

Archives, records, and information: Terms, concepts, and relationships across linguistic cultures¹

Arquivos, documentos e informação: Termos, conceitos e relações entre culturas linguísticas

GEOFFREY YEO

Honorary Senior Research Fellow, Department of Information Studies

University College London, United Kingdom

g.yeo@ucl.ac.uk

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0058-300X>

ABSTRACT

This paper is a lightly revised version of a talk that I gave as part of the seminar cycle *Rethinking the Archive(s) / Repensar o(s) Arquivo(s)* in Lisbon in March 2024. The organisers of the seminar asked me to speak about three terms that are central to our professional discourse: *archives*, *records*, and *information*. These terms give rise to a number of questions that I sought to address. What are the concepts that underlie them? How might they be related? How are the terms used in different languages and how are they understood in different linguistic cultures? Is there still a place for distinct understandings of *archives* and *records*?

¹ Conference delivered at the seminar “Rethinking the Archive(s)/ Repensar o(s) Arquivo(s)”, organized by the VINCULUM project, based at NOVA FCSH, and the Institute for Medieval Studies, NOVA FCSH. National Archive of Torre do Tombo, Lisbon, 6 March 2024. Comments by Laureano Ascensão Macedo, CEC-FL-UL, published in this volume. VINCULUM (2024, March 13). 5.ª Sessão do Ciclo de seminários: “Rethinking the Archive(s)/ Repensar o(s) Arquivo(s)” [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MhVvvwNIPTQ>

in a world increasingly dominated by ideas about *information*? In attempting to answer these questions, it seems best to begin by considering the terms themselves. Each of them has a diverse range of meanings, and this paper aims to examine how the three words have been used in the past as well as how they are understood today. It begins by discussing historical and current understandings of *archives*. It examines the origins of the word *records*, its transformation from a purely Anglophone to a largely global term, and the challenges that arise in translating *records* from English into other languages. It then considers how ideas about *information* intersect with our comprehension of records and archives, and offers some concluding thoughts on the importance of records and record-keeping in the digital era of the twenty-first century.

KEYWORDS: Archives; Records; Information.

RESUMO

O presente texto é uma versão ligeiramente revista da conferência que proferi no ciclo de seminários *Rethinking the Archive(s) / Repensar o(s) Arquivo(s)*, realizada em Lisboa, em março de 2024. Os organizadores do seminário pediram-me que abordasse três termos que são centrais no nosso discurso profissional: *arquivos*, *documentos* e *informação*. Estes termos suscitam um conjunto de questões que explorarei no texto: Quais são os conceitos subjacentes a cada um deles? Como podem estar relacionados? De que forma são utilizados em diferentes línguas e como são compreendidos em diferentes culturas linguísticas? Haverá ainda espaço para diferentes entendimentos sobre o significado de *arquivos* e de *documentos* num mundo cada vez mais dominado por ideias sobre *informação*? Ao tentar responder a estas questões, parece-me mais adequado começar por equacionar os próprios termos. Cada um deles tem uma gama diversificada de significados, e este texto tem como objetivo examinar como as três palavras foram usadas no passado e como são entendidas atualmente. O texto começa por discutir os conceitos históricos e atuais de *arquivos*. Examina as origens da palavra *records*/ *documentos*, e a sua transformação enquanto termo puramente anglófono para um termo amplamente global, e os desafios que surgem na tradução de *records* do inglês para outras línguas. Em seguida, analisa a forma como as ideias sobre *informação* se cruzam com a nossa compreensão dos *documentos* e dos *arquivos*, e termina com algumas considerações

sobre a importância dos documentos e do seu arquivamento na era digital do século XXI.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Arquivos; Documentos; Informação.

Archives

Archives, records, and information are a trio of contested terms, each capable of bearing a complex range of meanings. In seeking to examine how they have been interpreted and understood in different cultural contexts, I propose to begin by discussing the word *archives*, which is ostensibly the oldest of the three. This word, or its equivalent, exists in almost every language in Europe. As most archivists know, its origins lie in ancient Greece, where the word ἀρχεῖον (*archeion*) was used to refer to a place where laws, decrees, accounts, and title deeds were brought together, stored, and made available for consultation. The Greek word *archeion* gave rise to the Latin *archivum*, which in turn was the origin of *arquivo* in Portuguese, *archive* in English, and similar words in other modern European languages.

In the classical era, archives were essentially repositories. As time passed, however, the material holdings of repositories also came to be labelled as “archives”, and the pioneers of archival literature in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries all offered definitions of archives as materials rather than places or institutions (Muller et al., 1898, p. 1; Jenkinson, 1922, p. 11; Casanova, 1928, p. 19). To the best of my knowledge, this extension of meaning has occurred in almost every European language: if I speak in French of *les archives*, or in Italian of an *archivio*, it is not immediately obvious whether I am referring to a place, to the materials held in that place, or indeed to both.

In recent years, the range of meaning of *archives* has undergone several further shifts. Historically, in every language and every country where the word was used, it carried an association with public acts, or with writings kept by government bodies, but more recently it has become commonplace to accept that archives can also include non-written materials, and that they can be maintained by businesses, non-profit organisations, families, and individual persons as well as government institutions.

A further extension occurred when the word *archive* began to be used to denote the totality of documentary materials created or received by a single organisation, family, or person, irrespective of where those materials

were stored. From this perspective, an archive is a whole made up of parts. It can be moved from place to place; its ownership can be divided, with different parts of the archive dispersed among different individuals, institutions, or nation-states; but conceptually it can still be identified as a single archive.

