Mistakes, Falsifications, and Otherwise Confusing Thoughts on Authenticity in Archives
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A constant and potentially endless discussion among various archival and historical professionals is that of determining the authenticity of records, and what happens if that authenticity is questioned or totally compromised. First of all, defining what makes a record or material “authentic” is its own ongoing debate that deserves some exploration, and even when a unanimous definition is attained, we then begin the argument of how best to present and preserve that sense of reliability. Some researchers such as Heather MacNeil and Bonnie Mak fear that archivists are saddled with too much responsibility in terms of keeping perfectly accurate, untainted records, and Rodney G.S. Carter echoes that fear: “Archives are believed to be arbitrators of truth, even if the records themselves are not truthful” (Carter, 2007). Others, such as Paul Marsden, David Bearman, and Jennifer Trant, are desperate to figure out how to handle digital materials that are continuously being edited and re-formatted, sometimes losing integrity in the process. The task is especially daunting when one considers the consequences of falsifications in highly trusted repositories, such as the cases of the forged art records of John Drewe and the "false chronicles" of Cardinal Baronio, and while forgeries in the art world tend to garner much publicity due to the amount of money at stake, we rarely hear about the falsifications of textual records until the damage has already been irrevocably done. Although such damage may never be reversed, we can at least continue the conversations among archival professionals so that those working in the field can make educated decisions about securing their archival collections.

It seems that there is some debate about what defines an authentic record in the first place. Heather MacNeil and Bonnie Mak seem almost too preoccupied with the discussion in their article titled *Constructions of Authenticity* in which they present three different definitions for the term: “authentic as true to oneself; authentic as original; and authentic as trustworthy statement of fact” (MacNeil & Mak, 2007). I don’t know that I agree with their assertion that authenticity is just a “social construction” and that it can vary; to say so sounds as though there is no clear consensus on what makes something authentic, when in reality I think we all know what we mean (consciously or subconsciously) when we use the word. Whether we’re talking about a person, a historical document, or a brand name of clothing, the meaning of authenticity doesn’t really change. We want to know that the item is actually what it claims to be and that we are not being deceived. However, to blur the line of authenticity even further, Katrina B. Olds presents an interesting thought that is not frequently mentioned in other archival studies: that falsified archival records can become so deeply entangled with their true histories that separating the two becomes tricky, even after certain records are proven to be faked. In her article detailing the "false chronicles" of Cardinal Baronio, the author concludes that documents forged by Jesuit priest Jerónimo Román de la Higuera actually provided insight into attitudes about religion during his lifetime, gave posterity to his holy traditions, and even “helped identify anonymous relics” (Olds, 2014).

Because of this phenomenon false papers are sometimes not hated or destroyed, but rather accepted by scholars as important tributes to the beliefs of a different time.

Olds, being a historian and not an archivist, does not discuss how Higuera's forged letters were discovered which would be useful to professionals who work with similar materials. This brings us back to the common theme in archival literature which is that of the archivist wanting to achieve absolute authenticity in records, even when such a level of quality may be unattainable. In another article by MacNeil titled *Picking Our Text: Archival Description, Authenticity, and the Archivist as Editor*, the author notes that "The representation of a text provided by a scholarly edition is an abstraction: often the original text has perished and what survives are a number of derived forms or states of the text out of which the textual critic constructs an 'ideal' text, that is, the one that embodies most completely the author's final intentions" (MacNeil, 2005). Here she is referring to the many editions of James Joyce's *Ulysses* and how the manuscript has undergone so many revisions (both by Joyce himself and by other writers who feel that they can more adequately present Joyce's artistic intent) that there is no definitive answer as to what would make any edition of the text an "authentic" one. Do we try to best represent what we believe Joyce intended, or do we publish the first manuscript exactly as it was in its "original" state, mistakes and all?

Speaking of mistakes, most literature on falsified records realizes that, in most cases, documents are not intentionally altered but simply misunderstood and subsequently misrepresented. Perhaps the least understood method of creating false records lies in the archival work of digitization, and fears of damage to records from disasters such as floods or fires have given way to confusion about how to preserve the credibility of digital files. Paul Marsden discusses a little-known side effect of the advent of databases and information systems, and that is the loss of records creation in general. Think about it: most online databases process huge amounts of transactions almost instantly without any records of those transactions being made available to the user. Where do they go? Unfortunately (or perhaps fortunately), even Marsden admits "It is unlikely that the public would understand or have any time for such nuances as 'information systems' versus 'record-keeping systems'" (Marsden, 1997), but he continues to lament the loss of evidential value that can only be obtained through a traceable transaction history. In a more commonly shared sentiment, David Bearman and Jennifer Trant make a compelling argument that digitizing can have "distorting effects" on certain records and inadvertently create "copies that were designed to be faithful, but are, in fact, misleading in some manner" (Bearman & Trant, 1998). The authors elaborate that the technique of scanning an image or document may highlight one portion of the material thus making another portion less visible. This is yet another liability for archivists because these variations can result from the subjective goals of the individual tasked with the process. Another example is provided of a digital item that contained metadata that incorrectly claimed that "Kennedy ordered withdrawal of US troops from Vietnam in the month before his death" but the records actually related to "withdrawing US troops from the Mississippi school integration crisis in October 1962"

(Bearman & Trant, 1998). The metadata was only one digit off yet erroneously indicated that an event took place an entire year later than it had actually occurred, demonstrating how even a small mistake can completely misrepresent history.

