

Archives

Annotated Bibliography

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Introduction

Archives can feel like mysterious, dusty and aloof places – and truth to be told, some are incredibly dusty! However, many are high-tech with heaps of digitized materials that can be accessed instantly from the comfort of our homes and offices. Technology is not the only catalyst for archival change. Shifts in values and beliefs across society, for instance, around inclusivity, equality and respect for human rights, are reflected in both approaches to historical research and what materials are kept in the archives. This annotated bibliography provides you with a window into the future of archival studies and historical research. The books below will help you to gauge the huge changes in the field of archival research in the last twenty years and to appreciate why and how archives can influence what historians write about.

Guidance on using archives

‘Using Archives: A Guide’, Archives Hub (JISC): <https://archiveshub.jisc.ac.uk/using/>

This online resource draws on examples from archives in the UK, but the guidance it provides is relevant to using archives anywhere in the world. It includes accessible information on how to locate archives relevant to your research, understanding catalogue descriptions, and visiting archives. It also includes a helpful overview of further resources about archives.

The construction of archives

Markus Friedrich, *The Birth of the Archive: A History of Knowledge*, trans. John Noël Dillon (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2018).

Friedrich tells the story of the building of archives and archival practices in Europe between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. Using the examples of France and Germany, he argues that this process was closely linked to the formation of nation-states. The book explains how and why the act of collecting and housing sources developed into ‘archival science’ in Europe, discussing the formation of a managing mentality which went hand in hand with attempts of standardization, the creation of new professions and debates surrounding public access.

James Lowry (ed.), *Displaced Archives* (London and New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017).

This collection of essays takes us to places of displacement and conflict. It examines the impact of colonialism and postcolonialism on archive-building and the preservation of archives in the place of origin, considering care and respect for archives as matters with important bearing on human rights and therefore requiring the mediation of international law. Chapters explore wide-ranging case studies from Africa, Southeast Asia, Europe and the Middle East. The essays are united by attention to the relation between empire-building and the creation of national archives, the effects of displacement and conflict, the existence of diasporic archives and the quest for repatriation of long-lost materials. This is a fascinating journey into the cultural costs of empire-building and its legacy.

Elena S. Danielson, *The Ethical Archivist* (Chicago, IL: Society of American Archivists, 2010).

Danielson leads us on a behind-the-scenes journey into the actual workings of archives, with special emphasis on decision-making processes. As the former Head of Archives at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University, Danielson is able to look at archives from the curator’s perspective. She shows how archivists are faced with ethical dilemmas on almost a daily basis. These can arise at different stages of archival practice: from the acquisition of materials to issues surrounding accessibility, privacy and data protection, and ultimately disposal of materials. This analysis of the ethical implications of archival practice provides insight into what it means to curate an archive and the responsibilities that come with that in our time.

New directions in research on archives

Alana Kumbier, *Ephemeral Material: Queering the Archive* (Sacramento, CA: Litwin Books, 2014).

Amy L. Stone and Jaime Cantrell (eds), *Out of the Closet, Into the Archives: Researching Sexual Histories* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2015).

Both books discuss the existence of queer materials in the archives. Kumbier makes a case for queer experiences, values and perspectives to be considered in all archives, meaning beyond the boundaries of LGBTQ+ collections and archives. Stone and Cantrell's edited collection analyses and compares different queer archives. These essays approach archival spaces and objects from different perspectives: emotions, sexual desires, materiality, but also as a sensory experience. These studies reflect the growth of the field of queer studies and the changes in society gained through the recognition of LGBTQ+ rights, and the fight of LGBTQ+ communities for inclusivity and representation.

Andrew Flinn, Mary Stevens and Elizabeth Shepherd, 'Whose Memories, Whose Archives? Independent Community Archives, Autonomy and the Mainstream', *Archival Science*, 9:1–2 (2009), pp. 71–86.

This article was published more than fifteen years ago, but it provides an accessible introduction to an important topic in archival practice and archival studies. Much scholarship on archives discusses major institutions such as national archives and libraries. However, the last half-century has seen an explosion of local and community-based initiatives to collect and record historical materials once seen as 'marginal'. Independent community-based archives sometimes emphasize priorities and values different from those of larger and more established institutions, and can find themselves in conflict with them. Flinn, Stevens and Shepherd explore what this drive to independent community archives means in the UK context.

Abigail De Kosnik, *Rogue Archives: Digital Cultural Memory and Media Fandom* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2016).

This book takes the study of the archives into the twenty-first century by discussing the impact of digital technologies and social media in the creation of independent digital archives. De Kosnik calls these archives 'rogue' because they differ substantially from the way in which physical archives are managed and maintained; a case in point, for instance, is the lack of regulations surrounding property rights and use. The book posits the decline of control over the preservation of memory by the nation-state and official institutions such as museums, and views this process positively. De Kosnik argues that 'rogue' archives are more democratic and accessible than the official ones; for instance, marginalized voices and communities can have a direct say in how they want their history to be preserved. The book shows how new technologies have helped radically rethink the ways in which culture is preserved, shared and accessed.

Conclusion

The historiography of archives and archival research itself are in constant evolution. Recent trends indicate a move at pace towards delocalization and decentralization of holdings due to the digitization of materials and an increasing specialization which supports more current research interests and topics, as outlined in this annotated bibliography. Much more difficult to predict is how archival research, alongside the work of historians, will evolve in the near future. Current historiography has yet to catch up with and address how the latest technology of artificial intelligence (AI) is likely to shape the trajectory of archival studies and historical research in the years to come. The use of AI raises all sorts of issues, such as the risks entailed in embedding AI in the search engines of databases (who is dictating what is worthy of selection?), to its more practical use for the purposes of reading, summarizing and ultimately selecting and interpreting sources that are kept in physical and digital archives. The boundaries between AI and individual interpretation and originality will become more blurred and researchers will have to address and agree on what is ethical and acceptable in terms of research practice. Further to this, the trend towards dismantlement of national archives connected to central administrative bodies is likely to accelerate in a world where public funds are shrinking and archives might be conveniently considered a costly relic of a bygone era. On 20 March 2025, the Library of Congress in Washington (USA), which holds several archives, informed its patrons of a 'possible government shutdown [...] due to a lapse in funding',¹ which would have entailed the closure of the actual federal building and all types of digital access holdings. The shutdown did not come to pass, but the realization that knowledge and historical research could be impeded at any time should make us more aware of the significance of such places and the importance of preserving them for the access of future generations.

Note

- 1 Library of Congress (Washington), Patron Services, email to author, 14 March 2025.