

Archival Silence in the Age of Trump

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As I began writing this essay in late 2016 I had recently completed a paper on metaphors of archival silence. And so perhaps it isn't surprising that wherever I looked, I saw an escalation of concern about the effect of lies and distortions on the larger culture. I could barely read a news or opinion piece, watch a late night tv show, consult Facebook or Twitter, without observing the presence of a kind of zeitgeist defining preoccupation with the truth and reliability of the contemporary record. The Trump presidency has raised the stakes and the temperature of these concerns prompting questions about the viability of representative democracy in the face of mistrust of the president, skepticism of the press, and a social media landscape rife with bogus news and conspiracy theories. My plan is to situate some of these debates within the discourse of archival silence.

In my recent essay I defined archival silence as a way to name gaps, omissions and distortions in the historical record. I described this terminology and the use of similar metaphors such as archival exclusion or erasure as evidence of a broader questioning of the ways in which knowledge may be concealed, misappropriated or exploited in the service of governments, corporations and individuals. Since at least the 1990s we've seen an expansion of archival metaphor and archival theory. The recent attentiveness to issues of archival silence in particular might be construed as a shift in focus from a more general question of the archive as

foundation for the construction of knowledge to a more specific concern with those aspects of the archive that are invisible, irrecoverable and/or that underwrite and perpetuate governmental or institutional forms of violence. This engagement with archival silence also indicates an interest in theorizing and developing strategies to counter, mend, repair or simply acknowledge various forms of exclusion and loss. I don't mean to suggest that this interest has not been part of archival discourse from the beginning – only that it is increasingly the subject of both scholarly and popular literature.

I want to begin by enumerating a few of the many events that prompted me to pursue metaphors of archival silence and exclusion in the context of the current political moment.

These include:

- 1) The removal of material from the White House website on civil rights, climate change, health care, LGBT rights and immigration reform after the inauguration.¹
- 2) Attempts by the new administration, since partially walked back, to muzzle US agency employees by imposing a variety of restrictions, from limiting press releases and social media posts to preventing communication with Congress.²
- 3) Various attempts by President Trump to silence the press including his claim that he is at “war with the media,”³ his repeated impugning of major news outlets, and his February 17 tweet calling out the New York Times, NBC News, ABC, CBS and CNN as fake news and pronouncing them “the enemy of the American people.”

One response to these and other acts of institutional silencing has been a search for new ways to describe an environment in which allegations of lies and distortions are the stuff of the daily

news. Emblematic of this difficulty has been the struggle by the press to find language to characterize statements by the president and his surrogates. David Leonhardt of the *New York Times* highlights the challenge facing the mainstream press. He claims that the Trump administration's blatant disregard for the truth "puts the media in a tricky spot, because calling out the president of the United States and his staff for untruths will inevitably upset his supporters."⁴ But as Trump and his surrogates consistently respond to criticism by attempting to demonize and delegitimize the press, the media has few alternatives. Leonhardt warns that "We cannot use euphemisms for 'false' and 'untrue' when those are the accurate terms."⁵ An unquestioned and unchallenged Trump administration would constitute a massive archival silence, perhaps one in which we all got our news straight from the president and his staff.

It is therefore chilling to read that Google has warned a number of prominent journalists that they are being targeted by state sponsored hackers.⁶ The list of targeted journalists includes Jonathan Chait, Ezra Klein, Julia Ioffe, Brian Stelter, Paul Krugman and Keith Olberman.

Although so far Google has declined to identify the state, some of those affected suspect Russia is behind the hacks. In the words of an unnamed journalist cited in Politico coverage of the story, "The fact that all this started right after the election suggests to me that journalists are the next wave to be targeted....I worry that the outcome is going to be the same: Someone, somewhere, is going to get hacked, and then the contents of their Gmail will be weaponized against them – and by extension all media."⁷ As Christiane Amanpour noted in late November, journalism is in peril.⁸ Receiving an award in recognition of her work in support of freedom of the press, Amanpour declared "I never in a million years thought I would be up here on stage

appealing for the freedom and safety of American journalists at home.” Clearly this threat of archival violence is a new experience for many members of the U.S. press corps.

