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Democratising or privileging

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Introduction

Privilege has become a term of opprobrium. To be privileged is often viewed in derogatory terms, denoting a 'special right or advantage for a particular person or group' (Oxford English Dictionary 2001, p. 704) due to, for example, wealth or social status. In the United Kingdom, disputes over privilege tend to be encapsulated by a debate around educational provision and the disparities between fee-paying and non fee-paying schools with the resultant life opportunities that ensue (Gibbon 2011). In the United States, privilege tends to be cast across racial lines and the notion of 'white privilege' (Rothenberg 2011). Where privilege resides in the twenty-first century, it will often be accompanied by calls for its eradication via a democratisation, an act of opening-up, whereby something is, in principle, made 'open to anyone' (Oxford English Dictionary 2001, p. 230).

Such discourse is rooted in how different groups are able to interact with, and control, other groups. It is within this context of power relationships that archival privileging has traditionally dwelt.[2] Privileging is, in this reading, the process through which information is filtered by an archivist for preservation and dissemination. Archives have long collected, rather than simply received, records. After the creator-centric passivism of Sir Hilary Jenkinson archives, by collecting, took a more engaged stance via 'formal or informal policies defining what they will (or will not) collect' (Currall, Moss & Stuart 2006, p. 98). Such collection policies guided archivists when focusing on the value of a record in order to make retention or appraisal decisions. It was, therefore, a relatively straightforward process of evaluating the repository's needs and interests, based upon Theodore Schellenberg's model of evidential and informational value, and searching for available material (Schellenberg 1956). This remains at the core of many modern-day archives whose documentary base flows naturally from institutional records management processes and procedures. Yet it was, at the time, a particularly narrow perspective rooted in legalistic conceptions of evidence whereby records fulfilled their 'natural' function as 'by-products of administration, the untainted evidence of acts and transactions' (Cook 1999, p. 23) or in conceptions of informational research value which favoured the historian and the 'Great Man' theory of history that remained prevalent. Indeed Schellenberg, for all that he sought to move away from the 'old fossil' Jenkinson (Smith 1981, p. 319), retained a belief in the organic nature of archives and of them acting as explicit representations of organisational activity (Schellenberg 1956, pp. 15-16). The archival world was still, essentially, not so far removed from the archival world of Samuel Muller, Adriaan Feith and Robert Fruin in 1898, whereby:

> Only official documents, i.e. those received or produced by administrative bodies or officials 'in their official capacity', belong to the archival collection. Documents received or produced by members of an administrative body or by officials in *another* capacity, which are often found in an archival collection, do not belong to it (Muller, Feith & Fruin 2003, p. 13).

This version of the archive was prohibitive and sought borders and boundaries. One consequence of this stance was that the archivist was, in principle, removed from the subjective and the cultural. He, as the archivist of this time was likely to be, was not beholden to moral and political relevance or the whims of the day. Rather, the archivist was an idealistic representation of neutrality and impartiality. This was a state of being that raised the archivist from mere mortal to trusted professional, encapsulated in this Sermon-like quotation from Sir Hilary Jenkinson:

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[1] A version of this article was originally presented at the Democratising or Privileging: the future of access to archives conference held at the University of Dundee (25-26 April, 2013)

[2] The term is not to be confused with archival privilege, which is an issue relating to questions of confidentiality.

> [The archivist] exists in order to make other people's work possible, unknown people for the most part and working very possibly on lines equally unknown to him: some of them perhaps in the quite distant future and upon lines as yet unpredictable. His Creed, the Sanctity of Evidence; his Task, the Conservation of every scrap of Evidence attaching to the Documents committed to his charge; his Aim, to provide, without prejudice or afterthought, for all who wish to know the Means of Knowledge (Jenkinson 1980, p. 258).

The archivist was the servant of evidence, existing to ensure the preservation of trustworthy evidence which bore witness to facts, ideas and actions. By preserving evidence, it would, as a consequence, become accessible to the expectant and experienced user, mainly of an academic disposition, who received drafts of illumination through their own endeavour in the manner of this translation from Xenophanes: 'in the beginning, the Gods did not show to man all he was wanting; but, in the course of time, he may search for the better, and find it' (Popper 1966, p. 235).

From around the 1970s this subdued archival performance began to be widely critiqued, illustrative of a societal shift that undermined faith in the ability of bureaucratic structures to protect and reward. As deference to traditional elites within society gradually diminished, individuals and under-represented groups and communities desired to gain 'a sense of identity, locality, history, culture, and personal and collective memory' (Cook 2001b, p. 18). People sought, and fought, to be represented and the archive was unable to stand aside from such currents of change. This re-appraisal of the archival function found the archive to be a product of power relations, intimately entwined with a social contract that privileged establishment institutions and individuals. Archival privileging was at the core of the criticisms - the archive had come to represent those that were privileged via the manner in which the archivist filtered information for preservation and dissemination. As a result, the documentary base was biased. An early example of the dawning professional recognition of this unrepresentative archive came in 1975 when F. Gerald Ham, then President of the Society of American Archivists, delivered a 'damning rebuke of the profession and the entire process through which archivists documented society' (Johnston 2001, p. 214). The archivist's primary responsibility, he suggested, was to 'provide the future with a representative record of human experience in our time. But why must we do it so badly?' Ham was illustrative of the theoretical shift in archival thinking from strict neutrality and impartiality to an embracing of individual and collective subjectivity. For Ham, instead of continuing to 'document the well-documented', thereby producing a 'biased and distorted archival record', archivists needed to 'hold up a mirror to mankind' (Ham 1975, p. 5).

