INTRODUCTION

This issue is a substantially revised version of a paper given at the Association of Canadian Archivists in June 2003 (presently being considered for publication in that group's journal, Archivaria, with fuller, standard bibliographic citations). In this version, I focus on the critical issue of how knowledge about the administration of records has been formed over the past century. While the original focus was on the archival side of such knowledge, in this essay I have tried to tease out more of the implications for records managers. Nevertheless, far more attention needs to be paid to the nature of the knowledge supporting the administration of modern records systems.

Explanations for the start of the archival profession are endless, and consensus elusive, but no matter how we consider its origins, archival knowledge is critical to our understanding of and appreciation for the work of the archivist. The same can be said about the records manager. Can anyone be called an archivist or records manager who has not mastered the rudiments of the theory, methodology, and practice encompassing an understanding of records and recordkeeping systems? But, how do we get at the notion of this knowledge?

Knowledge is a tricky business, as the recently emerged field of Knowledge Management (KM) suggests. David Snowden, Director of IBM's Institute for Knowledge, writes of knowledge as both...
There seems to be a growing gap between some aspects of archival theory and its application in the real world, perhaps because of disparities between professional objectives and the content of the more conceptual components of the professional literature.

Even today, for many archivists working in the field with minimal educational preparation and only the Internet as a connector to the mainstream activities of a larger archival community, practice and experience remain their chief claim to being archivists.

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patterns should be familiar to records managers, who have had similar publication patterns and forms.

CHARACTERIZING THE PROFESSIONAL KNOWLEDGE

Following the establishment of the National Archives and the Society of American Archivists, professional literature grew slowly (as it did later for records managers after they established their separate professional organization). The primary catalyst for a more robust literature was the *American Archivist*, starting in 1938, although initially it was more a record of professional conferences. Slim volumes on basic preservation and other archival topics appeared—mostly in the form of the U.S. National Archives *Bulletins* on topics that institution’s staff was preoccupied with—but the profession eagerly swept them up and many remain well-known and consulted even today. Professional literature was becoming an important source for codifying and sharing experiences about practice, first in the self-reflective volumes on the history of archival and historical manuscripts repositories; later, records managers would stress stories about the formation of their programs. Individual archivists, sometimes sanctioned by their employing institutions, studied how archival matters were dealt with in other times and places as a means for grappling with current challenges.

Concern about the safety of records due to World War II and the need for management solutions to deal with the unprecedented growth of government and business records led to new kinds of publications that would ultimately be typical of the spin-off field of records management.

- Books on building and storage specifications, filing and classification systems, and recommendations for reprographic miniaturization all were noted by archivists, and such works, with their very practical and narrowly focused topics, greatly outnumbered works on archival theory and practice. Books considering particular kinds of documents, the use of archival records in various kinds of research, and autograph collecting—many from outside the profession, but with illuminating insights into the nature of the archival universe—enriched the compact literature of the time.

Someone entering the archival profession fifty years ago, at about the time when records managers were organizing into their own discipline, would find an extremely mixed group of publications about archival work. By reading the *American Archivist* and the National Archives publications, that person could only gain a sense of archival work. A new archivist would then have to scour the historical and library and information science literatures to find additional guidance about records and recordkeeping systems. The profession was building repositories and programs, but the knowledge supporting archival work always seemed to be catching up; in many cases, practice was outrunning systematically defined knowledge in the field’s published literature. Some archivists looked abroad for writings about archival theory and found some, but their influence was extremely limited for many decades, until the emergence of graduate archival education, the establishment of international communication networks, and the rebirth of interest in diplomatics. Records managers had to read through the archival literature since they had none of their own.

This was the decade featuring the publication of the first North American basic archives manual, T. R. Schellenberg’s *Modern Archives*, a work continuing to resonate in the modern archival profession. No research, practice manual, or theorizing about archival work starts without reference to Schellenberg’s first book. Even when his publications are not directly referred to, the language often mimics or echoes Schellenberg’s (and this is true in the records management literature as well). He systematized practice at the National Archives, adding his own useful insights and perspectives on archival work, drawing from or commenting on the archival literature in other countries and traditions.

In this manner, Schellenberg best embodies the symbiotic connection between professional knowledge and literature. Schellenberg’s publication reflects the beginning of a time of more self-conscious archival theory, where archivists set principles and collected and analyzed data about practice.

