

A NEW LANGUAGE TO BE SPOKEN: A PARADIGM SHIFT IN ARCHIVAL SCIENCE¹

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ABSTRACT

If anything is a social construct, archival science is. Archival science is not a corpus of accumulated knowledge providing answers to archival questions. Archival science, like any other science, is a discipline based on a mental framework, a paradigm, which allows us to phrase our archival questions and provide us with the tools to answer them. Like any other scientific discipline, archival science is a language, in which concepts are the words and the relations between the concepts is the syntax.

Archival science is in the middle of a paradigm shift. The existing paradigm, the paradigm of classic or custodial archival science, still valid in a classic or custodial archival world, cannot solve the problems of an emerging post-custodial archival world. Developing a new post-custodial paradigm, a new language, aimed at integrating both worlds by phrasing the problems of both worlds in the same manner, is vital for our profession. This new archival paradigm is in the process of being constructed by archivists of our time, who try to meet the archival challenges of our time, and whose ideas about these challenges have been generated by social developments of our time. Its formulation goes along with the repositioning of archival science in the world of education and research.

Leopold von Ranke, the famous German historian from the nineteenth century, wished the archives to speak for themselves through the mouth of the historian. On the basis of archives as historical sources, historians should merely “say what actually happened.”

Sir Hilary Jenkinson, the famous British archivist from the first half of the 20th century, stressed the sanctity of the archivists job. In his view an archivist was an impartial, neutral and objective custodian, who handed the archives, undisrupted and well arranged, over to the historian.

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Nowadays, archivists do not believe anymore that archives just mirror the past and that archivists are objective custodians. If a body of records mirrors something, it is what records creators found it useful to remember and to remind and what archivists found it important to preserve and highlight. They are considered sources for and parts of the stories records creators, archivists and users want to tell about the past and about themselves. We now tend to believe, that records are artefacts, constructed and reconstructed by records creators, records managers, archivists and users, who continuously change the archives by adding their own meanings to them and hiding other meanings, by inscribing in them their own ideas, concepts and theories and the ideas, concepts and theories of their times. Archives do not just mirror the past; they are social constructions and so is the knowledge based upon their use.

Archivists intervene in archives and in doing so construct and reconstruct them. We are constantly changing archives with our interpretations: by collecting them, arranging them, preserving them and making them available to the public. And we do so by applying to them our professional concepts, methods and theories, our own interpretative system, our own scientific discipline we call archival science.

As an interpretative system or an explanatory model, archival science is a social construction too. Like all other professionals, archivists cannot question the things *as they are*. We can only question phenomena, the things as they appear in our perceptions, perceptions which are structured by concepts and theories, like *records* and *archives*, *the principle of provenance*, *authenticity*, *the records continuum*. And where do these concepts and theories come from? They are not based directly on the structure of our intervention field, the archival world, but on the ideas and assumptions we share about how our intervention field is structured. Archival science identifies what professional questions should be answered and what professional problems should be solved, but it takes as its point of departure the shared ideas and assumptions of the professions, which are not scientific by character itself. They are determined by social factors, for instance by the way archivists define their relations with stakeholders, like governments, public administration, users, democratic society, or, speaking in a more general and abstract way, by the way the dominant group in the profession and the community of archival researchers perceive these social conditions.

Archival science, then, is a social construction. Archival science does not describe the essence of the archival world in its unity and totality. Its concepts do not refer objectively to an external archival reality consisting of clearly demarcated archival objects. Archival science is a system of archival thought. Its concepts get their meaning from their mutual relations. It does not discover an archival reality, it constructs one. This does not mean, that archival

reality only exists in the minds of the archivists; it means that archival reality can be classified in innumerable incompatible ways which are not dictated by archival reality itself.