Particularly in English-speaking countries in the twentieth century, some people have wanted to limit the scope of *archives* to materials designated for long-term retention, those judged to have historical or cultural value, or those that have been formally entrusted to an archival repository; but in many countries of continental Europe there is a history of resistance to limitations of this kind (Duchemin, 1992, p. 53). Even in Anglophone cultures, many commentators insist that these restrictions are unduly confining and that the status of an archive does not depend on its historical merit, its long-term preservation, or its custodial arrangements.

Debates have also arisen about the extent to which archives — in the sense of materials or writings — can be described as natural or organic accumulations. In the twentieth century, archivists generally insisted that the growth of an archive was a natural process, but today this assumption seems open to dispute. Individual items within an archive may perhaps be said to have come into existence more or less naturally as life or business progressed, but decisions about which items were to be kept, and how they would be organised and presented to users, are based on fallible human judgement. In parallel with this, many archivists have moved away from conceptions of archives as rigidly arranged entities. Recognising that no single ordering can capture the multiple relationships of archival materials or serve the multiple needs of their diverse users, archivists have begun to seek more flexible ways of addressing context and provenance (Michetti, 2013, pp. 1002-1010; Yeo, 2016, pp. 135-169).

In recent years, the shift to understanding archives as materials rather than institutions has also encouraged scholars to examine non-traditional or non-Western ways of maintaining archives or preserving memories. In seeking to re-define archives to accommodate these alternative perspectives, some scholars have argued that archives should be reconceptualised as assemblages of any objects deemed significant by those who assemble them (Flinn, 2011, pp. 164-165); others affirm that the term *archives* embraces not only collections of material objects, but also a range of memory-related practices in non-material forms (Evans et al., 2017, p. 6).

Understandings of archives have been further complicated by computer scientists, cultural theorists, and others who have appropriated the word *archives* — or, more usually, the word *archive*, in the singular — for

their own purposes. In computer science, an archive can be a back-up copy, a set of files or datasets stored offline, or a part of a website that displays superseded content. Digital humanities scholars, artists, audio-visual curators, and digital librarians have also adopted the word and use it to describe collections that have little resemblance to archives as archivists have traditionally understood them: a body of literature, for example, or a collection of soundtracks drawn from a variety of sources, may be described as an archive.

In the view of one recent cultural commentator, an archive in its “widest sense” is any “collection of data brought together to resist its being lost to memory” (Marchand, 2017, p. 139). An American literary scholar has taken this further, and argues that “all artifacts form one vast archive, the tangible residue of the activities of humanity” (Tanselle, 2002, p. 405). Cultural theorists influenced by the works of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida have rendered the concept of “the archive” into a metaphor for almost any protocol used for the control of knowledge or the exercise of hegemony. Today, as cultural historian Julietta Singh has observed, «“archive”... can mean almost anything» (Singh, 2018, p. 22).

How might we respond to these developments? Many archivists have been unenthusiastic about them. Some have simply ignored them; some have vociferously objected to the appropriation of a key concept of our discipline by scholars in other fields. Some have pointed out that most writings about “the archive” by scholars of literature, art, or cultural theory show little awareness of archival science as a discipline with an extensive literature of its own (Caswell, 2016). Others, however, have adopted some of the ideas put forward by non-archivists and have incorporated notions about archives from other disciplines into their own thinking. Rightly or wrongly, perceptions of archives as an inclusive concept, embracing a wider range of materials than archivists traditionally believed, are rapidly gaining popularity among archival scholars. I think we can confidently predict that, in the years ahead, further new conceptualisations of archives will continue to appear, both within the professional community of archivists and outside it.

Record(s): an Anglophone concept?

In summarising the changing uses of the word *archives*, I have been treading territory that is familiar to almost every European archivist and archival scholar. However, the early history of the word *record* is less well-known. To a considerable degree, the topic has remained unexplored by European

scholars simply because — until very recently — the word was specific to English-language discourse; there is still no precise equivalent to *record* in most other European languages. Even in England, however, the word's evolving uses have not been thoroughly researched until very recently.

Until the latter part of the twentieth century, both the term and the concept of *record* were confined to England and to other countries — such as the United States — that have legal and administrative systems with English origins. Although many archivists in non-English-speaking countries have begun to adopt the word *record* in recent decades, it remains distinctive of the English language. The word does, of course, have roots in Latin; it derives from the Latin verb *recordari* (to remember), widely used in ancient Roman literature. In modern languages other than English, words derived from *recordari* still connote “remembrance”; their meanings do not correspond to *record* as the term is now understood in Anglophone cultures.

This distinctive understanding of *record* originated with the common lawyers of twelfth-century England, who invented the Latin word *recordum* and used it to indicate a judge's oral testimony of judgements made in the proceedings of a court. After oral methods of recalling judicial business began to be superseded by writing in the late twelfth and more especially in the thirteenth century, the term *recordum* — later Anglicised as *record* — came to be applied to their written successors (Clanchy, 2013, pp. 78-79; Thorne, 1934; Yeo, 2022).

Between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries, concepts of record in England gradually shifted from an exclusive association with courts of law to a perception that records could be made and kept across a much wider array of contexts. By 1700, many people accepted that the term could be employed to describe the writings of a range of church and state institutions.