The substance of the professional literature in this era showed, however, modest change from what preceded it. The major difference was the publication of some monographs, conference proceedings, and *Festschriften*. Nearly all of these publications and what can best be called “reports” (publications issued by or commissioned by archival and other organizational entities) focused on the historical development of the profession (mostly institutional biographies). One encouraging sign was the issuance of research reports on technical functions such as preservation and conservation, but the emergence of records management and the need for management solutions to deal with the unprecedented growth of government and business records led to new kinds of publications that would ultimately be typical of the spin-off field of records management.
As corporations and governments contended with growing quantities of records, and as these entities often had more staff and fiscal resources for resolving challenges, publications of practice, forms, and processes appeared with increasing frequency.

The decades of the 1960s and 1970s were turbulent in the North American archival community, witnessing many changes: the growth of archival programs (especially university archives); the overall expansion and diversification of the field; the influx of individuals from graduate history programs (especially with a social history background, which led to the creation of many creative collecting programs and a subsequent impact on archival theory and practice); and the signs of a fledgling interest by library and information science education programs in the education of archivists (aided by the increased numbers of university archivists who could teach as adjuncts in these programs).

This was the era when the challenges of forming a substantial archival knowledge were made more complicated by a disciplinary fragmentation among what we can only call the records professions—with records management solidifying itself as a separate field and the fragmentation becoming more complex as archivists became more engaged in both information science and new historical research paradigms. The schisms bifurcated the nature of conceptualizing and administering records and their systems, weakening archival knowledge. These problems continue to the present. For example, an essay published in a records management journal tends to be read by only a small portion of archivists, and an essay appearing in an archival journal will be dismissed by a records administrator. This is, of course, both a serious and a ridiculous problem.

All of these changes were reflected in the publications of this era. There were a growing number of basic textbooks published for both archivists (including Schellenberg’s second book) and records managers (including the first edition of a pioneering textbooks on records management by William Benedon). New specialized manuals on preservation management and conservation also appeared for the first time, reflecting a growing interest in developing and applying basic principles on caring for archival and library materials being learned from the continuing research. The number of books, manuals, and reports on records management indicated an increasing preoccupation with the efficient and economic control of records—and the widening schism between the missions of records managers and archivists. Basic guides to paperwork, filing systems, micrographics, fire protection, and security proliferated across institutions.

There was a greater tilt towards a more expansive archival knowledge with an increasing number of monographs, edited works, and important conference proceedings. A cluster of monographs by H.G. Jones, Walter Muir Whitehill, and Ernst Posner represent one of the most important eras in evaluating the nature and health of historical manuscript and government archives repositories, all calling for change and new leadership. Like these studies, most of the monographs and similar publications focused on historical or biographical topics, examining pioneer archivists and records professionals, institutional biographies, the history of archives and historical manuscripts repositories in a particular state, and the use of archives as historical sources. Even the monographs published outside the archival community focused on similar themes of research in archives and the historical nature of records and recordkeeping.

While basic management continued to be the prevalent interest, there was a promising improvement in archival knowledge as reflected in the primary publications of the field, with a higher degree of scholarship emerging that could be noticed by other disciplines concerned about archives and historical manuscripts (although the lack of any bibliometric studies concerning archival literature prevents me from arguing this with any conviction). The heavy historical flavor of the topics and methodologies reflected the connection of the archival profession to the historical discipline and to a cultural mission, aspects that would change (with debate and considerable angst) in future decades. The literature was beginning to reflect a complexity in professional knowledge not seen before. Most records managers, however, did not appreciate the focus on the historical orientation of the literature.

About thirty years ago, the intense publishing of basic manuals for guiding practice began, continuing until the present. At first glance, little distinguishes this...
The seeds of a revolution in archival knowledge from the previous decade, with only a few basic comprehensive manuals being published. However, this was the decade that the Society of American Archivists (SAA) entered the basic manual publishing business with a vengeance. In 1977 it launched its Basic Manual Series covering every essential function of archival work, with each manual focused on a specific function. (The first volumes were on appraisal and accessioning, surveys, arrangement and description, reference and access, and security. More information on the series can be found at the SAA Web site at www.archivists.org.)

For whatever reason—perhaps due to the rapid growth of the North American archival community or to recognizing the need to establish cogent descriptions of professional best practice (as suggested by the publication of basic comprehensive bibliographies)—this was a time of immense industry in publishing basic manuals on every archival topic, from elemental functions to repository type to records and media forms. While a small number of these manuals were published outside by standards-setting bodies, most were the produced by professional associations and archival institutions.

Added to these publishing ventures were the normal array of conference proceedings and special journal issues. What weakened, especially in comparison to the outpouring of basic manuals, was the publishing of monographs on archival topics. The decade continued to stress the historians’ use of sources, with some minor growth of interest in such topics as secrecy, access, privacy, technical issues related to preservation, and records forms like maps and film. A few outstanding monographs of great interest to the archival field were published, including Cutright’s study of the history of the Lewis and Clark journals and McCoy’s serious study of the history of the National Archives, plus an earlier work by H. G. Jones, the only serious study of this institution. However, these were exceptions, and they reflected the strong connection of history to archives at the exclusion of other aspects of archival development, practice, and theory. This was a time of solidifying best practice, at its most rudimental level.