Since the emergence of an archival theory, archival reality has been classified in many different ways. “Archival thinking over the century”, Terry Cook states, “should be viewed as constantly evolving, ever mutating as it adapts to radical changes in the nature of records, record-creating organizations, record-keeping systems, record uses, and the wider cultural, legal, technological, social, and philosophical trends in society. Archival ideas formed in one time and place reflect many of these external factors, which ideas are often reconstructed, even rediscovered in another time and place, or reshaped across generations in the same place.”²

Archival theory, like any other theory, is built on names and definitions. By naming and defining, archivists make their perception of the archival world and its constituting entities visible and real. Naming and defining things is conceptualizing them; and concepts are needed for explaining experiences and observations.

The first thing to be defined by archivists is of course “archives.” The different ways in which “archives” have been conceptualized over more than hundred years, demonstrate that the concept of archives is a construct and that it does not refer to an objective external archival reality.

In 1898 Muller, Feith and Fruin defined archives as “the whole of the written documents, drawings and printed matter, officially received or produced by an administrative body or one of its officials, in so far as these documents were intended to remain in the custody of that body or of that official.”³ In ICA’s *Dictionary of Archival Terminology*, published almost hundred years later, archives are defined as: “Non-current records preserved with or without selection by those responsible for their creation or by their successors in function of their own use or by an appropriate archives [=archives institution] for their archival value.”⁴ And in your *Dicionário arquivo* is defined as “conjunto de documentos produzidos e acumulados por uma entidade coletiva, pública ou privada, pessoa ou família, no desempenho de suas atividades, independentemente da natureza do suporte.”⁵

² Terry Cook, “What is Past is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas Since 1898, and the Future Paradigm Shift.” in: *Archivaria* 43 (1996) pp. 17-63.

³ S. Muller, J.A. Feith, and R. Fruin, *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives*. Translation of the Second Edition by Arthur H. Leavitt with new introductions by Peter Horsman, Eric Ketelaar, Theo Thomassen & Marjorie Rabe Barritt (Chicago, 2003) 13. It is the definition of “archival collection.”

⁴ Peter Walne (ed.), *Dictionary of Archival Terminology / Dictionnaire de Terminologie Archivistique*. With Equivalents in Dutch, German, Italian, Russian and Spanish, 1988².

⁵ *Dicionário Brasileiro de Terminologia Arquivística*, Rio de Janeiro, 2005.

None of these definitions refer to “archives as they are”, but to archives as the definition makers perceived them. Muller, Feith and Fruin perceived archives as closed archives of government administrations and officials from the ancien régime, physical unities with fixed physical boundaries. In the English definition of the ICA Dictionary, we hear the echo of Jenkinson’s perception of archives: those records the records creator had decided to transfer to an archival institution because he could not use them anymore and considered them to have the qualities which justify their indefinite or permanent retention. The authors of the Brazilian definition perceive archives just as their colleagues from the South-European, Scandinavian and Dutch traditions: as integrated bodies of documents, not measured by their currentness or their permanent value.

It is rather funny, that you and me share the same concepts of archives, but that we are obliged to communicate here in a language in which this concepts cannot easily be expressed.

It would be interesting to take a closer look to these and other definitions of archives and analyse the similarities and the differences, but that would take us too far away from the subject of this session. The conclusion to be drawn is, that archives are what archivists say they are and that what archivists say about what archives are highly depends from their situated ideas on how the archival world is structured and who their stakeholders are, ideas about what type of questions must be solved and how these questions should be solved. Dependent from these ideas archives can be identified as created by governments, formal organisations or just you and me, they can be considered as a whole, as a part, as fixed or as ever-changing, they can be treated as documents, information, or carriers of meanings, and they can be defined as mere historical sources, as products of government administration or as memory of society.

The concept of archives cannot be isolated from other archival concepts. The concept of archives refers to all other concepts of our discipline. All other concepts on their turn derive their meaning from the concept of archives and from each other. The terms in our archival terminologies are not a collection of names referring to real, distinct objects, but a conceptual system in which each concept refers to the other concepts. Archival science like any scientific discipline is a language.

