

ESSAY TITLE:

Do you agree with Derrida that the process of archiving is a structuring activity as much as it is the production of a record? Answer with reference to an example of digital archiving.

CASE STUDY:

Web archives and www.archive.org

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For the last two or three years, the term ‘Web 2.0’ has been frequently employed to describe, amongst other online phenomena, the recent proliferation of websites devoted to ‘user-generated content’ – content which is created and uploaded by the site’s own users and visitors rather than by the managers, editors, or owners of the site. Due to ever-decreasing storage costs and ever-increasing bandwidth capabilities, these types of sites are able to receive, store and distribute vast amounts of digital information to and from millions of people around the globe. The photo-sharing website Flickr.com hosts millions of images from over 2.5 million users (Levy). YouTube, a video sharing site recently acquired by Google, serves over 100 million videos per day to online viewers (“YouTube”). MySpace, the sprawling social network owned by Rupert Murdoch’s News Corp, lays claim to around 150 million user accounts (Yadav). And various blogging networks such as Blogger.com, Livejournal.com, Vox.com, Typepad.com, and Wordpress.com host millions of online journals or ‘blogs’ as they are now commonly known. According to the blog tracking site Technorati, there were 70 million blogs online as of April 5th, 2007, and approximately 1.5 million new blog posts are created every day (Sifry). From these terabytes of user-created online content, we may deduce that archiving has reached a feverous pitch, at least among those privileged and educated enough to have the tools for media creation and broadband access to upload those media artefacts.

But for all the hype and utopian rhetoric of the democratisation and decentralisation of information and production, Web 2.0 is perhaps just a technological extension of previous archiving tools. The drive to archive and to store memories has existed for thousands of years. Even the earliest cave drawings can be read as a form of archiving, a mechanism to reify human experience, a method of categorising memory, and a way to provide meaning for future descendants and generations. However, is the physical and emotional act of remembering and memory rendered meaningless in the myriad databases of the networked information era? Or is the digital archive a purely informational reposi-

tory, a virtual and neutral storehouse of content, media, and knowledge that allows us to tap in and deposit or retrieve information at will, without danger and without violence? Perhaps Jacques Derrida can help us understand what may be at stake in the process of archiving and creating archives.

In *Archive Fever*, Derrida's dense psychoanalytic enquiry into the phenomenon of archiving, we encounter a deconstruction of the archive read through a foreground of the archiving of Freud's works. Since my own experience with Freud and psychoanalysis is extremely limited, I will not engage at length with the more psychoanalytic portions of the essay; however, *Archive Fever* still provides many valuable insights with regard to the activity and concept of archiving. While Derrida doesn't often directly address digital archiving, we can certainly employ his observations in a critical enquiry into the form, content and structure of the digital archive.

According to Derrida, the archive is not simply a neutral place for storing and conserving content from the past. It is also a place which determines the very structure and future relationship to its content. "The archivization produces as much as it records the event. This is also our political experience of the news media" (17). Each archive operates according to institutional limitations that subject material to certain laws and rules before inclusion is allowed into the archive. These can include limitations imposed by family law, state law, "relations between the secret and nonsecret," publication rights, rules of classification and order, etc (4). To explain these sorts of boundaries in the process of archiving, Derrida uses the example of Freud's Jewishness and the desire of Rabbi Yerushalmi for Freud to proclaim, "in his own name", that psychoanalysis should be honoured as a "Jewish science" (46). However, since Freud would never say this in a book, books being a matter of public archive, Yerushalmi is resigned to secrecy and will "keep for his personal archives the response that the phantom [of Freud], with its own mouth, could mur-

mur in his ear in private” (47). Derrida returns to the phantom repeatedly throughout *Archive Fever*, and in explains how in spite of Freud being dead, “the phantom continues to speak” (62). And here is where the archive continues to resonate. “The archivist produces more archive, and that is why the archive is never closed. It opens out of the future” (68); in this case, the producing archivist is Yerushalmi.

Derrida is also concerned about the ramifications of more recent archiving technologies such as databases, printers, fax machines, and particularly e-mail. Early on in the book, he suggests that e-mail is on its way to “transforming the entire public and private space of humanity” (17), breaking down archival boundaries between the private, the secret, and the public. Whereas the archived works of Freud are collected in such tangible objects such as letters, manuscripts, books, and sketches, which took days or weeks to arrive in another city, the instantaneous nature and “unprecedented rhythm” of e-mail, according to Derrida, will cause upheaval and turbulence in the social and political spheres (18). Derrida appears alarmed that these sorts of boundaries between ‘public’ and ‘private’ archives are dissolving in the archive fever. So alarmed, in fact, that he claims that archive fever ‘verges on radical evil’, for limits and conservation are destroyed in the infinite capacity of and drive toward archiving.