The recent decades have continued to show reliance on basic manuals, and with this we see the persistence of some tension between theory and practice, between specific application and a broader scholarship. The SAA continued to publish a growing variety of specialized manuals, and in the early to mid-1990s, it replaced its older Basic Manual Series with the Archival Fundamentals (and the SAA is now revising the Fundamentals with the first to appear in 2004). Other publishers—including other professional associations and professional, university, and trade publishers—also entered the market, causing an avalanche of specialized and general manuals. In the 1990s, the North American archival profession published more general basic manuals and nearly doubled the quantity of specialized basic manuals. Added to these basic manuals were a wide array of bibliographies and other basic reference tools reflecting the profession’s efforts to keep pace with its expanding literature and more demanding responsibilities (although the means of controlling the literature has not kept pace, and there is still no comprehensive bibliographic utility or clearinghouse covering the expanding literature). Such manuals often have served useful roles in supporting professional practice and in delineating professional knowledge. In Terry Cook’s important essay about the generations of electronic records archivists, he reflects on such roles with the 1984 publications of the Margaret Hedstrom and Harold Naugler electronic records management manuals. These publications, Cook says, “indicate clearly to any sensitive reader the debt which the archival profes-

A rich monographic literature developed in the past two decades, with growing evidence of the emergence of a core group of archival scholars and increasing interest in archives by scholars from other fields.
From the early 1980s until well into the next decade, numerous national, regional, and institutional plans were formulated, released, debated, refined, or shelved and forgotten. The profession is undergoing rapid change, questioning nearly every cherished assumption held by archivists, a precursor to new literature on the archival profession. From the early 1980s until well into the next decade, numerous national, regional, and institutional plans were formulated, released, debated, refined, or shelved and forgotten (as is often the case with self-study and planning). In Canada, a national archival plan was completed; in the United States, individual states created plans, and conferences led to efforts to articulate national mission and priorities as well as to create institutional self-study documents. Many of these planning efforts were also advocacy efforts, intended to gain broad public and policy-maker support for archives and historical records programs and the archival mission—trying to understand the societal perceptions of archives and archivists.

Increasing threats to the preservation of archives, especially those posed by new technologies, added to controversies, crises, and critiques challenging the modern archival community’s efforts to sustain useful practices and procedures—suggesting another source for the creation and text of new archival knowledge. Not surprisingly, archivists turned to new audiences, developing and offering teaching packets for schools, and trying to manage the growing professional literature of their field. Like other professionals, archivists struggled to manage their own knowledge while in the midst of a new kind of information age. All of these efforts reflected that archival knowledge was both shifting and stabilizing, implying an unprecedented breadth and depth within the literature.

The emphasis on local, regional, and national planning, while remarkable, was not the most notable change in the formation or presentation of archival knowledge. Research and other monographs began to appear regularly in the early 1980s, gaining momentum since then. In 1980, the first research study on any aspect of archival appraisal was published, quickly followed by studies on the U.S. National Archives, the Historical Records Survey, and descriptive practices. At the end of the 1980s, David Bearman’s groundbreaking Archival Methods was published, questioning nearly every cherished assumption held by archivists, a precursor to new literature on the archival profession. Research reports appeared on electronic records and appraisal and documentation issues, including the first major monographs on electronic records and other matters—followed by important volumes on similar themes throughout the 1990s. The first systematic
The newness of monographic publishing also created some critical assessments of such research. For example, while Ann Pederson praised Richard Berner's 1983 Archival Theory and Practice in the United States: A Historical Analysis as "our profession's first comprehensive, effective work," she also lamented some of its failings. Pederson argued that the book's "narrative does not sustain the standard of objectivity required of high quality historical work beyond its first three chapters.... Thereafter, the book becomes more and more openly prescriptive, with Berner justifying and promoting his own concept of a comprehensive finding aid system that will offer researchers a single point of access to all holdings" (Pederson, 35, 41).

These were the growing pains of a richer archival knowledge. Pederson's characterizations of the Berner book probably capture well much of the monographic publishing of this recent era, and in such assessments we recognize both the work of busy practitioners and the early efforts of a transitional group of archivists developing graduate archival education programs. From this point on, it was unlikely that the only litmus test for a new archival publication would be its practicality in the repository.