Like the definition of archives, archival science as such, is a social construction. Definitions of archives change over time and so does the framework of archival science. According to Thomas Kuhn, the American science historian, anyone who is involved in the development or the application of a scientific discipline is socialized by education. This is

where implicit and explicit values, standards and behaviours of a specific scientific community are transferred. Kuhn calls this system of values, standards and behaviours a paradigm. The paradigm of a scientific discipline provides a universally recognized explanatory model of a scientific discipline in the specific stage of its development and defines its fundamentals. For a time the paradigm models problems and solutions to a community of practitioners. A paradigm decides the character of the scientific problems and the way in which these problems must be defined, analysed and solved. When a whole community of practitioners takes a specific paradigm as starting point of its research and defends this paradigm against intruders, they are, according to Kuhn, in the stage of normal science.⁶

The classic archival paradigm, the paradigm codified by Muller, Feith and Fruin in their 1898 Manual, can be seen as normal archival science till the nineties of the 20th century. In its original shape it identifies as its *object* the whole of records created or received by an administration or an officer; and it identifies the physical item as the *basic entity*. The interactions between the basic entities are considered to be organic by nature.

The *objectives* are: physical and intellectual control of the documents, partly in preparation of their publication. The *methodology* consists of the application of the principle of provenance and the principle of the original order. And finally, the *technique* can be characterized as the formal description of physical documents and their arrangement not according to their form, but according to a natural classification, a classification that mirrors the organization of the records creator.⁷

Was Kuhn an archivist? His model for analysing the development of the sciences appears to be very much applicable to the development of our own scientific discipline. In a period of normal science, Kuhn argues, only those questions are formulated that can be answered with the methods and techniques of the dominant paradigm. This paradigm does not enable questions of another type to be phrased or even understood. The dominant paradigm, however, is not totally unadaptive. Members of the scientific community might ignore new problems in the beginning, but then they will try to frame them in conventional terms and even expand these terms if necessary. When archivist-historians were confronted with records

⁶ Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago, 1962, 3rd ed. Chicago, 1996.

⁷ "The Development of Archival Science and its European Dimension", in: *Arkivarierna och Arkivvetenskapen. Seminarium för Anna Christina Ulfsparré 10-11 Februari 1999 i Riksarkivet. / The Archivist and the Archival Science. Seminar for Anna Christina Ulfsparré 10-11 February 1999 at the Swedish National Archives* (Lund, 1999) 75-83.
<http://www.archiefschool.nl/docs/thomdeve.pdf>

management issues, they first choose to defend the boundaries of their discipline, but then, while maintaining their historical orientation, they expanded these boundaries in such a way, that current records became part of their domain, for instance by including pre-coordinated classifications of records in the concept of organic growth. The same process occurred when archives of private organisations and individuals appeared on the stage, or new types of records and new information carriers.

Since 1898, all composing elements of this classic archival paradigm have been object of professional discussion and reinterpretation. New questions Muller, Feith and Fruin had never thought of had to be answered. Accordingly the paradigm was gradually adapted to answer these new questions. But though the paradigm maintained its value in solving the problems it was designed for, increasingly, and particularly from the eighties of the 20th century on, archival problems were identified that asked for another interpretative framework.

In the eighties archivists could still analyse electronic records and recordkeeping systems in the same way as they were used to analyse paper records and conventional archives. But soon it appeared to be very complicated to phrase and solve problems related to electronic records with the conventional, custodial approach of classic archival science. The only alternative for ignoring fundamental novelties and leaving this new domain to other disciplines, like information science and informatics, is turning archival science upside down.

Kuhn predicts that when increasingly anomalies will occur, phenomena that cannot be analyzed with the concepts, theories and methods of the dominant paradigm, and normal science cannot give satisfying answers to new questions, a scientific revolution is likely to occur. New concepts are formulated and integrated in a new paradigm. If this new paradigm succeeds in offering solutions for both new and traditional problems and if the promoters of the new paradigm succeed in convincing the profession that it has the potential to solve the problems of the future, a shift of professional commitments will occur.

In Kuhn's view the new paradigm does not set aside the old one merely because it has more explanatory potential. A scientific revolution is a serious struggle between vested interests and new interests and it is only won by the newcomers when they succeed in acquiring a strong position in professional bodies, professional journals and in the communities of practitioners and researchers in general.

