

"Archives, records, and information: Terms, concepts, and relationships across linguistic cultures" of Geoffrey Yeo: a commentary^{1 2}

"Arquivos, documentos e informação: Termos, conceitos e relações entre culturas linguísticas" de Geoffrey Yeo: um comentário

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the evolving and complex relationships between core concepts in Archival and Information Sciences, as analyzed by Geoffrey Yeo in his paper, "Archives, Records, and Information: Terms, Concepts, and Relationships across Linguistic Cultures". Yeo underscores the need for a historical and cross-cultural examination of terms such as *archives* and *records* to reveal conceptual nuances shaped by linguistic and cultural contexts.

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Highlighting his recent works, *Record-Making and Record-Keeping in Early Societies* (2021) and *Records, Information and Data: Exploring the Role of Record-Keeping in an Information Culture* (2018), the paper addresses challenges in mapping these terms across languages, emphasizing the gradual expansion of archival terminology and practices. Yeo's approach sheds light on divergent interpretations across regions, advocating for more inclusive views that incorporate local archival traditions. In discussing the evolution of *archives* and *records*, he critiques modern Western influences, encouraging deeper consideration of non-Western perspectives. Moreover, the analysis of *records* as a distinct entity from *documents* raises questions about the ontological boundaries within archival studies, particularly in English-speaking traditions, as contrasted with Romance languages. This article also connects archival terminology with broader scientific discourses, specifically with Hispano-Lusophone vocabulary, reflecting on how contemporary shifts towards information governance, data management, and artificial intelligence are reshaping archival practices. Through this lens, Yeo calls for nuanced understandings of *records* and *information* to maintain their epistemic significance, especially amidst evolving digital environments. In this light, the paper provides a vital contribution to the field, encouraging ongoing dialogue about how cultural, linguistic, and technological factors inform archival science.

KEYWORDS: Linguistic and Epistemic Boundaries; Records, Archives, and Documents; Cultural and Terminological Evolution Digital Age and Information Governance.

RESUMO

Este artigo analisa as relações complexas e em evolução entre conceitos centrais da Arquivística e da Ciência da Informação, conforme estudado por Geoffrey Yeo no seu artigo "Archives, Records, and Information: Terms, Concepts, and Relationships across Linguistic Cultures". Yeo sublinha a necessidade de uma análise histórica e intercultural de termos como *arquivos* e *documentos* para revelar as nuances conceituais moldadas pelos contextos linguísticos e culturais. Destacando os seus trabalhos mais recentes, *Record-Making and Record-Keeping in Early Societies* (2021) e *Records, Information and Data: Exploring the Role of Record-Keeping in an Information Culture* (2018), o artigo aborda os desafios no mapeamento destes termos entre diferentes idiomas, enfatizando a expansão gradual da terminologia e das práticas arquivísticas. A abordagem de Yeo lança luz sobre as interpretações divergentes entre regiões e comunidades, defendendo uma visão mais

inclusiva que incorpore as tradições arquivísticas locais. Ao discutir a evolução de *arquivos* e *documentos*, Yeo analisa as influências modernas do Ocidente, incentivando uma consideração mais profunda em torno de perspectivas não ocidentais. Para além disso, o conceito de *records*, enquanto conceito distinto de *documentos*, levanta questões sobre os limites ontológicos dentro dos estudos arquivísticos, especialmente nas tradições de língua inglesa, em contraste com as línguas românicas. Este artigo também relaciona a terminologia arquivística com discursos científicos mais amplos, especificamente com o vocabulário hispano-lusófono, refletindo sobre como as mudanças contemporâneas nas áreas de governança da informação, gestão de dados e inteligência artificial estão a transformar as práticas arquivísticas. Sob esta perspectiva, Yeo apela a uma compreensão mais detalhada de *documentos* e *informação* para manter a sua relevância epistemológica, especialmente face aos ambientes tecnológicos em evolução. Neste contexto, o artigo constitui uma contribuição vital para o campo, incentivando o diálogo contínuo sobre como fatores culturais, linguísticos e tecnológicos influenciam a Arquivística.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Perspetivas transculturais na terminologia arquivística; Governança de informação; Arquivos, documentos e informação; Práticas arquivísticas.