Archivists and records managers were more likely to read outside their fields to learn about the historical, political, cultural, and economic nature of the modern Information Age, with many studies providing extended discussions about records and recordkeeping systems. One explanation for this may have been the immense changes in graduate archival education, with the emergence of both full-time academics supporting these programs and a stronger curriculum in both library and information science schools and history departments—even though the establishment and continuing development of regular, full-time academics focused on archival studies may not yet have had the desired results in archival research and theory.

There has been a corresponding growth in the number of doctoral students focused on archival studies and number of doctoral dissertations on archival topics in the past half-century. In general, it was a time when new ideas were being generated because of new issues caused by new technologies, as evident in the writings of the iconoclastic David Bearman or the visionary Hugh Taylor. This was the era of Taylor's most creative forays into the nature of archival knowledge. Gordon Dodds, reviewing the 1992 festschrift in Taylor's honor, reflected on the variety of "Taylorisms" served up to us—"information ecology," "paper archaeology," "sea changes," "dust to ashes," "cloistered archivists," "transformation of the archivist," "media of the record," "totemic universe," "the conjuring text," "Clio in the raw"—and suggested that a volume of Taylor's own writings would not only capture his nimble mind and imagination, but reveal a formative period in new archival knowledge (Dodds, 274).

Some of this interdisciplinarity suggested that the old dichotomy between history and information science was at an end, such as Terry Cook's assertion, "It is long past time for archivists to set aside the false dichotomies of historians versus information specialists.... It is now time to realize the wisdom both can offer to archival work, and to take strands from each and weave them into a rich texture archivists can call their own" (a stronger archival knowledge) (Cook 1990-91, 171). Yet, within the creative cross-fertilization of archival studies with other disciplines resides both great promise of intellectual riches and substantial dangers about a loss of core knowledge.

The past twenty years have also been marked by an outpouring of new volumes of collected essays from conferences or freshly assembled on a theme, covering every aspect of archival work. A prominent effort in this publishing genre was Tom Nesmith's (1993) work in assembling a reader on the contributions of Canadian archivists to archival theory and practice. Another important volume was the collection of essays on appraising American business records, edited by James O'Toole (1997), generating from a conference at the Minnesota Historical Society. The educa-
tion of archivists was the focus of a number of important conferences, with resulting published proceedings reflecting the increasing emphasis on the new energy devoted to this aspect of the profession.

Archival appraisal attracted new scrutiny as archivists searched for ways to evaluate the success of this function, as well as for new approaches. Arrangement and description, buoyed by an immense new interest in descriptive standards and authority control and access to archival records, also was a conference topic. Every aspect of archival work or the archival record was featured in one or more conference proceedings or collected essays. Special journal issues and other volumes of collected essays ruminated on the relationship of archivists to other professions, especially historians and public historians (reflecting the tensions and growing distance between historians and archivists), librarians, and rare books and special collections curators. Closely related groups, such as rare books and special collections librarians, were also closely analyzed.

As electronic information systems grew more sophisticated, issues like intellectual property and other public policy matters attracted greater attention and concern, as did oral history, other documentary forms, and the history of individual and institutional collecting. Festschriften in honor of senior members of the field also appeared, most notably the essays edited by Barbara Craig in honor of Hugh Taylor, a volume frequently cited for its substantial essays on a number of archival topics. Archivists, along with closely allied colleagues, love to hold conferences to set new agendas, resolve issues, articulate new objectives, and answer persistent archival questions—suggesting the dynamic nature of a knowledge unlikely to be captured in a one-volume primer. Even conference proceedings and edited thematic volumes that were uneven or weak often featured one or two stellar essays captivating the attention of the profession and adding to its knowledge.

Monographic publishing on topics related to archives and records have continued to be published in noticeably larger numbers than ever before. Some have been focused on persistent matters like privacy and access, public policy, and the development of office and information technology, all with direct relevance for archives and records managers. Pioneers of archival and historical manuscripts collecting—private and public historical societies—also received a fresh look, with some of the best analyses to date. However, there has been intense interest in the nature of particular kinds of records, such as photographs, maps, oral tradition, census documentation, government reports, letter writing, and diaries, adding considerably to our knowledge of these document genres and demonstrating how the archival and records management literature is intertwined. A new generation of writing about autograph collecting, and collecting in general, emerged, although this avocation still has not received its scholarly due. More notable was the growing interest in archives by journalists, freelance writers, and scholars. Janet Malcolm's riveting book on the matter of access to the Sigmund Freud papers at the Library of Congress still remains a useful case study in archival access and ethics. A number of journalists provided intense scrutiny on the murder, forgery, and other controversies regarding the Mormon Church and early records related to its history—in fact, forgery of historical manuscripts and archives continued to attract increased attention by both scholars and the public.