The terms of the new relation between journalists and the presidential administration came into focus on the day after the inauguration. Questions about the accuracy of information coming out of the White House were at the center of contentious coverage of the size of the inaugural crowds which press Secretary Sean Spicer declared “was the largest audience to ever witness an inauguration, period – both in person and around the globe”⁹ – a claim undercut by both photographic and other evidence including ridership figures for the Washington DC Metro.¹⁰

The dispute over crowd size only intensified when Kellyanne Conway appeared on *Meet the Press* on January 22nd and was challenged by Chuck Todd who asked her why Trump would send Spicer out to his very first press briefing “to utter a provable falsehood.”¹¹ Conway replied “you’re saying it’s a falsehood....our press secretary, gave alternative facts to that.” To which Todd replied “Look, alternative facts are not facts. They’re falsehoods.”¹²

Trend Watch, a website belonging to Merriam-Webster, claims that after Conway’s interview with Todd, there was a spike in searches for the word “fact,”¹³ which begs the question of why so many people suddenly sought out such clarification. The simple answer would seem to be that a media landscape fueled by lies and evasions erodes our faith in language and objective reality. Trump’s refusal to release his tax returns, the lack of clarity surrounding the complex web of his business dealings, and the sketchy outlines of his administration’s connections to the Russian government all contribute to gaps in our knowledge. As archivists and historians

increasingly study the record for what has been left out or not documented, many of us are attempting to read the current administration for what it is not telling us and why. It has been common practice for historians and archivists to treat official government misrepresentations as well as gaps in official records as forms of archival silence and to focus on unearthing whatever truth can be found or at least attempt to illuminate and make visible the silences. This is the response demanded by the current moment and it is complicated by our need to study these gaps as they are being created as well as needing to anticipate future gaps so as to save what might otherwise be lost.

Politicians have always lied but the nature of those lies has altered in roughly the past decade. Stephen Colbert captured the sense of a change in political discourse when he introduced the term “truthiness” in 2005.¹⁴ Colbert used the word to satirize the elevation of gut feeling and emotion over facts. He declared that “It used to be, everyone was entitled to their own opinion, but not their own facts. But that’s not the case anymore. Facts matter not at all.”¹⁵ Truthiness is a way of naming a kind of archival silence. It substitutes what a speaker wishes were true for actual facts. Thus it was used to refer to George W. Bush’s praise for the head of FEMA after its disastrous response to Hurricane Katrina: “Brownie, you’re doing a heck of a job.”¹⁶ The term truthiness clearly struck a chord. It was named Word of the Year by the American Dialect Society in 2005, by Merriam-Webster in 2006 and Top Word of 2006 by The Global Language Monitor.¹⁷

In a similar vein, we have seen the rise of the term post-truth, which was chosen as the 2016 Word of the Year by Oxford Dictionaries.¹⁸ Post-truth is a way to define or denote

“circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.”¹⁹ Although the term post-truth has been in circulation for the past decade it has undergone a dramatic spike in usage in the context of the Brexit and U.S. presidential campaigns. It has also become associated with a particular noun, as in the phrase “post-truth politics.”²⁰ Oxford University Press observes that the word bears some similarity to the word truthiness. However, it claims that post-truth extends the notion of truthiness from “an isolated quality of particular assertions to a general characteristic of our age.”²¹ It is precisely in this context that post-truth might seem to demand a discourse of archival silence to uncover, name or make visible what is lost to distortion and evasion. The development of this new terminology of truthiness and post-truth is in part a response to the increasing complexity and opacity of global systems. It is an attempt to find language to describe a world in which power is obscured and words cannot be relied upon.

In an essay written after the election but before the inauguration, Jacob T. Levy, a professor of political theory, describes the rise of the word post-truth as “a declaration of baffled uncertainty about how contemporary politics and politicians relate to the facts of the world, with Donald Trump ..., as exhibit A.”²² Levy finds that although some of Trump’s outrageous claims come “with a spin-zone indifference to whether anyone believes” what he says, Trump is well aware that they are false. Attempting to understand Trump’s motivation, Levy looks to George Orwell, Hannah Arendt and Valclav Havel for their analysis of language and truth under authoritarian regimes. And he takes from their work the notion that often “a leader with authoritarian tendencies will lie in order to make others repeat his lie both as a way to demonstrate and strengthen his power over them.”²³ Levy speculates that Trump relishes the

power to make his surrogates repeat his outrageous lies. Levy claims that Chris Christie, Rudy Giuliani and Kellyanne Conway making the rounds of the Sunday talk shows during the election campaign, repeating and restating Trump's lies, were not meant to win over new voters. The audience for shows like *Meet the Press* was unlikely to grant them much credulity. But the repeated assaults on truth by Trump spokespeople constitute a form of archival violence. They create an environment in which lies and distortions take up so much airspace that they undermine faith in our ability to recognize truth when we see or hear it. And, of course, this assault on the truth further damages the credibility of the news media.