The paper, “Archives, Records, and Information: Terms, Concepts, and Relationships across Linguistic Cultures” by Geoffrey Yeo, emphasizes the significance of examining the fundamental concepts of Archival Science and Information Science from an evolutionary perspective. The proposed theme is particularly fitting for someone with extensive experience and a long-standing commitment to the study of these subjects, as demonstrated by his substantial scholarly contributions. In this comment, I will primarily reference the most recent publications by Geoffrey Yeo: *Record-Making and Record-Keeping in Early Societies* (2021) and *Records, Information and Data: Exploring the Role of Record-Keeping in an Information Culture* (2018).

While numerous publications worldwide have addressed these concepts, there are distinct interpretations of them, as emphasized by Yeo. However, analyzing these concepts across different linguistic cultures presents a particularly challenging task, as proposed by our speaker, especially when attempting to map the nuanced layers of thought associated with them. Yeo’s contribution extends beyond merely acknowledging the significance of these concepts; it slightly transcends epistemic boundaries. This perspective is evident in various scientific communities that consider information

their primary object of investigation. However, I ask, is it valid to speak of epistemic communities within “Archival Sciences”? Is this concept defensible? When it comes to the sciences surrounding records or information, it may be acceptable, though it might lack sufficient justification.

Thus, his approach involves not only discussing the evolution of these concepts in distinct sections but also incorporating additional concepts that, in his view, help to clarify their relationships, contexts of use, and conceptual interdependencies. Similarly, I will aim to contribute by establishing connections with concepts in the Portuguese language, which have also evolved over time, marked by continuities, disuses, appropriations, and revitalizations. Yeo’s paper clearly reflects a significant effort to address the contemporary issues that affect us across various contexts, and it does so in a very clear and admirable manner.

Thus, moving on to the commentary itself, regarding the section on Archives, our speaker examines the origins and evolution of the concept, shifts in the perception of archives, the expansion of the definition of the archive, and how debates and perceptions about archives have developed over time. The paper highlights key trends, ranging from perspectives focused on inclusion and respect for cultural diversity to issues of (re)appropriation, reactions from the archival community, and future trends.

It is well known that the ancient Greek word ἀρχεῖον [*archéion*] is the indisputable origin of the term “archive”, which has influenced various languages. Etymological analyses of this term can be found in nearly all dissertations on archives, authored by scholars such as the Gerardus Johannes Vossius, Baldassarre Bonifacio, Albertino Barison, Gabriel Naudé, Ahasver Fritsch, Franz Neveu von Windschläg, Georg Radov, Georg Engelbrecht and many others from 17th to 19th century. Nevertheless, the Latin term *archivum* was not as common among the Romans. More frequently used were *Tabularium* — due to its metonymic relationship with the support, *tabulae*, as evident in Roman epigraphy and literature — or *Scrinium*. In the Greek world, the public repository was known as the Μητροῶν [*Mētrōon*] in Athens, but other denominations coexisted, such as γραμματοφυλάκιον [*grammatophylacium*], χαρτοφυλάκιον [*chartophylacium*], and *gazophylacium* — the latter derived from *Gaza* (גזא/gzʾ), a mixed Hellenic-Semitic term meaning “repository” or “treasure”, associated with the ancient city of Gaza. According to Carl von Behaim’s dissertation (1722), it suggests that Gaza could be interpreted as a “city of treasures” (i.e., of archives). The idea of treasure associated with archives is present in French as *Trésor des Chartes* or *Thesaurus chartarum*. In Portugal, the *Torre do Tombo* was also known as the “Tower

of the Treasure” since medieval times, accordingly to Azevedo and Baião (1905, p. 6). These terms were not only associated with the idea of the archive as a place, but also denoted its custodians: *custos*, reflecting the archive’s role as a place of custody, or *phylax* (in greek).

However, it is unrealistic to assume that the archives and repositories of these ancient civilizations — serving as places of custody, stewardship, and preservation of records — functioned in the same manner as contemporary archives. As astutely noted by Yeo in his book *Record-Making and Record-Keeping in Early Societies* — a perspective with which I concur — care must be taken when drawing parallels between contemporary archival management concepts and those employed by ancient civilisations. Although our understanding of these collections is indebted to the work of archaeologists and experts who study specific ancient civilisations, there is often a tendency to incorrectly classify these collections as either archives or libraries. Additionally, archival terminology is sometimes used less critically to describe the management practices of these records from the distant past. This aspect reflects the caution expressed by our speaker regarding the considerable evolution of the concept of archives: from the notion of a repository (as previously mentioned), a place, or an institution, to a more complex hierarchical representation. This evolution encompasses not only public and private archives but also various types of records, formats, and supports, resulting in an increasingly diverse field.