Historians analyzed how societies and organizations function by the creation and use of information and record systems (in addition to basic research primers). They came out with an influential study of business communication systems between 1850 and 1920 and another on the struggles of a seventeenth-century Dutch notary to make a transition to the newly dominant English culture (with haunting lessons about the problems of cultural shifts for recordkeepers) (Yates; Merwick). Public controversies and social issues featured records, such as the tobacco litigation case and a scathing indictment of the management of U.S. Internal Revenue Service records (Glantz et al.; Davis). All of these volumes are just as relevant to the records manager as to the archivist.

The schism between archivists and records managers continued to be evident as records professionals contended with the emerging challenges posed by digital media. Archival programs, especially in government, continued to publish basic records management manuals. Meanwhile, the publications program of the Association of Records Managers and Administrators (ARMA), along with other professional records and information resources management associations, became more active in publishing a wide array of texts on records and information resources management, reflecting a widening gulf in perspectives between archivists and records managers. Basic records management textbooks, published by a variety of commercial textbook publishers, appeared with relentless frequency, most providing little about archives as an integral element of records management. National studies and specialized manuals for assisting various institutions implement their records management programs became common.

By the mid-1980s, archivists certainly understood that records management functions were crucial in an organization administering its records, and they also understood that records management texts provided useful information about the mechanics of records and recordkeeping systems. Unfortunately, the evidence does not suggest that records managers had the same appreciation for the archival perspective. Among archivists, skepticism about the role of records management surged, perhaps because many archivists held to a cultural role and were critical of any emphasis on records and evidence.

In these publications, we see a fracturing of the archival community into something that can only be termed the records professions. At the advent of the 1980s, archivists wrestled with whether they were or should be distinct from librarians and historians, prompting a heated debate in North America in the mid-1980s and again in the early 1990s (with little resolution and with modest contributions to the concept of an archival knowledge). Reports on the nature and purpose of documentary editing also accentuated differences between documentary editors and archivists. There were increasing signs of deepening schisms between archivists and records managers and even between archivists and preservation administrators (the latter developing a highly specialized technical literature). And, then, there were emerging archival specializations (like moving image archives) leading to new professional associations. Most of the writings about the splintering of various disciplines concentrated on the relationship between archivists and historians with complaints about stereotyping by historians and a desire for demonstrating stronger links between the fields. However, the schismatic nature of the archival discipline has been far more complicated than generally acknowledged. Despite the debates there were some who persisted in holding to a static view of
While the archival profession seems to have splintered in a thousand directions, a scholarly context for understanding the nature of archives and archivists has emerged with great promise for influencing nearly every aspect of the archivist's knowledge. The emergence of scholarly interest in public or collective memory, mixed with new cultural and literary studies and postmodernist textual criticism, has considerably enriched the historical and contemporary understanding of archives—from the news media serving as an archival record, photography functioning as a mechanism for cultural memory, and Americans interacting with the past, including archival records, as a means for forming collective memory. The relevance of public memory studies should be obvious, since, as Barbara Craig comments, "All archives originate in the conscious act of memorializing some thing by the giving, receiving, and keeping of documentary records" (Craig 2002, 279). Nearly all the recent studies on public memory comment to some degree on the nature or role of archives, although in many respects such studies from the outside both enrich and detract from a broader understanding of archives. With their increasing intensity of focus on records, one might assume that records managers would be more conversant with this emerging scholarship, but that appears not to be the case.

There are other troublesome and promising aspects of the broadening of archival knowledge, as represented in both the profession's own literature and that on its borders. Not too many years ago, the notion of convergence of various information professions was a spacy topic, although some in the archives field shunned the idea. Rather than convergence, we have seen a centrifugal force at work, creating more spin-offs and subfields than commitment to a core knowledge. Peter Wosh, for example, argues that while we should "nurture diversity," the archival community is far too fragmented (Wosh, 101).

Still, we need to pay attention to a wider variety of disciplinary scholarship, such as James O'Toole contend with historical literacy studies: "What does writing do and not do? How does written communication circulate in modern organizations or personal life? What are its formal and informal means? What is the interplay of forces that are expressly literate and those that are non-literate, such as voice-mail, person-to-person transactions, and (perhaps) e-mail?" (O'Toole 1995, 99). It is critical to do this if we are to develop a more coherent sense of how theory and practice relate to each other.

Tom Nasmith, reflecting on Trevor Livelton's 1996 Archival Theory, Records, and the Public, wonders if we don't require a broader notion of theory encompassing a "wider study of various understandings of the broader world," one that would "reorient some archival theorizing...from a focus on what the classic archival texts say an archives, a record, or a public record is in 'nature,' to a study of how human perception, communication, and behavior shape the archives, records, and public records we actually locate and create as archivists and records creators." As Nesmith suggests, "to explore the wide terrain of human perception, communication, and behavior in relation to archives would also require us to consult the leading works of theory in these areas" (Nesmith 1999, 142). At the least, it requires archivists and records managers to read more than ever before.