Some later developments in the meanings attributed to *record* paralleled the changes in understandings of *archives* discussed earlier in this paper. In particular, an extension of the concept of record beyond the writings of corporate bodies to embrace those of private individuals had become commonplace by the early twentieth century. Most English archivists of that era, such as Sir Hilary Jenkinson, instinctively saw *records* as the products of official or institutional activities, but many of them also used the word to refer to personal and family papers or other unofficial writings (Yeo, 2022, pp. 30-31).

Other new concepts of record emerged in the twentieth century, after the birth of what was initially called *records administration* — a term soon replaced by *records management* — in the United States in the 1940s.

The pioneers of records management associated the word *record* with organisational business needs and sought to confine *archives* to materials kept for historical or cultural purposes. These usages were promoted in the writings of Theodore Schellenberg and led to the famous dogfight between Schellenberg and Jenkinson, who insisted that the words *records* and *archives* were “practically synonyms” and castigated Schellenberg for advocating a point of view that (in Jenkinson’s opinion) was both “arbitrary” and “dangerous” (Jenkinson, 1957, pp. 147-149).

A more recent development in Anglophone discourse is an acknowledgement that records need not be in the physical form of *documents*. This, I think, is very largely a consequence of the digital revolution, with its frequent emphasis on *data* rather than on documents in the sense of fixed units of narrative text. In the early days of computing, as Australian archivist Adrian Cunningham has noted, archivists “tended to be a bit standoffish about data”; because data in database systems are often subject to constant updating, they lack stability, and this led many archivists in the late twentieth century to “regard data management as someone else’s concern” (Cunningham, 2020, p. 172). In the twenty-first century, however, most archivists have come to recognise that records can be, and increasingly are, created using structured data and database applications.

The relationship of *documents* to *data* has remained a matter of debate. In English-language writings, some commentators have wanted to demarcate a clear boundary between them, some have argued that the universe of *data* subsumes *documents*, and others — though perhaps in smaller numbers — have turned this argument on its head and have claimed that the definition of *document* embraces what computer scientists call *data*. Whatever view we take of these disagreements, it seems undisputable that the growth of database technologies has occasioned some shifts in conceptualisations of what a *record* might be.

Just as it has been widely accepted in recent years that *archives* can include non-written materials, it has also come to be acknowledged that a *record* need not be dependent on the use of writing. Few archivists would now dispute that a record can — and frequently does — consist of one or more visual images, or combinations of images and written text. Video and audio technologies can also be used to create records. A few years ago, I made a survey of professional literature and collected more than fifty definitions of *record* from recent decades; the definitions were very varied, but almost all of them insisted that records could be created and maintained in “any media”.

Despite this apparent acceptance of diversity, however, it is evident that even today expansive concepts remain in competition with more restrictive modes of thought. Some twenty-first-century commentators want to limit the term *records* to items deliberately designed or selected for medium-term or long-term retention, while others affirm that ephemeral items, casual communications, and items that survive only through happenstance can also qualify as records. Some professionals in our field continue to limit their perception of records to organisational settings and insist that records are confined to items captured and managed within an organisation's formal control system, while others — including many proponents of “records continuum” theories — seek an inclusive view that extends the concept of records to non-textual materials kept by marginalised communities and to the traditions, songs, dances, and rituals of indigenous cultures across the world (Gilliland, 2017, pp. 54-55; Piggott, 2012, pp. 251-270).

In my own writings I have claimed that records and record-keeping practices can be identified in early societies such as Mesopotamia, Pharaonic Egypt, and Shang-dynasty China (Yeo, 2021). On more than one occasion I have chosen to write about the *kipu* (or *quipu*), the knotted cord device used by the administrators of the Inka empire, and to interpret *kipus* as records and archives maintained in a society where writing was absent. Indeed, the identification of *kipus* as archives dates back as far as the work of the Italian scholar Baldassare Bonifacio in the seventeenth century (Bonifacio, 1632, p. 6). Diverse and inclusive conceptualisations are not wholly new.

The polysemic nature of the word *archives* has often been accepted without demur; today, within our profession, its use to designate both institutions and materials is largely taken for granted and seems to cause few difficulties in everyday practice. Disquiet has largely been restricted to the appropriation of the word by cultural theorists, computer technologists, and others outside the profession.

But different understandings of the word *record* have often led to acrimonious debate within the profession, at least in English-speaking countries. Most professionals agree that records are made and accrued in the course of activities that take place in the world, and that they are closely connected with those activities; but beyond this, consensus is often lacking. Does a record come into existence when an inscription is made, when it is communicated or used in the course of activity, or only when someone designates or selects it for preservation? Some practitioners insist that records are defined by management procedures; others (more convinc-

ingly, in my opinion) argue that they are distinguished by their associations with actions and events².

Further questions ensue. Is a record essentially an object, or might it more appropriately be characterised as a relationship between object and event? If it has object characteristics, is it always an individual item or can a multiplicity of items constitute a single record? Should enquiries about objects and physical items now be abandoned, in the light of newer understandings that records can be intangible? All these questions can give rise to considerable disagreement.

Academic commentators also disagree about whether records must be fixed and secured against change or alteration, as archivists have traditionally believed, or whether we live in a world where fixity is a chimera and records are always fluid. Each of these views has its advocates, and there often seems to be a gulf of mutual incomprehension between the parties to the debate. Further tensions arise because in Anglophone countries *record* is a word used in everyday speech as well as specialist discourse. It has to bear many differing nuances.

Record(s): a global term?