How can we take these writings of Derrida and make his theory of the archive relevant or meaningful in the context of the digital archives of 2007, if indeed his theory is still applicable at all? ‘Archive Fever’ was published in 1995, before the Internet became a banal¹ medium of communication, but during the period in which use of the World Wide Web and e-mail through graphical web browsers and desktop e-mail clients was growing by exorbitant amounts (Zakon). Derrida was obviously aware of these changes

¹ The term ‘banal’ is used here to describe the Internet in terms of its now widespread, popular usage. In the early 1990’s, much of the World Wide Web still existed mainly as the domain of specialists, scientists, geeks, hackers, and academics.

in the technological and social field, and he responded to these changes with a sceptical tone. Would we be wise to adopt the same approach to the digital archive as Derrida, and agree with him that digital archiving technologies will throw the social and political spheres into upheaval? Have we seen boundaries dissolving between the public and the private? In order to begin to answer these questions, we can turn to a website which embodies the essence of digital archiving in its very name: The Internet Archive.

The Internet Archive, located at <http://www.archive.org>, is a massive online database of archived web pages, photographs, moving images such as videos and animations, live concert recordings, audio in various forms, texts and books, and software. Their goal is to build a digital library of “cultural artefacts” and to “provide free access to researchers, historians, scholars, and the general public” (<http://www.archive.org/index.php>). Once visitors to the site create an account, they may freely upload content to any number of categories: the Live Music Archive (which currently contains over 38,000 recordings by almost 3000 bands), the Audio Archive (containing 133,702 items in categories such as Open Source Audio, Audio Books & Poetry, Music & Arts recordings, Podcasts, and the ever-present Grateful Dead concert archive²), Moving Images, Software, etc. The Internet Archive also provides access to a web archive called the ‘Wayback Machine’ which contains an index of about 85 billion web pages from 1996-present. This can be useful in finding web pages that are no longer online. Another project with which the Internet Archive is currently involved with is the Open-Access Text Archive, which intends to scan public domain and open-source books in to provide an open-source alternative to the more proprietary, closed-source book scanning projects by Google and Microsoft (Lombardi).

² The Grateful Dead were well-known for their openness to fans making, sharing, and distributing recordings (or, shall we say, archives) of their concerts—as long as the recordings weren’t made available in the commercial sphere. This accounts for their somewhat ubiquitous presence on free music websites.

So what sort of rules, laws and limitations might be operating in this electronic domain that determine and structure the content of the archive, if indeed the content is structured by the archive at all? Firstly, much of the material available in the vast databases of archive.org is either in the public domain or licensed with a Creative Commons license, meaning that content can be downloaded and re-distributed freely as long as the work remains free (i.e. non-commercial) and as long as the original artist or creator is credited. This stands in contrast to commercial archives such as the Apple iTunes music store or stock photography websites, where users pay a fee to download material and content often comes with restrictive “Digital Rights Management” code and/or restrictive licensing rules³. However, while the Internet Archive strives to maintain openness and comprehensiveness in their various archives, there is still exists a lengthy ‘Terms of Use’⁴ section that outlines what may and may not be added to their digital collections. For instance, content in the archive must abide by regional and international copyright law, so any item that infringes upon copyright law may be removed at the discretion of the site owners and managers. Removal from the archive is not just contingent upon copyright law, however: “If the author or publisher of some part of the Archive does not want his or her work in our Collections, then we may remove that portion of the Collections without notice.” (Terms of Use).

Another potential Derridean stumbling block of the digital archive on the pathway to information utopia is the death drive. In *Archive Fever*, Derrida also refers to the archive in terms of two opposing drives: the ‘conservation drive’, which is the drive to store and preserve archival content, and the ‘death drive’, which contradicts the conservation

³ Digital Rights Management, or DRM, is an encoding of certain usage rights and rules into a digital file. For instance, a song downloaded from the Apple iTunes music store may only be played on 3 computers and burned only as many as 3 times. Many digital films also come with DRM installed. These sorts of restrictions may perhaps be viewed as the digital form of the psychic law—those institutional laws which determine the constitution of the archive.

