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Theories of the Archive from Across the Disciplines

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Abstract

Creative and compelling theoretical formulations of the archive have emerged from a host of disciplines in the last decade. Derrida and Foucault, as well as many other humanists and social scientists, have initiated a broadly interdisciplinary conversation about the nature of the archive. This literature suggests a confluence of interests among scholars, archivists, and librarians that is fueled by a shared preoccupation with the function and fate of the historical and scholarly record. The following essay provides an exploration and overview of this archival discourse.



Theories of the Archive from Across the Disciplines

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There has been a striking growth of interest in the concept of the archive outside of the library and archival communities. In the past decade historians, literary critics, philosophers, sociologists, anthropologists, geographers, political scientists, and others have wrestled with the meaning of the word "archive." A compelling body of literature has accumulated around this term that demonstrates a convergence of interests among scholars, archivists, and librarians. This archival discourse provides a window onto current debates and common concerns in many academic fields. It also helps illuminate the ways in which all of us are implicated in transformations in scholarship, publication, and the changing fortunes of libraries and archives. This essay provides both an overview and a sampling of archival discourse across the disciplines.

Researchers are proclaiming the centrality of the archive to both the scholarly enterprise and the existence of democratic society. Political theorist Irving Velody declares, "[A]s the backdrop to all scholarly research stands the archive. Appeals to ultimate truth, adequacy and plausibility in the work of the humanities and social sciences rest on archival presuppositions."¹ Jacques Derrida argues, "[T]here is no political power without control of the archive, if not memory. Effective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation."²

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