Although the word *record* is still widely perceived as characteristic of English-speaking societies, there are indications that it is now becoming a global term in our discipline. Most notably, it has been adopted by several Francophone archivists; in 2006, for example, Marie-Anne Chabin and Françoise Watel published an article entitled *L'approche française du records management* (Chabin & Watel, 2006; see also Fournier & Morineau, 2005). In countries around the world, large numbers of archivists have come to recognise — and sometimes to employ — the word *record*, even if many of them apprehend it as a foreign importation. However, professional leaders in non-Anglophone countries have often resisted the use of the English word, and attempts have frequently been made to find a translation using words such as *registres* and *documents* in French, or *registros* and *documentos* in Portuguese. To the best of my knowledge, this seems to have been the usual practice in Portugal in recent years.

When I was invited to speak in the seminar cycle *Rethinking the Archive(s) / Repensar o(s) Arquivo(s)* in March 2024, the organisers of the seminar kindly sent

² I argue in favour of this latter view in Yeo (2011). Others who propose similar arguments include McKemmish (1999) and Menne-Haritz (2006).

me an invitation in English and asked me to talk on the theme *Archives, records, and information*; shortly afterwards, however, I observed that when the title of my talk was rendered into Portuguese it had become *Arquivos, documentos e informação*. When I noticed this shift from *records* to *documentos*, I began to give some thought to questions of translation. It occurred to me that there might perhaps be an expectation that, if I spoke to a Portuguese audience about the English concept of *records*, my remarks would be equally applicable to the Portuguese concept of *documentos*. But I am not convinced that this is wholly correct.

Besides a concept of *records* there is, of course, a concept of *documents* in the English language. I have already mentioned the ongoing Anglophone discourse about relationships between *documents* and *data*. This is not the place to explore the English concept of *documents* in detail, but I want to emphasise that the concept of *documents* in English is not the same as the concept of *records*. In an article that I wrote in 2011, I analysed the two concepts at some length and concluded that documents and records follow different logics. Documents, I argued, are generally defined by their format; unlike records, they are almost always perceived as entities at item level. In some circumstances, I affirmed, a single document may constitute a record, but in others a record might be a part of a document or a set of documents; physical or digital objects that are not in documentary format can also be records (Yeo, 2011; for the understanding of *documents* at item level, see also Duchein, 1992, p. 52). Some English-speaking archivists might interpret these concepts differently, but the English concept of *documents* certainly allows an interpretation along these lines.

I am not qualified to offer a full analysis of the concept of *documentos* in Portuguese, and I do not know how much diversity in interpretation it allows or how far my characterisation of *documents* in English might apply to it. I strongly suspect, however, that the Portuguese concept of *documentos* is not identical either to the English concept of *documents* or to the English concept of *records*³.

Difficulties of this kind are not limited to translations between English and Portuguese. When the international standard ISO 30300 (*Records Management: Core Concepts and Vocabulary*) was translated from English into Norwegian, *records management* was rendered by the Norwegian term *dokumentasjons-forvaltning*, but *record* was translated as *registrer* (Brorson, 2023, p. 7). We may observe that the Norwegians chose to invoke words

³ Cf. the comments of Couture (1996, pp. 80-81) on the supposed equivalence between *records* in English and *documents* in French. See also Ketelaar & Frings-Hessami (2021, pp. 4-5); Soum-Paris (2021, pp. 15-16).

equivalent both to *document* and to *register*, in order to resolve the challenges of translating technical terms across linguistic boundaries. Yet in English, neither *document* nor *register* carries precisely the same connotations as *record*. There is, of course, some overlap in the significance of all these words. But ultimately the translation is misleading. This becomes apparent if we look across to non-European cultures: we can see that an Inka *kipu*, for example, can be described in English as a *record*, but it is far from clear that it can be called a *document* or a *register* in the English senses of these words.

The Slovenian language apparently has five words that can be translated as *record*, but all are said to have slightly different meanings (Foscarini et al., 2021, p. 69). I have been told that, in German, there are at least eight such words⁴, and I would be hugely surprised if any of them carries precisely the same nuances as the word *record* in English. Eric Ketelaar wrote in 1997 that “many... terms in the professional archival terminology... are only understandable in another language when one knows... the... cultural, legal, historical, and sometimes political background of the term” (Ketelaar, 1997, p. 143). I believe that Ketelaar was right; when we face what Michel Duchein called *la tour de Babel archivistique* (Duchein, 1992, p. 49), we must accept that linguistic usages and their associated concepts are always shaped by the forces of local culture. Even in non-Anglophone countries that have adopted the English word *record*, the word is almost certainly acquiring further local nuances that differ from the nuances it bears in English.

Information

After this excursion into the field of comparative linguistics, I now come to the third member of our trio: how and where might the concept of *information* fit into our understandings of archives and records? In older writings about archives, *information* was barely mentioned. But today it has a high public profile and many archivists identify themselves as information professionals. Archives, we are told, are part of an “information multiverse” (Gilliland & Willer, 2014, p. 1117), and archival studies is said to be a sub-field of information studies (Caswell, 2016, paragraph 6). Some commentators go further and claim that, in a digital era, distinctions between archives and information are irrelevant, and that the two disciplines are converging, or should converge, into a single profession called *information management*.

⁴ E-mails from Rod Stone to the author, 16 January and 2 February 2024.