As Masha Gessen has argued, "Lying is the message."²⁴ In a piece called "The Putin Paradigm" she claims that "It's not just that both Putin and Trump lie, it is that they lie in the same way and for the same purpose: blatantly, to assert power over truth itself."²⁵ This obviously creates new challenges for journalists. Gessen thus claims that "It is time to raise the stakes from fact to truth. With a president who lies in order to demonstrate power, fact-checking is indeed useless if it's the entire story. The media have to find a way to tell the bigger story—the story about the lies rather than the story of the lies; and the story about power that the lies obscure." This claim echoes the call among archivists and historians to attend not only to the gaps in the historical record, but to the power that determines the contents and thus the silences of the archive. It is crucial to establish how power is wielded to shape the truth.

Through both words and deeds the Trump administration is creating archival silences in so many arenas that it will require a range of strategies to name, fill or just make them visible. Fortunately, much work is under way to do precisely this. We are currently witnessing efforts

within the archival, library, IT and scientific communities to preserve records, to monitor official information that is subject to alteration, and to disseminate information that would otherwise be suppressed. This multi-pronged resistance to archival erasure and suppression represents an acknowledgment of the centrality of archival production in establishing truth, providing a foundation for new knowledge and preserving the historical record. It also represents an appreciation of the variety and depth of information provided by the federal government that might be at risk such as basic information about public health, employment, education, crime, the economy and the environment.

Perhaps the greatest concern about a potential loss of information has been voiced by climate scientists.²⁶ Even before the inauguration stories were circulating about how years' of carefully collected data might be erased. Under any new administration there is a risk of information disappearing from U.S. government websites. But the issue has taken on greater urgency in the face of Trump's skepticism and hostility to scientific data including his claim that the idea of manmade climate change is a hoax perpetrated by the Chinese.

In response a variety of initiatives were born. These include "data rescue" and "data refuge" events where people can volunteer and share tools and expertise.²⁷ Students, coders, librarians, and scientists have all become involved in the project of saving U.S. government data.²⁸ Many events have been sponsored by the Environmental Data and Governance Initiative (EDGI), a new network of academics and nonprofits formed to address threats to scientific infrastructure that supports access to government information.²⁹

Another major player in these efforts is called the End of Term (EOT) Presidential Harvest 2016.³⁰ It is a multi-institution collaborative to copy and save public U.S. government web sites as they existed on January 20, 2017. A key participant, the Internet Archive, has committed to crawl broadly across the entire .gov domain. But preserving federal websites only addresses a piece of the problem. The larger challenge is to copy and provide usable versions of complex databases and data sets.³¹ This work has raised awareness of the vast amount of valuable government data dispersed across servers in hundreds of departments where it may be difficult to find and even more difficult to extract and save.³²

Beyond attempts to preserve U.S. government information, efforts are underway to document and secure records of the new administration that might otherwise be lost or suppressed. The Presidential Records Act of 1978 set rules requiring the preservation and transfer of presidential records at the end of a term to the Archivist of the United States.³³ Although a U.S. National archives spokesperson has said that a president's tweets are part of the official record, scholars like Shontavia Johnson, a professor of intellectual property, are concerned that there is no official guarantee that Trump's altered or deleted tweets will be saved.³⁴ She does, however, note that at least one organization has voluntarily taken responsibility for saving tweets deleted from Trump's account. ProPublica, a nonprofit corporation dedicated to investigative journalism has created an archive of deleted Trump tweets. It includes, for example, a January 6 tweet taken down after 51 seconds saying that Mexico will pay to build a border wall and another tweet of December 17 removed after an hour that says that China has stolen a U.S. drone by ripping it out of the water.³⁵ Because these kinds of presidential statements may have international consequences there is a certain urgency about preserving

them. Nevertheless this is a moment in which maintenance of the record depends in part upon the voluntary work of individuals and organizations.

The Internet Archive has been a major player in archiving the web and providing access to it through its *Wayback Machine*.³⁶ It has also been building what it calls the *Trump Archive*, collecting and preserving Trump's televised speeches, interviews, debates and other broadcasts. When it launched in early January it already included more than 520 hours of Trump video dating back to 2009. The Internet Archive itself announced just after the election that it was building a copy of its digital collections to reside in Canada. Brewster Kahle, founder of the Internet Archive, wrote on their official blog that the decision had been made after taking into account the priorities of the new administration."³⁷ Recognizing the potential for archival violence, the organization decided to establish a site outside the U.S. This is an unprecedented move to preemptively secure documentation from threats of a U.S. presidential administration intent on wrapping itself and the rest of us in archival silence.