Subsequently, Ham's entreaty has become the locus point around which discussions regarding the nature of the profession, and what it means to be an archivist, revolve. Randall Jimerson, in the Preface to his 2009 publication *Archives Power: Memory, Accountability, and Social Justice*, stated the following:

> As I became engaged in wider circles of professional activity and responsibility, I found it necessary to ask *why*? Why do archivists select some people and some organisations to document and not others? Why do they appraise (evaluate) certain types of records as significant and others as unimportant? (Jimerson 2009, p. xiii)

Jimerson is questioning the role of the archivist and what archivists do with the power they unquestionably hold. Such discourse and critique has led additional individuals, such as Verne Harris, Tom Nesmith, Terry Cook and Joan Schwartz, to argue that corrective action must be taken to ensure that the malpractice of archiving is reversed and that the archive undoes the distortion of social memory that has come from privileging certain institutions and sections of society within recorded information (Cook and Schwartz 2002; Harris 2005; Nesmith 1999). For example, Cook and Schwartz draw on the work of Harris to conclude that:

…they can only welcome and respect the 'Other,' and try to tell through appraisal and description and outreach as full a story as possible, 'using records systems and sites of records creation as the primary raw materials.' Of course, despite careful research and the 'vigorous exercise of reason,' sensitive archivists will always know 'that there are other tellings, other stories which they might have chosen' (Cook & Schwartz 2002, p. 18).

Harris himself has quoted with approval the writer Andre Brink who argues, in a book entitled *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South* Africa, that 'the best we can do is to fabricate metaphors – that is, tell stories – in which, not history, but imaginings of history are invented' (Harris 2002, p. 149).

The archive has, in this vision, moved beyond the mind-set represented via the translation from Xenophanes whereby the archivist is nothing more than a passive conduit through which the records flow into the archive and out to the user. Yet despite what the author believes to be progressive developments, the fundamentals of archival theory that inform the basic remit of the archivist remains, in principle, the same - it is to preserve and to facilitate user access. It is, at root, to serve as a gatekeeper to historical knowledge and at the core of being a gatekeeper in the recordkeeping realm is the act of privileging information: if something is archived, it is considered important enough at the time to serve as a representation for future reference and is thus signified as something of importance – for individuals, groups, nations and society as a whole. There is, therefore, power in the archive through the construction of a hierarchy of value and non-value and the archive, in this telling, acts as a legitimating authority. Hence whilst, in the past, archivists thought being a gatekeeper meant to be neutral and protective it did, in fact, mean privileging. Harris and Cook, amongst others, have brought this to our attention but what they are fundamentally arguing for is that the archive and archivist publicly acknowledge its individual and collective subjectivity. In so doing, such acceptance enables the profession to be fairer, open and more transparent about its privileging (Cook 2001b). This is different from calls for its removal - ultimately individuals like Cook and Harris are advocates for the ethical and political power of the archive and the ability of the archivist to be a privileger for progressive and democratic action. In essence the archivist is to become an equal rights privileger, an activist and campaigner for justice with the record as the weapon.

This is inspiring and many will see this as precisely where the profession needs to position itself to retain relevance in the twenty-first century. Whilst Cook and Harris would likely instinctively recoil from an archivist as gatekeeper analogy, Jimerson does, for example, quote with approval Wallace C. Koehler and J. Michael Pemberton in asserting that 'As gatekeepers of information, information professionals have a greater ethical responsibility than ever before to their users, to themselves, to the profession, and to society' (Jimerson 2009, p.345). Yet whilst Jimerson has utilised the term gatekeeper for positive ends, explicit description of the archivist as a privileger or gatekeeper is rare and often appears to be held in active opposition to the democratic act of opening-up the archive. The extent to which this seems to have become normalised was in evidence in 2013 when the Centre for Archive and Information Studies, at the University of Dundee, held a conference entitled *Democratising or Privileging: the future of access to archives*. The conference title should have been viewed as deliberately provocative as it embraced a clear demarcation – Democratising *or* Privileging. Yet despite there being one session that provoked contentious discussion around the issue of whether the profession should privilege the academic user over the genealogist researcher, the general thrust of the papers presented to this exceptional conference accepted and confirmed the validity of a conceptual divergence - it was as though an unconscious consensus had formed that democratising was a noble and virtuous act, whereas privileging was bad (fair or otherwise). As a result, many speakers focused solely on the notion of democratisation enshrined within the conference title and displayed how they had undertaken actions to support the processes of democratisation over the past couple of decades. In so doing, they had opened their archive up to an increased number of users and democratised a set of processes that were elitist, closed off, inaccessible and representative of a societal power imbalance. The conference narrative came down firmly on the side of democratisation at the expense of privileging.