Archival science is in the middle of a paradigm shift, but the new paradigm is not fully formulated, let alone fully accepted. There are many ideas about what this so called non- or post-custodial paradigm should look like and many ideas about the way to go along with it.

Let me therefore link my ideas about the developments in our discipline to parts of my personal history, in order to avoid unjustified generalisations.

In the early nineties, when I was the Director of the Dutch Archives School, I could see the archival paradigm starting to shift in my own programmes. The teaching of functional analysis, macro-appraisal and electronic records introduced new concepts in our classes. We increasingly felt the need to define these concepts in coherent terms and adapt the definitions of traditional archival concepts in such a way that both new and traditional concepts could be integrated in a new interpretative framework. A new common language was what we needed, in our communication with our students and in our communication with the profession. So I wrote *A First Introduction in Archival Science* in order to integrate classic archival science into a new and broader approach of the archival discipline. The core of the article was a redefinition of records as process-bound information, that is information generated by work processes and recorded and structured in the course of these business processes in order to enable retrieval within the context of these work processes.⁸ This definition and the rest of the *First Introduction* differ from the classic definitions in the sense that they conceptualise archives from a higher, logical level, that it focuses on information rather than documents, on processes rather than objects and on functions rather than organisations. Furthermore, it allows information to be bound to different processes, records systems and other information systems, subsequently or at the same time.

Dear colleagues, a new archival paradigm is in the process of overthrowing the old one. At certain intervals, a science needs a new language in order to formulate, address and solve new problems. But in order to replace the old paradigm, the new one must not only be able to solve the new problems, but also the problems the old paradigm could already solve. The new paradigm incorporates the old one; it includes all the old concepts, methods and theories but places them in a new and broader interpretative framework. The new archival paradigm does not force us to throw our classic *Manual* on the rubbish dump of archival history, no, it allows and stimulates us to expand on classic archival contextuality, look upon it from a new perspective and give it a new and much broader relevance. Similarly, the shift of attention in our new archival paradigm from the physical to the logical level does not forbid us to deal with records as physical objects anymore, but allows us to expand our interpretative potential. Generally speaking, classic archival theory and methodology are still

⁸ In 2001, a translation in English was published in *Archival Science*. The translation of the concept *archieef* caused some difficulties. Theo Thomassen, *A First Introduction to Archival Science*, *Archival Science* 1-4 (2001) 373-385.

valid and applicable in the classic archival intervention field. But in recently discovered domains they are not. If you ride a bicycle, you can perfectly help yourself with Newtonian mechanics. But when you travel in an intergalactic missile, you'll better read Einstein's theory of relativity.

I referred to my First introduction. It was only one of the many steps taken in those years in the transformation of the Archives School and Archival education. A paradigm shift in archival science asks for a shift in archival education and a shift in archival education asks for re-evaluating your relations with other scientific disciplines and the position of your school and programs in the general education system. And this is not only a question of principles, but also a question of given circumstances.

For decades, the Dutch Archives School had been part of the Dutch archival system, and not of the general education system. In spite of many adaptations, the focus in the programs was still very much on history. When the school was privatised, however, we had the chance to make a fundamental shift by establishing our programs as distinct study tracks of the program of the Book-, Library- and Information program of the University of Amsterdam and the program of the Information Services Department of the Professional University of Amsterdam. From that moment on, archival education was embedded in an academic information oriented research infrastructure.

The shift from a predominantly history-oriented program to a more information oriented program of archival education and the establishment of archival education as an autonomous program in an information sciences context are not typically Dutch of course. In many archival communities of the world this step has been taken. Originally, classic archival science was merely considered an auxiliary science of history, and most of the time it was taught in history departments of universities or in the archival institutions by the archivists themselves. And where archival theory had not gained recognition at all, archives were considered special collections of libraries and the techniques for processing them were taught in the framework of Library and Information Studies.