While many worry about the erasure of information, equally troubling is the potential for the misuse of information and the possibility that large collections of data could provide the foundation for the exercise of state violence. Of particular concern at the moment is a company called Palantir Technologies, a data analysis firm incorporated in 2003 by Peter Thiel.³⁸ Thiel is probably the only prominent Silicon Valley executive to support Trump and is currently his senior technology advisor. Palantir has produced systems that for years have been supporting homeland security, intelligence and law enforcement.³⁹ Palantir is currently expanding a system called Investigative Case Management or ICM, which could provide the digital underpinning for

massive deportations.⁴⁰ Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) already uses the system for which Palantir was awarded a 41 million dollar contract in 2014. ICM is supposed to be fully functional by next September.⁴¹ And it would enable ICE to aggregate and mine data from other federal agencies to establish a variety of personal details about anyone they are tracking. Palantir has also developed a system known as the Analytical Framework for Intelligence, which gathers data from various government databases and is used by U.S. Customs and Border Protection to identify people based on individually constructed profiles.⁴² So according to Fortune magazine, “There already is something like a Muslim registry, and Peter Thiel owns it.”⁴³

Despite, or perhaps because of such developments, many in the tech community are seeking to raise awareness and to foster social justice, diversity, privacy and security. As noted earlier, some are trying to find ways to save at risk data. Still others are working to protect the information of at risk populations. In January the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) took out a full page ad in *Wired Magazine* exhorting the tech industry to unite in defense of users. This would involve companies and organizations securing their systems, “deleting unnecessary user data and encrypting communications.”⁴⁴ Otherwise the EFF warns that companies run the risk of their servers being conscripted to support Donald Trump’s agenda.

In addition to the efforts of the EFF, a grassroots initiative with a similar goal is the neveragain.tech pledge.⁴⁵ It has been signed by roughly 3000 people employed by the tech industry or tech organizations based in the U.S. Within the pledge there is a statement acknowledging that in the past technology has been deployed to perform the work of

identifying and locating individuals targeted for government persecution. It notes the dependence of Nazi Germany on IBM technology in carrying out the holocaust. And it also mentions the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. Hence the pledge “never again.” Signees commit to “refuse to participate in the creation of databases identifying information for the U.S. government to target individuals based on race, religion, or national origin” and to advocate for minimizing the collection and retention of data that could be used to discriminate or to persecute groups or individuals.

The recognition of the need to protect and secure user data indicates a growing awareness of its potential to underwrite archival violence. Members of the library community have long known the importance of protecting such data. In 2001 libraries resisted the Patriot Act and its expansion of U.S. government surveillance.⁴⁶ Among other things, Section 215 required libraries to turn over patron data when requested by law enforcement to do so. It also prohibited libraries from alerting users that their data had been surrendered. Many libraries responded by posting signs informing patrons about the potential for the FBI to monitor their computer use. A group of librarians fought the government demand for non-disclosure and eventually prevailed in court.⁴⁷

Although libraries have worked to protect themselves against state or other intrusion, the Trump administration has galvanized library and related organization in entirely new ways. There has been a chorus of resistance from across the library, archive, university press and writers communities.⁴⁸ At least seven major professional organizations in these fields have issued statements condemning Trump’s executive order banning some of the world’s most

vulnerable populations and declaring the law's potential to disrupt research, collaboration and the free flow of ideas and information. The Society of American Archivists warns that a travel ban will prevent marginalized communities from preserving and sharing archival records and impede the work of archivists and students seeking to build and support those collections.

Even before Trump proposed the elimination of the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) in mid-March along with the NEH, NEA, and others, the broader library community saw the new Trump administration as a singular threat to its goals and mission. Before libraries were aware of or began to mobilize against Trump's proposed cuts, ARL, an organization of 124 research libraries in the U.S. and Canada, started collecting and posting mission statements created by their members. Most were produced between November and February affirming their core beliefs in such things as openness, accessibility, diversity and intellectual freedom.⁴⁹ No other presidential administration has prompted this kind of action. The closest historical parallels are two official statements approved by the American Library Association (ALA). The Library Bill of Rights began as a response to the rise of Fascism in the 1930s and the Freedom to Read statement was a response to McCarthyism in the 1950s. Neither was a defensive act against a sitting president.