⁴ archive.org/termsfuse

drive in that there is also a desire to destroy, an aggression, a “forgetfulness which does not limit itself to repression...there is no archive fever without the threat of this death drive, this aggression and destruction drive” (19). For Derrida, the archive always takes place at the breakdown of the memory in question, the death drive of the archive kindles forgetfulness and ‘annihilates’ memory (11). In terms of the archive, the desire to conserve is also coupled with the fear of destruction. And we can certainly see this dual tendency in the mission statement of archive.org:

“...without cultural artefacts, civilization has no memory and no mechanism to learn from its successes and failures. And paradoxically, with the explosion of the Internet, we live in what Danny Hillis has referred to as our ‘digital dark age.’
...The Internet Archive is working to prevent the Internet - a new medium with major historical significance - and other ‘born-digital’ materials from disappearing into the past.” (<http://www.archive.org>).

By using this type of sweeping rhetoric— “civilization has no memory...digital dark age...major historical significance...disappearing into the past” – and by twinning the desire to conserve with the fear of destruction, the possibility of the death drive, the writer of this text constructs a grand narrative for the viewers and users of the site: you are taking part in an acutely important historical project, one which will preserve the memories of humankind and also one which will help to guide our future decisions by providing an archive of past “successes and failures” from which to learn from. In this case, Derrida is correct when he notes that the archive is never fully closed, that “it opens out of the future” (68). The phantom continues to speak.

However, while I do agree with Derrida to a certain extent that archiving can be a structuring activity rather than a purely neutral act of ‘storing information’, insofar as the rules which govern inclusion into the archive can include and exclude certain types of

content, I believe that his stance leans too far both toward technological determinism and a dualism between social memory and personal memory. Despite the possible limitations of the archive, and although there are certain restrictions as to what can be included in archive.org's databases, especially as related to copyright law, I would argue that much of the content on archive.org isn't produced according to the rules, expectations, and boundaries of the archive. Let's look at the example of a concert recording uploaded to archive.org. The performer may or may not have known that an audience member had a recording device at the concert, but more often than not, live performances are geared toward the live audience rather than toward the laws of digital recording and archiving. When the recordist creates the digital audio files to upload to archive.org, she is obviously using a technical format to create a listenable and downloadable file, but the work of the performance itself is not structured according to the rules of the archive. When I download a work from archive.org, I am downloading a work that is in a technical form, but the work itself is representative of the artist's performance, not of the rules of the archive. On a more general level, archive.org avoids an excessive regulatory structure by embracing a philosophy of inclusion rather than exclusion and of openness to contributors and contributions rather than institutional hierarchies of knowledge and access. Even Derrida himself notes that there are archives which are more democratically organised than others: "effective democratisation can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation" (4). Of course, one may always argue that access to the digital database is not necessarily democratic because of the technological expertise that one must possess in order to properly use the archive, or because of economic or social barriers to Internet access, but the fact remains that we can build electronic databases and networks in order to develop and grow archives outside the realm of state or corporate control.

At this point, we might find it useful to turn to Arjun Appadurai, whose essay “Archive and Aspiration” addresses the sociality of memory and finds the electronic archive as a place where collective intervention may be formed within and between communities. For Appadurai, “all documentation is intervention” (16), and by using the media of migrant communities as an example, he provides a reading of the migrant archive as an interactive space, a space where archival technologies such as print, email, the web, and other forms come together and provide a “site of negotiation between collective memory and desire” (23). Electronic networks, with their ability to send vast amounts of information quickly and over great distance to large numbers of people, allow communities and collectivities to share images, video, sounds, and text in a self-produced, deliberate environment (Appadurai 17). While Derrida views the archive as an expression of the death drive, an annihilation of living memory, and a place that can never be internalised or experienced in Real life (Derrida 11), while he expresses pessimism toward electronic technologies of archiving, and while Foucault had a panoptic, governmentalised approach to the archive (Appadurai 16), Appadurai views the site of the archive as an active, lived space of collective memory and movement, and in doing so, breaks down the dualism between “neuro archives and social archives” (24).

While attempting to avoid either a utopian or dystopian approach to archiving and the technologies of archiving, I find myself agreeing more with Appadurai’s ideas than Derrida’s. While archives are certainly not neutral repositories of information or static storehouses of past memories, they aren’t the dire expression of a death drive that I understand Derrida sees them to be. And while we have seen a breaking down in the barriers and boundaries that traditionally separated public and private realms of archiving – for instance, online photo-sharing websites replacing the family photo album, online journals replacing and supplementing personal diaries, forums and bulletin boards used instead of hand-written correspondence – neither have new archiving technologies, by themselves,

caused either the radical social upheaval or the symbolic violence toward the field of psychoanalysis that Derrida outlines in 'Archive Fever' (16). Rather, the digital archive, although not always and perhaps never free of structuring activity which can regulate the form of the content of the archive, can be a place of collective documentation in which individuals and groups can live memory and movement, and provide a space for collective negotiation and intervention.

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