It was the *éminence grise* of archival science in Italy, Elio Lodolini, who in 1987 analyzed the war of independence of archival science from history.⁹ Archival science should have close relations with history, he argued, but it could only fulfill its tasks if it positioned itself not as a discipline supporting historians in archival research, but as an autonomous

⁹ Elio Lodolini, "La guerra di indipendenza degli archivisti", in: *Miscellanea Carlos Wyffels* 1987), p. 269-293; translated and abridged in "The war of independence of archivists", in *Archivaria* 1989, pp. 36-47.

discipline, covering the whole archival life-cycle. In other parts of the world a similar war of independence was waged against the patronage of library and information studies, with almost the same arguments. Archival education and archival research had to broaden their scope in order to include not only the use end of archives but also the stages of records creation and records management. In many countries of the world, archival science positioned itself as an autonomous discipline in the realm of the information sciences, claiming the whole records continuum as its intellectual domain.

In view of the post-custodial character of the new paradigm of archival science, the establishment of new relations with the information and communication sciences was a logical step. Particularly in an electronic environment, records can be organized as elements of larger information and communication systems. The components and functions of these systems are an important structural characteristic of the information and records management environment. Content elements of a records system can be components of some other information system, and vice versa. Archival practitioners and researchers must be able, then, to communicate on a conceptual level with designers of information systems and information and communication scientists.¹⁰ But in spite of the central role of electronic information systems in the present scientific revolution in archival science, in spite of the many new techniques, concepts and metaphors and the expansion of our intervention field we owe to the study of electronic information systems, the new paradigm of archival science will not be or should not be an electronic paradigm. Research on electronic records clearly shows the benefits but also constraints of technical approaches in our discipline. It goes beyond the subject of this session, to question here the positivist character of much information science thinking, but it seems necessary for archival researchers when thinking about authenticity to think beyond the linking of metadata to data, when thinking of collective memory to think beyond the boundaries of linear thinking databases, and when thinking about information retrieval to include thinking about freedom of interpretation. It needs more disciplines to cover the whole range of archival thinking.

The new post-custodial paradigm of archival science should not be absorbed by a broad overarching information and communication discipline. When the academic program in archival science of the Dutch Archives School was re-established as a distinct study track of the program of the Book-, Library- and Information program of the University of Amsterdam,

¹⁰ Jozo Ivanović "Archival theory and its practical impacts" in: *Arkistoyhdistyksen Julkaisuja* 9 (Helsinki, 2004) 69 vv.

the former general state archivist of the Netherlands Eric Ketelaar was appointed professor in archival science there. Within a few years he placed Dutch archival research in the forefront of the international debate by introducing a postmodern approach and a new contextual orientation by what he called social and cultural archivistics, focusing on societies, organizations, and people that create archives rather than on archives themselves. In doing so he gave archival science in The Netherlands a strong position as an autonomous and multidisciplinary discipline. In the Netherlands, the establishment of archival science as an autonomous science in the field of the information sciences was not considered an end position but a start position, a position from where other domains can more easily be explored, an open gate to all other disciplines dealing with the conditions under which memory is constructed and reconstructed and with the way messages or texts can be phrased, communicated and interpreted, with history, museology, the administrative sciences, sociology, semiology, linguistics and other scientific disciplines.

I deliberately mentioned museology. For four years now, I am the Director of Reinwardt Academy, faculty of museology of the Amsterdam School of the Arts. It is one of the few schools of higher education in the world that offers a program of cultural heritage education aiming at preparing students for most professional positions in a cultural heritage environment, a program, in which museology, or heritage studies is basic. What I see is an amazing convergence of developments in archival science and developments in heritage studies. Cultural heritage, formerly defined in terms of objects with intrinsic historical value is in the process of being redefined in terms of context carriers or anchor places of memory and -more specifically – of collective memory. Rather than a collection of fixed objects, cultural heritage is considered a continuous process of contextualizing, de-contextualizing and re-contextualizing human environment. Authenticity is defined in terms of public trust, rather than considered an attribute of the object itself. Musealisation is conceptualized as the act of attributing a heritage function to objects, rather than the physical transfer of an object to a museum. Like any human intervention in the archives, interventions in cultural heritage is considered an act of power, the power namely to decide what will remain and what will disappear, what will be remembered and what will be forgotten, what narratives can and will be told in future and what narratives will never be told, the power over collective memory and collective identity. Like archival science, heritage studies have become a process-oriented, contextual discipline, heavily involved in the post-modern discourse.