Yeo further notes that many 20th-century Western perspectives on archives, particularly those rooted in English and American traditions, are now being scrutinised and challenged. Efforts are underway to highlight and integrate alternative approaches. Concepts such as provenance and context are not exclusive to Archival Science. They are shared with other fields including museology, law, library and information science, computer science, visual analytics, digital humanities, as well as anthropology, ethnology, archaeology, genetics, art, and various other scientific disciplines, as highlighted by Lemieux (2016). Furthermore, it is noted that the concept of the archive has been extended across various epistemic domains. For instance, in computer science, an archive might refer to a backup, as mentioned by Yeo. In the realm of visual arts, the archive — and its Derridean counterpart, the *anarchive* (Derrida, 1995) — can manifest as a performative artistic expression, such as an ephemeral art installation.

Although there is a shift in Portugal towards exploring alternative approaches, this change is occurring quite cautiously. For example, decolonizing Portuguese archives should not be a *uexata quaestio* or a wicked

problem within the academic and professional community. This indicates that there is still a significant journey ahead.

Despite efforts to standardize archival terminology at the international level, as noted by Duchein in his article “Les archives dans la Tour de Babel” (1985), the current approach is less prescriptive than in the past. Instead, it has become more descriptive and inclusive, reflecting post-modern perspectives. In my view, a substantial portion of the terminological resources available in Portuguese tends to focus on operational and technical concepts related to institutions or entities with a bureaucratic apparatus, with minimal attention given to emerging archival concepts, primarily concerning post-modern archival concepts.

Allow me to add that, in the case of Portuguese, a Romance language, it includes the concept and term *arquivo*, also spelled *archivo* prior to the 1911 orthographic reform. However, it has not been frequently used in Old and Modern Portuguese. Without any intention of conducting a philological analysis here, we can compare, for example, in the famous *Report* of Cristóvão Benavente, dated 1583, where the *Torre do Tombo* is mentioned as the “Archiuo Real” (Dinis, 1968, p. 157). In the *Dictionarium latino-lusitanicum* (1592) by the Portuguese humanist Jerónimo Cardoso, the Latin term *archivum* is translated into Portuguese as “cartório dos tombos” (p. 18), and “tombos do Reino” is translated into Latin as “monumenta” (p. 80). This means that the Portuguese word *archivo* was not widely used at that time. We possibly find for the first time, in Rafael Bluteau, in his *Vocabulario Portuguez e Latino* (1712, pp. 476-477), the terms *Archivo* and *Archivista* (archivist): where *Archivo* has two meanings, “The place where papers or titles of a family or community are kept”, and metaphorically, “as a memory”. That is, the archive as memory, as found in the *Records Continuum* model, is nothing new. On the other hand, *Archivista* has a dual meaning: it can refer to someone “who is in charge of the archive”, and it can also denote “the Indian who was singing, he was the archivist of the Village”, as quoted by the Jesuit father Simão de Vasconcelos in his *Noticias curiosas, & necessarias das cousas do Brasil* (1668, p. 199). In fact, Vasconcelos actually cites a work by Alonso de Ovalle in his *Historica relación del Reyno de Chile* (1646), where he stated that, freely translated here, “that Indian was the archivist, or better said, he is the archive of that people” (Ovalle, 1646, p. 93). This introduces indigenous knowledge into Portuguese and Castilian Spanish, highlighting the concept of oral archives — a notion that, after being long dismissed, has recently been revalued. The term also underscores how singing by indigenous people served as a means of communicating

information, emphasizing the role of oral transmission through memory rather than through written records or documents. We also have in the Bluteau's lexicon *registro* or *resisto* (record/registration), *tombo* (archive), and *cartórios* (registry offices). Document sets are sometimes represented as *monumentos* (meaning "monuments").

In Portuguese Royal Legislation, *tombo* appears more frequently than the word *arquivo* (archive). This raises the question of how extensively the term *arquivo* (or *arquivo*) was used in Portugal from the thirteenth to the seventeenth centuries and whether its usage reflects a more recent introduction, potentially facilitated by scholarly influences in the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries.

In Portugal, although research on archives does not have the same robustness observed among our colleagues in Brazil, who enjoy significant vitality in this area, it is noteworthy that, even sharing the same language, there are differences. These differences are evident not only in terminology — where concepts and terms are often adopted more readily by Portuguese-speaking countries than by European Portuguese archival concepts — but also in the capacity to explore archival themes beyond the predominant perspectives of bureaucratic, institutional, patrimonial, and custodial frameworks, as noted by Portuguese scholars such as Fernanda Ribeiro and Armando Malheiro da Silva (2002).