Despite the rapidly progressing efforts to digitize and thus reduce paperwork in many organizations, paper has not completely disappeared just yet and there is still much debate about determining the legitimacy and preserving the integrity of paper records. Forging or falsifying documents in archives has been happening since the beginning of records creation and the practice will certainly never go away. Unfortunately we are often totally unaware when documents have been forged until some kind of sensational news story emerges long after the damage has been done. Biblical folklore might be one of the earliest examples of what Raymond H. Thompson calls “invented and manufactured history” in which writers created hagiographical accounts of saints with the intention of progressing a religious agenda. Both Thompson and Carter confirm that forged paintings and false archaeological artifacts are often not convincing enough to generate widespread belief in a fabricated story, but “On rare occasions, forgers surface who have a very nuanced understanding of archival records. They realize that the real importance is not necessarily in the record’s intrinsic or market value, but rather in their informational and evidentiary nature” (Carter, 2007). Thompson heavily focuses on early British writers who invented various historical accounts, and while his writing on the subject provides some interesting examples of famous forgeries, he speaks from a historian’s perspective and does not delve into how those accounts were discovered to be false or how archivists can learn from the examples.

Peter Hirtle and Rodney Carter supply some ideas of what can be done to prevent devastating fabrication of records. Hirtle describes in his article a Bostonian naval ship that for thirty-five years was believed to be the USS *Constellation*, a historic ship built in Baltimore in 1797, until it was later discovered that the ship had actually been built in Virginia in 1854. Carter describes an artist named John Myatt who forged famous artworks using paint that had not even existed during the time from which his paintings claimed to be, yet he conned many experts because his accomplice, John Drewe, was able to create and plant fake documents into archival repositories. Here we have two examples of physical items that alone may not have fooled anyone, but the documents related to the ship and the paintings were able to cause confusion among experts. Hirtle argues that archivists are “not concerned about the value, accuracy, or utility of the content of the record. A document may contain lies, errors, falsehoods, or oversights-but still be evidence of action by an agency” (Hirtle, 2000). This idea sounds a little extreme in that it almost implies that archivists should turn a blind eye at the suspicion that a record has been falsified, which is why he then argues for the archival practice of diplomatics that relies on studying the content of individual records rather than relying on provenance and an unbroken chain of custody, as is more commonly taught. Indeed, it does seem rare for an archivist to argue that a record’s content is more indicative of its authenticity than anything else, but Carter hints at a similar belief when he mentions that, while a completely unbroken paper trail is certainly ideal, it is also extremely

unrealistic. Therefore had diplomatics been employed on the records of the false USS *Constellation*, certain typos and other “red flags” such as missing dates and signatures would have been noticed. Even if the typographical and clerical errors were not enough to cause alarm, FBI examiners found that the documents had been typed on typewriters that didn’t even exist until thirty years after the documents had supposedly been created. While Hirtle’s argument for diplomatics in archival research makes sense, it does place much more responsibility onto the shoulders of archivists who are already heavily burdened by society to be all-knowing holders of truth.

Tying back to this common theme of archives as pristine keepers of historical knowledge, we find ourselves in some troubling territory as described by Susan M.B. Steuer and Matthew T. Brodhead, who advocate for higher levels of security and patron monitoring in archival institutions. As usual proponents of open and easy access to information, it is hard to believe that some archivists would argue for “supervision of readers by trained staff” as the first solution to consider when worrying about theft and proper handling of records (Steuer & Brodhead, 2011), but many professionals suggest that at least some monitoring should take place to prevent fraud. It is not uncommon for a rare books or manuscripts room to require visitors to make an appointment and then to lock personal belongings in a locker before entering, but the visitor is usually not accompanied into the room by a staff member. Apparently John Drewe (the famous forger previously mentioned) often donated artwork or large sums of money to well-known and highly-regarded organizations such as the Tate Archive and the Institute of Contemporary Art, then was allowed complete and unsupervised access to their archives where he “took advantage of lapses in security” to remove documents and plant fake ones in their place (Carter, 2007). Though the case of Drewe and Myatt is extreme, it does illuminate the fact that even highly trusted individuals have the capacity to tamper with records. Carter first suggests measures such as regular security audits as a strategy to combat future incidents, but Steuer and Brodhead recognize that this method is just not feasible for most institutions and they note difficulties such as having enough staff available to monitor all users at any given time, not to mention that many users would be made uncomfortable by such monitoring. Even without those disadvantages, it still seems that archivists are hoisting a heavy burden when it comes to ensuring the safety of their records.

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