

**UCLA**

**InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies**

**Title**

Review: *From Polders to Postmodernism: A Concise History of Archival Theory* by John Ridener

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5132x1dg>

**Journal**

InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies, 6(2)

**ISSN**

1548-3320

**Author**

Acker, Amelia

**Publication Date**

2010-05-27

**DOI**

10.5070/D462000677

Peer reviewed

**From Polders to Postmodernism: A Concise History of Archival Theory** by John Ridener. Duluth, MN: Litwin Books, 2009. 208 pp. ISBN 978-0-9802004-5-4.

Critical theorists and historians have often taken up the cultural role that the archivist plays in “creating” documentation through the organization and preservation of knowledge. Most notably among these are the works of Jacques Derrida (1996) and Michel Foucault (1972), and more recently Ann Laura Stoler (2009) and Carolyn Steedman (2001). Rarely, if ever, do archivists themselves write about the history and significance of archival theory to their own professional practice. Consequently, many readers will be happy to see that John Ridener’s recent contribution, *From Polders to Postmodernism*, began during his archives training in library school.

This slim book (reflected in its apt subtitle) is a concise history of archival theory over the past 120 years as it began in Europe and developed in the United States. It manages to cover a range of archival theories by tracing major concepts, practices, and functions as they have been imagined, created, and shaped by archival mandates, cultural shifts, and technological change, especially the principles of the *fonds*, provenance, and appraisal theory (critical information related to the source, origins, and chain of custody of a collection).

Ridener interrogates these three major paradigms of archival theory by illustrating the shifting responsibilities of the archivist’s role throughout the twentieth century. The author highlights these shifts by locating the functions of the archivist in a series of professional manuals: *The Dutch Manual*, Sir Hilary Jenkinson’s *A Manual of Archive Administration*, and T.R. Schellenberg’s *Modern Archives*. For Ridener, the archivist’s role and authority over archives can be characterized as a “tension” between the subjectivity of practice and the ideal of objectivity (p. 34). The tension that Ridener’s book identifies between subjectivity and objectivity for professionals in the Library and Information Sciences (LIS) is not a new problem. Attempts to mediate or balance the issue of subjectivity when stewarding information has been debated and theorized widely, not simply amongst archivists and librarians, but among historians and educators as well (Day, 2008; Grafton, 1999). This tension that Ridener identifies provides a critical point of entry for LIS scholars concerned with historiography, theories of documentation, and the sociology of knowledge.

The European documentalist Suzanne Briet was one of the first thinkers to articulate the unique, mediating role of information professionals in the middle of the twentieth century. For Briet (2006), the documentalist (a present-day librarian or archivist) is “in advance of the researcher, guided, guiding” (p. 51). Since the 1990s there have been many careful studies on Briet and her theoretical contributions to understandings of documentation, universal bibliography, the

future of libraries, and the European documentalist movement (Buckland, 1995; Maack, 2004). But what remains salient for archivists today, as it did for documentalists in mid-century France, are the qualities of mediation and adaptability because, as Ridener notes, as the “cultural and social expectations of archives change over time, so too does the role archivists play in creating and maintaining the adaptable archives” (p. 132). Balancing subjectivity and objectivity through adaptation continues to be an existing source of debate for practicing archivists and for those who study them. However Ridener’s characterizations of major paradigm shifts and appraisal in archival theory could have been bolstered by a brief survey of other professional debates—such as the European documentalist movement or the planning and policy discussions during early digital libraries initiatives of the 1990s, where similar issues of adaptability, information appraisal, and shifting professional responsibilities have been written about thoroughly.

For Ridener, acts of appraisal are identified as the most critical and subjective acts that archivists can exert in their practice. Appraisal is often considered to be part of an archivist’s first encounter with a collection of materials. By determining what remains in the archive through appraisal, archivists, in Terry Cook’s words, “co-create the archive” through valuation (as cited in Ridener, 2009, p. xiv). Early in the book Ridener argues for the value of understanding the significance of archival theories from the past in order to evaluate how they have shaped current methods of appraisal. Having a strong understanding of the theories which archival practices are based upon gives archivists the ability to contribute to how the archive is constructed and culturally communicated.

However, by tying down the archivist’s “initial interface” with archives to the sole principle of appraisal, Ridener sells us short on the boundaries of archival theory. Current theories tend towards privileging the initial appraisal encounter, which in turn limits the archivist’s interventions and the ability to co-create to the archival threshold and thereafter. Should appraisal be the only way that archivists shape the meaning and significance of the archives that they steward? Do possibilities presently exist for archivists to participate in records creation before the threshold of appraisal? What speculative avenues currently exist?

The act and role of theorizing in the archival realm continues to be debatable in LIS. Many sources maintain that there is little or no more theory to be discussed surrounding archival practice. However, this posture hems in the possibility of change in records and documentation practices that will lead us to question and re-evaluate our traditional concepts and theories. Tom Nesmith (1999) has advocated for a deeper understanding of the critical role that speculation might offer to archival theory despite the more normative aspects of an archivist’s work.

Though there has been little work done on the subjectivity of the archivist throughout the history of archives and records management, there exists even less work that speculates and imagines the shifting role of the archivist in the present and future—especially with relation to the future of digital records, preservation, and data archiving. There is plenty of work to be done that addresses the ways in which emerging conceptualizations of digital records and storage may be understood (or speculated) as archival records. Although there is no shortage of scholarship on how these new technologies problematize current documentation and preservation practices, there is a lack of speculation about how digital records affect and evade basic concepts in archival thinking, theory, and practice.

How should information scientists and archivists alike think of theory as it shapes archival ideas? How do new types of digital record formats such as data sets or electronic photographs challenge key archival concepts that archivists and record-managers have traditionally espoused? Ridener's book gives us the occasion, and the means, to think beyond the current appraisal paradigm of archival theory. For students, practitioners, and historians of American archives and those enthusiasts interested in the theory and foundation of archives and records management, *From Polders to Postmodernism* offers a solid foundation of archival theory and a platform to imagine, question, and theorize what the future of digital records management and archival practice might look like.

### References

- Briet, S. (2006). *What is documentation?: English translation of the classic French text*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press.
- Buckland, M. K. (1995). The centenary of "Madame Documentation": Suzanne Briet, 1894-1989. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science*, 46(3), 235-237.
- Day, R. E. (2008). *The modern invention of information: Discourse, history, and power*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Derrida, J. (1996). *Archive fever: A Freudian impression*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Foucault, M. (1972). *The archaeology of knowledge and the discourse on language*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Grafton, A. (1999). *The footnote: A curious history*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Nesmith, T. (1999). Still fuzzy, but more accurate: Some thoughts on the "ghosts" of archival theory. *Archivaria*, 47, 136-150.
- Maack, M. N. (2004). The lady and the antelope: Suzanne Briet's contribution to the French documentation movement. *Library Trends*, 52(4), 719-747.

Steedman, C. (2001). *Dust: The archive and cultural history*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press.

Stoler, A. L. (2009). *Along the archival grain: Epistemic anxieties and colonial common sense*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

### **Reviewer**

Amelia Acker is a PhD student at the UCLA Department of Information Studies. She reads and writes about the cultural significance of ordering, standardizing, and archiving new forms of information. Her interests include critical information theory, digital humanities, data archives, and cultural informatics of scientific communities.