Regarding the "records" section of the paper, Yeo acknowledges the specificity of this concept and term, which is primarily confined to the English-speaking world. This is despite the fact that the concept is globally recognized and integrated into archival terminology in various countries. He clarifies that the term "records" derives from the Latin verb *recordari* (to remember), from which the medieval Latin term *recordum* originated (du Cange, 1678, p. 533). The term underwent various uses and evolutions from the 16th to the 20th centuries. In Portuguese, we inherited the term as *recordar/recordação*, which is associated with memory, but it has not extended beyond this context.

It is now undeniable that the concept and term "record" have spread and solidified across various recordkeeping traditions. Its application has become widespread not only in bureaucratic contexts but also concerning typologies and formats. A significant distinction highlighted by Yeo is between "records" and "documents": while documents are defined by their format or support, records are typically perceived as entities at the item level. I will refrain from discussing the use of terms in other languages, acknowledging my limitations. In Romance languages, particularly Portuguese, the term *documento* encompasses the meanings of both archival document and record,

which are typically distinguished in English. This could be attributed to the fact that the Portuguese archival tradition, like that of France, Spain, and Italy, inherited Diplomats and extended it to its colonies. Consequently, the concept of *documento* in Romance languages, grounded in this diplomatic tradition, does not exhibit the same distinction as the one observed between “records” and “documents” in the English-speaking archival tradition.

On the other hand, some also translate “records” as *registo* or *registro* (from the Latin *registrum*, derived from the verb *regerere*, meaning to record), which is similarly polysemic and closely related to the concept of “register”. In the context of diplomats, *registros* are also considered documents, defined primarily by their format or support.

“Records management”, for instance, is translated into European Portuguese as *gestão de documentos* and into Brazilian Portuguese as *gerenciamento de documentos*. Similarly, “records center” is translated as *arquivos em fase administrativa* (current or intermediate archives). In the English-speaking context, “the archives” corresponds to what is known in European Portuguese as *arquivo definitivo* or *histórico*, and in Brazilian Portuguese as *arquivo permanente*, as illustrated above. The term “records continuum” is translated as *modelo de continuidade documental* (referring to continuous document/information management, particularly in the electronic realm) or retains its original designation. Adjectival distinctions often help to clarify the various meanings and contexts of the term “archive” in Romance languages (C. G. da Silva, 2018).

I do not wish to overlook an important aspect highlighted by Yeo: it is crucial to acknowledge other archival traditions, as emphasized by Baldassarre Bonifacio in his reference to Caspar Ens’s *Indiae Occidentalis Historia* (1612). Bonifacio not only introduced European audiences to the Inca *quipus* but also discussed Chinese typography, which was often erroneously attributed to Germanic invention in Europe. Undoubtedly, his recent book, *Record-Making and Record-Keeping in Early Societies* (2021), which has been subject to critical review (Macedo, 2021), offers a compelling analysis of the diverse forms of record production across various ancient civilizations. The crucial question is not merely how ancient these practices are but rather why they are considered an exclusively human characteristic, or to what extent they might be.

In the third section, Yeo examines the complex interrelationships between information, archives, and records. I am uncertain whether the perception observed within the English-speaking community aligns with that in other regions regarding the convergence of archives and information into a single

profession or academic discipline. It appears that this convergence stems not from the profession itself but from overlapping competencies. In Portugal, and similarly in Brazil, there has been a shift from Documentation science to Information Science, a transition now broadly accepted within the academic community in Portugal. However, it is unclear to what extent this shift is contested by those in the field of History, who often regard Archival Science as an ancillary discipline. Archival Science is increasingly recognized as an applied discipline within Information Science, akin to Library Science, Museology, and Information/Knowledge management. For example, Brazilian researcher Angélica da Cunha Marques (2016, 2017) has identified three perspectives on the relationship between Archival Science and Information Science: there are

(First) “authors who ignore the historical trajectory of archives and Archival Science and do not consider it scientifically”, citing Le Coadic (1994) as an example;

(Second) “authors who conceive Archival Science as part of Information Science”, exemplified by Pinheiro (1998) (Brazil) and Silva et al. (1999) (Portugal); and

(Third) “authors who demarcate the autonomy of Archival Science and recognize, to varying degrees, its relationships with Information Science”, viewing them as parallel scientific areas, citing examples like Jardim and Fonseca (1992), Araújo (2010), and Cruz Domínguez (2017).