A statement by the Concerned Archivist Alliance makes the most explicit case regarding the threat to the historical record posed by the Trump administration.⁵⁰ It claims that Trump's destruction or deletion of digital and paper records in the face of government investigations of his businesses raise "grave concerns that, as president, this pattern of behavior, will put the documentary record of his administration at risk."⁵¹ The Alliance finds that even more

disturbing is the claim by Trump and his surrogates “that ‘there are no such things as facts’ and that everything is a matter of opinion” as this “goes against the fundamental tenets of the archival and historical professions.” By dismissing the existence of evidence, proof, scientific and other data, Trump undermines not only the press and journalism but all the professions whose foundation is built on documentary evidence and a grounding in the historical record. This is indisputably a key moment in a battle to prevent a reign of archival silence.

¹ <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2017/01/20/trump-s-whitehouse-gov-disappears-civil-rights-climate-change-lgbt-rights.html>

² <https://www.aclu.org/blog/speak-freely/government-employees-get-have-opinions-too>

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/28/us/politics/donald-trump-truth.html>

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/23/opinion/the-media-cannot-waver.html>

⁵ (ibid Leonhardt) <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/23/opinion/the-media-cannot-waver.html>

⁶ <http://www.politico.com/story/2017/02/google-hackers-russia-journalists-234859>

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ <https://www.cpj.org/awards/2016/christiane-amanpour.php>

⁹ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/01/21/statement-press-secretary-sean-spicer> and

¹⁰ https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/21/us/politics/trump-white-house-briefing-inauguration-crowd-size.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&clickSource=story-heading&module=a-lede-package-region®ion=top-news&WT.nav=top-news&_r=1

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¹² Ibid.

¹³ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/news-trend-watch/conway-alternative-facts-20170122>

¹⁴ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Truthiness>

¹⁵ <http://www.avclub.com/article/stephen-colbert-13970>

¹⁶ <http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/hurricane-katrina-anniversary/heck-job-brownie-where-disgraced-fema-head-now-n400436>, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9501E3D6123FF931A15752C0A9609C8B63>

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¹⁸ <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/word-of-the-year/word-of-the-year-2016>

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² <https://niskanencenter.org/blog/authoritarianism-post-truth-politics/>

²³ <https://niskanencenter.org/blog/authoritarianism-post-truth-politics/>

²⁴ <http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2016/12/13/putin-paradigm-how-trump-will-rule/>

²⁵ Ibid.

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- ²⁷ <https://twitter.com/search?q=data%20rescue&src=typd>,
<https://twitter.com/search?q=data%20refuge&src=typd>
- ²⁸ https://mobile.nytimes.com/2017/03/06/science/donald-trump-data-rescue-science.html?_r=0&referrer=https://t.co/OBXupuuPkP
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- ³² https://mobile.nytimes.com/2017/03/06/science/donald-trump-data-rescue-science.html?_r=0&referrer=https://t.co/OBXupuuPkP
- ³³ <https://www.archives.gov/presidential-libraries/laws/1978-act.html>
- ³⁴ <https://www.yahoo.com/news/trumps-tweets-presidential-records-deletions-205649210--politics.html>,
<http://www.usnews.com/news/national-news/articles/2017-02-01/donald-trumps-tweets-are-now-presidential-records>. (On April 3rd, two days after this talk was presented, ABC News reported that “The head of the archives, David S. Ferriero, told two Democratic senators in a letter last week that the White House has assured him it's saving all Trump's Twitter blasts.” <http://abcnews.go.com/Technology/wireStory/national-archives-white-house-save-trump-tweets-46546934>)
- ³⁵ <https://projects.propublica.org/politwoops/user/realDonaldTrump>
- ³⁶ <http://archive.org/web/web.php>
- ³⁷ <https://blog.archive.org/2016/11/29/help-us-keep-the-archive-free-accessible-and-private/>
- ³⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_Thiel
- ³⁹ <https://theintercept.com/2017/02/22/how-peter-thiels-palantir-helped-the-nsa-spy-on-the-whole-world/>
- ⁴⁰ <http://mashable.com/2017/03/02/peter-thiel-palantir-ice/#6fhoFuR43aqh> and
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- ⁴³ <http://fortune.com/2016/12/22/trump-thiel-palantir/?iid=sr-link1>
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- ⁴⁷ <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/31/nyregion/31library.html>
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- ⁴⁹ <http://www.arl.org/publications-resources/4225-arl-library-statements-affirming-our-core-beliefs#.WMAcgo0zWIK>
- ⁵⁰ <https://concernedarchivists.wordpress.com/>
- ⁵¹ <https://concernedarchivists.wordpress.com/>