VISUALIZING THE CREATION OF ARCHIVAL KNOWLEDGE

What do the publication patterns mean for the state of North American archival knowledge? The reliance on basic manuals suggests that archival knowledge is easily summarized or, perhaps, that most archivists look for convenient summaries describing practice essentials. This is, however, challenged by the publication trends of specialized manuals, a phenomenon indicating that there are, indeed, more substantial changes occurring in the field in both practice and knowledge. Another indication that archival knowledge is transforming is the recent burst of scholarly monographs on archival topics (from a diversity of fields), providing a more complex meaning of archives, the nature of recordkeeping systems, and the role of records in society.

Some of this recent scholarship challenges long-held basic precepts of archival knowledge and practice, or suggests how archival knowledge will be reevaluated in future years. This scholarship also is being buttressed by an unprecedented growth in doctoral dissertations on archival topics, a trend indicating that a new research foundation is being built with promise for expanding archival knowledge. Providing greater insights into records and their administration, these studies also will benefit the work of records managers.

From our vantage point, North American archivists seem preoccupied with basic manuals. Such publications, as an indicator of best practices and consensus of how practices and theories mesh, are quite valuable to those interested in understanding and archivists. If we only consider the publication of basic manuals, those trying to cover all functions and activities in a single volume, we might not be very impressed by the professional community's demand for such volumes. Figure 1 reveals that the publication rate of such volumes has been steady over the past half century, never totaling more than five in any of these decades (although, for a field as small as archives, a new basic manual every two years suggests oversaturation of the market).

The questions that emerge about the publication rate of such general texts are, however, quite troubling. Is archival knowledge changing so rapidly that we must have new manuals every few years? How does the content of these general texts differ from one to the other? Are these manuals being pitched to different levels of experience and education in the practitioners' ranks or aimed at archives and archivists in different settings? Do they adequately reflect the changing aspects of archival knowledge, whatever these may be? Do these archival manuals demonstrate that they are being prepared and published as efforts to keep up with changing records and recordkeeping technologies? Although such questions will be debated for a long time, there are elements of basic archival practice and theory that seem quite fluid (such as the shift in archival description from standardizing repository finding aids to standardizing national and international inventories), requiring manuals to be regularly revised or replaced.

Over the past thirty years, however, the proliferation of basic manuals on specialized topics suggests that the parameters of archival knowledge are expanding. These manuals range from a focus on specific archival functions, such as appraisal or reference, to specific types of records forms (photographs, maps, and architectural drawings) and issues (such as legal concerns and intellectual property). Figure 2 reveals a remarkable growth of such publishing—177 volumes in thirty years—a rate of more than five a year. The primary
question is whether the knowledge portrayed in all these volumes is being incorporated into the more general texts or captured in other ways by the archival community.

One must wonder if the scattering of publications across records and repository types, archival issues and functions, is not being assimilated into a coherent archival knowledge. Indeed, while general manuals may provide a kind of foundational unity about the fundamentals of archival practice and knowledge (and these manuals need to be examined more closely to help archivists discern what the unifying features are), the specialized manuals may suggest a continuing fracturing of the archival community into sub-specializations (just think of the increasing complexity of specialized listervs).

The reliance on basic manuals may be an attribute of any modern information profession, so we must be cautious in how we characterize the North American archival community. While it is easy to suggest that the publication of such manuals means there is a heavy orientation to basic skills rather than a sophisticated knowledge, we need to place the archives field into a broader context of the information, library, and historical disciplines. Other components of the professions related to archival work continue to publish a lot of basic (both general and specialized) manuals. In history, numerous basic works in historiography and historical method are regularly published and many of the best basic remain in print for a considerable time; the difference is that the historical discipline also produces countless scholarly monographs on all aspects of historical research, themes, and controversies. Perhaps a better comparison is what occurs within the records management discipline, a professional group that splintered from the mainstream archival field nearly half a century ago. Figure 3 demonstrates that the records management community is even more focused on basic textbooks, reflecting perhaps its lower educational standards and more practice-oriented field. The records management field also supports a wide array of specialized manuals, just like the archives field, but there is little evidence of scholarly research monographs (see the publications list offered by the Association of Records Managers and Administrators (ARMA) at www.arma.org).