Similar trends can be observed among records managers. In an age when the importance of information is constantly promoted, many — perhaps most — records managers have enthusiastically adopted the notion that they are information professionals. Both in the United Kingdom and in Australia, the divisions of the National Archives that were responsible for records management have been rebranded as coordinators of information management, and have rewritten their published guidance in a way that emphasises the role of *information* and minimises the use of the word *record* (Cunningham, 2020, p. 170; Yeo, 2018, pp. 176, 184-185).

Other records managers, especially in North America, have embraced the concept of *information governance*, defined by one of its proponents as “the holistic, coordinated approach to information” (Blair, 2018, p. 23). Some see records management as an “essential building block” of information governance (Carlisle, 2018, p. 407), but for others it seems that notions of records management as a distinct practice are now redundant. Some professional associations, such as ARMA International in the United States, seem to have abandoned the word *record* almost entirely, presumably on the grounds that records and their management have been superseded by newer practices in the world of information. Like archivists, records managers have often struggled to maintain their profile in the workplace, and many of them have been tempted to rebrand their discipline in the hope that a new label will enhance their visibility and allow their voices to be heard in the corridors of power.

Although information has a glamour that records and archives frequently appear to lack, the precise meaning or meanings of *information* are not easy to pin down; as information scientist Christopher Fox observed, information appears to be ubiquitous in the modern world, but “no one seems to know exactly what information is” (Fox, 1983, p. 3; cf. Hill, 2005, p. 13). Records professionals who have embraced the term have seldom troubled to investigate it in depth, and their assumptions about the ways in which information and records might be connected have often been very disparate. Some have chosen to see records as a *type* of information; others think that records *contain* information; a third view is that information becomes a record when it has evidentiary value or when measures are taken to ensure its rigorous management; and a fourth is that distinct perceptions of records are no longer needed because the universe of information has subsumed them⁵.

⁵ See Yeo (2018, pp. xi, 52-53, 73-77, 94), where I discuss these disparate opinions at greater length. For the notion that information can “become” a record, see also Choksy (2014, p. 15); Biber & Luker (2017, p. 6); Wiltshire Police and Crime Commissioner (2022, p. 6).

Although the discordance of these opinions is rarely remarked in our professional literature, the view that information becomes a record when it is managed in a special way does not seem easily reconcilable with the opinion that governance of information is superseding the management of records; the view that records are a distinct type of information seems incompatible with the notion that differences between records and information are vanishing. As Adrian Cunningham has noted, in adopting ideas derived from discourses about information, “many of us seem happy to rebrand... ourselves as professionals serving a concept that we have made little if any effort to understand” (Cunningham, 2020, p. 171).

Relating *information* to *records*

About ten years ago, I set out to explore some of the possible meanings of the term *information* and to investigate the conceptual relationships — real or supposed — between information and records. Most of my findings found their way into my book *Records, Information and Data*, published in 2018; the book also aimed to provide a detailed study of “the place of record-making and record-keeping in today’s information culture” (Yeo, 2018, p. viii; see also Yeo, 2017; Yeo & Lowry, 2020). In the present paper, I cannot hope to examine every aspect of these topics or to give a full account of my investigations, but I will attempt to explain why I thought these were important questions and to summarise the conclusions that I reached in my book.

Like *record*, the word *information* has antecedents in ancient Latin, and a pedigree in the English language that reaches back to the Middle Ages. Early dictionaries explained *information* as an “act of informing” or as “intelligence given”, and for many centuries it was assumed that information was both abstract and intangible. More recently, it has often been perceived as a material entity, a physical or digital object or set of objects that can be measured, stored, and systematically managed. However, this newer understanding is by no means universally accepted. Today, the word *information* can bear many different meanings; several observers have commented that there are “as many definitions of information... as there are writers on the topic” (Furner, 2015, p. 364; cf. Logan, 2020, p. 233).

In English, *information* is always singular, but in a number of other European languages, including (I believe) Portuguese, its counterparts have a plural as well as a singular form. Thus in many parts of the world information is apparently a countable phenomenon; in English-speaking countries

it is not. Whatever the precise implications of this may be, it offers a clear indication that understandings of information vary, not only across time, but also across different linguistic cultures.

One popular approach in recent years has been to define information in relation to *data*; information is frequently described as data that have been concentrated, processed, or improved. But data in their turn have often been defined as “the raw material of information” (Brotby, 2009, p. 7), thus introducing a circularity of argument that leads us nowhere. Writings by computer scientists lack agreement on what is meant by the word *data*; it seems uncertain, for example, whether data are deemed to be meaningful or whether they are simply clusters of binary signals on digital media (Yeo, 2018, pp. 115-117). *Data* remains an elusive term, and its definition is just as fluid as definitions of information.

When we come to explore points of contact and points of difference between information and records, we may find it more fruitful to view these concepts through a lens of performativity. Information — whatever it may be — often appears inert. People choose to do things — sometimes very important things — in the light of the information they possess, but the information itself does nothing at all. Commentators writing from a modernist or rationalist perspective often associate information with facts, or supposed facts, about the world (Stair et al., 2011, p. 6). Information tells us how the world is, how it was at some moment in the past, or how it is supposed to have been. But the information we possess about the world seems largely distinct from the world it describes.

Records, by way of contrast, are not passive, but active; at the moment of their creation, they are linked to the performance of action, and in their later lives they continue to have active social roles. Consider, for example, an e-mail in which I write “I apologise” to someone I have offended. When I despatch this e-mail, I do not merely send information about an apology; I perform the act of apologising. Writing and acting are intimately connected. Other records work in a similar way: they pose questions, issue instructions, make promises and agreements, or confer rights of ownership. They are not pieces of information, but agents by which actions are performed.