We propose adding a fourth perspective: those who view Archival Science as an autonomous disciplinary field in its own right. This viewpoint, influenced by Diplomatics and the professional aspects of the discipline, is supported by authors such as Heredia Herrera (1991), Duranti (1996), Marques (2016, 2017), and others.

As observed, the connections between Information Science and Archival Science are deeply influenced by the paradigm through which these concepts are examined. This situation reveals emerging tensions between advocates of change and those who resist it. Presently, there is a discernible preference for information management over records management. This shift inevitably prompts a re-evaluation of the core focus of Archival Science: should it center on archives, documents, or information? Some argue that information pertains to other sciences, and one might also include humankind. Unlike in the 1990s, today a discipline is defined not by its object but by the perspective through which it engages with that object.

Certainly, as Yeo clearly indicates, the shift from the traditional role of the archivist to that of an information manager is closely tied to the proliferation and diversification of information technologies in the digital age.

Historically, our profession has undergone various renamings, with some terms falling into disuse while others evolve. It is evident that the theoretical, conceptual, and methodological influence of Computer Science currently dominates the discourse in Information Science. Furthermore, the predominance of Information Science, with its focus on IT and primarily English-speaking origins, often overshadows the European approach, which views Information Science as a social and human science. In today's context, it is inconceivable to remain disengaged from this discussion.

Indeed, as Yeo highlights, the trend in the United States towards emphasizing information governance and the decreasing use of the term “records” reflects a broader shift. Information ecosystems have not only diversified but also become increasingly complex, leading to a transition from traditional recordkeeping management models to data management approaches. In the realm of artificial intelligence, it is data — rather than records — that serves as the fundamental informational unit for process automation. This underscores the need to consider how the automation of information production will affect the future application of these concepts.

In the fourth section, an exercise is undertaken to relate “records” to information and data. Building on the etymological origins, as clearly presented by Yeo, it is evident that the concept of information is rarely used in traditional archival treatises. This is unsurprising, considering that the document or record is foundational to modern Archival Science, just as information is foundational to postmodern Archival Science. The term “information” is documented in Jakob von Rammingen's *Von der Registratur* (1571), where it appears in Latin in various sections of the monograph, such as *ad informationem et instructionem* (p. 34) and *ratio informandi* (p. 46).

It is indeed intriguing to consider the contrast that Yeo establishes between information and records. On one hand, information can exist in a passive or inert state, whereas records are active entities that document activities and events, persisting over time. Records serve as complex instruments of social interaction, with information being a potentiality they can provide. However, once records are imbued with meaning and subjected to interpretation, it is no longer the records themselves but the information derived from them that is present.

Recent developments in generative artificial intelligence (AI) introduce important considerations regarding data and its handling. The inability of AI to discern between true and false information, combined with its capacity to generate content without human oversight, raises significant questions. Perhaps the perspective of affordances, as suggested by Yeo, should focus

on understanding and critically analyzing how algorithms are structured to create records of this nature. This leads to a new question: when data is structured by algorithms, do we have records or information? The generated data comes imbued with meaning that it did not possess before, thereby complicating the traditional distinction between records and information.

To conclude, Yeo explicitly chose to focus on the connections and nuanced semantic distinctions between information and records, rather than between information and archives, and he deliberately avoided the debate surrounding records and archives. In my view, this debate might not only be redundant but could also add unnecessary complexity, especially since it is less of an issue in some Romance languages. Nevertheless, Yeo underscores the importance of preserving the distinction between records and information to prevent diminishing their ontological and epistemological significance. From a Portuguese perspective, records are more closely associated with documents than with information.

Many perspectives will coexist regarding the concepts of records, information, archives, and now, data and knowledge as well. This underscores the vitality that various epistemic fields, beyond Information Science and Archival Science, attribute to these concepts. However, if we closely observe current trends, we see that traditional archives are increasingly being replaced by new terminologies such as information centers, knowledge centers, Houses or Centers of Memory, and data centers, reflecting a trend towards hyper-specialization. These changes are not merely cultural; they often have political and economic motivations within a neo-capitalistic framework. The concerns highlighted by Yeo are also relevant to our professional and academic community in the Portuguese context.

In summary, Yeo's paper represents a significant contribution, reflecting the importance of his extensive body of scientific work. His passionate call urges us to reassess and realign these concepts within our broadening epistemic domains, which are increasingly transcending traditional boundaries.

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