A recent survey conducted by ARMA of its Information Management Journal concluded that records managers desire articles on how-to/best practices, technology, news, and other such matters: “The survey also found that topics readers would most like to see covered or emphasized more in future issues of the Journal include electronic records management, more RIM how-tos, and more content geared toward beginning RIM practitioners” (survey results were published at www.arma.org/publications/infopro/online.cfm#six, accessed April 17, 2003, the date the results were released). This came after a short-lived effort by ARMA to support this journal being more scholarly in content.

A mark distinguishing the archival discipline from the records management field is the recent burst of scholarly monographic publishing, indicating a new interest in the broadening of knowledge buttressing practice. Figure 4 shows a strong spike in publishing such research in the past decade, with evidence that this trend is continuing. In 1980, shortly before such publishing began, Maynard Brichford said that “archivists’ avoidance of empirical research is somewhere between the pathological and the scandalous,” and that the field needed a “scientific research methodology.” One response was the proliferation of research agendas, but the more important change has been monographic publication.

Most of these publications eschew the idea that their content must have any practical intent, aimed to contribute more depth to a particular aspect of archival knowledge or to reform and continue strengthening the profession and its mission. The lack of a practical aim sometimes irritates reviewers of these publications, but more often than not, the reformation aspect upsets commentators even more. Unfortunately, at times, it appears that the field still has not developed an adequate sense of how to engage in scholarly debate that advances its own knowledge, perhaps because the archival discipline is only recently getting accustomed to having monographs rather than primers available to it about its mission and work.

If we add to these monographs the increasing number of doctoral dissertations, we see an even stronger transformation in the scholarly foundations of archival knowledge. More dissertations on archival topics at North American schools or on North American topics have been completed in the past decade than in the entire rest of the century (see Figure 5 on p. 12). The impact of this research on archival knowledge still seems suspect at this point—with only one in three dissertations leading to article publication and about one in ten leading to a monograph. However, this, along with the spurt of monographic publishing, suggests that we are witnessing a new era of archival knowledge. When we consider the growing number of publications on the “archive” by a variety of scholars outside the archival community, we can surmise that we might be witnessing a true revolution.

The idea that an archives is a reasonably static place has been all but destroyed by scholars in the past few decades, as just one recent book, Hamilton et al.’s Refiguring the Archive, suggests. In this volume’s introduction, three of the editors write, “For the archive is . . . always already being refigured: the technologies of creation, preservation and use, for instance, are changing all the time; physically the archive is being added to and subtracted from, and is in dynamic relation with its physical environment; organizational dynamics are ever shifting; and the archive is porous to societal processes and discoveries” (Hamilton et al., 7). The instability of archival knowledge, in that it is growing and changing.
Archivists were quick to take advantage of the Internet. The potential of these electronic means of disseminating information of archival knowledge is the Internet. In the 1990s, the influence and potential of the Web as a publishing venue may be the most critical aspect of the real revolution to occur in the continuing formation in archival knowledge, but its role will only be critical if the archival community has matured enough to sustain high-quality professional and research literature.

CONCLUSION

At the start of this essay, I enumerated some limitations in my analysis of the archival literature. In this concluding section, it is important to consider additional limitations since they suggest how much more there is to understanding the general state of archival knowledge. The primary limitation may be that my comments suggest that somehow the form of a publication (whether it is a basic manual or a scholarly monograph) indicates the quality of knowledge the publication communicates. Obviously, there are excellent basic primers and deficient scholarly monographs, so it is not my intent to make an absolute connection between the publication form and the quality of its content. My aim is to demonstrate that in the increasing diversity of research and publication, there has been a substantial change for the better in archival knowledge, with the promise of more improvement to come. One of the most obvious, and perhaps notable, features of the literature is that each aspect of the archival field and its knowledge is becoming too complex to characterize in a single essay. Even when experts write about the literature of part of the field, with all its weaknesses and strengths, they still find a considerable array of books, conference proceedings, technical reports, and journals that must be evaluated.

Another limitation of this analysis may be giving an impression that, as time passes, archival knowledge increases and improves. Another analysis could certainly suggest that while we can see substantial improvement in the professional literature, closer examination of particular aspects might suggest otherwise. Hopefully, an example will suffice to demonstrate my point. Prior to the advent of the U.S. National Archives, Schellenberg's theoretical musings, and records management techniques, the idea of archival appraisal was limited. From the 1940s until well into the 1970s, the evidential/informational model of archival value governed appraising. In the 1980s, appraisal became more complicated as neo-Jenkinsonism took root in parts of North America, other concepts (such as “total archives,” “documentation strategies,” “functional analysis,” and “macro-appraisal”) were introduced, and the task of appraising was discovered to be more challenging.