Of course, many records are created to make statements about the world; they report on events that have taken place or decisions that have been reached. But to make a statement is also to perform an act. As numerous cultural critics have reminded us in recent years, statements about the world are not autonomous truths. Some may be false; others may be ambiguous. All are contingent on the actors who make them and the contexts in which they are made.

Records are always closely associated with human behaviour. Record-making is not merely a matter of documenting or describing activities or events external to the recording process. Humans *perform* activities through records, and these activities are essential to our systems of rights, duties, commitments, and obligations. Records enable people to conduct business and communicate with others in the course of their daily lives, and they play a powerful role in the construction of our social world.

We may want to ask how records achieve these results. I have argued that they function as *representations* of activities. A representation is something that stands, or is believed to stand, for something else: records stand for things that happen in the world (Yeo, 2007, pp. 334-338). But they do not merely describe actions undertaken at earlier moments in time. Records also participate in actions and help to constitute them. We can perform an action, such as making a statement, giving an instruction, or entering into a contract, by representing ourselves as performing it. As management scientist Marc Berg remarked, “the creation of the representation... is... involved in the very event it represents” (Berg, 1996, p. 500).

Activities and events are perceived to have endings in time, but records have *persistence*: they have the capacity to remain available after the activities or events they represent have ceased. Because they are persistent representations, records can participate, not only in creating and conferring rights, duties, and obligations, but also in sustaining them after the moment of their creation.

Suppose, for example, that I make a promise; the act of making the promise occurs today, but the conventions of western societies insist that the obligation of the promise endures until it is fulfilled (Smith & Searle, 2003, p. 305). But because records, too, remain in existence after their moments of issuance, we can use them to underpin the continuation of promises, contracts, rights, and responsibilities over time. The ability of records to create rights and obligations and to represent their creation persistently places record-making and record-keeping at the foundation of social life.

If we understand records in this way, we may ask where concepts of information fit into the picture. I have argued that information is not a material entity, but an intangible affordance that can be garnered both from records and from a diversity of other sources. It is one of the many affordances that records offer: others that often figure in archival discourse include evidence, senses of identity, and reinforcement of memory (Yeo, 2018, pp. 154-156). Like evidence, information is a product of interpretation, rather than a commodity that resides in a record and merely awaits extraction by a user.

Photographic records supply a useful example. Rather than claiming that information is embedded within photographs, it seems more congruent to argue that we can elicit information when we examine them. Such information can extend beyond the subjects depicted in photographs: we may, for instance, obtain information about photographic techniques or photographers' preferences for particular locations. Textual records seem equally versatile. A file of correspondence may provide users with information about items of business, social networks, or styles of writing. A user can employ records to acquire information, not only about the activities that the records represent, but also about topics that may not be explicit in the records' content. Different users interpret records in different ways and conjure different information from them.

I am very doubtful about suggestions that records comprise information about their subject-matter but can also be employed to garner *other* information. Instead, my preferred perspective sees records as complex instruments of social interaction, and information as an affordance that they can supply. Records have a distinctive and vital role in performing as well as representing human activities. As Eric Ketelaar has said, they do not contain information, but they "make it possible" (Glaudemans et al., 2017, p. 301). Our minds can derive information from using records intelligently.

Conclusions

Finally, some concluding thoughts. In my presentation in March 2024, when I discussed concepts of information in relation to our discipline, I chose to speak about connections between information and *records*, rather than those between information and *archives*. To some degree, this allowed me to sidestep the thorny issues of how far, or in what respects, records and archives might be deemed to relate or to differ. Nevertheless, in emphasising the active character of records, their relationships to activities and events, and the roles they play in society, I have sought to raise issues that are also very relevant to our understanding of archives. In particular, I see common ground between my thinking on these subjects and the views expressed in 2015 by German scholar Markus Friedrich, when he spoke of the need for those of us who study archives to "shift our focus from archives as institutions to archives as arenas for and elements of human behavior" (Friedrich, 2015, p. 471).

Some commentators on my work have tried to smuggle in ideas that reinstate information as a central component of records. In 2017, for example,

Dutch archivist Frans Smit claimed that my characterisation of records as socially active representations fails to specify “what the representation consists of”; Smit affirmed that, in his view, such representations “consist of information” (Smit, 2017, p. 252). I disagree: I would argue that, historically, they consisted simply of objects, or marks made on objects, which human minds interpreted as representations of phenomena in the wider world. Today, besides written characters and inscriptions, they also include digital signals that can be read by a computer. Unlike Smit, I do not believe that ideas about information are needed to explain their structure.

That said, I accept that in my writings about records I am merely expounding understandings that I personally have found helpful. I welcome others who have chosen to adopt my ideas, or have adapted them for their own purposes; but I willingly acknowledge that my way of looking at these questions is not the only possible way. I know, for example, that many archivists with backgrounds in librarianship or information science instinctively want to see records and archives in informational terms. It seems certain that, in the years ahead, there will continue to be different conceptualisations of what a record might be.

Nevertheless, I would urge archivists not to overlook the consequences of the growing tendency to emphasise information rather than records. Some may ask why this should be a matter of concern. I have often heard it affirmed that archivists must “go with the flow” and accept that *information* is the key term that needs to be used in twenty-first-century discourse. Pragmatists in our profession sometimes argue that we should stop worrying about terminology and simply concentrate on doing our daily work. My response is that this is not merely a topic for academic speculation; on the contrary, it has significant practical implications. In today’s workplaces, information is undoubtedly a powerful concept. Advocacy of our professional concerns is rarely easy, but using the language of information can appear extremely effective in our dealings with colleagues and senior managers. However, failing to emphasise — or attempting to downplay — the distinctiveness of records and archives is a tactic that also brings dangers. It leads to confusion about the purposes that records serve and the vital roles they fulfil in organisational business and human life.