Many may wonder why this would matter if, overall, the direction of professional travel is towards the archive being open, transparent, representative and producing progressive results. Within the internal walls of the archival profession it probably seems to matter little as steps have been taken to meet Ham's primary responsibility of providing the future with a representative record of human experience in our time. However, this paper will argue that a challenge to the archive has emerged over the past decade that has the potential to alter the archival profession and change the role of the archivist as it has been traditionally, and is still currently, understood. At its core is a movement for the full democratisation of knowledge. Advocates of this movement take on notions of control and mediation in the digital realm, a consequence of which is the potential by-passing of the privileger / gatekeeper. This paper will examine this shift and will argue that now, more than ever, the profession needs to understand and recognise the transformative and democratic effects the archive can have via the act of privileging as it is precisely our continuing reliance upon filtering information for dissemination and preservation that will keep the profession relevant and important in the twenty-first century. The structure and focus of the paper will be as follows:

- Section I – The Democratisation of Knowldege - will introduce and analyse Web 2.0 and the overhaul of how we find and locate our knowledge. These complementary developments which, to their advocates, democratise the processes surrounding information, knowledge and communication, have important consequences for the relationships between information, order and access

- Section II – Privileging in the Digital Environment - will argue that the claims made for the demise of privileging amid the liberation that comes via the democratisation of knowledge are, in many instances, false or misguided and that there is still a role for the gatekeeper

- Section III – Making a Choice for the User - expands upon Section II to argue that one of the essential questions for information creators and users in the digital environment is how information can be used widely and efficiently. The paper will argue that it is here that privileging reaffirms its importance

- Section IV – Opening Gates - will provide a counter-balance that recognises that processes which democratise access to knowledge and enable the user to become a participant within that process do have multiple benefits. It will advocate that via the utilisation of some of these processes, the profession can be a gateopener as well as a gatekeeper through encouraging participation and imaginative re-thinking

- Finally, the paper will conclude that the profession needs to shout loudly, clearly and without shame that archivists engage in privileging. By so doing, it is the archivist that enables a democratisation of knowledge that actually functions as a democratisation in practice and that expands the voice of the user and user access. The archivist as gatekeeper, as a privileger of the historical record and narrative, can and should still be applicable in the twenty-first century – the future of archives, both in the paper and digital environments, lies not in democratisation *or* privileging but in a form of democratisation *and* privileging or, to be more precise, democratisation *via* privileging.

The Democratisation of Knowledge

An advocate for the on-going relevance of the gatekeeper must accept that there are unattractive elements attached to the concept which diminishes its standing and attractiveness. Rupert Murdoch for example, as a figure of power with a measure of control over the messages disseminated throughout society, is a media mogul operating within an ethical vacuum where the concept of 'truth' is frequently manipulated and misrepresented (Fiderer 2011). Perhaps it was someone like Murdoch who was in the mind of Amazon founder Jeff Bezos when, in 2012, he stated that we need to 'eliminate all the gatekeepers' (Friedman 2012). With this mind-set at the top of Amazon's organisational chain it is unsurprising that Bill Carr, Amazon Vice-President for Digital Music and Video, recently stated, in relation to Amazon Studios, that 'We let the data drive what we put in front of customers. We don't have tastemakers deciding what our customers should read, listen to, and watch' (Packer 2014). Bezos and Carr are part of a community who believe that online communication is intrinsically an

emancipatory force for good and on the side of the oppressed rather than the oppressor. Such beliefs are rooted initially in Web 2.0, those World Wide Web sites that emphasise user-generated content, usability and interoperability. Douglas Rushkoff, for example, extols the virtues of Web 2.0 by stating:

> The Internet's ability to network human beings is its very life's blood. It fosters communication, collaboration, sharing, helpfulness, and community…The ideas, information, and applications now launching on Websites around the world capitalise on the transparency, usability, and accessibility that the internet was born to deliver (Rushkoff 2002, p 27).

At the core of this idea is the ability of individuals to by-pass traditional information portals, seen as encapsulating establishment networks of control, so as to become personally empowered to create, locate or upload content that is not reliant upon gatekeepers or tastemakers for validation and dispersal.

The liberating and democratic claims made as a result of this development have, at times, been breath-taking. For example, in 2009 the then Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Gordon Brown, stated that 'You cannot have Rwanda again because information would come out more quickly about what is going on and the public opinion would grow to the point where action is taken' (Viner 2009). Brown here is not only reifying networks of communication but the ubiquitous nature of information commensurate with the radical overhaul of how we find and locate our knowledge. Ronald Day, in *The Modern Invention of Information*, documents an idea in Paul Otlet's book *Monde*, published in 1935, where the 'ultimate problem of documentation' is envisioned: the creation of a technological device that would unify information but also transform it in such a way as to present it in the most 'advantageous' manner to each viewer'. Day provides a summary of Otlet's ideas that are worth detailing at length:

> The final goal of such a project would be the presentation of all the "facts" of existence to all the people – a sort of Hegelian vision of absolute being with information playing the role of Hegel's notions of truth. Epistemic "transformation," here, ends with a form of total representation. History, for Otlet, was a progressive movement of ever-accumulating knowledge and clarity; what was lacking was a device for the storage, retrieval, and communication of this progressive store so as to bring the fruits of reason to all the citizens of the world. Otlet's multimedia device would present to each person, in the comfort of his or her own armchair, something like the omniscient vision of the world by God. At one stroke, this device would solve the problem of science (to rationally represent all things in the world), the problem of technique (to rationally organise all the knowledge of the world), and the problem of society (to make available to each person all the knowledge of the world.)…Such a device would provide each person with a true and complete picture of all knowledge in a manner that would be most true for each person, thus eliminating conflicts over differing interpretations and providing the grounds for "true" conversation (Day 2001, pp. 19-20).