Even though we are now beginning to see specific case studies of appraisal methodologies and more theorizing about the nature and aims of archival appraisal, there are still many weaknesses in our knowledge of archival appraisal. There is little evidence that individuals outside of archivy understand or appreciate the notion of appraisal. There is also very little known about the notion of success (saving the right records) and failure (destroying or saving the wrong records) in archival appraisal activities. Indeed, the idea of failure as a means of elevating professional or any knowledge seems like something mostly avoided by archivists, manuscript curators, and records managers—an avoidance bound to have a negative influence on a continual maturation of archival knowledge.

Figure 2. Publication of General and Specialized Archives Manuals, 1970–1999

Figure 3. Publication of General Archives and Records Management Manuals, 1950–1999
My point is, however, that we need to keep examining, testing, and poking at our own assumptions about what constitutes the knowledge that distinguishes someone as an archivist, since archivists never take anything for granted about what is known or not known about archives and the archival discipline. We also need to make sure that archival knowledge is continually tested in the organizations creating records and recordkeeping systems and in the reference room where researchers ultimately strive to use archival records.

Another important limitation is the visibility of archival knowledge to other fields. Archivists have not contributed greatly to public scholarship, in going outside their own disciplinary boundaries to discuss records, archives, and manuscripts. The business of public scholarship is a difficult one, requiring contacts, support, and resources (especially time) that most archivists do not possess. Writing outside the archivists’ own discipline is problematic. Given their knowledge about the nature of source material and its uses, often displayed in critical essays in their own journals, it is surprising, despite the barriers, how little such writing and publishing archivists have done (especially given the many opportunities of breaking news stories in which records and archives prominently figure). Such opportunities are not confined to public venues, but they also reside in new forms and approaches of scholarship. In surveying the possibilities of postmodern scholarship for archives, Tom Nesmith very neatly describes the potential here:

The postmodern outlook suggests an important new intellectual place for archives in the formation of knowledge, culture, and societies. It helps us to see that contrary to the conventional idea that archivists simply receive and house vast new quantities of records, which merely reflect society, they actually co-create and shape the knowledge in records and thus help form society’s memory. This implies that studying the archiving process itself (and not just using archives in the familiar way to study other things) is a vital aspect of the pursuit of human understanding. The study of archives is no longer just the seemingly esoteric interest of a few archivists who believes it makes them more effective on the job, or provides an underpinning for professional culture, valuable as these internal pursuits may be. (Nesmith 2002, 26–27)

We must also recognize that in this expansion of the sense of archives and archiving, there is a danger of losing sight of the very unique aspects of what makes some things archives. Despite the promises of postmodernist scholarship (and I concur that the promises are immense), there is also the danger that the boundaries of archives will become considerably blurred (prompting debate about the nature of records in the postmodernist milieu). In his impressive survey of archival ideas over the past century, Terry Cook indicates, “archival theory now takes its inspiration from analysis of record-keeping processes rather than from the arrangement and description of recorded products in archives” (Cook 1997, 45).

Will the infusion of a postmodernist scholarly bent allow archivists to maintain such a focus? Tom Nesmith believes it will, since the “central archival concerns now and in the future are not primarily technical or procedural. . . . The study of archives is very much a study of human beings (including archivists) and why and how they act when recording, keeping records, and placing, using, and perceiving them in archives” (Nesmith 1996, 91). And in a sense, whether more prone to a postmodernist inclination or not, such a recognition suggests that a real maturation has occurred with archival knowledge. Undoubtedly, some will worry that many frontline archivists—the practitioners—will not be tied into this newer form of archival knowledge. However, fixating on this issue only churns up the older issue of the relationship of theory and practice, a relationship that while continuing to be vexing is also the wrong issue to focus on. Stephen Jay Gould, in his last book before his death, helped us to see that the kind of dichotomy that exists in all professions in their views toward theory and practice is deeply ingrained in the human psyche: “I strongly suspect that our propensity for dichotomy lies deeply within our basic mental architecture as an evolved property of the human brain.” (Gould, 82). In other words, our wrestling with what is clearly something never to be resolved is only useful to us if we are engaged in building—from both practice and research revolving about theoretical concepts—an archival knowledge that communicates to archivists, guides them, and engages other disciplines and the public in appreciating what archives are and why archives are important. Gould pokes fun at the dream of unifying science and the humanities, when he says he wants the “sciences and humanities to
become the greatest of pals, to recognize a deep kinship and necessary connection in pursuit of human decency and achievement, but to keep their ineluctably different aims and logics separate as they ply their joint projects and learn from each other" (Gould, 195). Perhaps, in the same way, archivists should be a little self-mocking, and hope that archival practitioners and theorists keep their aims and logics separate while they learn from each other. An already strong archival knowledge has only more to gain. And records managers need to join in.

REFERENCES


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