When archivists speak mainly or only about information, organisational power-brokers can easily assume that record-keeping has no distinct value, that specialist archival skills and practices are unnecessary, or that archival functions can safely be left to information technologists, data analysts, or others who claim to possess competencies in information management.

I believe that archival professionals must continue to promote and affirm the importance of *records* in the digital era, both as instruments of current social action and as bulwarks that support our ability to corroborate what was said and done in the past.

Bibliography

- Berg, M. (1996). Practices of reading and writing: the constitutive role of the patient record in medical work. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 18(4), 499-524. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9566.ep10939100>
- Biber, K., & Luker, T. (2017). *Evidence and the archive*. Routledge.
- Blair, B. T. (2018). Information governance: we are finally asking the right questions. In P. C. Franks, *Records and information management* (2nd ed., pp. 22-27). ALA Neal-Schuman.
- Bonifacio, B. (1632). *De archivis liber singularis*. Giovanni Pietro Pinelli.
- Brorson, K. S. (2023). Fremtiden for dokumentasjons-forvaltning og informasjonsstyring. *Arkivråd*, 2023(2), 7-9. https://www.arkivrad.no/sites/arkivrad/files/arkivrad_2_2023_trykk.pdf
- Brotby, K. (2009). *Information security governance*. John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Carlisle, D. K. (2018). Perspectives on information governance and managing information assets. In P. C. Franks, *Records and information management* (2nd ed., pp. 406-412). ALA Neal-Schuman.
- Casanova, E. (1928). *Archivistica*. Stab. Arti Grafiche Lazzeri.
- Caswell, M. (2016). "The archive" is not an archives: acknowledging the intellectual contributions of archival studies. *Reconstruction*, 16(1). <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7bn4v1fk>
- Chabin, M.-A., & Watel, F. (2006). L'approche française du records management. *Gazette des archives*, 204, 113-130. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3406/gazar.2006.3830>
- Choksy, C. E. B. (2014). The record is dead, long live the record. *IRMS bulletin*, 182, 14-15.
- Clanchy, M. T. (2013). *From memory to written record: England 1066-1307*. (3rd ed.). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Couture, C. (1996, May 30-31). *Is the concept of a record still relevant in the information age?* [Conference paper]. The concept of record: Report from the Second Stockholm conference on archival science and the concept of record, Riksarkivet.
- Cunningham, A. (2020). GEOFFREY YEO, *Records, information and data: exploring the role of record-keeping in an information culture*. *Archivaria*, 89, 169-173. <https://archivaria.ca/index.php/archivaria/article/view/13741>
- Duchain, M. (1992). Les archives dans la tour de Babel: problèmes de terminologie archivistique internationale. In M. Duchain, *Études d'archivistique 1957-1992* (pp. 47-56). Association des archivistes français.
- Evans, J., McKemmish, S., & Rolan, G. (2017). Critical approaches to archiving and record-keeping in the continuum. *Journal of critical library and information studies*, 1(2), 1-38. <https://doi.org/10.24242/jclis.v1i2.35>

- Flinn, A. (2011). The impact of independent and community archives on professional archival thinking and practice. In J. Hill (Ed.), *The future of archives and recordkeeping: a reader* (pp. 145-169). Facet Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.29085/9781856048675.009>
- Foscarini, F., Barrera, G., Babić, A. S., Henttonen, P., & Gunnlaugsdóttir, J. (2021). The language of the GDPR: translation issues and archival issues in four non-English-speaking countries. *Archives and manuscripts*, 49(1-2), 62-87. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01576895.2020.1864427>
- Fournier, D., & Morineau, E. (2005). Comprendre et pratiquer le records management. *Documentaliste: sciences de l'information*, 2005(2), 106-116. <https://shs.cairn.info/revue-documentaliste-sciences-de-l-information-2005-2-page-106?lang=fr>
- Fox, C. J. (1983). *Information and misinformation*. Greenwood Publishing Group.
- Friedrich, M. (2015). Introduction: new perspectives for the history of archives. In A. Brendecke (Ed.), *Praktiken der Frühen Neuzeit* (pp. 468-472). Böhlau Verlag GmbH & Cie.
- Furner, J. (2015). Information science is neither. *Library trends*, 63(3), 362-377. <https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2015.0009>
- Gilliland, A. J. (2017). Archival and recordkeeping traditions in the multiverse and their importance for researching situations and situating research. In A. J. Gilliland, S. McKemmish, & A. J. Lau (Eds.), *Research in the archival multiverse* (pp. 31-73). Monash University Publishing. <http://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/31429>
- Gilliland, A. J., & Willer, M. (2014, March 1). *Metadata for the information multiverse* [Conference paper]. iConference 2014 proceedings, Berlin School of Library and Information Science, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. <https://doi.org/10.9776/14396>
- Glaudemans, A., Jonker, R., & Smit, F. (2017). Beyond the traditional boundaries of archival theory: an interview with Eric Ketelaar. In F. Smit, A. Glaudemans, & R. Jonker (Eds.), *Archives in liquid times* (pp. 295-305). Stichting Archiefpublishaties. <https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/30942>
- Hill, M. W. (2005). *The impact of information on society*. (2nd ed.). K. G. Saur.
- Jenkinson, H. (1922). *A manual of archive administration*. Clarendon Press.
- Jenkinson, H. (1957). Modern archives: some reflexions. *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, 1(5), 147-149.
- Ketelaar, E. (1997). The difference best postponed? Cultures and comparative archival science. *Archivaria*, 44, 142-148. <https://archivaria.ca/index.php/archivaria/article/view/12201>
- Ketelaar, E., & Frings-Hessami, V. (2021). Scholarly and professional communication in archives: archival traditions and languages. *Archives and manuscripts*, 49(1-2), 1-7. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01576895.2021.1919043>
- Logan, R. K. (2020). The biology of information. In M. Burgin, & G. Dodig-Crnkovic (Eds.), *Theoretical information studies* (pp. 233-250). World Scientific Publishing Co. https://doi.org/10.1142/9789813277496_0011
- Marchand, S. (2017). Ancient history in the age of archival research. In L. Daston (Ed.), *Science in the archives. Pasts, presents, futures* (pp. 137-157). University of Chicago Press.
- McKemmish, S. (1999). Yesterday, today and tomorrow: a continuum of responsibility. In P. J. Horsman, F. C. J. Ketelaar, & T. H. P. M. Thomassen (Eds.), *Naar een nieuw*

