility of our documentary heritage. They can actively participate in the Researchers' Forum recently established at the National Archives, in the Advisory Board which comprises members of the Canadian Historical Association, and in the Committee on Archives of the CHA. Beyond these formal links, however, informal conceptual channels must be maintained and expanded so as to crossfertilise these two communities that have the same long-term interest. The accumulation of a gigantic mass of valueless records will stifle research

54. For a good summary of the issues at stake, see A. Garnier, "The Future of the Audio-Visual Age: Implications for Museums and Archives," *ACA Bulletin* (January 1991): 8-11; E. Dick, "The Future of the CBC's Past: Archival Strategy for Broadcast Records," paper presented at the 1991 ACA Conference; Sam Kula, "Management of Moving Image and Sound Records," *Management of Recorded Information*, 76-82. What about "still videos" and photographs without film? On this question, see Andrew Rodger, "The New Image Carriers: Problems of Acquisition," paper presented at the 1991 ACA Conference.

55. On the involvement of the National Archives in standards development, see Durance and Wallot, "La normalisation des pratiques archivistiques . . . ." On the need for standards in information technology, see Helen M. Wood, "Information Technology Standards: A Foundation for Data Management," in *Management of Records*, 102-10. On the building of a Canadian archival system, see Ian Wilson, "Towards a Vision of Archival Services," *Archivaria* 31 (Winter 1990-91): 91-100 and 98.

56. For diverse views on those subjects, see Wilson, "Towards a Vision . . ."; Blais and Enns, "From Paper Archives to People Archives . . .," in which the authors propose to reduce one-to-one service to invest more in the preparation of better reference tools that would enhance the researchers' autonomy; and Cook, "Viewing the World Upside Down. . . ."

57. For more details and the relationships among the National Archives, the Canadian Council on Archives, and the Bureau of Canadian Archivists, see the introduction to the *Annual Report of the National Archives of Canada, 1988-1989* (Ottawa, 1989).

and discourage investments in archives. On the other hand, an irretrievable loss of precious historical documentation results in gaps in the collective memory of Canadians, thus in a sense of dislocation and uncertainty.

I cannot imagine that historians would be satisfied with simply tracking the documents illuminating their own particular historical topic. Surely they also care about future generations of researchers which they are training. Otherwise, they would lack even the basic instinct of reproduction. The multiplication of professional historians and of professional archivists, both crowned with advanced university degrees, evinces on the contrary a vibrant dynamism that speaks well for the future. "Si notre métier est de travailler à connaître le passé," stated our past president, Jean-Claude Robert, last year, "il nous engage aussi à faire en sorte que ceux qui viendront après nous puissent faire le même travail."[58]

As for archivists, they carry a heavy burden. They hold the keys to the collective memory. In this world of superficiality and "instant" everything, they must, more than ever before, develop the treasures of our "houses of memory," enriching them and making them more available and more visible to as many people as possible. An archives is about the past. Indeed, our staff feel privileged in our unparalleled access to our favourite pursuit: the study, acquisition, and preservation of permanently valuable records from the past. Yet archivists also look to the future. Where else will our children turn to answer their questions about our — *their* — history? How can we preserve the traces of the important events of today, which will become their past? We must, in effect, predict the past for them now, in cooperation with our allies in neighbouring professions — this is one of the subthemes of the 1992 Congress on Archives — and with historians. This responsibility to the future is the greatest challenge we face.

58. Robert, "Historiens, archives et archivistes . . .," 15.