Repositioning archival science as an autonomous science in the field of the information sciences comes to finding a new start position indeed. The real measure for the disciplinary autonomy of archival science is its ability to adapt concepts and methods and techniques of other disciplines to its own benefit and incorporate them in its own interpretative system and research tradition and its suitability of its concepts and methods to be applied by other disciplines in their own domains.

Let's finally talk about new chances and new directions in archival research.

The chances for archival science to develop successfully and independently can be measured by the state of the art in archival research. Over the last decades new archival domains have been identified and explored and new archival methods have developed. It cannot be predicted yet where this will bring us, but optimism is justified.

In the last volume of *Archival Science*, guest-editors Ann Gilliland and Sue McKemmish picture a quite impressive overview of the growth of archival research in volume and in diversity between 1990 and today.¹¹ “The past 15 years have witnessed enormous growth in research addressing all aspects of archives and archivistics in society. (...) While a corpus continues to develop that examines issues relating to traditional custodial and life cycle notions of archives and archival activities, there is much exciting work that is being done that addresses recordkeeping in all the complexities identified by the records continuum – including the socio-cultural roles of records creation, recordkeeping and records use.”

Gilliland and McKemmish highlight several factors that attest this growth.

- Archival research is increasingly addressing not only the professional and managerial aspects of archival practice, but also the disciplinary aspects such as studying and theorizing the record, the archive and the archives within their organizational, social, historical, cultural and information management contexts.
- New theories and programs are built.
- The numbers of doctoral programs, recent graduates employed in research positions, and full-time academics increase.
- The demand for research in practice grows, while more funding is provided by the archival community and other stakeholders.

¹¹ Anne Gilliland and Sue McKemmish (ed.), Special Thematic Issue: Research Methods. *Archival Science* 4, 3-4 (2004)

- A new type of archival research projects emerges that is collaborative, multidisciplinary, national or international, and in which academics and practitioners collaborate.
- The numbers of research projects in other disciplines that incorporate an archival component increase.
- The number of archival journals publishing archival research increase.
- Existing archival research designs, methodologies and techniques become increasingly popular and new ones are developed.

Gilliland and McKemmish claim, that it is vital for us to further develop our research infrastructure, that is: to establish a well developed scientific paradigm, a broad collection of methodological tools, adopted or adapted a solid footing within the university, an accumulation of rigorously conducted research, and appropriate dissemination outlets. Despite all the research activity that is ongoing, the research infrastructure within archival science today is still in a fledging state, and there remains a need for archival researchers to become more reflexive and explicit about the design of their research in order to do the best possible research, and to educate archival audiences in how to conduct and read archival research.”

A new archival paradigm is in the process of being constructed. Archival science and archival education are in the process of liberating themselves from disciplinary patronage and positioning themselves as autonomous entities. Archival theory and methodology are adopting tools from other scientific disciplines, while other scientific disciplines are discovering how fruitful the use of the archival approaches can be. Archival research is growing in volume and diversity. These developments are too fundamental by character to leave them to our academics.

Dear colleagues,

It is the whole archival profession that has a great challenge to meet. The development of the archival discipline is vital to the interests of all practitioners. The boundaries of the discipline are the boundaries of the profession, not vice versa. Archival research constitutes the basis of professional action and is conditional to a high level of quality of the services the profession renders to society. Archival science as a grown up discipline must be free in determining its own direction; if not, it would lose its innovative potential. But archival science also addresses the professional problems the profession needs to solve.

I congratulate your association with making archival science the theme of this congress.

Everything is a social construction. Let us go and construct together.