- paradigma in de archivistiek* (pp. 195-210). Stichting Archiefpublicaties. <https://kvan.courant.nu/issue/JB/1999-01-01/edition/0/page/99>
- Menne-Haritz, A. (2006). Managing and archiving administrative records in the digital era: the instrumentality of electronic records for administrative communication. In N. Bütikofer, H. Hofman, & S. Ross (Eds.), *Managing and archiving records in the digital era* (pp. 31-38). Hier + jetzt.
- Michetti, G. (2013). Archives are not trees. In L. Duranti, & E. Shaffer (Eds.), *The memory of the world in the digital age* (pp. 1002-1010). UNESCO.
- Muller, S., Feith, J. A., & Fruin, R. (1898). *Handleiding voor het ordenen en beschrijven van archieven*. Erven B. van der Kamp.
- Piggott, M. (2012). *Archives and societal provenance*. Chandos Publishing.
- Singh, J. (2018). *No archive will restore you*. Punctum Books.
- Smit, F. (2017). Records, hyperobjects and authenticity. In F. Smit, A. Glaudemans, & R. Jonker (Eds.), *Archives in liquid times* (pp. 249-265). Stichting Archiefpublicaties. <https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/30942>
- Smith, B., & Searle, J. (2003). The construction of social reality: an exchange. *American journal of economics and sociology*, 62(1), 285-309. <https://ontology.buffalo.edu/smith/articles/searle.pdf>
- Soum-Paris, P. (2021). "La tour de Babel," 35 years later: challenges and tools relating to the translation of archival terminology from English to French. *Archives and manuscripts*, 49(1-2), 8-36. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01576895.2020.1833226>
- Stair, R., Moisiadis, F., Genrich, R., & Reynolds, G. (2011). *Principles of information systems*. (2nd ed.). Cengage Learning Australia.
- Tanselle, G. T. (2002). The world as archive. *Common knowledge*, 8(2), 402-406. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/7611>
- Thorne, S. E. (1934). Notes on courts of record in England. *West Virginia law quarterly*, 40(4), 347-359. <https://researchrepository.wvu.edu/wvwr/vol40/iss4/4>
- Wiltshire Police and Crime Commissioner (2022). *Records management policy*. <https://www.wiltshire-pcc.gov.uk/SysSiteAssets/assets/3.-transparency/records-management-policy.pdf>
- Yeo, G. (2007). Concepts of record (1): evidence, information, and persistent representations. *American archivist*, 70(2), 315-343. <https://meridian.allenpress.com/american-archivist/article/70/2/315/24102/Concepts-of-Record-1-Evidence-Information-and>
- Yeo, G. (2011). Rising to the level of a record? Some thoughts on records and documents. *Records management journal*, 21(1), 8-27. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09565691111125071>
- Yeo, G. (2016). Debates em torno da descrição. In T. Eastwood, & H. MacNeil (Eds.), *Correntes atuais do pensamento arquivístico* (pp. 135-169). Ed. UFMG – Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais.
- Yeo, G. (2017). Information, records, and the philosophy of speech acts. In F. Smit, A. Glaudemans, & R. Jonker (Eds.), *Archives in liquid times* (pp. 92-118). Stichting Archiefpublicaties. <https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/30942>
- Yeo, G. (2018). *Records, information and data: exploring the role of record-keeping in an information culture*. Facet Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.29085/9781783302284>
- Yeo, G. (2021). *Record-making and record-keeping in early societies*. Routledge. <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/oa-mono/10.4324/9780429054686/record-making-record-keeping-early-societies-geoffrey-yeo>

- Yeo, G. (2022). "Let us see what is meant by the word *recorde*": concepts of record from the Middle Ages to the early twentieth century. *Archivaria*, 93, 6-41. <https://archivaria.ca/index.php/archivaria/article/view/13833>
- Yeo, G., & Lowry, J. (2020). Data, information and records: exploring definitions and relationships. In A. Thurston (Ed.), *A matter of trust: building integrity into data, statistics and records to support the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals* (pp. 49-66). University of London Press. <https://uolpress.co.uk/book/a-matter-of-trust/>