In one paragraph, produced 80 years ago, Otlet summarises what today are the core tenets of the World Wide Web and Google's mission statement that 'Google's mission is to organise the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful' (Google). As the vehicle through which all the world's knowledge will be stored, retrieved and communicated to all citizens of the globe it is, seemingly, the ultimate democratic, progressive, act. A digital Library of Babel.

These complementary developments which, to their advocates, democratise the processes surrounding information, knowledge and communication, have important consequences for the relationships between information, order and access. One specific question surrounds the concept of aggregation. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, aggregation is 'the action or process of collecting particles into a mass, or

particulars into a whole; collection, assemblage, union' (Oxford English Dictionary). The connection to archivists and the techniques utilised so as to ensure order and enshrine context is evident and, as a result, aggregation is essentially an article of faith for archivists. Records, as single items, are made meaningful by their relationships with other records and form collections. The whole, in this reading, are truly the sum of their component, 'particle', parts. These accumulations of records, which, if viewed via an organisational context, occur organically via function or activity, subsequently form the record groupings commonly referred to as files, series and, at collection-level, Fonds. It is from these groupings of records that archivists determine provenance and context and create descriptions based upon hierarchy. However, as Geoffrey Yeo writes:

> In the world of paper records, aggregations are brought together and arrangement is fixed before the user arrives on the scene, but many critics argue that the digital revolution overturns these conventions; users can now make orders of their own choosing and construct their own aggregations dynamically when they wish (Yeo 2012, p. 43).

Google is, of course, an illustration of this in practice. Upon the user entering a search term, an algorithm determines the results the user sees on the screen – via the search term, the user has 'manipulated' the returns. In principle the ultimate meritocratic system, each item is supposedly 'equal' and ranking is determined upon an ability to fulfil the needs of the user. Crucially, however, Google operates at item-level – search engines have no sense of context and no idea what other related content exists within the container of its information universe. In this regard it privileges snippets of information at the expense of evidence and the record, utilising hyperlinks to jump from one item to another without much narrative framing. The rise of Big Data is an exemplar of this system whereby data-sets are systematically dumped on-line in a move towards transparency and openness. In so doing, the user is then encouraged to mashup the data by combining these discrete data-sets together to get new, unique and actionable insights. Hence the process of aggregation has, supposedly, undergone a democratisation where it is opened-up to everyone.

Search engines such as Google can, therefore, be recognised as an instance of postmodernism in practice, with their non-linearity and seemingly randomly constructed decontextualized signs. It may actually be the archetypical postmodern space, as it has the power to draw in references from every conceivable avenue, to break the narrative chain, diminish the authorial voice and eliminate the ability to impose structure and meaning as the user recombines small information fragments in any way they choose via an environment where everything is related to everything else. This is reminiscent of Michel Foucault's 'heterotopia', with the internet as a dramatically more subversive device than that of the 'utopia' – Foucault's ordered universe. Foucault stated, in his 1970 publication The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences, that:

> Heterotopias are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this 'and' that, because they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy 'syntax' in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also the less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and also opposite one another) to "hold together"…[heterotopias] desiccate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the very possibility of grammar at its source; they dissolve our myths and sterilise the lyricism of our sentences (Foucault 1970, p. xviii).

This environment of information fragmentation, where the primacy of content is to the fore, has seemingly little need for naming conventions, evidence, reliability, integrity and authenticity. Specific archival practices / principles such as provenance, original order and the chain of responsible custody can be deemed to be redundant as the archive moves towards undetermined and unstable texts with scant evidential value.

Privileging in the Digital Environment

It would be understandable, therefore, if many day-to-day practitioners within the archival profession longed for a previous age where the nature of the record as an evidential vessel was clear and hierarchies and order were fixed and determined in advance by the archivist – to quote Van Morrison, 'take me back (woah) to when the world made more sense' (Van Morrison 1997). In response to technological advancements and the democratisation of knowledge it could be surmised, if one was to take a technologically deterministic view, that the archival profession ought to raise the white flag and realise that, like Communism, it has served its time and purpose and will, in future, be confined to a few alien outposts where an older reactionary generation, probably consisting solely of academic historians, will continue to worship at its shrine and advocate for its continuing existence and virtue. Yet whilst the profession needs to listen when people like Bezos begin to speak in such explicit terms and raise fundamental questions that speak directly to the nature of what it is that archivists do, it also ought to be wary of falling into the trap of abdicating responsibility. Instead it must have confidence in what it does – it ought to be understood and appreciated that for someone to be professional means they 'profess that they are trustworthy, possess appropriate specialist knowledge and skills, and aspire to excellence in performing their work' (Pederson 2005, p. 52). Why can this be surmised? Well, firstly, the notion that in the digital environment the act of privileging is eliminated, as per Bezos, is simply inaccurate and is perpetuated by those who are deliberately loose with the truth, prone to over-exaggeration or see algorithms as non-actors. In reality, algorithms are active actors, privileging certain pieces of information over others. Embedded in every algorithm are criteria, or metrics, which are computed and used to define ranking through a sorting procedure. These criteria embed a set of choices and value-propositions that determine what gets pushed to the top of the ranking and, importantly, personalise that for each individual user. Jimmy Wales, co-founder of Wikipedia, has acknowledged this by stating that:

> People think of search as some kind of computer function but it's really editorial – it's journalism. If I type 'Martha Stewart' into a search engine and I get 10 results back, those results are an editorial judgement whether or not it's made by a computer. (Wales 2007)

It is privileging in order to tailor results to individual need – privileging in order to democratise, it may be said. It is clear that similarities can be drawn between algorithms and the editorial function in journalism, as Wales does, or between algorithms and the privileging process in archiving. The difference is in scope and accountability. The algorithm – a non-human agent – is, in this environment, so much more powerful than the actions of individuals. These 'little pieces of code' are, as Eli Pariser, CEO of news website Upworthy, recently stated, 'more powerful now than a lot of the most powerful editors in media' (Dredge 2014). It is algorithms that control who sees what on social media sites such as YouTube and Facebook. It is algorithms that control who sees what in defined news spaces with their lists of most-shared and most-commented features. To read Michael Lewis is to understand the power of anonymous trading algorithms in the almost completely digitised and machine-led world of the financial markets which so calamitously collapsed in 2007-2008 (Lewis 2014). The algorithm is, quite simply, an active gatekeeper / privileger, filtering information for dissemination. Yet rather than being able to at least hold accountable the subjective decision-making judgments of gatekeepers in whatever form, we are, collectively, beholden to an entity whose workings are cloaked in invisibility. This is anti-democratic – further, Google refuses to reveal its algorithm that would detail how it ranks search results and its auto-complete facility has been accused of being 'evil' as it seems to reinforce, for example, gender stereotypes and sexism (Chemaly 2015).

Algorithms, of course, bring with them many benefits – it would be foolish to try and deny that it is anything but a joy to have access to so much information, easily accessible and personalised, despite well documented and valid privacy concerns. However, 'the democratisation of access to knowledge should not be confused with the democratisation of knowledge itself' and this is a crucial conflation made by those cyber-utopian proponents. It

is the confusion at this juncture which enables us to see that the Internet may be 'misleading and even pernicious' as, 'in cyberspace, every source seems as authoritative as every other' (Himmelfarb 1999, p. 615). This continues and expands upon a trajectory that took off with postmodernism. Over the past 30-40 years. evidence, as a natural understanding of reality, has been attacked by those who question the objective reliability of the historical record and the smothering embrace of history. For Robert Darnton, 'hard facts have gone soft' as the ability of evidence to act as a stable referent has been critiqued (Darnton 2003, p. 267). As a consequence, the positivist belief in evidence has begun to look somewhat out-of-date. Darnton has previously asserted that 'historians may still favour favour metaphors like digging in the archives, but who believes in quarrying out nuggets of reality' (Darnton 2003, p. 267). However, whilst this belief that Truth, as a singular entity, is unobtainable has a valid base, a belief in truths, plural, still exists – in the archive domain it is about discovering your own nuggets to build towards a form of reality via the evidence at your disposal. This is the base of all historical enquiry – for the historian, authentic and reliable records are the major source of information from which the process of footnotes and bibliographies emerge to form the canon of evidential methodology. For the genealogist they are the lifeblood of generations past. For local citizens they are rooted in the mentalities of place, symbolising the blood, sweat and tears of their predecessors. For auditors and legislators, they are the underpinning for all future action. It is the principle of evidential credibility, based in the authentic and verifiable record, that is so much more valuable than simply information fragments: to the user the record is a representation of truth and factual occurrences. People still recognise records as a conduit to the past, to a connection with long-dead human beings that they recognise, to truths that they thought unattainable or lost. Indeed, if the profession takes a deep breath it can see that this is a golden age of belief in the archive. Consumption is at a high, with individual investigations into family history leading the way and externally visible through the continuing popularity of Who Do You Think You Are? and the success of books such as Alison Light's memoir *Common People: The History of an English Family* which, in 2014, was nominated for the Samuel Johnson prize for non-fiction. Hence amongst disorienting change, the record and the techniques we used to fix it within the principle of evidential credibility can still be the basis of our collective foothold.

There are correlations with other professions – for example, in simple terms, if you want your illness diagnosed where do you go? You may go to Google with your symptoms but ultimately you still go to the doctor for an authoritative assessment. Similarly, the continual reliance on the BBC in the United Kingdom for news exemplifies the same stand against a technological determinism that assume everyone will move to one of the multiple emergent sources of online news or apps such as Flipboard or Twitter which personalise and mainly deal, at least initially, with small informational fragments. The knowledgeable arbiter, the professional who has an in-depth knowledge and understanding of their professional domain, is still important and access to this arbiter is still desirable. An archival theorist that understands this is Geoffrey Yeo. Yeo is aware that the archival community cannot stand still nor be passive in its response to the rise of the digital domain. As a result, he has sought to reconfigure definitions of a record for the twenty-first century and take the term far beyond the narrow administrative and legalistic framework it previously encompassed whilst retaining evidential parameters. For Yeo, a record should be characterised as a 'persistent representation of activities, created by participants or observers of those activities or by their authorised proxies' (Yeo 2007, p. 337) where representations are 'things that stand for something else, and are usually assumed to have some kind of correspondence to the things they represent' (Yeo 2007, p. 334). Yeo believes that this definition will straddle many boundaries – across formats, relativists and objectivists, those from the archive, manuscript or information management traditions, and so on (Yeo, 2007, p. 342). The definition encompasses records from different traditions, such as personal records, that have long been a core component of archival collections but have stood outside of traditional records characterisation. It also, crucially, reaffirms the prominence of evidence. Alan Bell has been particularly impressive at summarising this work of Yeo and adds that:

> If persistence is fundamental, then it seems logical to suggest that, either as a result of a conscious decision or through serendipity, it represents a point of separation between records and information and imparts a status upon the former that is not held by the latter…A focus on persistence acknowledges

the centrality and practical importance of the identification of the 'record' and, therefore, the agency of the recordkeeper as the mediator of the relationship (Bell 2014, p. 239).

Yeo's attempt to reposition the record for the twenty-first century accepts that information is unstable in an online environment but it allows the record to exist as a carrier of evidence in this environment. It is also an acceptance that the record, as a carrier of evidence, and the archive still have value and, consequently, that there is little reason to assume that archival users are attracted to undetermined and unstable texts with scant evidential value, with an archive that is:

> …a repository of material which has only been loosely classified, material whose status is as yet indeterminate and stands between rubbish, junk and significance: material that has not yet been read and researched (Featherstone 2006, p. 594).

It is, ultimately, a validation of the archival role.

Making a Choice for the User

The distance between the revolutionary claims made for aspects of the internet and the reality of user needs is increasingly evident with the issue of mediation. As previously mentioned, users can now completely by-pass traditional information portals and create, locate and upload their own content. Many individuals, of course, do just that. However, one of the essential questions for information creators and users is how information can be used widely and efficiently and it is here that mediation and, subsequently, privileging, reaffirm their importance. For all the supposed emancipation implicit in the pronouncement that we are all creators now, the loss of critical authority and of knowledgeable arbiters with some influence on public attention can diminish the agency and choice of the user – essentially the argument is that the more information there is, the less any of it matters. As Paul Virilio cautioned in 1995, 'What will be gained from electronic information and electronic communication will necessarily result in a loss somewhere else' (Virilio, 1995). What this amounts to, according to David Shenk, is a 'memory loss', an inability to digest and remember information coming at us increasingly thick and fast – where contexts, instances, events, histories, our cognitive basis for self-reflection, seem to 'vanish in a sea of data' (Shenk 1997, p. 48). In his novel *Slowness*, Milan Kundera put across the same sentiment when he wrote that 'the degree of slowness is directly proportional to the intensity of memory; the degree of speed is directly proportional to the intensity of forgetting' (Kundera 1996, pp. 34-35). According to Everett Rogers, information overload 'is the state of an individual or system in which excessive communication inputs cannot be processed, leading to breakdown' (Case 2002. p. 98). Put simply, there is too much content and too much choice. This is the focus of a psychology article by Sheena Iyengar, of Columbia University, and Mark Lepper, of Stanford University, published in 2000 entitled 'When Choice is Demotivating: can one desire too much of a good thing?' (Iyengar and Lepper 2000). In their abstract they explicitly challenge the popular notion that:

> …the more choice, the better – that the human ability to manage, and the human desire for, choice is unlimited. Findings from 3 experimental studies starkly challenge this implicit assumption that having more choices is necessarily more intrinsically motivating than having fewer (Iyengar and Lepper 2000, p. 995).

They go on to write, amongst providing case studies and evidence, that:

…studies show that the selection, evaluation, and integration of information are all clearly affected by the available number of options; this suggests that, as the complexity of making choices rises, people tend to simplify their decision-making processes by relying on simple heuristics (Iyengar and Lepper 2000, p. 996).

Interestingly, from an archive perspective, in 2005 Bob Usherwood, Kerry Wilson and Jared Bryson produced a study entitled 'Relevant Repositories of Public Knowledge? Libraries, Museums, and Archives in the Information Age' (Usherwood, Wilson & Bryson 2005). The paper documented why cultural heritage organisations are deemed to maintain relevance in the twenty-first century. It showed that archives, when they were used, were consulted because of the trusted status of the archive as place and the concept of authenticity – the understanding that within the archive were records that emitted truth(s) from which the individual can search, find, and be illuminated. Yet this use of archives was about more than simply Jacques Derrida's *archivum*, the house where the *archons* are the document's guardians (Derrida 1996, p. 2). Usherwood, Wilson, and Bryson quote a participant as saying the following:

> What I tend to think about this question is that if you think of libraries, museums and archives, the mass of choice that is within them, is actually disempowering, and therefore as indicated earlier, to have somebody mediate it is vital…I actually think that people get fed up with making choices, and that in some areas of life they do want others to make the choice for them (Usherwood, Wilson & Bryson 2005, p. 96).

Make the choice for them - to identify what is of value; to contextualise; to authenticate, mediate and legitimise. This is the language of the gatekeeper, of the knowledgeable arbiter and of the archivist. The dynamics underlying these thoughts are something that Susan Greenfield, the neuroscientist, understood when she explicitly questioned the supposed postmodern undermining of narrative by challenging her fellow peers in the United Kingdom House of Lords to consider that:

> When you read a book, the author usually takes you by the hand and you travel from the beginning to the middle to the end in a continuous narrative of interconnected steps. It may not be a journey with which you agree, or one that you enjoy, but none the less, as you turn the pages, one train of thought succeeds the last in a logical fashion. We can then compare one narrative with another and, in so doing, start to build up a conceptual framework that enables us to evaluate further journeys, which, in turn, will influence our individualised framework. We can place an isolated fact in a context that gives it a significance. So traditional education has enabled us to turn information into knowledge. Now imagine there is no robust conceptual framework. You are sitting in front of a multimedia presentation where you are unable, because you have not had the experience of many different intellectual journeys, to evaluate what is flashing up on the screen. The most immediate reaction would be to place a premium on the most obvious feature, the immediate sensory content, the "yuk" and "wow" factor. You would be having an experience rather than learning. The sounds and sights of a fast-moving multimedia presentation displace any time for reflection, or any idiosyncratic or imaginative connections we might make as we turn the pages, and then stare at a wall to reflect upon them (Greenfield 2006).

For Greenfield the democratisation of knowledge, on such a vast scale, does not necessarily bring benefits to citizens, nor does it bring ever-accumulating knowledge and clarity. And just as traditional education has provided Greenfield with the capabilities to turn information into knowledge, so professional education has provided archivists with the tools and techniques to do the same. For example, although online researchers have greater flexibility in terms of the strategies that can be used to identify materials, controlled vocabulary and structured points of access remain perhaps the most effective means of aggregating and ultimately locating

relevant information. Indeed, as the volume and variety of digital documents increase, so does the need for the imposition of some sort of bibliographic control. The centrality of metadata schema – and the work of the metadata specialists – to any digitisation project provides eloquent testimony to the need for sophisticated organisation and detailed description of online repositories.

Hence it can be said that, in the digital world, the user is in the midst of dislocating change with the potential for more bafflement than enlightenment. This directly contradicts the claim that the gatekeeper is redundant and can be disregarded. Choice can be disabling and the user may have knowledge at their fingertips but they may be unable to engage with it in a productive, contextual fashion. Hence the archival profession would benefit from a reorientation of its collective mind-set that rejects the dichotomy of traditional / new that is simply distracting and disorientating. A different way of looking can ensure digital platforms become less intimidating.

Opening Gates

This paper has argued that the democratisation of knowledge is not of unquestionable benefit to the user. However, processes that democratise access to knowledge and enable the user to become a participant within that process do have multiple benefits, both for the user and for the archival profession going forward – the profession cannot operate from behind gates that lock users out. It is evident that the gap between the knowledgeable arbiter and the citizen has drastically reduced. Rather than communication being uni-directional, a process of reverse flow has taken over and society has moved into a position where it is increasingly able to communicate its wishes and desires to those who, traditionally, control. Helga Nowotny has argued that this conjunction is transforming the epistemology of the sciences, within which ought to be included archival science, from one based 'on a very clear separation of science from society' (Mode-1) - a one-way communication with science speaking to society – towards one (Mode-2) – in which society is speaking to science as much as science is speaking to society – that 'makes it harder to say where science ends and society begins' (Nowotny 2003). Hence there is a dialogic process between those once viewed as actors and those once viewed as subjects. As a result, many professional institutions, organisations and bodies have found themselves tested by the emergent digital sphere that encourages the by-passing of traditional information portals and have had to take appropriate steps to become part of the process on their own terms rather than overwhelmed by it. The Guardian, a newspaper traditionally rooted in the United Kingdom, generated GuardianWitness as a response to pressures it was feeling in this area. Its mission is to be:

> The home of user-generated content on the Guardian. You can contribute your video, pictures and stories, and browse all the news, opinions and creations submitted by others. Posts will be reviewed prior to being published on GuardianWitness, with the best pieces featured on the Guardian site (GuardianWitness).

GuardianWitness opens itself up to user-generated content but, crucially, states that it will retain control over what is dispersed – it will act as a privileger prior to content being published. Hence the profession has to embrace and utilise tools that assist the archivist to provide a better service to users and enhances the contextual information provided – essentially, archival processes are democratised and the relationship with the user evolves but does so within a recognisable evidential framework. Many archives have already taken steps in this direction. Some have, for example, taken to Flickr to crowd-source information about photographs (Flickr). Others have embraced tagging whereby the public can tag records from online, digitised collections. These enable users to add metadata and close the semantic gap whilst at the same time enabling the archivist to retain taxonomy authority and metadata quality. Hyperlinks are, of course, a wonderful opportunity to enhance our ability to link across collections and catalogues and Google-style algorithmic personalisations tailor searches to individual needs. As Geoffrey Yeo writes:

It is becoming increasingly apparent that the ability to juxtapose one item with others previously unconnected to it, to form and re-form temporary collections that may sometimes cross the boundaries of provenance, can enhance user experiences and provide scope for innovative modes of research and intellectual discovery. Users who are accustomed to such capabilities in other domains will expect no less from archivists. (Yeo 2012, p. 70)

The internet also enables the profession to realise that groupings of records can be malleable and, in such a manner, can embrace the vision of Cook, Schwartz and Harris that the profession tell stories. At present, for example, The National Archives in the United Kingdom has web pages dedicated to the 100-year anniversary of the First World War so as to enable users to explore their collections of First World War records (The National Archives). There is no contradiction here - the crucial separation is that archivists will retain control and the record is the locus of action. As Alan Bell has said, 'Recordkeeping is, essentially, a profession predicated upon control' (Bell 2014, p. 227). In this reading, control does not simply mean physical control but what archivists do when they appraise and subsequently utilise processes that ensure fixity and that capture and preserve together those crucial tenets of a record – content, context, structure, providing adequate contextual metadata to enable the user to obtain the validation, verification and contextual information they require, as and when they require it, as well as remaining on-hand to offer and provide our professional expertise. Archivists being archivists.

Conclusion

The archival profession has, in the past, been guilty of privileging certain sections of society over others. As a result of the criticism practitioners have received over their role in enshrining traditional power relationships via the processes through which they filtered information for preservation and dissemination, the profession has been wary of engaging with how they subsequently utilise archival privileging. Instead there has been a collective desire to avoid overt usage of the term, preferring to see all subsequent revisions of practice and extensions of access and the documentary base as acts of democratisation – an opening-up as an act against or away from privileging. In actuality, the move towards representation and justice has inserted the archivist directly into moral and political discourse in a manner that required conscious decision-making and necessitated the active use of archival privileging tools so as to address the unequal balance of power that so distorted the documentary heritage. Privileging as a means for democracy and activism, as a force for social good – this is at the root of many documentation strategies, engagements with minority groupings and early adoptions of initiatives in the digital domain that have emerged over the past 20-30 years and it is this that has enabled the profession to move towards Ham's dictum to hold a mirror to mankind. This is as it should be. However, the digital environment has ushered in new challenges and questions. As a result, this paper argues that it is time for the profession to come to accept its role as a privileger of information and a gatekeeper of knowledge. As Koehler and Pemberton asserted, gatekeepers have an ethical responsibility to users, to themselves, to the profession, and to society. This responsibility entails taking on cyber-utopian advocates for the democratisation of knowledge who would downscale, at the very least, the influence of archivists and other gatekeepers in the digital domain. Yet it requires doing so via the act of privileging and asserting the principle of evidential credibility that may carry more power than ever before in an age of seemingly unlimited choice and of information fragments that lack authority.

Hence when the initial proposal submitted for the conference at the University of Dundee by the author intimated that the archival profession was in a state of crisis over the question of democratising or privileging it was, rather like the Daily Mail (another UK-based newspaper) when it came to discussing the legacy of Margaret Thatcher, full of hyperbole. Instead, the profession is actually pulsing in a moment of great opportunity, living in a digital in-between where nothing has been resolved and everything is potential. To move forward and to fully embrace our role in the twenty-first century and the opportunities offered to the profession

requires a reassertion of old principles. It is by retaining and emphasising principles such as evidence, context, selection and aggregation that will enable the profession to be a gateopener as well as a gatekeeper through encouraging participation and imaginative re-thinking – democratising whilst privileging. It is still being a gatekeeper, although a benevolent rather than a malevolent one. It is a cooperative relationship but retains the archivist as a gatekeeper of knowledge, that forwards the record as a representation of authenticity and truth and factual occurrences. This is the only position for the profession that retains an ability to influence and have advocacy power, crucial in an age of diminishing financial resources.

As a consequence, the profession ought to have confidence that within it resides the answers to the set of questions posed by the sociologist Mike Featherstone in 2000:

> If we are faced by a vast unbounded sea of data, how will navigation be managed and legitimated? Will disintermediation, the direct access to cultural records and resources from those outside cultural institutions, lead to a decline in intellectual and academic power or will the increased scope and complexity overwhelm the untutored user and lead to greater demands for re-intermediation, involving the context framing and mapping skills of cultural intermediaries? (Featherstone 2000, p. 166)

The answer is via the archivist, and via the archivist as privileger. As Yeo indicates, there may even be an emerging market for such thinking via scientific research groups that are moving towards re-contextualisation as they understand that:

> …while data can and should be reusable and reused, each piece of data should carry with it some evidence of its history and its original context, to help those who encounter it to form a judgement about its trustworthiness. (Yeo 2013, p. 220)

The digital environment here leads to greater demands for re-intermediation, involving contextual framing and the archival intermediary. Hence the profession ought to celebrate its inner gatekeeper and shout loudly, clearly and without shame that they are archivists and engage in privileging. By so doing, it is the archivist that enables a democratisation of knowledge that actually functions as a democratisation in practice and that expands the voice of the user and user access. The archivist as gatekeeper, as a privileger of the historical record and narrative, can and should still be applicable in the twenty-first century – the future of archives, both in the paper and digital environments, lies not in democratisation *or* privileging but in a form of democratisation *and* privileging or, to be more precise, democratisation *via* privileging. This is a soundbite that, for once, may be worth remembering.

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